

The sorcerers

João do Rio

Antônio is like the young Africans mentioned in the work of the English writer. The young people knew about both the Catholic gods and their own, but only venerated whiskey and *schilling*. Antonio is well aware of *Nossa Senhora das Dores*, he is familiar with the Orishalas from Africa, but he respects only paper money and Port wine. Thanks to these two powerful agents, I shared the intelligent and vivacious black man's affection. Thanks to Antonio, I was able to visit the houses on *São Diogo*, *Barão de São Félix*, *Hospício*, *Núncio* and *América* streets, where the candomblés take place and where the fathers-of-saint live. And I thanked the Lord, for there is certainly no better way to go about it in the whole city.

"You will enjoy a number of things, sir!" smiled Antonio. And he was right.

Of the large number of African slaves who reached Rio de Janeiro during the colonial and monarchist periods in Brazil, around a thousand black people remain. They are all from small nations of inner Africa. They belong to Ijesha, Oié, egba, Aboum, hausa, Itaquá, or consider themselves children of Ibouam, ishau dos Jêje and Cambindas. Some wealthy families send their Brazilian offspring to Africa to study the religion; others leave the tradition to their half breed children here, in the form of mysteries and magic spells. All, however, speak a common language among themselves - Yoruba.

Antonio, who has studied in Lagos, said:

"To Africans, Yoruba is like English to civilized folk. If you speak Yoruba, you can cross Africa and live among the blacks of Rio de Janeiro. Only the Cambindas do not speak Yoruba, but they ignore even their own language, which is very difficult. When the Cambindas speak, they mix all the languages ... As for the Orishas and Alufás, they speak only Yoruba".

"Orishas, Alufás?" I said in amazement.

"They are two entirely different religions. You'll see".

Indeed. The black folk from Africa are divided into two major beliefs: the Orishas and the Alufás.

The Orishas, in greater number, are the most complicated and animistic. Skilled in litholatri and phytology, they have a huge collection of saints. They fuse Catholic saints with their own, and live a double life, finding in every stone, in every turtle shell, in every herb, a soul and a spirit. This barbarous polytheism of sorts includes deities that manifest themselves and gods that are unseen. The black folk hold the idea of an absolute God like the Catholic God: Orixá-alúm. The list of saints is endless. There is Orixalá, which is the oldest; Axum, mother of fresh water; Ie-man-já, the mermaid; Exu, the devil, who is always lurking behind the door; Sapanan, the Blessed Sacrament of Catholics; Irocô, who materializes on the sacred fig tree; the Gunocô, formidable and large; Ogum, who is St. George or the God of War; Dadá, the Queen, who are all invisible. And many others, such as the saint of thunder and the saint of herbs. To add to this complicated assortment, black folk still have evil spirits and the Heledás, or guardian angels.

Naturally, there must be an ecclesiastic hierarchy if there is to be a celestial one. Creatures live in awe of the invisible and only those who have studied and trained know of the saints' wills. This is why there is such a large number of religious authorities. At times, on the streets, we find jetblack negroes chewing unceasingly. They are babalaos, brilliant mathematicians, keepers of the sacred secrets and people's futures; or babas who throw the endilogum; or babaloshas, venerable fathers-of-saint. They have dabbed the powder of salvation on the slashes you see on their faces, and their mouths are always chewing obi, or kola nut, which is good for their stomach and protects against curses.

Antonio, who spoke of the advancement of magic in Africa, told me one day that he was like Renan and Shakespeare: he was always in doubt. This, however, did not prevent him from believing in curses and the trouble African Saints can stir.

"You cannot imagine, Sir! Saints have annual celebrations; they suddenly appear to a person they want to take over, and he must immediately start celebrating; saints attend to the pledge of the Iauôs and soon enough they scurry from Carnival to Holy Week; but they still want to party more... They truly rest only from February to April".

"They are always on holiday".

"At Carnival negroes practice ebó".

"What is ebó?"

"Ebó is an offering. The saints all go to the fields and there they rest".

"Perhaps, they are in Petrópolis".

"No. Saints leave the city for the woods, to be surrounded by nature".

"But what are the religious ranks?"

"There are the babalaos, the açoba, the aboré - the highest position - little-mothers, the ogan, the agibonam..."

The list is similar to that of the saints', it's very long, and each of these characters plays a different role in sacrifices, in candombés, and in witchcraft. Antônio shows me the most notable, the fathers-of-saint: Oluou, Eruosaim, Alamijo, Adé-Oié, babalaos Emídio, Oloô-teté, which means stingray; and a crowd of sorcerers: Torquato requipá, or rain-halting fire; Obitaiô, Vagô, Apotijá, Veridiana, Crioula Captain, Rosenda, Nosuanan, the renown Chica de Vavá, who is the protégée of an economist politician ...

"So, Chica has political protection?"

"You bet she does. What do expect, Sir? There are important men who owe a load of money to the alufás and babalaôs and have reached the 32nd level in their Masonic Lineages".

