

*The following interview took place in Sorbal, Brazil during January, 1999.*

## JOSE MARIA: BRAZILIAN UMBANDA SAINT FATHER

In the days of slavery in Brazil, an estimated 3.6 million Africans were brought over from the Congo, Angola, and Mozambique. When some of them escaped and came into contact with the indigenous cultures of Brazil, they met Indian elders and shamans (pajes). In their ceremonies, they experienced the presence of both African and Indian ancestral spirits. They exchanged healing knowledge and spiritual practices resulting in a sacred bond between Indian and African ways. Later, Rio's high society introduced a new form of spiritism brought from Paris by a man named, Allan Kerdec. It featured the summoning of ancestral spirits. In these contexts, the syncretic (blended) religion of Umbanda was formed, allowing for the expression of diverse Brazilian spirits that include what they call northerners, Caboclos (Indians), bjanos, Pretos Velhos (old blacks), sailors, and children. They also give offerings to catholic saints that are mirrored with the African-Brazilian deities known as orixas.

The ceremonies and practices of Umbanda are directed by a man or woman called "Pai" (or Mre) de Santo", that is, saint father or mother. This person is a medium who calls forth the spirits typically in a large room with an altar where members sing "Pontos," chants for a spiritual entity.



Jose Maria

### JOSE MARIA:

My spiritual life began when I was five years old. At that time, I became emotionally sick with a fever and was scared. My mother believed I had epilepsy and gave me some medicine. I never had an epileptic seizure, but back then village people referred to all nervous and unusual mental problems as epilepsy.

When I was seven years of age, my mother took me to Sabrol, Brazil, where we visited a grandmother who was a healer. She told us that I was a spiritually gifted boy. She said that I should go to the city of Fortaleza to visit a certain Macumba house where another elder woman was in charge. (Editor's note: "Macumba" is the

everyday term used by Brazilians to describe African-based spirit worship, which is further differentiated into two forms of worship: Candomble, a mix of the African Yoruban religions with Catholicism; and Umbanda, a broader mix of Yoruba, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Catholicism.)

The old woman at the next Macumba house told my family to place all of their gold and valuables in a bowl of water. On the second day, I was instructed to drink the water, and I was told it would cause me to have a dream. I dreamt of a tree. When I woke up, I left home holding a candle in my hand, setting out to find the gurema tree I had seen in my dream. When I found it, I received a spirit. I fell to the ground and went into a long trance.



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Hours later, my family found me and took me back home. My mother was very angry and forbid me to do anything like that again. She feared that the dead spirits would go into my body. Nevertheless, I returned to the tree when she wasn't at home. I would take a candle and walk to the tree. The spirits did go inside of me. It was a very strange experience that felt like having to urinate and being unable to stop the flow. When I went to the tree, the experience was always the same. The spirit was always waiting for me. The tree doesn't exist anymore, but whenever I'm weak, I go to the place where the tree used to live and become replenished with energy.

Between five and ten years of age, I often went into trance. It felt very strong and I thought I was displaced outside of my self. People started coming to me with their sickness. They wanted me to help them. They asked me to receive the spirit. People would make this request at the market, near the river, and all over the village. I would oblige and the spirit would speak to them, specifying how to be healed. I am from the same spiritual village as my head father, the Indian King. We call my head father, King Rei Tapinare. I was introduced to this spirit at the tree, but I didn't know his name at the time.

When I was around 10 or 11 years old, a ring was stolen in the village. The owner came to me with a horrible headache and asked for help. She really wanted to know the name of the person who had stolen the ring. She asked me this while I was in a trance state. I was able to help her find it.

