My Night of Candomblé

Attending an African-Brazilian religious ritual, the author fulfills a dream of twenty years and experiences a sense of awakening.

The heavy, jungle smell of that airless room is what I remember most vividly. That and the glowing, brown face of the Brazilian woman who stood before me, in a deep trance, howling as she thrust the remnants of a floral bouquet toward my uncomprehending eyes. What did she want me to do?

This was my night of Candomblé, the centuries-old ritual in honor of spirits carried to the shores of the New World in the hearts of enslaved West Africans. For twenty years I had dreamed of visiting Brazil and experiencing this rite firsthand. Finally, in a country town fifteen miles outside Salvador, my night of Candomblé was unfolding. And despite those years of accumulated expectations, the night was proving far more fascinating—and puzzling—than I ever imagined.

The evening had not begun auspiciously. While still at the hotel, carefully dressing in the outfit of long pants and white shirt suggested by the tourism official who’d located the ceremony for me, I’d had a sudden attack of nerves. How was I going to find the terreiro, the house of worship where the Candomblé was to be held? I had only the name of the town and my rudimentary Portuguese to help me. Once I found the place, what was going to happen?

Would I know what to do? And could I find a taxi or bus to take me back when the dancing and chanting stopped in the early hours of the morning? I continued to worry as I walked the few minutes to the bus stop. Sporadic, fat drops of warm rain fell from the starless sky and hit my clothes with a soft thud, leaving a pattern of blotchy dots. I found a jitney marked with the name of the town and joined a few silent locals already seated inside. We took off, plunging into the deep, humid night of the Brazilian countryside.

The jitney arrived at its destination a half-hour later, and with the help of a fellow passenger I located the terreiro—a tin-roofed, cinder-block building set at the far end of a walled yard. Light poured from the doorless entry and its flanking pair of unglazed windows, illuminating rectangular patches of packed earth and scrubby plants. The sound of a few voices and a solitary drum drifted across the yard. I sidled up to a window and peered in.

The room had obviously been prepared for a celebration of some kind, but there was no one to be seen except four small boys. One of them stood on a drum-filled dais across the room, intently playing a conga almost as tall as himself, while the others ran between rows of wooden benches placed against the side walls. The empty concrete floor in the center of the room was strewn with hundreds of fresh leaves; overhead, zigzagging strings of white tissue-paper cutouts hung limp in the still air. The boy with the conga glanced up, spotted me,
and stopped playing. A bewildered, startled look came across his face, a look that made me question whether I'd be as welcome at the ceremony as my contact had promised.

I wandered the town's one haphazardly paved street for the next hour, enduring the open stares of children and periodically checking the terreiro. Small groups of people, some dressed in their Sunday best, slowly gathered in the street outside the terreiro and quietly chatted among themselves. Eventually—as if on some cue that to me was imperceptible—they filtered through the dark yard and into the building. I followed them, and once inside saw that women and children were moving toward benches on the left. I headed to the right, with the men, and squeezed into a spot on a back bench. No one seemed to notice me.

Almost immediately, the drumming began. Staccato reports shot from the dais and electrified the room. Conversation stopped as we all locked our eyes on the five men beating out intricate, syncopated rhythms on throaty congas and high-pitched bongos. Outside, a crowd collected, craning their necks to get a view through the door and windows, while next to the dais a gravel-voiced man in dashiki and matching cap started to chant in an African dialect. There was a jostling at the doorway and the crowd parted. Then, one after another, thirteen hoop-skirted women slowly entered, swaying in time to the music and singing in high, nasal tones. Their dresses and elaborately tied head scarves were made of starch, white lace, and as the women dipped and turned in their slow, undulating dance around the center of the room, a vegetal aroma rose from the carpet of leaves being ground underfoot. I could hear the hard, metallic clink of shiny bangles and amulets on the women's arms and the rustling of the innumerable strings of multicolored beads that hung from their necks. The oldest dancer—a rail-thin woman of perhaps 80 years, whose blue-black skin hung from her face in great folds—passed in front of me. My eyes met hers, and she smiled.

The drumming, chanting, and dancing went on for several hours. The smell of the leaves grew increasingly pungent, until it seemed I was breathing the jungle itself. My skin glistened, on the verge of a full sweat, while streams of perspiration ran down the faces of the dancers. Still the drumming continued, its sinuous pattern of constantly shifting rhythms lulling me into a comfortable state of dreamy awareness.

