

The *Terreiro*

Participants and *abia* arrived at the *terreiro* around 7:30 in the evening. The doorway had offerings of okra, cornmeal, and flowers at the threshold. Upon entering, the men were directed to sit on the left, while the women moved to the right.

The room was rectangular in shape, measured about 50 by 30 feet, and was constructed with simple concrete blocks. The women's side of the room was larger than the men's area. Everyone sat on white molded-plastic chairs and benches behind a low brick wall that separated the *abia* from the main floor, where the ceremony would take place. Incense hung thick in the air. Dividing the two walled-in areas for the *abia* was an aisle.

The section of the room beyond the walled enclosure was approximately 30 feet square with chairs set around the perimeter facing inward. At the front of the room was a door with a curtain. To the right of this door was a large throne where the *Yialaxe* sat while presiding over the ceremony. To her left was a group of men who would be drumming throughout the entire evening.

Large animal horns, painted blue and filled with fresh flowers, hung high up on the walls, as did acrylic paintings of different Orixás. Hanging from the ceiling, rows of fringed decorative tissue rustled in the light breeze. There were several windows on the left side of the room, where members could casually observe the ceremony from outside. The room was well-lit and members greeted each other warmly with smiles and hugs as they entered.

The Ceremony

About 30 *yão* members of the *terreiro* filed in and sat on the seats in front of the brick partition. The drummers signaled the beginning of the ceremony with a few strikes of a cowbell-like instrument.

The ceremony followed the complicated rhythms of the drums. Sixteen women began to dance in a slow moving circle that ambulated counter-clockwise. Counter-clockwise movement is notably feminine in nature, based on the movement of the moon. Dressed in long white dresses in the traditional Bahian style, the women wore multiple strands of bead in colors that relate to their *orixás*. Women with a higher status in the group wore hoops under their skirts and multiple strands of beads, some of them exquisite thick ropes of color. Each aspect of their dress was symbolic; for instance, the wrapping a turban around the head in different ways held specific meanings. In the all of the elements from clothing to music and dance, African, Amerindian and Portuguese influences blended together.

The first round of dancing went on for about an hour. The songs started at a slower pace and gradually increased in tempo and intensity. Specific songs summoned each orixá with lyrics and dance steps particular to each. Then, the drumming stopped and the women and men retired to the room behind the curtain. When they reappeared from the backroom, half of the *egbomi* were dressed in the specific symbolic costumes of the orixá who had "mounted"

them and now possessed their bodies. These dancers' eyes were closed, signifying their possession, and remained closed for the duration of the ceremony.

One woman being "ridden" (or possessed) by Yansã carried a copper dagger and an *eruexim* (duster made of an ox-tail). On her head she wore a copper crown and a red beaded veil. On her arms were the large copper arm guards of a warrior. She and the other *egbomi* were accompanied by the *ogan* and *ekedi* who ministered to them during their trance, rearranging their clothing, if needed, and keeping them safe during their possession.

A young man, "mounted" by Yemanjá, spirit of the sea, wore the orixá's silver crown, beaded veil, and a white dress from which large silver fish hung on silver chains from his waist. It is acceptable for women and men to be possessed by spirits of either gender; however, some gender roles are more strictly defined. For example, only men play the drums for the ceremonies.

Although dancers use their feet, the primary motion comes from the shoulder. As the shoulders roll, shake, shimmy, and beat in time, they stimulate pleasure centers in the brain, bringing feelings of euphoria to the dancers. These feelings of goodwill were evident in the ways the dancers greeted each other. They were also a strong antidote to the pain of slavery's legacy: *banzo*.

Moving around the circle the different *ogan* and *egbomi* greeted each other and the members of the community with an embrace and smile. The *ogan*, while unable to be possessed and not dancing with the same fervor as the *egbomi*, wore decorative sashes emblazoned with the names of specific orixás. These men serve in a supportive role during rituals. One woman, possessed by a warrior spirit, scowled and moved with bold motions, keeping to herself in a corner of the room, pacing back and forth. At times, she moved into the circle to interact with other dancers.

The dancers would occasionally leave the circle and slowly begin to dance down the aisle toward the front door. When some of the dancers reached the doorway, they let out a whoop. Outside of the *terreiro*, members set off fireworks to send the evil spirits scurrying.

During the ceremony, the *ogans* selected specific members from the group and lead them in, or out, of the main room. These non-initiates were not participating actively, yet sat in the ceremonial circle. One small boy selected by a specific *orixá* was handed a symbolic bow and arrow, placed on a chair, and carried to the front door.

Toward the end of the ceremony, several plates of hot food were brought out to the members of the *terreiro*. These plates of food containing preferred foods of the orixás were offertory and had been prepared earlier in the day. Members were encouraged to eat as the ceremony concluded. The ceremony reinforced the cohesiveness of this community.

It was especially touching to see two young grade-school boys dressed in traditional African clothing sitting in the circle of participants. These two boys watched the orixás come alive before their very eyes, embodied by their parents and elders. In this realm of song, dance,

drums and colorful clothing, Candomblé is the embodiment of African culture filtered through the crucible of slavery, so these young boys were learning their culture through transcendent and spiritual mysteries.

Glossary Terms

Abia	an observer of Candomblé, pre-initiated participant
Axé	a living force that is everywhere. It is an invisible force that is cyclical in nature. When a being dies, it provides <i>axé</i> to living beings.
Ayê	material world
Babakekere	man who is second in charge (after the priest)
Babalão	person knowledgeable in the Ifa system (This office is now rare, and, usually, the role of Babalão is taken by the priest, either female, or male.)
Babalaxe	a man who is a priest
Banzo	from the Bantu language, Banzo describes the deep sadness and pain the slaves felt when they were torn from Africa. They were uprooted from their culture, religion, beliefs, customs, family, and friends, <i>without hope of ever returning home to Africa</i> . As a result, some slaves became severely depressed, went mad, or died.
Egbomi	a possessed person who is “mounted” and “ridden” by a God during a ceremony, aided by the <i>ogan</i> and <i>ekedi</i>
Ekedi	women who are not possessed by Gods during ceremonies and who help the <i>egbomi</i> during their trances
Eruexim	duster made of an ox-tail (used to whip up the winds and storms)
Ifa	a divination system that sets up a dialogue between the metaphysical world and the material world
Ogan	men who are not possessed by Gods during ceremonies and who help possessed persons during their trance.
Orixás	the Yoruban term traditionally used to refer to the principal spirits, such as Ogum, Lemanjá, etc.
Orum	invisible metaphysical world
Terreiro	Afro-Brazilian cult center; may refer to the entire center or, specifically, to the central space where dancing and trances occur.
Yão	those initiated into the religion of Candomblé
Yiakekere	woman who is second in charge to the priestess
Yialaxe	a woman who is a priestess