

An Explanation For The Predominance Of Women In The Umbanda Cults Of Pôrto Alegre, Brazil

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ABSTRACT: The numerical predominance of women in the role of spirit medium at Umbanda centers is obvious even to the casual observer. But why in a modern nation like Brazil should women continue to fill this traditional role? Drawing on data from fieldwork in Pôrto Alegre, Brazil, I offer an explanation which combines ethnographic, emic data with data drawn from labor market surveys defining female participation rates in the modern Brazilian economy. It is suggested here that the traditional popularity of the role of spirit medium with Brazilian women today continues because it emphasizes "feminine" qualities in recruitment and it offers women (and some men) access to "power" and thus offsets the relative powerlessness typical of comparable socioeconomic roles available to them in the modern economy.

Introduction

In the cities and the towns of Brazil, there exists a popular folk religion known as Umbanda in which women predominate as spirit mediums. Spirit mediums are central to the Umbanda cults. Meeting with their clients at the Umbanda centers several times per week, the spirit mediums prescribe remedies, give advice, and offer help "free of charge" to all who attend.

Umbanda probably touches the lives of most Brazilians, both urban and rural. Although Umbanda has been characterized as an urban institu-

tion (Pressel 1973: 275), it is not restricted to urban neighborhoods. Modestly built wood-frame Umbanda centers can be found in outlying neighborhoods in the "interior."¹ To use Margolis's terminology, Umbanda is a vehicle of "social urbanization" whereby rural people are drawn into the urban institutional nexus to become part of the urban system (1979: 215). This may occur when clients attend Umbanda sessions in the city and then return to their neighborhoods in the interior, or, as I observed in Pôrto Alegre,² when a cult leader, who has been trained at an urban Umbanda center, establishes a "daughter" center out in an interior neighborhood.

Umbanda's popularity is difficult to measure, however, because when Brazilians are asked directly what religion they follow they are likely to respond that they are Catholics.³ Yet, being a Catholic does not preclude being a spirit medium or a client in Umbanda (Pressel 1980: 107). In fact, Brazilians see no real conflict between the two religions. Actually, Umbanda is a composite of several religious traditions including Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian candomblé, and kardecism⁴ (Bastide 1974). This rich mixture of religious tradition is reflected in both ritual and belief.

Women have been associated traditionally with the role of spirit medium in Brazilian folk religions. Women were predominant in the northeastern candomblé cults studied by Landes (1940, 1947), Ortiz (1979: 39), Carneiro (1940: 271-273), Pierson (1967: 285), and M.J. Herskovits (1966: 232). More recently, the Leacocks (1972: 103) reported the numeric importance of women in the batuque cults of Belem, and in two earlier studies of Umbanda (Brown 1979: 292, and Pressel 1973: 276), a similar pattern was observed. In this respect the Brazilian cults reflect a worldwide pattern (see Bourguignon 1979: 261-264; Kehoe and Giletti 1981).

In this paper, I offer an explanation for the predominance of female spirit mediums in selected Umbanda centers from Pôrto Alegre. This explanation rests upon ethnographic, emic data and data drawn from labor market surveys defining female participation rates in the modern Brazilian economy. The traditional popularity of the role of spirit medium with Brazilian women today continues because it emphasizes "feminine" qualities in recruitment and it offers women (and some men) access to "power"⁵ and thus offsets the relative powerlessness typical of comparable socioeconomic roles available to them in the modern economy.

The numerical predominance of women is easily observed at Umbanda centers. But in what way is this numerical predominance reinforced, and, more importantly, why does it continue? With this question in mind, I queried informants about the kind of person they believed became a spirit medium. Using role analysis⁶ to organize my approach, a clear definition of the ideal spirit medium emerged from informants'

responses. In addition to possessing an innate prescribed quality known as *mediunidade* ("mediumistic abilities"), it became apparent that the qualities most often named in describing the medium were those which informants also used in discussing the attributes of a good mother or a good wife. The similarity was obvious both to my informants and to me. In fact, they were convinced that female life experiences prepare women for the role demands of spirit medium. Their emphasis on female life experiences directed my attention toward a comparison between the spirit medium role and other roles commonly held by my female informants, and by Brazilian women generally.

In addition to being wives, mothers, and spirit medium, many of my informants were also employed in low-paying formal sector or equally low-paying informal sector positions.⁷ I found that the female spirit mediums in my study had the same employment profile as a vast majority of the women in Brazil. Looking closer at the skills necessary to enter these occupations, I discovered striking similarities with the abilities which are required in the performance of the role of Umbanda spirit medium. These skills are essentially the same as those which Brazilian women have learned in filling their domestic roles of mothers and wives. The roles are complementary.⁸ Furthermore, there are some advantages offered by the role of spirit medium over the typical formal and informal sector occupation.

One advantage is prestige. Since the medium is possessed by a spirit, she becomes the repository of super-human wisdom. Clients come seeking this wisdom. Besides wise counsel, clients may also receive practical help. Spirit mediums are able to offer their clients practical help because they stand at the center of a network of clients. The resources which clients have at their disposal vary, but a clever spirit medium may use this information to help all of her clients. In this way, she becomes "powerful" as she reallocates resources, goods, and services among her clients. Thus, the role of spirit medium may offer the additional advantage of "power."

These advantages make the role of spirit medium an attractive one to women (and some men, too) in the face of current economic conditions. Supplementing but not replacing employment, the role of spirit medium is a positive option for many Brazilian women. Thus, I should like to suggest that tradition, gender role definitions, economic realities, and prestige variables all combine to draw modern women into the traditional role of Umbanda spirit medium.

