

“recognizing ourselves in others”

Images and Descriptions

From a presentation by

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Image by Jeff Percy Photography

Death's Door Dance Festival

Door County, Wisconsin

July 2024

Image 1



The *Passa Fogo* (“Pass through Fire”) is a dramatic community celebration of the *Bumba meu boi*. Each year in Viana, a city in the lowlands of Maranhão, the ox puppet (*Boi*) is carried through a city parade route that is darkened for the festivity.

People accompany and interact with the *Boi*, throwing at it *carretilhas*, a type of homemade firework – thus creating this spectacular coexistence of excitement and danger.

Participants are advised to wear non-synthetic clothes (that don’t catch fire so easily)

and remember the 50-gallon drums of water placed at every intersection to douse the ox and unwary participants who catch on fire.

Image 2



The *fogueira* (bonfire) is an important element in the preparation of a group for performance in the *Bumba meu boi* celebration. Here one of the percussionists of a modest neighborhood group uses the open fire of the *fogueira* to heat the animal skin drums.

The heritage custom is to make the drumheads with goat skin. They must then be tuned to the right tension over fire.

Even though many groups now use factory drums with tuning pegs, the *fogueira* remains an important link to tradition.

Image 3



The *Cazumba* is an important performer in *Bumba meu boi* celebration as performed by the rhythmic tradition of the *Baixada* (Lowlands) of Maranhão.

The characters are masked and through their playful behavior, shuffle in wide skirts, playing a rhythmic African bell or gong.

Cazumbas have multiple meanings, but most all they

seem to represent creatures or spirits from the forests of the Lowlands.

Performatively the *cazumbas* preserve the perimeter of the space, interacting especially with children, and setting the outer boundary of the group's movements.

Image 4



Catirina is a key figure in the *Bumba meu boi*. She represents a pregnant slave woman who convinces her husband Chico to kill the master's prize ox so she can eat the tongue.

Chico steals and kills the ox, setting in motion the celebration's satire on the power struggle between slaves and masters in Brazilian colonial society.

In more tumultuous days of the street celebrations of the past, Catirina would be performed by a male in "macho drag," but in today's more peaceful street celebrations Catirina is often performed with active gender fluidity. The celebration is a unique occasion where gender diversity of performance is accepted and encouraged in an otherwise patriarchal society.

Image 5



This “Caboclo de Pena” represents an homage to the indigenous heritage of the region in the Matraca tradition of the Bumba meu Boi celebration. The figure – performed by a male or female – dances in a headdress that weighs several kilos and limits movements to dramatic bouncing motion and circular dancing.

The costumes were once made of ostrich feathers, but for species protection the headpieces and costumes are now made of emu feathers.

The *Sotaque de Matraca* is the typical form of the city-island of São Luís. Some groups in this style have been performing for more than one hundred years.

Image 6



In the Baixada tradition of the Bumba meu boi, indigenous figures play a major dramatic and performative role. The performers known as “indios” spend a significant amount with their costumes and make-up.

Preparation itself is a major part of the ritual and the devotion. A performer may be trained for the role as a youth and continue for many years, becoming a senior performer and trainer of new performers.

Performers we have known for years tend to elaborate their personas over time and become increasingly individual and distinct.

Image 7



The regional celebration of Pentecost is an example of “popular Catholicism,” celebrations that once originated in the Church but are now part of popular culture. Pentecost is celebrated internationally on the 50th day after Easter when, according to the Biblical account, the Holy Ghost appeared to Jesus’ disciples.

It is called Festa do Divino and its celebration in Northeast Brazil is reminiscent of the 17th Century Portuguese

royalty. An Emperor and Empress are selected from the community for an elaborate celebration.

Here, the Empress of the community of Saint Christopher (São Cristovão) is dressed for the ceremony. She holds the crown of the Holy Ghost, wrapped in lace.

Image 8



This young woman drummer (*caixeira*) is the future of the tradition of women drummers for the Holy Ghost. Most of the women are older and hopeful of passing the tradition on to a younger generation.

She is drumming in a procession around the blessings of food that will later be shared by the community. She is framed by sides of beef from an ox that was freshly slaughtered for the festival.

This community, named Santa Rosa dos Pretos, is recognized legally as a *quilombo*, a traditional community of Black slave descendants. This status under Brazilian law gives it certain protections and rights to the land that other “traditional communities” and indigenous communities still have not acquired.

Image 9



A devotee dances at the Terreiro Pedra de Encantaria, in the neighborhood of Maiobão, in a ceremony led by *Pai de Santo* José Itaparandi de Badé.

When it appeared that she was entering in trance, attendants of the spiritual house gathered around her and ensured her safety until she regained her balance.

Once worshippers have passed though the transitional phase of entering trance, they generally continue dancing and singing, though they normally claim to

remember nothing in the experience after the transition.

Image 10



This devotee of one of the largest terreiros in Maranhão, the Umbanda Tenda Espirita da Rainha de Iemanjá in the city of Codó, is dancing in a celebration honoring two female Afro-Brazilian deities or *Orixás* – Iemanjá and Iansã.

Iemanjá is celebrated on that evening by a procession and homage at the Itapecuru River (photos in this series).