It was then that I noticed a plump, brown-skinned woman begin to tremble as she danced no more than ten feet from where I sat. At first, her trembling didn't really register with me, but as it grew and she ultimately sank to the floor, twitching and writhing, my heart raced. It was a trance, I realized. The woman, dancing herself into a hypnotic state, would receive, and be animated by, one of the African spirits in whose honor the ceremony is held. Several dancers carried the stricken woman from the room, and for the next hour other women—mostly dancers, but also congregants—were struck by a trance and either led or carried away. Many of them lurched back into the room a few minutes later, still in a trance, dressed in costumes indicative of the particular spirit inhabiting them. With eyes half closed, they repeated a lumbering version of their earlier dance. One woman returned with a giant, wooden bowl balanced on her head. The bowl was filled with little fried balls of spiced bean paste, called acarajé, which I'd already seen being sold on street corners in Salvador. The acarajé was distributed to everyone in the room, and I waited until I saw the others eating theirs before I did the same. The acarajé was flavorful but dry, and like a sponge it sucked the little remaining moisture from my mouth. I suddenly craved one of the tall, ice-cold Brazilian beers I'd grown so fond of during the previous two weeks.

Finally, the plump woman herself returned, resplendent in a flowing, pink satin dress, a veil of beads covering her face and a bouquet of blood-red roses in her arms. She moved in a swaying stupor around the room, repeatedly distributing a single rose to obviously important personages until nothing was left of her bouquet but the palm frond trim, a crackly cellophane wrapper, and a ribbon tying the two together. I watched with ever-widening eyes as she rounded the end of the room, approached the spot where I sat, and came to a stop right in front of me. She grunted and shook the bouquet. I froze, and she grunted again.
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She had no way of knowing, of course, that it was a promise I'd already made to myself.

San Francisco-based writer Christopher Hall exhibited a penchant for travel as early as age nine, when he started a neighborhood travel club and roped a couple of other kids into joining. Club members took Saturday bike trips to local points of interest and sent away for every brochure advertised in the back of National Geographic. More recently, he has traveled extensively in Europe and Asia, and he is a regular contributor to The New York Times.

Ogum, like the other Yoruba orixás, is a demanding god. He requires devotion, veneration, prayer, and celebration with music, dance, and food. The Candomblé religion has maintained within its oral traditions the ritual recipes of the gods from West Africa and even today the dishes are prepared with what can only be described as religious fervor. Ogum’s day of celebration began in the syncretized manner of Candomblé with a mass at Our Lady of the Rosary Church in Salvador. From there it progressed back to the terreiro where worshipers were served an after-church breakfast which resembled so many that I had eaten growing up: tiny cups of dark coffee—this was, after all, Brazil—accompanied by sweet rolls and cakes. However, instead of the meal taking place in the church basement to the music of an organ postlude, this was eaten to the accompaniment of African drums playing complex rhythms celebrating Ogum’s glory.

As the day progressed, working up to the crescendo of the evening ceremony, preparations began again for another of Ogum’s meals, this time for the black bean and smoked meat feijoa doa that is his ritual dish. The slave dish has become the national dish of his adopted country. This feijoa doa was served with great festivity at the midday meal and consumed by the votaries of the African gods who ate with gusto during the pause in the daylong ceremony. It was a simple meal, one that has its origin in a dish prepared by the slaves from the leftovers that they were given. It is a preparation that still constitutes a celebration dish for many of the people in this complex country where poverty and riches live side by side. It consisted of well-seasoned black beans and a side dish of various fatty but oh-so-savory pieces of smoked and sun-dried pork and beef. It was also accompanied by a dish filled to the brim with sand-colored toasted manioc flour, called farinha, which was sprinkled on the beans and meat to give consistency and
add texture. There was chili in the form of malagueta pepper for those who wanted a little heat.

As we sat around the simple dining room table, I looked at my neighbors to the left and right. One was an old woman who was the granddaughter of slaves, on the other side was a youngster who had just been initiated into the religion and was still dressed in her ritual white. Each in turn spoke of the history of the religion. The elder was a living witness to the persecutions that it had survived; the younger one represented its continuation and growth at the end of the 20th century.

—Jessica B. Harris, Tasting Brazil: Regional Recipes and Reminiscences

JOHN KRICH

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Simply Irresistible

Crashing the gates of Salvador’s Carnaval, the world’s biggest party pooper finds it hard to say no to the conga line.

Now there is no escaping the music. It’s too late for finking out on the bacchanal. Looking up, every stacked balcony, colonial and peeling or concrete and flimsy, has been turned into a vertical danceathon. The heat of bodies has replaced the day’s tropical furnace and the cobblestone boulevards have turned to trampolines for an aerobic populace. Bouncing on the balls of my sneakered feet, I periscope above the bobbing heads crowned in Indian feathers and Portuguese admirals’ caps, the arms upraised in an exultant vanishing of inhibition, the hands clapping like metronomes for copulation. Puleando is the term locals use for what everyone’s doing, but it means far more than jumping up and down—it implies a leap to Heaven, or, at least, the irrational. Grab hold of that slinky waist up ahead if you can, grip a passing set of female haunches if you dare. Sweat is the natural lubricant for our grinding parts. The sole way to make progress through this orange-and-yellow tinsel-draped orgy is to join the boa-length conga line snaking and shoving its way to nowhere. In this human gridlock, there are no handy exits from a slow surging pack whose only destination is dawn. Nothing can move and everybody is moving. On