Umbanda in Pôrto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul

Pôrto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, is located in the

southern regional division of Brazil along with Paraná and Santa Catarina. Even though this is the smallest region (578,000 square kilometers), it is home to 18 percent of the Brazilian people. Rio Grande do Sul is the largest of the three states with about half the area falling within its borders. Since its colonization during the eighteenth century by Portuguese Azoreans and European farmers, Rio Grande do Sul has experienced steady growth. By 1970, its capital, Pôrto Alegre, had over one million inhabitants.

Pôrto Alegre is located in the east-central region of the state lying at the junction of the Lagoa dos Patos and the Jacuí and Guaíba Rivers. It is the largest city in the state and the center of manufacturing and trade. Its population reflects a diversity of ethnic backgrounds including Portuguese, German, Italian, Japanese, and African. Even so, the inhabitants of the state and the city are stereotyped as *gaúchos*, or Brazilian cowboys, because of the historic importance of cattle ranching in this area.

Umbanda is one of three spiritist religions found in the state. The oldest spirit cult is batuque (see Herskovits 1943 and Bastide 1974 for a discussion of Batuque in Rio Grande do Sul). Batuque, an Afro-brazilian cult similar in ritual and belief to the northeastern candomblé cults, originally drew devotees from the Negro population who, when enslaved, worked in the dried-beef industry in the cities of Pôrto Alegre, Pelotas, and Rio Grande. Kardecism, a second spiritist religion, did not appear as early as batuque. Yet, the Kardec cults are very popular in Pôrto Alegre today. They sponsor a spiritist hospital and they have formed their own federation, separate from Umbanda and batuque. Their devotees are concentrated in the middle- and upper-middle class, according to their cult leaders.

Umbanda stands midway between batuque and the Kardec cults in terms of belief and ritual. It combines elements of African, Kardec, and Catholic belief in an ongoing process of syncretism. This flexible and fluid state of affairs allows local cult leaders and spirit mediums to adapt ritual to the specific needs of their cult followers. In the two centers I selected for intensive study, the cosmology and ritual were heavily influenced by Kardecism. To demonstrate this to clients and to outsiders, the cult leaders used the label "Evangelized Umbanda" in the hopes of communicating what they perceived as an important difference in their particular Umbanda centers.

The Umbanda cosmology is headed by the triad of God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. Beneath them and in their service are the saints who have become syncretized with the African orishas, as is typical of most Afro-Catholic folk religions in the Americas (see Herskovits 1937 and Bastide 1974). While these deities are important to Umbandists, they are not involved directly in the major rituals of Umbanda, which is the pos-

session of human mediums by spirits.

In Umbanda there are four types of possessing spirits: Indians, Old Blacks, children, and *Exus*. Each type has a characteristic style of possessing mediums. Informants used the term *roupagem* ("outfit" or "apparel") in reference to this style. *Roupagem* affects role enactment by establishing a set of guidelines which correspond to expectations about how the medium should feel and act during possession. For example, a spirit medium whom I shall call Iara⁹ commented that when she is possessed by an Indian spirit she can "see" herself complete with arrows, bows, and native dress. To the outsider, Indians appear straight-legged and stern-faced. The Old Black spirits typically walk bent over, and, seated on low benches, they consult with their clients. A white cult leader named Ana said this of her Old Black (*preta*): "*My preta¹ is a large, fat, black woman with big lips and a wide nose. In the past whenever I received my preta, I danced and laughed . . .*" The typical child spirit is of Brazilian nationality. The *roupagem* calls for childlike behavior including a fondness for candy, toys, and balloons. At *festas* set aside for the child spirits, spirit mediums act like children at a birthday party. Because they are pure and innocent, child spirits are popular among clients.

The fourth spirit category is the *Exu*. Informants expressed ambivalence about *Exu* spirits because, on the one hand, a possessing *Exu* may embarrass its medium by making her engage in antisocial acts, and on the other hand, "friendly" *Exu* spirits stand guard at Umbanda centers protecting the mediums from other "evil" *Exu* spirits. Although *Exu* possession is common at many Umbanda centers, the cult leaders of "Evangelized Umbanda" did not encourage it. They did, however, reserve a special place for friendly *Exus* near the doorway which led from the street to the altar room, thereby protecting their centers from being by "unfriendly" *Exus*.¹⁰

The Spirit Medium

It is difficult to determine accurately the number of spirit mediums in Brazil today. The Brazilian census, for example, did not begin to keep track of Umbandists until 1964, and it is unclear from the terminology then in use whether census enumerators include spirit mediums only or both spirit mediums and their clients. As the data from Tables 1 and 2 indicate, increasing numbers of people list themselves or are listed by enumerators as *adeptos*¹¹ in Umbanda between 1964 and 1973. The base year, 1964, shows 93,395 Umbandists. By 1965 the number increases 20 percent to 105,850. Most of this 20 percent is accounted for by an additional number of *adeptos* from the state of São Paulo (1964:

3,916 and 1965: 13,372) and similar but moderate increase from the states of Rio de Janeiro-Guanabara and Minas Gerais. No Umbandists are listed from Rio Grande do Sul in either 1964 or 1965. This should not be interpreted as an absence of Umbandists in the state because, according to officials at the Union of Umbanda in Pôrto Alegre, Umbanda was first introduced into the state as early as 1920 and into Pôrto Alegre itself by 1944.

