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Light to the mind, peace to the heart and positive energies: health and disease according to Umbanda Esotérica or Iniciática

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Abstract: the chief point of this paper is to present a theological view of health and disease according to the doctrine advocated by Umbanda Esotérica or Iniciática (Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda), one of the schools of Umbanda. Therefore, the concepts of mental, astral and physical organisms will be discussed, as well as the importance of initiation for attaining a state of health. This research is based on the book *Umbanda: o*

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despertar da essência (Umbanda: the awakening of essence), first published in 1995 and expanded in the new edition of 2021.

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Introduction

In 1995 I wrote for the first time the text of *Umbanda: o despertar da essência* (Umbanda: the awakening of essence), 26 years ago, as a religious text in which I addressed important aspects of my school of Umbanda. At the time, Umbanda Esotérica or Iniciática (Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda) was conducted by my *pai de santo*, F. Rivas Neto, known as Mestre Arapiaga. These are religious knowledge developed by him that I have assimilated and translated into the book here addressed. Therefore, the product is a dialectical relationship between what my *pai de santo* has taught and what I have experienced.

In 2021 I reedited this book by Aláfia Editora (RIVAS, 2021) and, in the process of reviewing and expanding its content, I came across some approaches that fit perfectly into a discussion not only of religious insiders, but specifically in the

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field of Afro-Brazilian theology in general considering a proposal of Umbanda theology in a more precise way.

Among several possibilities, I choose in this paper to detail in the theological angle a health and disease proposal of Umbanda theology from the perspective of the Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda school. In order to do so, I will develop a notion of the body of the human being through the observation of the Mestre de Iniciação (Master of Initiation). Next, I will talk about the reasons and causes that provide the state of health or disease in the spirit. Finally, it follows a brief consideration of Initiation as a key to success in the balance between mind and body, spirit and matter. ■

Bodies of spiritual manifestation

The notion of body is simple and, at the same time, complex. Its simplicity lies in the perception that anyone may have about it. The question is straightforward: I only exist on this plane, in this dimension, because I have a body. Some people may care more about this bodily identity, others less, but in the end we exist and perceive our existence from our body.

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The complexity resides in the moment we try to immerse ourselves in this reality and observe how other areas of human knowledge can contribute with their perceptions and analyses. In the case in discussion, physiology and psychoanalysis ratified a dual perspective.

The dual view of the body is one that sometimes prioritizes the mind and sometimes the materiality of the body. In the midst of this psychophysical dualism, the body is defined according to the two theoretical aspects mentioned above, the one that makes it sacred because of its condition as the home of the soul and the spirit, both immortal, while, on the other hand, the one that neglects it for its material and mortal condition, the body conceived in its vulnerability and inevitable perishability. The Psychoanalytical aspect conceives the body as the physical support of the mind, however, it explains its immaterial aspect of: intelligence, emotion and feeling. The physiological aspect is valid and necessary to explain the biological basis of the body, especially the bodily expression. However, it is not enough to reach the fullness of its characterization. Even so, the physiological aspect contributes to the psychological investigation of the body, because it brings an underlying influence of coexistence in society, with cul-

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ture and history, which maximally approaches a more holistic interpretation of the body. (COSTA, 2011, p. 246, our translation).

The interesting research by Vani Maria de Melo Costa (2011) does not stop at this point. She discusses the various notions about the body throughout history and points to the opportunity for discussing the body beyond a plastered duality. Such angle is possible, but it is not the only one, nor does it necessarily respond to the needs of society today and in the past to deal with various needs, such as, for example, its health.

As noted in the text that I have recently reedited and taken as a basis for the discussion of this paper, “I emphasize that I do not go into the scientific medical field or of biomedicine at all, but I use the traditional wisdom of *terreiro* and its point of view in understanding disease” (RIVAS, 2021, p. 61, our translation). Therefore, my proposal is to dialogue with different types of knowledge and not to propose an overlap, not even a substitution between traditional, religious and scientific knowledge.

Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda then, through its presuppositions and religious doctrine, admits that the spirit as a prin-

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ciple governs all existing realities: natural, social and supernatural. Our condition as human beings is only possible, according to this religious lens, through the extent that the manifestation of the spirit in the present reality becomes viable.

Such manifestation can be didactically compared to seven vehicles of the spirit, going from the subtlest to the densest according to:

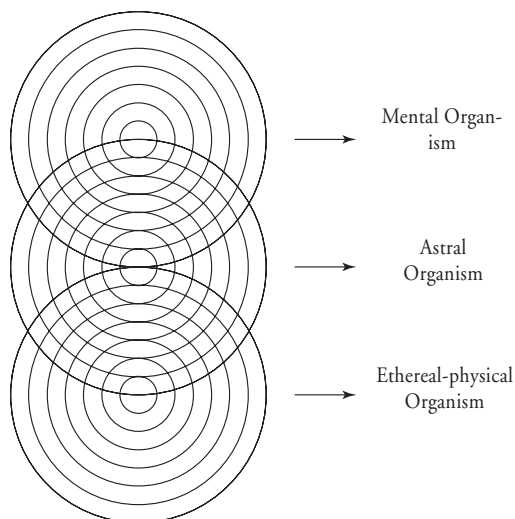
1° vehicle Karmanic Psychosomatic	It is a vehicle that has no direct connection with the spirit, whether it is incarnated or not. It contains all the information regarding the spiritual being in the natural realm, as a true file, with all the activities, so that the proper karmic measurement can take place.
2° vehicle Causal	It is the first vehicle directly connected to the spiritual being. It is an envelope of individuality. It consists of a single substance already in a differentiated state in mental matter. Headquarter of abstract thoughts, of intuition (not of the mediumistic modality).
3° vehicle Mental	It is the seat of reasoning. Consisting of “organized” mental matter. It is from this vehicle that the form, the “realized idea” of the other vehicles emerges.
4° vehicle Astrally pure	It is the channeler between the mental vehicles and others.
5° vehicle Astrally inferior	It works as an envelope for the pure astrally vehicle, keeping its basic characteristics. Also serving as a mediator between the pure astrally and etheric vehicles.
6° vehicle Etheric	Its atomic constitution is closer to what official science knows today. It serves as a decoder for all vehicles before the physical one. One of its functions is to absorb prana.
7° vehicle Physical	The physical body itself, composed of atoms, molecules and cells. (RIVAS, 2021, p. 62, our translation).

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This approach to the Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda clearly draws on the influences of Hindu, Theosophistic and European occultism traditions in general. By demonstrating the 7 vehicles or bodies, it seeks to give a dimension of the complexity of the manifestation of the spirit in multiple realities. After all, not only the 5 senses are the human being's contact channels with nature. Everyone has feelings and thoughts that determine or at least influence his action in the world.

Continuing on the description of the doctrine of Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda, the bodies or vehicles of spiritual manifestation can be grouped into 3 organisms, namely:



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The scheme is interesting because it reinforces that there is not interruption between the three organisms. They have a deep connection with each other, being able to access the mental and astral organism through the physical organism and vice versa. Then, it is possible to process supernatural mechanisms to act on physical health, as well as the physical body can offer important clues on how the spirit places itself in its various organisms.

The mental organism is the seat of ideas and thoughts. The astral organism is the driving force of feelings, and the ethereal-physical organism can be recognized as a great catalyst for the visible and invisible energies of our natural dimension.

The relationship presented here is gestalt, which does not fail to express a natural relationship with the Umbanda cosmovision celebrated by the faith of its adherents. Within the Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda it is admitted in its doctrine that the deities (Orixás) are our divine parents. Although there is always a preferential, the so-called Orixá of the person's head, which determines our existence in a proposal very close to henotheism, all Orixás have a home in all our bodies.

In the ethereal-physical organism, for instance, we recognize the chakras, or *axé* vortices, located in the head and

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which may be associated with Oxalá and Yemanjá, in the neck with Yori, in the heart with Xangô, in the splenic region with Oxóssi, in the belly with Ogun, and in the coccyx with Yorimá. That is a brief and summarized association with the 7 Orixás, but these relationships can be extended to more Orixás, whether they are in the ratio of 8, 14 or 16.