After that experience, I left town and stayed at my adopted sister's home. Her neighbor was sick. I placed candles in different points around her house. When the woman asked who had put out the candles, I told her my story. She immediately took me to a Macumba house. The father saint at that place wouldn't let me talk, saying, "No children allowed here." Not discouraged, the woman took me to another



Jose Maria conducting a healing ceremony



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house. There we found a mother of saints. She accepted me, initiated me, and became my mother saint. Her name was Rocilda. She embraced me and put her hand on my head, announcing, "He is a medium." She then dressed me up in white with a green scarf, in the costume fitting the spirit from the tree that had come into me. When the ceremony began, I started to cry. My friend asked if I wanted to go and I said, "No, it's OK." The mother saint came to me. I was sitting in the chair she had been sitting in. She fell to her knees and asked to be blessed by me. The King told her, through me, "I brought this child to you. He is my son. Take care of him. Please teach him."

To complete the first set of teachings, you must go through seven steps to become a son of saints. The spirit had taught me the first three steps and the saint mother had to finish the next steps. The spirit told us that it must be completed within a year. The steps involve learning the teachings of each of the orishas (the African Gods). For example, I started with Oxossi, the orisha of the hunter of the woods. For each orisha, I had to learn the appropriate dance, rhythm, and music.

After I went through the seven steps, the saint mother told me that I must next learn the "Umbanda of the left" which is called Quimbada (black magic). The first seven steps belonged to the right side of the spirit world. The popular name of the whole set of teachings that includes Quimbada and Umbanda is Macumba.

Where I live, Macumba refers to the drum, the instrument needed to make spirits dance. (Editor's note: Brazilian slave holders allowed their slaves to play the drums, whereas slave holders in the United States did not. In Brazil, the rhythm of the saints became the samba. As some are fond of saying, this is why Brazil got the samba, and the United States got the blues.) The popular name of a father or mother saint is macumbeira. The father of Quimbada is called a kuimbeandeirol. The saint of Quimbada can be used to kill someone. It is a dangerous and sometimes evil practice. (Editor's note: It is overly simplistic to say that Umbanda only works for good and Quimbada solely works for evil. There is a tension between good and bad that holds together the whole spiritual universe.)

The saint mother sent me to the Quimbada houses so I could see how they work. They didn't like my energy and claimed I was spoiling their work. They were doing wrong things. But my spirits always protected me from harm. I never did anything bad toward anyone and my enemies were not able to hurt me. If someone else came to me with a curse, I learned how to remove it.

There are two kinds of healing: spiritual healing during ceremonies when spirits come to help and physical healing when people come during the week and are helped through praying. For the latter, I put a candle on my altar, light it, and ask for a spirit to go to the sick person and help them. It is not necessary for the sick person to see me.

When newborn babies come to me, I pray over them and give a blessing. I don't use a spirit when I give a blessing. I simply pray. Jesus is everything. I can't begin or end without Him. Oxala is Christ, the main God. After Oxala are the orishas, then princes and kings, Indians, and our African ancestors.

I have no students. When I die, what I know will be forgotten. Most people come to me for help and after they are helped, they don't come back. They are not in love with spiritual matters like me. They are not in love with God. I am in love with God and this love makes me feel drunk.



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Temple Room

I have no interest in power. When people come to me, they have usually tried other healers. They come to me when they are desperate and really need help. By the time they get to me, they have spent all of their money on doctors and healers. But I must still help them. It is my responsibility. I am a worker of God and I love to help people. God wants me to do this.

After learning about the initial steps, acquainting myself with the orishas, and seeing what takes place on the left side, I did not see myself as a father of saints. I was simply a housekeeper of God's work. Every day I learned new things. I always felt deficient. Jesus is the true father of saints. He knows everything. I am only a tool in his hands. In that way I can help others.

I see Jesus in the beauty of a person, in an elder's wisdom, in the evening stars. I ask for help from God when I pray. When help comes, this confirms to me that God is present. People say that statues have no value. Each image and statue I look at is an image of God. I like seeing a photograph of someone I love.

Sometimes I feel like a garbage can. People put their garbage in me. I cry for God and for people who are a part of God. God is pure like the wind. One night, while it was raining, a car stopped in front of my house and a woman came out. I knew her from a local church. I was lying in my hammock and I invited her to come inside. She sat in a chair and stared at my room. She asked, "Do you work with a dog? I am



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looking for a dog." I asked her, "Do you see a picture of a dog in your mind?" The dog image she was looking for was an image of the devil. The woman went on, "What brought me here was that all my friends went to college and became lawyers and doctors and made me feel unimportant. Please do something to help put them down." I calmly replied, "You are looking for the devil here and he lives inside of you."