TABLE 1. Distribution of Umbandists by States (1964-1973)

State	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
São Paulo	4	13	27	24	26	25	24	27	30	26
Rio de Janeiro -Guanabara	68	50	37	31	29	34	41	39	36	37
Rio Grande Do Sul	NA	NA	18	25	24	21	11	11	9	9
Minas Gerais	18	17	10	10	11	8	10	9	11	12
Other States	10	20	8	10	10	12	14	14	14	16
Brazil	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Absolute No:	93,395	105,850	185,442	240,088	256,603	302,952	195,112	218,792	238,216	254,993

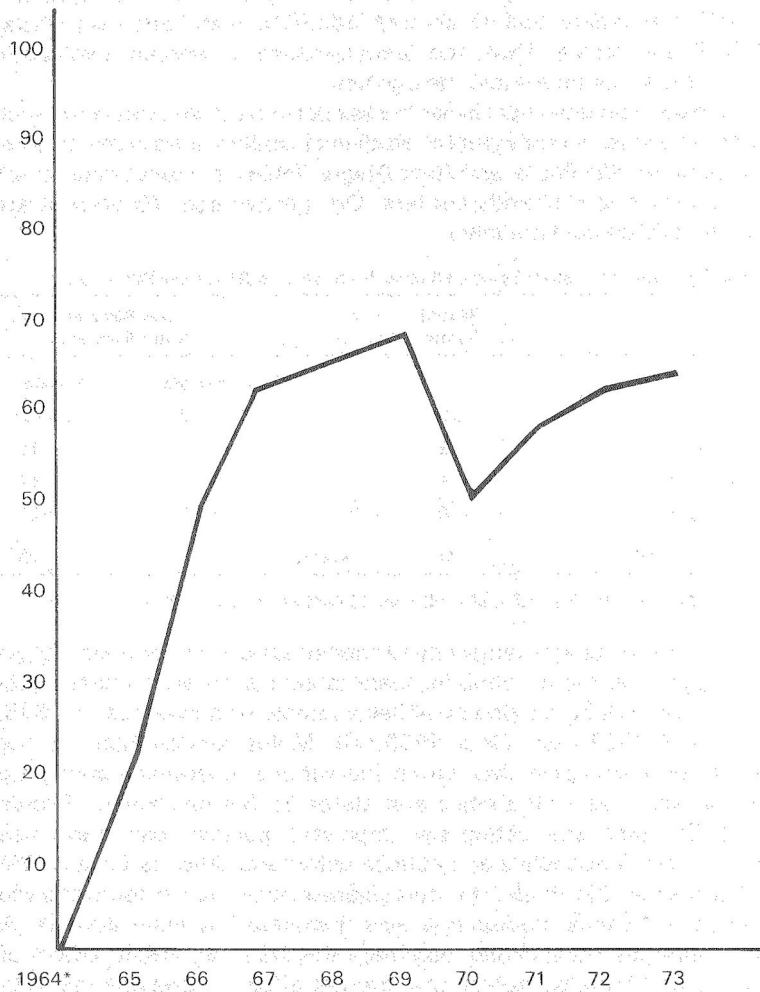
Source: Anuário Estatístico do Brasil [1967:519; 1968:488; 1969:591; 1970:637; 1971:620; 1973:728; 1975:754] Percentages by Author.

By 1966 there is a 50 percent increase in the number of *adeptos* reported in the four states. This increase is unevenly distributed and, as in 1964, the greatest jump is found in São Paulo (1966: 49,887). The first time recording of *adeptos* from Rio Grande do Sul is also responsible for this significant upward trend. Thereafter until 1970, the numbers steadily increase in all four states. After 1970, the number of *adeptos* appears to drop off. This decline is difficult to explain without additional information. While Umbanda's popularity increases again in 1971, 1972, and 1973, it never regains the pre-1970 levels.

In 1975 the officials at the Union of Umbanda in Pôrto Alegre were claiming that they had three thousand Umbanda and batuque centers listed on their membership role. If the average center had fifteen spirit mediums, then there were forty-five thousand spirit mediums at centers affiliated with this particular federation. Out of this forty-five thousand, approximately three-fourths were Umbanda spirit mediums.

The most recent published data on the growth of Umbanda as well as other forms of Brazilian spiritism are less useful than those from previous years (FIBGE 1980: 11). Religious preference in 1980 does not differentiate between Umbanda and other Afro-brazilian spiritist cults.

Table 2: Growth of Umbanda per year based on increases in number of "adeptos" reported in the census Brazil 1964-1973



*Base line = 93,395 adeptos as reported for 1967.

Source: Anuario Estatístico do Brasil (1967:519; 1968:488; 1969:691; 1970:637; 1971:620; 1973:728; 1975:754)

Thus in 1980, spiritists are listed as either "kardecistas" or "afro-brasileiras." Those indicating some form of spiritism represent only about 1½ percent of the total of those Brazilian who indicated any religious

preference at all. In 1980 spiritism is still essentially an urban religion (1,508,995 urban and 116,366 rural). In the cities, 55 percent (835,540) of all spiritists are female, 54 percent (469,860) of all "kardecistas" (868,081) are female, and 57 percent (365,680) of all "afro-brasileiras" (640,914) are female. Thus, the predominance of women involved in urban spiritism continues into the eighties.

Census data does not reveal the sex of Umbandists. However, such data are reported in ethnographic studies of Umbanda from the cities of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Pôrto Alegre. Table 3 compiles data on sex from seventy-one Umbanda centers. On the average, 70 percent are female and 30 percent are male.

TABLE 3. Sex Ratio of Umbanda Spirit Mediums: Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Pôrto Alegre

City	No. of Centers	Sex Ratio of Spirit Mediums	
		Female	Male
São Paulo ¹	12	60-75	25-40
São Paulo ²	35	64	36
Rio de Janeiro ³	14	67	33
Pôrto Alegre ⁴	10	75-80	20-25
Total:	71	Average: 70	30

¹Pressel (1974:133) ²R. Ortiz (1978:48) ³Brown (1974:198) ⁴Lerch (1978:137)

Within the centers female spirit mediums outnumber male. Yet, in Pôrto Alegre and Rio de Janeiro, there is almost an even chance that these centers will be headed by either a female or a male (Lerch 1978: 137; Brown 1979:292; Ortiz 1979:50). Males predominate in the external leadership positions within the various federations governing Umbanda activities in the cities and states. In Rio de Janeiro, Brown (1979:313) noted the potentially important political patronage ties between male Umbandists and carioca politicians. And, as Ortiz (1979: 52) observed in São Paulo, the new popular book market featuring the teachings of famous mediums is also dominated by male authors. A pattern emerges here: males dominate the external, public affairs of Umbanda and females handle the internal affairs, especially the individual relationships between mediums and clients. This division of influence parallels that of the middle class Brazilian family. And, as I intend to show, the market place as well.