Of these, very few read. In the past there were still sages who pored over the sacred book and knew why Exu was evil – everything was as crystal clear as water. Nowadays, learning is done by ear. The self seeking African father-of-saint teaches the aboré; he teaches the iauô when he hands them the knife. In other words, not only does the art lose many of its interesting steps, but the stories are altered and forgotten as well.

"Nowadays, you do not need to know the Saó Hauin either. Just by looking at a person and knowing his name, a black man can do a great deal of harm", says Antonio.

The orixas are usually polygamous. In the houses you cross on the main streets of a large city, there are men surrounded by women. Every night, just like in the African savannas, the bed of the babaloxás is occupied by one of his wives. There is no jealousy – the oldest announces who will replace her, and all work for the father's peace of mind. Oloô-Teté, an old man who is at least ninety, still has a partner for the pleasures of the marriage bed; and the savviest keep the daughters-of-saints as the most beautiful of the harem.

The alulás have a different rite. They are Islamic, but with a touch of mysticism. Almost all dedicate themselves to the study of the religion, and the rogues who usurp their titles know more than the orishas.

Right after the suma, or baptism, and circumcision, or kola, the alufás begin the reading of the Koran. Their obligation is the kissium, the prayer. They pray when they bathe, washing the tips of their fingers, their feet and nose; they pray in the morning; they pray at sunset. I have seen them, black as night, their faces shining behind white beards, doing the aluma gariba when the moon is rising in the sky. They wear the abadá for these prayers, a white tunic with large sleeves. They stick a red filá onto their heads, from where a white ribbon

hangs, and, in the evening, the kissium goes on while they are seated on the skin of a sheep or tiger.

"Only the wealthy alufás sit on the skins of tigers", Antonio informs us.

These creatures hold the rosary or tessubá at night, they hold the principle of not eating pork and write down their prayers on tables, the atô, with ink made of burned rice. They fast like the Jews, for forty days on end, only taking their meals at dawn and at sunset.

These people value their ceremonies and after the assuamy, there is no feast which is more important than the Ramadan in which they exchange the saká, or mutual gifts. Both their religious and judicial administration is absolutely independent from the land where they live. In several tribes there are general priests or ladamos, who obey the lemano, the bishop. The judiciary is in charge of the alikaly, the judges; sagabamo, the deputies of the judges; and the assivajiú, the master of ceremonies.

To be an alufá, you must have had a great deal of learning. These black fellows, who pretend to be serious and marry in great earnest, do not give up the amuré with three or four women.

When the young alufá ends his exams, the others dance the opasuma and conduct the novice on horseback through the streets to show triumph.

"But you can't have that type of parade here," I cry out.

"Of course we can. The ceremonies always take place in the suburbs, in remote places; and the alufás put on their white clothes and red caps."

Naturally, Antônio listed the names of the alufas:

"Alikali; the current lemano, a crooked-legged black man who lives on *Barão de St. Félix* street and who inspires respect and terror; Chico Mina, whose daughter studies violin. Alufapão, Ojó, Abacajebú, Ginjá, Manê, who was born in Brazil, and many others".

The *Alufás* don't like the people-of-saint who follow the African religion, who they call *auauadó-chum*, while these despise creatures who do not eat pork, calling them *malés*. Still, they are all related by language; and on the surface their customs are more or less identical; they also practice witchcraft. The *Orishas* make sacrifices, drown the saints in blood, give them food, ornaments and palm oil.

The superior *Alufás*, despite religious prohibitions, use the *aligenum*, imps invoked for good and evil, in a book of charms written in red ink. Some of them, the greatest, such as the *Alikali*, even practice *idams*, or great sorceries, in which a cabalistic word is enough to stop the rain from falling and *obis* materialize in empty plates.

Before studying the spells, the practices of the *iauô* run through the *camarinhas*, and the service rituals, I wanted to have some notion of what the houses and the men who lived there were like. Antônio first took me to the

home of an *Alufá* sorcerer. On the tables lay books with complex writing, herbs, rabbits, mats, and a fine bamboo nib.

From the door, the guide shouted:

"Salamaleco".

No one answered.

"Salamaleco!"

"Maneco Lassalama!"

In the corner of the room, sitting on a sheepskin, a black man was saying the rosary, eyes upturned.

"We can't speak to him now. He's praying and doesn't want to talk".

We walked onto the street and right away ran into Xico Mina. Like many of us, he was wearing a light suit and had closely-trimmed sideburns. I had already seen him in crowded cafes, talking to some politicians. When he saw us, he rushed by.

"He is afraid of questions. And he is a buffoon".

However, on our way from *Largo da Carioca* to *Aclamação* Square, besides a disciple of Alikali, Omancho, as they call him, we ran into two mothers of saint, an old babalao and two babaloxás.

We were off to the house of the old mathematician, Oloô-Teté.

The houses of the mynahs still retain the same appearance of yore, but are full of Bahian blacks and mulattos. These are often bleak abodes, where five, six or more people live with the main character. In the rooms, broken and dirty furniture, little mats, benches; on the tables, pitchers, bowls of water, straw hats, herbs, oilcloth cases where the opelé is kept; on the walls, drums, strange clothing, glasses; and often, in the backyard, tortoises, black hens, roosters and goats.