Some people come and ask me why I have a big house and live alone. They ask, "How do you manage living in such a large place?" "Don't you want a sex life?" My answer is always, "When I was young I had lovers and sex, but now all that I want is to love my friends and family."

For me, the best place in the world is my home. I rarely go to anyone else's place. This is because Umbanda is not understood by all people and it causes unpleasant gossip for others if I visit them in their homes. I love it when people come to my house and visit. I cook for them and enjoy every moment.

I learned to cook from my grandmother because my mother didn't know how. My grandmother was a beautiful woman. She was tall, blonde, strong, courageous, and always told the truth. My hands are from my grandmother. She and I have long fingers. Grandmother is now very happy where she is in the spirit world. She is happy about what I am doing for others. She used to say that every person has a weak point, but believed that I had no weakness. I was like a baby Jesus to her.

In 1958 we had a great draught. It didn't rain for a long time and there was no fresh milk available. I closed my house and went to visit my grandmother. On my way, I stopped to visit a friend and his father who were working on the land. They gave me two pieces of corn. When I arrived, I asked my grandmother, who was 99 years old, if she wanted to eat something. I had bought some condensed sweet milk and prepared a special dish by mixing it with ground corn. My grandmother could smell it and asked, "Who is making canjica?" "How can this be possible?" I prepared a bowl for her and my aunt. She said, "You rascal. How did you manage to make this dish?" She continued, "I will never eat this dish again because the next time the corn grows, I will not be alive." I didn't eat my bowl, but gave it to her the next morning saying, "Old woman, you are eating it one more time." She ate it and died within the year before the next corn grew again.



Jose Maria

My mother and grandmother believed that all people were good. It didn't matter what color a person was. My grandmother used to say, "I love all people if they respect me. If someone comes to my house, I will treat them well." My mom didn't know how to cook and grandmother would tease her, "Woman, you are so beautiful. Why are you unable to hold a man with you? Look at how your son wins people with the fork. He wins the people with his cooking."

A young boy with tuberculosis came to my house and sat by the door near my altar. I prepared him some fish, rice, and beans. I put all of the food in plastic and gave it to him. Later, my friend came



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over and wanted me to fix him lunch and was upset when he saw that I had given away my food to the boy. I told him, "I would never betray God. He wants us to feed those who are sick and unable to find food. I must do this for people who are in greater need than myself. It is my duty."

I am proud of one thing. When I was 12 years old, I was still living in Massape. There was a laundry woman who washed clothes in the river. She used to leave her children at home when she went to wash clothes. One day she bought some cashews for her children. The next morning she left home with some beans cooking on the stove. The children broiled the cashew nuts and the house caught on fire. When I saw the fire, I shouted out that there are children in the house. At that time, my hair was very long. The children were screaming and men were standing by looking, not doing anything. I took a piece of wood, knocked down the door, and a wall fell down. I grabbed each child with my arms. My hair caught on fire, but I went inside once more to get their goats, the source of milk for the children. After I came out with them, the house collapsed. People were shocked that I did it.

My mother spanked me because I lost my hair. I answered her, "You have your feelings of being a mother. I was right to save those children." My grandmother later saw me and said, "Well done." The boys now live in Fortaleza and have children of their own. Twenty years later, I met them in the market. He introduced me to his wife by saying, "He saved my life."

One of my aunts was widowed three times. She eventually came to live with me and another three older women came with her. One had leprosy, another was mad, and the third had a heart problem. The one that was mad broke many things in my home. People told me to put her in an institution. They argued that it wasn't good for her to be here. The woman with leprosy made everyone leave my house. No one came to see me because they were afraid of catching her disease. She became worse and turned blind. I bathed her, fed her, and gave her medicine. People warned me that I would get sick. I answered, "I will not abandon her. I accepted her as she is, as God brought her to me. Five years ago, the last of these three women passed away. They finished their last years with me. People also worried because I was taking care of many young children. None of them became sick. I prayed to God that he would protect my

skin and the children's skin. Perhaps God cared for them because of my love for Him.