Within the confines of the center, in the role of spirit medium, there is a numeric predominance of women. This predominance receives support from the role definition of spirit medium and people who are perceived to possess these traits are encouraged to become mediums.

Spirit Medium: Role Expectations, Qualities, and Attributes

A spirit medium is a person who is recognized by others as the *aparelho* ("apparatus") of a spirit or spirits. Umbandists refer to such people as *espirita* or *medio*. The most basic role attribute is *mediunidade* or mediumistic ability. Umbandists believe that *mediunidade* is innate, inheritable, and God-given. It cannot be acquired. A person who has this gift may discover its existence by accident when a spirit possesses her spontaneously.

Spirit possession may take one of several forms. My informants used three separate terms to describe this event: *incorporado*, *encostado*, and *en transe*. In the first form of spirit possession, the medium's body is under the control of the spirit. The possessing spirit replaces the personality of the medium and, to any others who might witness this event, all the subsequent actions and speech are attributed to the possessing spirit. *Incorporado* is the native category most like the etic category possession trance¹² that E. Bourguignon (1976:8) has defined as "... a belief in possession that is used to account for alterations or discontinuity in consciousness, awareness, personality, or other aspects of psychological functioning." After the possessing spirit leaves the body of the medium, she regains herself but she should have no memory of what transpired during possession trance. This post-trance amnesia may not be effective in each case, however.

The second type of spirit possession is referred to as *encostado*, which is a derivation of the verb "encostar," or "to be alongside of" something. In this form of spirit possession, the spirit is next to or near the medium but it does not take over the medium's body, actions, or speech. Instead, the spirit communicates with the medium by placing messages "into the heart" of the medium who later transcribes them or, if the medium is experienced, reports them from memory. This form of spirit possession appears to involve a meditative form of altered state of consciousness¹³ rather than a full trance state. This altered state is not to be confused with the next in which informants recognize a much more intense trance state.

Only rarely does a medium enter the third form of spirit possession which is referred to as being *en transe* ("in trance"). One medium who had experienced this state described a complete loss of consciousness from which she awoke feeling exhilarated. This type of possession was interpreted as a powerful sign of mediumistic ability.

Mediumistic abilities, though innate, require nurturing and training. Umbandists use a word which means "to develop" to describe this training. Development is an arduous, demanding process during which raw mediumistic ability is transformed into seasoned, disciplined medium-

ship. The process is referred to as *desenvolver mediunidade* ("to develop mediumistic abilities") and, for a layperson with no previous experience as a medium, it may take up to three or four years of study and practice. It is useful to view this period of role-learning as the transition phase in a rite of passage.

Originally associated with life crises events such as birth, puberty, and death, rites of passage are now known to accompany a variety of significant role changes. Van Gennep (1960) noted that there is a common structure to rites of passage involving three separate phases: separation, transition, and reaggregation. The phases themselves have been analyzed, and in Turner's (1969: 94-95) view the transition or liminal phase can become very important in easing the individual through the role change. The Umbanda ritual *desenvolver mediunidade* is usefully viewed as a transition ritual.

The transitional or liminal phase, according to Turner, may also be broken down into three parts: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Throughout the entire phase, the person's social identity remains ambiguous; he or she is "betwixt and between" social positions. In Umbanda, the cult leader is responsible for the successful completion of the medium's development and special care is taken to insure that the proper qualities and attributes required in a spirit medium are nurtured in the medium-candidate.

During the pre-liminal stage, the medium-candidate commonly experiences difficulties such as ill-health, family problems, or frustrating employment/career situations and is told by her cult leader that these "troubles" are caused by her undeveloped mediumship. Essentially, her problems are spiritual. Spirits are the first to identify people with mediumistic abilities. It is believed that unenlightened, backward spirits will attach themselves to an unsuspecting medium-candidate and cause the kind of trouble mentioned above. Cult leaders interpret such happenings as excessive crying, unexplained events, difficult problems, and unusual occurrences as signs of undeveloped mediumship. Furthermore, these experiences are viewed as "tests" of the medium-candidates' resolve and determination. A weak person would fail as a spirit medium as such "tests" may continue over a lifetime.

The following example from fieldnotes illustrates how cult leaders help clients identify their potential mediumistic abilities. In this example we find Ana, a cult leader, working with a female client who has just experienced spontaneous spirit possession. (Ana developed at the urban center of "Evangelized Umbanda" and, in 1975, she struggled to keep her newly-opened center in the interior neighborhoods of "Little Waterfalls" from failing.)

A young woman named Consuela came to the center to consult Ana. Consuela was troubled because her husband who had a drinking problem was disrupting their family life. Since Consuela's husband refused to attend the center, Ana advised Consuela to bring along some of his clothes which she would bless. (This is an example of *roupas para firmar*.)¹⁴ As Consuela entered the circle of mediums, she suddenly collapsed onto the floor in a heap. Ana immediately attended to her, explaining to those present that an *irmãozinho* ("little brother spirit") recognizing *mediunidade* in Consuela, had attached itself to her. Ana "enlightened" the spirit with a short lecture and it left Consuela. As Consuela stood up, Ana told her once again that such things were signs of mediumistic abilities. As long as Consuela continued to delay her development, Ana said, she would be harassed by such spirits. Consuela was reminded that even her husband's drinking problem was related to her undeveloped mediumship.

This example describes one type of difficulty which medium candidates commonly experience. Many take the advice of their cult leaders and commit themselves to development.

