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The Valley of the Dawn (Vale do Amanhecer)

Esoteric ideas and practices have long flourished in Latin America, interacting with local realities to produce a rich array of alternative religions, spiritual therapies, healing modalities, philosophies, art movements, and literatures. In Brazil, one of the most significant examples of Western esotericism is the contemporary spiritual movement called the Valley of the Dawn (Vale do Amanhecer).

Officially known as Social Works of the Christian Spiritualist Order, the Valley of the Dawn is known for its eclectic cosmology and collective rituals performed by adepts dressed in ornate garments. The headquarters and Mother Temple is located near the Brazilian capital of Brasília, but the movement claims over 700 affiliated temples throughout Brazil as well as other locales in South America, Europe, and North America. As of 2019, there were nearly 140,000 officially registered members worldwide (Pierini 2020, 56). Due to the movement's public-facing mission of spiritual healing, however, its reach is much greater than these numbers suggest.

Founded by the charismatic spirit medium Neiva Chaves Zelaya (1925–1985), or Aunt Neiva, the Valley of the Dawn is the largest and most conspicuous of the alternative movements that have emerged in and around Brasília since the late 1950s. Its doctrine blends elements from various religions present in Brazil with an esoteric metaphysics that emphasizes the hidden connections behind the world of

appearances, promising adherents a path to spiritual evolution. This wisdom is transmitted to humans through a hierarchy of highly evolved beings, referred to within theosophical circles as Mahatmas or Masters of Wisdom, and known to Valley of the Dawn members as Great Masters or Great Initiates.

Aunt Neiva was a young widow and mother when she migrated to Brasília with her children in 1957 to work in the construction of the new capital city then being built. Not long after their arrival, however, Aunt Neiva began to suffer from visual and auditory disturbances that left her terrified and, at times, unable to work. Her search for answers led her away from the Catholicism of her upbringing to the spirit mediumship traditions of Umbanda and Brazilian Kardecism. Eventually, she was persuaded that her troubling experiences were evidence of a unique spiritual sensitivity and that she was a gifted medium in communication with highly evolved entities.

Among these were figures traditionally associated with Umbanda such as *pretos velhos* and *caboclos* (spirits of elderly black slaves and indigenous Indians), as well as cosmic beings inhabiting other worlds. In 1959, Aunt Neiva and another medium established the White Arrow Spiritualist Union (União Espiritualista Seta Branca) in homage to Aunt Neiva's chief spirit mentor, the caboclo Father White Arrow. After the two mediums parted ways in 1964, Aunt Neiva founded the Social Works of the Spiritualist Christian Order (OSOEC).

For the first few years of its existence, OSOEC functioned much like any other spiritist center, with Aunt Neiva and a small cadre of mediums pursuing the spiritist

version of charity by offering healing rituals to the public. However, in 1965, Aunt Neiva met the man who would become her companion and the official interpreter of her visionary experiences: Mário Sassi. As a result of their partnership, the esoteric elements of the Valley of the Dawn grew more pronounced. While the spiritist practice of disobsessive healing remained central, over the next two decades OSOEC morphed into something more than a spiritist center. It became, as adherents describe it, an "initiatory-evangelical system:" a doctrine offering a path to self-knowledge and spiritual development based on the gospel of Jesus Christ, updated for modern times (Hayes 2022, 247).

In 1969, the community moved to its present location in a valley some forty kilometers outside Brasília, giving rise to the moniker Valley of the Dawn. What followed was an especially intense period of religious creativity as Aunt Neiva, working closely with Mário Sassi, continually introduced new institutional, ritual, and bureaucratic structures, each of which involved its own symbols, specialized garments, and built environments. Veteran Valley members describe this period as one of perpetual invention and non-stop work centered on Aunt Neiva's ongoing revelations, which were described as voyages to different dimensions, premonitions, and messages from her spirit mentors. In a series of books, writings, and lectures to the community, Sassi labored to position this spiritual *materia prima* within a grand narrative of human and cosmic evolution whose core ideas are rooted in Theosophy, Kardecism, and an esoteric version of Christianity emphasizing Jesus's ethical teachings as a means of karmic redemption.

A key moment in OSOEC's esoteric evolution occurred in the early 1970s, when Aunt Neiva began to introduce a hierarchy of initiatory ranks ostensibly modeled on her own spiritual initiation by a living Tibetan Master, Umahã, one of a cosmic hierarchy of Great Masters who guide the spiritual evolution of humanity. Despite residing in a remote Himalayan monastery, Umahã met daily with Aunt Neiva in the astral dimension over a period of five years, according to Valley lore. During this time he instructed Aunt Neiva in advanced esoteric teachings that had been forgotten in the West, including a technique of returning to past times and places in order to redeem karma associated with previous lives.

At the end of this esoteric apprenticeship Aunt Neiva received her *mestrado* or master's degree. This capacitated her to "bring the *mestrado*" to her followers and around 1972, she and Mário Sassi began to implement a structure for training mediums based on a hierarchy of initiatory levels, each accompanied by a series of "development courses." As initiates ascend through the ranks, they are said to receive specific "mantras of force" that permanently transform them at a psycho-energetic level and mediate their contact with the higher spiritual planes (Pierini 2020, 155–159). Specific titles, insignia, articles of ritual clothing, and privileges mark each level, materializing what is otherwise an interior process linked with the acquisition of esoteric knowledge and spiritual capacities believed to transform the individual (Hayes 2022). After completing the second initiation, mediums are considered official members of the *corpo mestrado* (body of masters) and receive the title of Master.

Despite the Valley of the Dawn's many esoteric elements, scholars have tended to classify the movement as either an "offshoot" or an especially syncretic form of Kardecist spiritism: a "veritable sponge that absorbs and unites a host of belief systems into an original doctrine," as one researcher put it (Introvigne 2013, 189; Holston 1999, 607). However, the movement's emanationist cosmology, hierarchy of highly evolved intermediary beings, and concern with human spiritual evolution also exemplify Antoine Faivre's four intrinsic characteristics of Western esotericism (Faivre 1994): (a) correspondences that link the microcosm to the macrocosm; (b) living nature, which is the comprehension of the cosmos as a complex, hierarchical being animated by a divine energy that emanates throughout all levels; (c) imagination and mediations expressed here as cosmic Masters and spiritual guides whom adherents experience via imaginative perception and ritual; and (d) the experience of transmutation, an inner transformation or change of state as present-day Valley adherents engage in practices aimed at redeeming their negative karma and deepening their knowledge of the principles that govern the universe (Hayes 2020, 77).

Considering the Valley of the Dawn as an example of Western esotericism sheds light on how a transnational set of ideas with deep historical roots has interacted with local realities in Brazil, bringing that country into a scholarly conversation that has focused almost exclusively on European and North American contexts. It enables the Valley of the Dawn to be compared with other esoteric movements, past and present, and facilitates the identification of continuities and cross-fertilizations as well as differences.

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