Jose Maria and Lualal

I feel that I am a mother of the suffering. Lualal is a close friend of mine who is also a mother of the suffering. She lives nearby. She also has some things to say.

### LAURAL:

I have known Jose Maria for 32 years. Many years ago, my mother had a spiritual disease and was treated by Jose Maria. She was sick for over a year and no physical doctor was able to help her. Her headaches wouldn't go away. Jose Maria said she had three evil spirits around her. He helped her get well. Every time I took her to one of his

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ceremonies, he took away a spirit. He worked with the midnight Indian spirits. Those spirits helped my mother get rid of the evil forces around her. After that, I started going to Umbanda on a regular basis.

Before our ceremonies, we wash ourselves with special water to protect us from bad spirits. In the beginning of a ceremony, the room is cleaned with smoke and rum. These things absorb all the energies and make the place clean, empty, and ready for spiritual work. Different offerings also must be in place for the different orishas. All the spirits like rum, while sugar cane brandy is for the mermaid and female spirits. Some of the orishas like red wine, but the Indian spirits prefer beer. Each orisha also has a certain color of candle. Oxala has white candles and they are always present with the other orisha candles. For example, Exu (the equivalent of St. Anthony) uses red and/or black; Ogum (St. George) uses red; Oxossi (St. Sebastian) uses green; and Oxum (St. Bartholomew) uses yellow and dark blue.

When a healing begins, the sick person kneels in front of the saint father who is in trance. You tell him what you want. He then places his right hand on your head and blesses you. You feel a back and forth rocking movement when he touches your head. It makes you feel dizzy and sometimes you pass out. After that, you are asked to stand as he spins your body. During the spinning, he blows smoke on you and may ask you to drink some rum. Next he asks you to sit down near his right side.

If you need more help, a helper will take you to another shrine. This other shrine is for recovery. The healing always takes place during the ceremony. Everyone who has sickness or a problem goes to Jose Maria. In the ceremony, he smokes a cigarette and makes a lot of smoke. That makes us dance. After I watched him heal my mother, I trusted Umbanda and liked it very much. I joined the group and have been with it ever since.

I go to ceremonies once a week. When I am there, I feel my eyes start to close. I think I am going to faint from being dizzy and I get the impression that I am going to fall into a hole. I hear the sound you hear when you put your ear up to a seashell. That's how I begin my spiritual experiences. I am no longer an observer, but a true participant. I am called a daughter and Jose Maria is my godfather.

Jose Maria told me that he originally saw that these things would happen to me. He asked me to be part of the chain, the link of members in Umbanda where each shares his or her energy with the whole. Some members of the chain receive spirits while the others hold on to one another and feel the energies. In the ceremony, the chain of members raises the energy in the room. Jose Maria, the saint father, is the first to manifest or receive a gift. Next the members receive the spirits. They dance and speak. The ceremony ends when the spirits have finished their work and everyone is calm.

In the beginning of a ceremony, the saint father receives one of the orishas and sings its song. All of the orishas have



Jose Maria praying

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equal importance and each orisha has a song that is regarded as a line or chain to the spirit. For example, the line of the forest takes you to the Indian spirit. After the saint father or mother receives an orisha, the other members are invited to receive spirits. When someone first receives a spirit, they are very calm, quiet, and focused. Then they start to shake and tremble. Eventually their body posture changes and they move in a way that is unique to the spirit. Each orisha moves in a particular way.



A section of the Shrine

In Jose Maria's group, only three people don't speak for the spirits. I am one of those people. Although I can feel a spirit's energy, I would like to go further and fully receive it. The Indian spirit (Arranca Toco) is my favorite orisha. Tranca Rua (Exu) is my other favorite. Their energy comes inside my body very easily. They make me feel very good. Jose Maria is a very good man and a wonderful friend. He works for charity. Money is not the first thing in his life. I consider him as my second father and I love him very much.