The liminal stage begins when the medium candidate "puts on the uniform," a public sign that she has decided to develop. This stage ends four years later when she is awarded the *guia* or necklace of a complete medium.¹⁵ The *guia* ("guide") symbolizes the role transition. A medium wearing this necklace has received her protecting spirit or spirits and she will work in possession trance during the weekly client consultations. But prior to this, the medium candidate must move through a hierarchy of preparatory roles which are a subset of the medium role.

The first such role is *cambona*. At this point, the only thing separating a *cambana* from a client is her uniform. But, on advice from experienced mediums, the *cambona* learns how to enter trance, thus widening the gulf between herself and a layperson. Practicing trance is only one aspect of this role, however. The *cambona* position entitles the new medium to enact two other roles: that of *escrevedor* ("scribe") and that of *porteiro* ("usher"). Actually, even fully developed mediums enact these roles. Sometimes, female mediums who are not prepared to "work" with clients will decide to be a scribe or an usher instead. Male spirit mediums often become permanent scribes or ushers, choosing never to "work" with client consultations. Scribes are at the beck and call of the possessing spirits. They are responsible for writing down spiritual messages, prescriptions, or other remedies on small slips of paper which the clients take with them. Ushers are supposed to insure that each spirit has a sufficient number of clients waiting to consult with him (spirits are often male). They must also move clients in and out of the altar room in the proper way. Lines of waiting clients must be straight and clients who are already "passed" (ritually cleansed) must never be allowed to cut through the lines of the "unclean," waiting clients.

Male mediums are more serious about these responsibilities than female mediums. At the "Evangelized Umbanda" center run by Jorge,

ten out of fifteen male spirit mediums were permanent scribes and ushers. They performed their tasks alongside of female *cambonas* whose lackadaisical style irritated them. For example, male ushers thought it more important to balance the number of clients waiting in each line, whereas *cambonas* gave priority to the wishes of each client.

Only five men worked with clients at Jorge's center. In the opinion of female mediums at this center, the other ten men could not work *incorporado* because they were weak, that is, they refused to refrain from drinking, smoking, and other activities which diminished their mediumistic abilities.

The highlights of development are seven ritual confirmations: Baptism, "Triangle of Fire," Initiation, "Work of the Sea," "Waterfalls," "Stones," and Oriental Line and the Old Blacks. As the *cambona* advances, she becomes a *medium aspirante* ("aspiring medium") and eventually a *medium con guia* ("medium with a guide"). These events are important ritual markers. But medium candidates are prepared weekly during the development classes, too. These classes reveal the important qualities of the spirit medium.

The development classes observed at the two centers of "Evangelized Umbanda" emphasized self-discipline and submission to the rules of the ritual at the centers. Good mediums must maintain a healthy, pure body. This requires the observance of taboos against overeating, smoking, and drinking in general and especially on the nights of Umbanda sessions. Proper behavior and conformity to social norms is very important, too. Spirit mediums must lead exemplary lives in order to avoid malicious gossip and rumors. In their personal lives, they should maintain harmonious relationships with their spouses. Ideally, their domestic lives must be in order, too.

To summarize, spirit mediums possess an innate quality (mediumistic ability) which must be perfected through development. Those who delay or resist development are troubled by "tests" of spiritual endurance. Development is the process of learning how to meet these spiritual tests and to conquer them. It marks the transition from layperson to medium. Although men and women may become spirit mediums, women outnumber men in the position. Even when men develop, they often fill roles such as scribe or usher supporting rather than participating in the important ritual of consultation. Men are perceived to be weak creatures, unable to endure the spiritual tests and the rigors of development. Where do women get their spiritual strength? Strength comes from dealing with everyday life, from the performance of complementary roles.

Spiritual Strength and Suffering

One Umbanda spirit medium summarized her feelings about the suffering¹⁶ of women as follows:

Women suffer more than men, both on the spiritual level and on the material level. This history of suffering makes women better suited to be mediums. Women suffer because of their husbands. If a woman is sexually suffering, then all her life is wrong. Women learn to suffer with patience and resignation.

"Suffering" originates in a variety of difficulties stemming from domestic relations, especially from anything which prevents women from being good mothers and wives. The primary problem facing married women, informants say, is male infidelity. Some said such a discovery would be the "greatest shock of their lives." Others, holding a more practical view, believed male infidelity was to be expected since men cannot confine their sexual desires to one woman. Most thought women should try to maintain harmony within the family and not allow jealousy over extramarital affairs to lead to a separation. Male infidelity accompanied by irresponsible spending habits could cause even greater problems for married women. And they expressed concern that in such a situation they, as mothers and wives, would not be able to educate their children adequately or manage their household properly. These concerns reflect accurately the dependent position of most Brazilian women, who as labor market surveys show, are "economically inactive." Even the small percent who are employed are concentrated in low-paying and informal sector jobs.

Women survive such threats to their success as wives and mothers because they are spiritually strong. Inner strength comes from their great capacity for humility and sacrifice. And these are precisely the qualities believed desirable in spirit mediums. On the other hand, Brazilian men are believed to be "brutal," more accustomed to violence. Thus, there is an expectation that they cannot conform as easily to the rigorous demands of development and the post-development restrictions and taboos required to perform the role of spirit medium successfully.

Occupations of Spirit Mediums

A majority of the female spirit mediums who worked at the centers of "Evangelized Umbanda" claimed to be unemployed housewives. Those who were employed worked as domestic servants, cleaning houses and washing clothes for pay, or in clerk-typist positions in offices and factories of Pórtó Alegre. Age appeared to be an important factor in determining whether or not the employed spirit mediums worked as paid domestics or

as clerk-typists in the office buildings in Pôrto Alegre. Older women generally were employed in the former and younger women in the latter.