Health and disease: perspectives in dialogue

Once the constitution of the bodies and their consolidation in the 3 organisms is understood, it is necessary to present how to associate it to the state of health and disease in the Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda from this perception of realities.

Prior, it is important to remember that the World Health Organization (WHO), since the 1940s, has considered health as: “as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being”, included in the research by Marco Segre and Flávio Carvalho Ferraz (1997), who, when addressing the dimension of public health, conclude:

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Therefore, the “inside-out” approach of the human being, where what counts most is the subjectivism of the individual, including recourse to theory and psychoanalytic experience for its foundation, may seem unreasonable and outside the context of public health. That’s not what one would think. The emphasis on human autonomy, in which there is supposedly a “will”, being part of a “psyche” (soul) that transcends the sociocultural environment and even its genetic baggage, perhaps gives a better condition to understand the virtual inefficiency of health policies in certain cases and circumstances. This anti-positivist and more human view of the activities of health professionals can contribute to a more syntonical, more empathetic and, consequently, more ethical contact between them and the assisted population. And, in conclusion, within this approach, could it not be said that health is a state of reasonable harmony between the subject and his own reality? (SEGRE; FERRAZ, 1997, p. 542, our translation).

Accordingly, it has been over sixty years since international organizations have recognized health as a broader state of health. Not only the correct functioning of organs and systems of the human body, but also states of mind and their social interaction.

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In F. Rivas Neto (2017) it is already possible to measure four fundamental pillars of health: spiritual, material (economic), affective and human body issues. These pillars include the broader notion of health promoted by WHO. However, Rivas Neto's concept also answers the provocative question of Segre and Ferraz (1997) when it leads the theme to a harmonious state between the subject and his own reality.

Rivas Neto's idea is broad and, in this paper, I will direct that idea to the reality of the Esoteric or Initiatory school of Umbanda. A common jargon in this religious practice is to desire "light to the mind, peace to the heart, and positive energies." Such blessing to others reveals a profound concept of homeostasis between the individual's thoughts, feelings and actions, not only in relation to himself, but also to the reality that surrounds him.

Thus, health is achieved at the exact moment when there is full development of harmony in the mental organism, balance in the astral organism and stability in the etheric-physical organism. Naturally, the ideal state of this healthy connection is practically impossible in the current moment of society, considering all the inequalities that persist and the individual factors that make it difficult to reach this stage. However, it

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is possible to seek the best conditions to live well under these terms and here it is important to observe the four dimensions mentioned by F. Rivas Neto.

Another way to observe homeostasis is by the full manifestation of the spirit in all the realities in which it operates. Something that in the *terreiro* I call (re)encounter with the Orixá. This path of knowing oneself, mediated by the Master of Initiation to which the disciple is linked, as well as to the Illustrious Ancestors who cover up this relationship.

Once this relationship is broken or is not fully integrated in the harmony of the divine power (Orixá) with the individual, various diseases arise that can be located in the psychic field and can even be materialized in the human body. Certainly, the possibilities are practically infinite when it is understood that the levels of imbalance of one or more of the bodies spiritual manifestation are innumerable.

A schematic content can help in understanding the manifestation of the disease:

Disharmony in the spirit itself in its
conduct (insubordination).



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(lower frequency)

Mental disharmony, the Lines of Force bring imbalance to the first organism of the spirit, having there its first concretion.



(lower frequency)

Astral disharmony, once again the imbalance is taken to the lower organism through the Lines of Force, which will materialize in the astral matter the derangements of the spiritual being.



(lower frequency)

Auric disharmony (etheric vehicle). The low vibrations of higher organisms bring the imbalance of the aura (sum of the energies of organisms), making it the weak and susceptible.



(lower frequency)

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Physiological disharmony (physical
vehicle). Low vibrations reach the concrete,
visible part.