I want the world to know about Jose Maria. He experiences a lot of suffering. When he arrived in Sorbal, there was great prejudice against him, both against Umbanda and his gender identity. But then all the politicians went to him for help when there were elections. And the police also went to him for help. It is also common for people to go to him pretending to be sick, just to test whether he is real. He always detects them and sends them away immediately.

I am the same as when I was a little girl. I wanted to help others and I always had a great love for God. I have great faith and know that God remembers me. At nine years of age, I received communion and started to feel a love for God. I learned to be this way from my mother. Umbanda doesn't make me feel less love for God. I go to Umbanda

because I like it and for the gratitude I have for how it helped my mother. It brings me closer to God. When Jose Maria's sister died, I raised her children. I feel like he needs my help. People say I am like a guardian angel. I pray three times a day. I usually pray with my rosary and I pray for many people.

If I could tell something to the world, it would be that people should be free and released from anger, hate, and violence. I wish that every person would know true peace, the peace that comes from faith in God. I have no fear at this time in my life, but this wasn't always the case. When my father died, I feared death for a while. But my faith carried me through. I am now in total peace.

### JOSE MARIA:

Laural has a water orisha. When people of water arrive in a ceremony, she feels their presence. She doesn't feel it enter from the top of her head, but from the bottom of her feet. She is trying to learn how to fully enter this spirit. Spirits usually touch you on the shoulders. Then they ride you. You shake at first.



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Then they settle down and speak through you. When the spirit comes into you, your body posture changes. Some spirits make you look more beautiful while others make you look ugly.

Many years ago, before I moved to Sobral, my neighbors began each morning by going to the river to get water. One day I was carrying my bowl of water on my head and I paused to look into a small grocery store. At first I saw the owner. Then, to my great surprise, he turned into a skeleton that drank a glass of brandy. I watched the liquor spill all over his skeletal bones. This sight shocked me and I fell down, spilling all of my water. I was taken home by my neighbors and when I gathered myself, people asked what I had seen. I told them about the skeleton in the store. Eight days later the owner of that grocery store passed away. After seeing that skeleton, I stayed away from the spiritual path for six months. I was later told that seeing a skeleton like that meant that I had received spiritual wisdom.

I am an Umbanda man. I take care of my people. When I see them quarreling, I intercede to help them make peace. I say, "This is God's house. We must make peace with each other." People must be good to each other in my house.

When I was 10 years old, I was very aggressive. I fought with knives and even served time in prison. Once a 36-year-old illiterate man asked me to read a letter he had received from his girlfriend. In the letter, she declared an end to their relationship because he had slept with a prostitute. After hearing that news, the man stabbed me with a knife. I walked to my family and showed them my wound. With blood pouring out of me, I was taken to a hospital in Sobral where they immediately put me into surgery. I opened my eyes 11 days later. Unfortunately, I acquired a bad infection from my wound. The doctor who operated on me intended to go into politics. He said that if I promised to help him win the election, he would provide me with medicine. He was elected and I recovered. Everyone was happy.

Months later, my mother and father went to church one Sunday morning. I stayed at home with my grandmother. I looked out the window and saw the man who had attacked me. He was walking by our house. I told my grandmother that I wanted to kill him. She said, "Take a knife and go." I grabbed a knife, followed him for a while, and then stabbed him three times.

I quickly ran away to my sister's house, waiting until it was dark. At that time, my family brought over a suitcase filled with my clothes. They told me that I had to leave town because the man was in a very bad condition. I went away for three months. The doctor who had become the politician later cleaned my file. The man didn't die and we all went on with our lives.

If I had killed that man, I would not be happy today. If you kill someone, you will always be unhappy. My mother later said, "If you had killed that man, I would still accept you. But if you become a saint father, I won't accept you." I had to follow God's purpose for me in spite of the rejection that came with it. Sometimes I feel like a saint father and at other times I feel like a saint mother. It depends on the occasion. I am both a father and a mother. That is my purpose in life.