A similar pattern is reported from São Paulo where Pressel (1974: 154) provides occupational data on the spirit mediums in her study. Both male and female spirit mediums are either employed in informal sector occupations/or are outside the work-force in the economically inactive category.

A larger sample of spirit medium is available from Rio de Janeiro. Reporting the occupations of four hundred-three spirit mediums from fourteen Umbanda centers Brown's (1974: 194-208) data reflects a similar occupational profile. In her sample, two hundred and sixty-nine or 67 percent of the total are female and the majority, or one hundred fifty-five or 58 percent are economically inactive housewives. This figure may be higher since the sex of those listed as students is unknown. The following one hundred-fourteen women and one hundred-twelve men are economically active: Civil Servants (thirty-two); Military Officers (seventeen); Professionals (twenty-four); Commerce (fifty-three); Transport (four); Industry (nine); Skilled Labor (fifty); Semi-skilled (forty-four). Unfortunately, Brown does not provide the sex of those in each occupation.

Although the occupational data on Umbandists are scarce, it is clear that female Umbandists' occupational profile is similar to the one reported for Brazilian women in general, that is, female Umbandists, like Brazilian women as a group, appear to be marginal participants in the labor market. Since labor force participation rates are often used to measure an individual's or a group's share of the benefits accruing from modernization and development, it would appear that neither Umbandists nor women generally are partaking in these benefits. Tracking female labor-force participation from 1940-1970, those years during which Brazil's economy experienced its greatest period of industrialization, only an average of 20 percent of all Brazilian women (ten years old and older) were considered economically active. (See Table 4.) Incredible as it may seem, the figures present the possibility that 80 percent of all Brazilian women were unemployed, outside the work force, seemingly idle. Among those women who were economically active, 80 percent were employed in the service sector (Madeira and Singer 1975: 491). This sector, as Table 5 shows, was the lowest-paying labor market sector.

On the surface, it appears that most Brazilian women are outside the modern work force and most female Umbandists, by their own admission, are unemployed housewives. Yet to conclude that neither Umbandists nor women make any significant contribution to production is premature. The productive activities of women and those of Umbanda spirit mediums are invisible to outside observers. As Boulding (1980: 5)

TABLE 4. Population Present, 10 Years Old and Over Per Sector of Activity: Female

Economic Activity	Persons 10 Years Old and Older			
	1940	1950	1960	1970
	% of Total			
Economically Active	19.2	13.6	16.5	18.5
Agriculture, forestry logging, hunting, fishing	9.0	4.1	5.0	3.8
Industry	2.0	2.1	2.1	1.9
Marketing	0.3	0.5	0.7	1.1
Services	6.6	5.0	5.9	7.1
Transportation, communications, and storage	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2
Social Services	0.8	1.3	1.7	3.0
Public Administration	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.5
Other Activities	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.9
Not Economically Active	80.8	86.4	83.4	81.5
% Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Absolute Number Total	14,603,238	18,469,715	24,622,009	33,305,630

Source: FIGBE (1975:35)

TABLE 5. Distribution of Female Labor Force and Average Wages and Salaries Within Selected Industrial Sectors, 1970 (Percentage Distribution)

Sector	% of Total	Salary	
		0-Min.	Above Min.
Rendering of Services	45	76	34
Social Services	18.02	40	60
Processing	16	57	23
Merchandising	10.66	54	46
Public Administration	4	21	79
Liberal Professions	1.73	49	51
Transportation, Communication Storage	1.16	24	76
Construction	.29	32	68
Public Utilities	.20	17	83
Mineral Extraction	.08	76	34
Other	2.86		
Total	100.00 (7,465,160)	Varies from region to region	

Source: PNAD 1973, Tables 2.3 % 2.31
on pages 22-23; Tables 3.1 % 3.11 on page 36

has noted, the tasks women perform go unnoticed in most third world developing countries. The case of Umbanda will be discussed in later sections.

The failure of census takers and economic planners to take notice of the productive activities of women is in part definitional and involves the concepts of work, social production, and remuneration (see: Madeira and Singer 1975: 490-93). In Brazil, "work" is any productive activity engaged in for pay. Ideally, real work is also "socially productive," (i.e., extra-domestic) (1975: 491). Thus, most of the traditional domestic production performed by women is by implication socially unproductive work. When such work is performed for pay outside the home, as in the case of domestic service, the person performing such work is "economically active" but socially unproductive. Socially unproductive work appears to be similar to that type of work which characterizes the informal labor market.

The Spirit Medium and the Informal Sector

Brazilian women, as we have seen, have remained marginal participants in the labor force throughout the period of economic development. Those who are employed find work primarily in the service sector, the lowest paying sector of the economy. In the urban areas new jobs have accompanied industrialization and, theoretically at least, should have been of sufficient numbers to absorb those who sought employment. Indeed, some younger and/or more highly educated women have found work in these new job markets (Miranda 1977: 270).

The marginal position of women appears related to the kind of employment they are able to find. In this regard, the distinction between the formal and the informal market sectors that has been made by those who analyze the urban labor market and its role in labor absorption contributes to our understanding of female marginality.

The urban labor market is divided into segments which differ as to the types of employment found in them. The formal sector is characterized by higher paying, protected positions in which workers are seen as contributing directly to the modern economy. Such jobs offer security, stability, and some advancement. The informal sector is defined by temporary employment without job security or protection. This type of work functions to prepare workers for employment in the formal sector. Migrants and unskilled workers, according to this view, need time to acquire those skills necessary for formal employment. The informal sector fills this need. Even so, not everyone will be able to obtain formal sector jobs. The chief barrier to formal sector employment facing men is educa-

tion according to Abreu (1976: 185) who analyzed the absorption of male migrants into the urban areas of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Women, however, are likely to remain in the informal sector their entire working lives.¹⁷ In his 1976 study, Abreu predicts that portion of the Brazilian population likely to be employed in the informal sector:

the triad of age-sex-position in the household have been signalled out as major determinants of informal employment. Thus, the sector consists mainly of females, males outside prime working ages, and workers who are not the main breadwinners of the household (1976: 54-55).