(lower frequency)

Cellular anatomical disharmony, alter-
ations in cellular harmony.



(lower frequency)

▪

Disharmony or elementary disarrange-
ment: when disease occurs according to the
scientific concept (Rivas Neto, 1996).

(RIVAS, 2021, p. 239)

In this scenario, the Initiation Master must identify the type of disease and which spiritual remedy can be applied in each case, considering the biopsychosocial characteristics of those who attend the *terreiro*. It is important to emphasize that, for the doctrine of Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda, sci-

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ence or the possibilities of psychological and medical treatments is never denied.

On the contrary, therapeutic technology guided by science can and should be used in all cases to treat the patient exclusively through the hands of professionals who are properly trained and qualified for this purpose. Addressing treatments from an Umbanda perspective refers to the possibilities of recognizing the spirit and its potencies in the search for integral health. Therefore, *terreiro* practices recognize and value science, proposing in a complementary and parallel way other paths that, together, help this same biopsychosocial unit already mentioned. ■

In this sense, it is possible to mention smokings, herbal baths, use of magical and religious means so dear to adherents of Umbanda. In the work I use as a reference in this article, I mention the use of meditations, mantras (sacred music), yantras (positions and movements performed with the body that provide better contact with ancestry), sacred signs that can be crossed with an appropriate chalk on a wooden board or inscribed on religious artifacts such as talismans, among other possibilities (RIVAS, 2021).

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Initiation

Of all the possibilities for curing diseases in this broader concept of homeostasis, which takes into account the harmony of the human being with divine power, the path of initiation is certainly the most important for the Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda.

Initiation is not a determination. It depends on the neophyte's willingness to follow this path and on the Master who will accept him. It is important to emphasize that the initiation process is related to the predisposition of the person's destiny and is not just the desire of a Master and a disciple.

Another point is that initiation is the desire to reunite (vision of interdependence) of all realities of the spiritual being in different densities (spirit and organisms or bodies of manifestation) breaking the body and spirit dichotomy, as well as the rescue of the spiritual being in close relation to nature, humanity and divine power. The loss of such perception causes biopsychosocial diseases – a fragmented view of reality. So it is self-healing as we understand that we are manifest spiritual beings.

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Within the Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda school there is a tripod that contemplates the body of knowledge (doctrine) and the way its practitioners exercise these same values in society (ethics). The means that enable the understanding of the doctrine and the coherent behavior of this doctrine in society is initiation.

Initiation is based on the principle of knowing all things, starting with oneself. Such a movement demands prioritizing spiritual values that provide a harmonious life with oneself, with others, with nature and society as a whole. In this process, naturally many harmful addictions and habits need to be fought, a real struggle to overcome oneself.

Given the complexity of this path and the effort necessary, it is believed that initiation is a process that never ends and, therefore, it is not about winning, losing or ending when one reach a certain place. What is at stake in the initiation is to be a spiritualized human being who understands the adversities of life and daily seeks to thank the spiritual world with achievements that benefit the community in which he is inserted and bring personal fulfillment in such a way that the first is confused with the other.

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Conclusion

Given all that has been discussed, it is possible to infer that the doctrine of Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda, of which I am responsible, theologically proposes a broader notion of the body, considering elements that are invisible to human eyes, but that directly influence the lives of each one of us. In this composition, the key to health is to balance life in its various facets, establishing a harmonic vision of spirit and body without a break in continuity.

▪ Disease would lie precisely in the disarrangement of these relationships between the spirit and the divine power or in the relation between spirit and issues affecting the others and society. Since the problem is identified, it is possible to use a series of instruments with the wisdom of *terreiro* to enable a return to the original state of health.

Of the most varied possibilities to reach a state of health, for the adherents of Esoteric or Initiatory Umbanda, initiation emerges as the most efficient as it has a perennial effect. Knowing yourself, acting in the world in a more spiritual way under the auspices of your Master or Initiation Master is to foster

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in society a social actor who stops sucking natural and social goods to be a builder of spiritualized ways of living well. In this context Umbanda promotes the awakening of the essence.

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