Iansã is embodied by the spiritual leader of this house of worship, *Pai de Santo* Bitá do

Barão, later in the evening (photo in this series).

Image 11



A major spiritual house in the city of Codó, the Umbanda Terreiro of Iemanjá, celebrates the Orixá Iemanjá, the African-derived divinity of water, the mother of all gods, and a patron of sailors.

The celebrants gather at the Itapecuru **River** in the city of Codó to celebrate Iemanjá who is embodied/represented by the woman in blue in the lower right of the photo. The woman, Janaína, Mãe Pequena (second in command) of the spiritual house.

In this ceremony, celebrants were initiated in the Itapecuru River by the *Pai de Santo* (spiritual head) of the *terreiro*, Bitá do Barão (†).

Image 12



Spiritual entities may often take male or female form, and they can be embodied in worshippers of diverse gender manifestations.

In female form Orixá Iansã is the queen of tempests and the wife Xangô, the Orixá of thunder. The male manifestation is typically Oyá who is associated with death.

Iansã's syncretic identity is commonly associated with the Catholic Saint Barbara, who was executed by her

father for her Catholic faith. In punishment, storms ravaged his kingdom.

Image 13



This celebrant is just at the point of entering trance, incorporating a spiritual entity during a Tambor de Mina ceremony at the Terreiro de São Benedito commonly known as Terreiro do Justino.

The *terreiro*, or spiritual house, is in the São Luís neighborhood of Vila Embratel and is one of the oldest in the city.

Image 14



This worshipper is participating in an Umbanda ritual honoring the Afro-Brazilian entity associated with a sensual uninhibited life on her own terms.

This entity is often called Maria Padilha or Pomba Gira, among other names. She dresses in luxurious black and red dresses, displaying the flamboyant quality of her character.

She is often seen as the patron of prostitutes and gender fluid people, but more generally she stands for sensual expression and female freedom.

Image 15



This devotee is preparing for the celebration of Preto Velho (Old Black) at the Tenda Santa Terezinha in Angelim, a neighborhood of São Luís.

She holds a small percussion instrument called a *Shekere* (from the Yoruba *Ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀*) made from a dried gourd inside a loose beaded net. It is shaken rhythmically with the pace of the dancing and chanting of the ceremony.

When Preto Velho has been embodied (see photo of Mãe de Santo Mariinha, Image 16 in this exhibition) he offers counsel and comfort to those who come to see him. Since

entities have no physical presence of their own, they depend on being embodied in devotees who are treated with reverence due the entity.

Image 16



Here *Mãe de Santo* Mariinha of Angelim, São Luis, embodies Preto Velho (*Old Black*) in a ceremony at Tenda Santa Terezinha. Though a male entity, Preto Velho can manifest in bodies that are male, female, or gender fluid.

Preto Velho represents the spirit of an Afro-Brazilian who died in slavery. He is a wise, kind entity who returns to counsel and comfort his people. He is sometimes identified with the Black Saint Benedict who was himself a child of slaves.

Signs of his manifestation are a cane, bent gait, drinking alcohol, and smoking cigars or a pipe.

Here Mariinha signals his presence with a cigar. When Preto Velho is present in her body, devotees can receive counsel and blessings from Preto Velho speaking through the *Mãe de Santo*.

Image 17



Caixieras are a tradition of women drummers in Maranhão who take their name from the *caixas*, or drums, they play. Often called “Drummers for the Holy Ghost,” they are particularly active in Pentecost celebrations.

Men are sometimes allowed to play along, but the real celebrations, which may go on for days, are an expression of their faith and solidarity as women. These *caixieras* in the small city of Monção did us the great honor of gathering to play for us and to be interviewed for our podcast project. *Caixieras* will also be part of a new choreographic work that Simone Ferro is developing for the Cisne Negro Cia de Dança in São Paulo in May, 2024.

Image 18



Tambor de Crioula is a distinctive women's dance form of African origin that is practiced by hundreds of groups in Maranhão.

Only women dance. Men play the traditional three-drum percussion, interacting with individual dancers who move to the center for solos. The tradition has also been a place for gender-fluid dancers who identify as female or may have transitioned to female.

Tambor de Crioula has been recognized as a Brazilian Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2007.

This photograph was taken in the *Tambor de Crioula* museum and headquarters in the historic center of São Luís. The patron saint of the tradition is the black Saint Benedict.

Image 19



In the old cemetery of Caxias, family and mourners gather for the Day of the Dead (*Dia dos Mortos*). In the day-long commemoration graves are surrounded with candles or fires that burn until an after sunset.

This singer is accompanied by other musicians and flag bearers waving the banners with the dove and crown of the Holy Ghost.

At sunset the cemetery is a field of lights in the darkness.

In the wealthier cemetery across town the gravesites are marked with more elaborate headstones but are

commemorated with less tradition than here in this older, less wealthy space.

Image 20



This woman in a rural area of Matinha was the keeper of the effigy of São Bilibeu who once a year is carried during Carnival.

Bilibeu is in the form of a carved African statue presented as a lusty male who can promote fertility and protect families and family animals.

This is a tiny, unique celebration in Matinha. Its male custodian was said to be 104 years old when we visited (his wife is in the photo).



Field work, Atins Maranhão, photo by Jeff Percy

Thank you!