Women who work are likely to be employed in the informal sector and they are unlikely to leave this sector and enter the protected, formal sector. The informal sector, while transitional for men, is permanent for women.

For the jobs which women typically hold, the distinction between formal and informal sector employment may be blurred by the similarity of tasks performed. In Brazil, between 1940 and 1970, most employed women worked in domestic service drawing upon traditional household skills. A similar finding from Mexico prompted Arizpe (1977: 29) to argue that the formal-informal sector division as it concerns women is tenuous at best. (See Table 6.) As she observes, female domestic servants who earn a salary are considered economically active while the housewife, doing the same chores as the domestic servant, is "economically inactive" by official standards. Yet, when they are in economic need Mexican and Brazilian women may fall back on their domestic skills which they can actively exchange for wages. Working as a paid domestic on a part-time basis in order to earn supplemental income places the worker in the informal sector. But performing the same chores on a regular basis for one or more employers under the protection of a contract moves the workers into the formal sector.

TABLE 6. Female Economic Roles and Their Labor Market Sector

Employed		Unemployed
Formal	Informal	
	Domestic tasks: baking, sewing, embroidery, tutoring, childcare	
Contractual		
Long-term paid	Part-time intermittent	Full-time unpaid

Source: derived from Arizpe 1977:36

As Jelin (1977: 138) points out "... domestic service is not a job like others." Domestic service is not productive. There is no product being produced by the labor expended. "It is work performed for self-consumption, and in that sense domestic work is more comparable to housework performed by the members of the family without pay than to work performed by a wage worker" (1977: 139). Domestic service extends the traditional private domain work out into the public sector and in this respect it is similar to the Umbanda spirit medium role and its dependency on feminine qualities and skills in role recruitment. Informal sector employment, domestic service, and the Umbanda spirit medium role share common attributes. Entry is easy, age and skill levels pose no threat to women.

Yet, unlike low-paying informal (or formal) sector employment, the Umbanda spirit medium role offers prestige and "power." This is demonstrated in the consultation ritual. Spirit mediums accumulate information about clients after frequent and regular contact. Using this information, the spirit medium is able to tap these resources by intertwining the problems and solutions (cures) of various clients. A set of examples collected from one female spirit medium from Pôrto Alegre illustrates this point. The four cases summarized below were collected during fieldwork in 1974-1975 from one spirit medium who carefully and eagerly explained the kind of help which clients receive from spirits mediums (see Lerch 1980: 148-52). The spirit medium who revealed these data had been "working" as a medium for the past ten years. She was then in her mid-fifties and popular at the Umbanda center among the clients.

In the first pair of cases, the spirit medium uses knowledge of the hopes and fears of one of her male clients to pressure him into donating a portion of his income to help support the children of another one of her clients. The first example tells about the problem which faced a young woman whom I shall call Margarita. Margarita found herself deserted by the father of her children. As the time passed, she experienced increasing difficulty supporting her family. When she approached the spirit medium, she was in a desperate state. The spirit possessing Dona Bette (the medium) told Margarita that her present suffering was related to her behavior in another life, another incarnation. The spirit explained to Margarita that in her former life she had been a man, and as a man, she had fathered several children, deserted them, and left her "wife" to fend for herself. The spirit explained that she was being punished for these past sins. Total relief was impossible; yet, this explanation was expected to alleviate some of her pain. It was the current children of Margarita who were the real innocent victims in this situation and their welfare concerned the spirit. Margarita was sent home for the time being.

In the second case, Roberto was fearful about recovery from an "ill-

ness" that had plagued him for many years. As a regular client of Dona Bette's spirit, his hope for a "cure" was well known to her. At a consultation following shortly after that of Margarita, the spirit of Dona Bette told Roberto that if he wanted to get better he would have to contribute some of his wealth to other people. In short, he should be charitable. Thus, the spirit encouraged Roberto to come to the aid of Margarita's children by promising him that charitable works would effect a cure for his illness. Here we have the solution of Margarita's problems being tied to the cure of an illness of another client, Roberto. The spirit guide effectively reallocated the "wealth" of Roberto and rechanneled it toward the supposed benefit of another set of clients, Margarita and her children.

In the second pair of cases a similar reallocation of resources is involved only this time one client's connections are used to help another client find a job. Iara, a female spirit medium who was just beginning her career as a medium, met with the spirit of Dona Bette's (the same medium who worked out a solution for the clients in the first set of cases) and asked for her spirit's help. Iara worked as a domestic servant in the home of a woman of Italian descent who apparently did not approve of Iara's spending late nights out at the Umbanda center. After failing to heed several warnings from her employer, Iara was fired from her job. Since domestic servants often live in the homes of their employers, as Iara had, dismissal meant losing not only an income but also a place to live. Iara received help from her friend Dona Bette on two levels: Dona Bette provided Iara with temporary lodgings, household goods, and, in return for help with domestic tasks, a small income; Dona Bette's spirit also knew a person, a former client, who could help Iara find another job. Iara was eventually hired by the former client and, with her friend Dona Bette's encouragement, began attending night classes to obtain a high school level education.

The consultation ritual is characterized by "power" in the sense that mediums, using their spiritual influence, can reallocate goods and services among a network of clients. Umbanda spirit mediums would assure me during interviews that they never solicited pay for their services. In fact, the cult leader of one urban center often boasted to the clients gathered for evening sessions that the services rendered at his center were free of charge. Unsolicited gifts and contributions were always welcomed. Thus, as with informal sector jobs, the role of spirit medium is low-paying but, unlike the informal sector job, there is considerable prestige and some "power" attached to the position of Umbanda medium, at least in the eyes of the clients who are likely to be friends, neighbors, relatives as well as strangers.