There is a strong smell of palm oil in the air; Ethiopian pepper and stench; the black people talk about the lack of work, and puff on thick straw cigarettes. If not for their candor, their life would be harsh - in each of their gestures lies a secular lethargy.

Some old men spend their whole lives sitting and dozing.

"They're thinking!" Some might say. Suddenly, the poor, naive old men wake up from a powerful dream into this troubled world of animated stones and herbs with souls.

"Xangô says that I have to make a sacrifice!"

While he was asleep, Xangô, the god of thunder, ordered him; and the opelé, made out of tortoise shells and baptized with blood, falls on the stained table to reveal the sacrifice that will please Xangô.

Others, the more cunning, spend their lives lying on the couch. The daughters-of-saints, some who are prostitutes, compete to make their existence easier; those who visit these women give them what they can spare. Their concern is to know more - the unknown spells; and when someone who knows all the

mysteries comes in, they kneel in fright and kiss his hand, sobbing:

"Tell me how to chant, and I all I have is yours!"

In the afternoon, the women arrive, as well as those who happen to work in some quarry. The sorcerers tell stories, criticize each other, talk with familiarity of the most relevant people in the nation, of the emperor, whose picture almost everyone has on the wall; of Cotegipe, of the Baron of Mamanguape, of the Presidents of the Republic.

The women listen while chewing obis and singing eerily sweet songs. These songs are almost always prayers, invocations, and the same phrase goes on and on, sung in monotone, endlessly.

It is only with the candomblé and sessions of high witchcraft, in which the babalaôes are absorbed and the fathers-of-saints work day and night, either in waiting rooms or making invocations in front of fires holding a tessubá, that these people's lives are drawn out of the fluid listlessness of acassá and palm oil.

When we entered the house of Teté Oloo, the old and sensual mathematician, an old miner, who was chanting somnambulistically, suddenly stopped.

"Don't stop, please".

She said something incomprehensible.

"She is asking if you can give her a couple of coppers," Antônio interpreted for us.

"Certainly".

The old black woman opens her mouth and begins to chant, clapping her hands:

"Baba ounlô, ó xocotám, o ilélê."

"What does it mean?"

"The festivities are over, and the saint is leaving. It means 'papa is gone, he's done, it's over; go away!'"

I looked at the narrow ray of sunlight in the yard where the land turtles slept.

"Is the land turtle a sacred animal?"

"No," tells us the wise Antonio. "Each saint likes his animal. Xangô, for example, eats land turtles, roosters and sheep. Abaluaí, father of smallpox, only likes goatlings. Umbanda fathers are forced by their nature to breed animals to sell and sacrifice. The land turtle is nothing but an animal that provides happiness. The sacrifice is simple. The saint's stone has to be well washed, sometimes even with champagne. After that it should be poured in a bowl. The animal's blood drains, some parts are taken to a place chosen by the saint, and the remains are served to the group.

"But are there any greater sacrifices that could harm people?"

"Yes! In these sacrifices even bulls are slaughtered".

"Spells never fail," pronounces the honorable Oloo-tete, with his admirable knowledge. "Nobody is unbreakable. But there are some people who are stronger.

Blacks are easily stricken, mulattoes are more resistant, and when it comes to white people, we sweat our guts out. But it always works. That's why black folk always wear the assiqui, the coverage, the brief. And they always chew obi, the protective kola nut".

For me, the gentle Oloo-Tetê disposed the opelé, in the presence of some of his companions. This opelé was baptized many years ago and predicted my future.

This future of mine will be interesting. According to tortoise shells, which always turn in pairs, I will be extremely happy, ascending Jacob's ladder of happy positions with the speed of an automobile. It is true that there is an insignificant enemy who wants to harm me. Nevertheless, I will crush him, all the while reaching high positions and inspiring admiration.

I respectfully embraced the mathematician who solved the square of the hypotenuse of the unknown.

"Place the money here," she said.

I gave him the notes. With trembling hands, the wise man smoothed them out for a long period.

"Now take this rock and shell. Ask the shell what you want, saying yes, and saying no to the stone.

So I did. The opelé fell back into the tarp. The shell was in Antonio's right hand, the rock in his left, and Oloo was shaking while talking to the saint, with black fingers trembling in the air.

"Open your right hand!" he ordered.

It was the shell.

"If it comes to pass, will you give Oloo a gift?"

"Certainly".

He quickly consulted the opelé. Then smiled.

"It will come to pass. The saint has said so". And he prescribed the protection that would make me invulnerable.

I also smiled. Poor old man, so naïve and such a rascal! I had merely asked the shell of the future, in all modesty, if I would become the Emperor of China...

In the meantime, the singing black man sang a happier tune, with wide gestures and open laughter:

O loô-ré, xa-la-ré

Camurá-ridé

O loô-ré, xa-la-ré

Camurá-ridé

"What does that mean?"

"It's an Orixalá chant. It says 'The man with the money is here. Let's lift him high...'"

I shook his hand, joyful and grateful. In the allusion of the primitive song, palaver remained in the enchantment of eternity...