Summary and Conclusions

There are some striking similarities between the typical informal sector job and the position of Umbanda spirit medium. First, women are predominant in both. They will continue to find employment in the informal sector as long as wage discrimination, age discrimination, higher education, and extra-domestic skills are required to enter formal sector jobs (other than the lowest paying, lowest prestige ones). Women will continue to predominate in Umbanda, too. Gender definitions make it an acceptable position for women, suitable to their special nature. Age and skill levels will never be a barrier to entry since the key qualification for the role, *mediunidade*, is an ascribed, not an achieved, trait. Reentry is easy and scheduling of activity can be fitted to life-cycle needs.

There are certain advantages offered by the position of Umbanda spirit medium, too. In interviews with spirit mediums in Pôrto Alegre, informants stressed the immense satisfaction that they derived from "working" in Umbanda. Listening to other peoples problems, one spirit medium said, taught her how to better deal with her own. More experienced mediums felt pleasure from being able to help people who were troubled. In addition to the satisfaction derived from helping others solve their problems, many spirit mediums discussed the steadying influence which their possessing spirits had brought to their own lives. Some cited miraculous recovery from lingering illnesses and others simply the importance of having a purpose in life, a mission to fulfill.

For many women, and men too, the position of Umbanda spirit medium does not replace the need to find a full or a part-time job. Indeed, there is no intention in this paper to imply otherwise. Rather than replace employment, the role of spirit medium supplements employment. Perhaps it is more than just a coincidence that Umbandists describe their activity in Umbanda as "*trabalho*" or work. At least for women, the skills required to become a successful spirit medium are often the very same skills necessary to find employment, formal or informal.

NOTES

¹The "interior" neighborhoods, according to informants in Pôrto Alegre, are located farthest from the city center, the poorest, and the most lacking in urban conveniences such as paved roads, indoor plumbing, and electricity. Pigs, cows, chickens, and horses wander freely around. The more common label, *favela*, is used to describe these neighborhoods.

²The ethnographic data in this paper were gathered during an eleven-month field study in 1974-1975 in the city of Pôrto Alegre, Brazil. The fieldwork was supported by a travel grant from the Graduate School of Ohio State University. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Women and Development Conference sponsored by the Latin American Studies Association and WAID held at the 1980 LASA Annual

Meetings, Bloomington, Indiana. Additional research and revisions were undertaken in the summer of 1981 when I attended a seminar entitled "Unity and Diversity in Brazilian National Culture," led by Professor Charles Wagley of the Latin American Studies Program, University of Florida, Gainesville. A summer grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities supported my participation in this seminar.

³Estimates of the popularity of Umbanda and other forms of spiritism in Brazil can reach as high as fifty million people or close to one-half of the entire population (Stott 1980: 32).

⁴Kardecism is a form of spiritism named after its founder Allan Kardec, the *nom de plume* of Frenchman Leon Denizart Hippiolyte Rivail. For an account of his life and works, see Macklin (1974: 338-39)

⁵According to E. Friedl (1975: 8), "Power is derived from the right to distribute and exchange valued goods and services to those not in a person's domestic unit."

⁶The role paradigm used in this study is drawn from the works of Nadel (1957), Hughes (1969), Merton (1957) and Sarbin and Allen (1968). Role is viewed as a system of internally consistent parts: (1) role name or label; (2) role expectations, viewed as actions people should do or qualities in adjectival terms such as "friendly," "sincere," etc.; (3) role attributes (Nadel 1957: 31); (4) role enactment or conduct (Sarbin and Allen 1968: 547), and (5) role recruitment or variables revealed in a list of required characteristics to determine whether a person is perceived as eligible for recruitment into the role.

⁷In Brazil, according to Abreu (1976: 22-23), "the formal-informal dichotomy relies heavily on the concept of job protection . . . Protection is reflected in the existence of fringe benefits . . . , and wage levels which are normally above market clearing levels. "There are entrance barriers (i.e., academic credentials, aptitude tests) which prevent all workers from finding employment in the formal sector. Hence, many workers can only find employment in the informal sector where jobs lack protection, entry is easy and turnover rates high, and where wages are determined by competition" (Thomas Merrick 1976).

⁸According to Nadel (1957: 71), individuals are often recruited into additional roles based upon attributes indicating the performance of specified other roles held by the person either previously or concurrently.

⁹All names are fictitious.

¹⁰For a recent discussion of *Exu* possession in São Paulo see E. Pressel (1980: 107-128).

¹¹"Adeptos" translates as "followers," or "believers."

¹²Possession trance is a form of altered state of consciousness.

¹³Altered states of consciousness (ASC) are conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition, and emotions are altered (E. Bourguignon 1979: 236). A. Ludwig (1968: 69-85) has made a typology of ASCs based on the mode by which the state is induced; yet, despite the variety of causes of ASCs, they share such common features as alterations in thinking, disturbed sense of time, loss of control, changes in expressions of emotions, changes in body image, perceptual distortions, changes in meaning and significance assigned to experiences or perceptions, a sense of the ineffable, feelings of rejuvenation, and hypersuggestibility.

¹⁴*Roupas para firmar*, or "clothes for blessing" is a cleansing ritual believed to affect the general well being of the victim by cleansing the body's spiritual "aura" of evil influences.

¹⁵This is true only of the complete novice to Umbanda. Many spirit mediums change centers, thus shortening the time required for development. The cult leader has the authority to decide when a particular spirit medium is ready to work giving consultations.

¹⁶See: A. Pescatello (1973) and E. P. Stevens (1973) for a discussion of the suffering syndrome in Brazil and Latin America.

¹⁷See: Boulding (1980), Leacock (1977), and Miranda (1977).

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