



# IN BAHIA, THE ART AND RHYTHMS OF AFRICA ROLL ON

By Courtland Milloy

SALVADOR BAHIA, Brazil — Antonio Cozido, dance instructor and owner of the House of Dance, led his students through a dance style he'd created called Swing Afro Bahiano. With knees bent, he began hopping along the floor while rolling his hips. You may have seen a similar move performed by flexible young women on Black Entertainment Television.

At the House of Dance, as in most of Brazil, such gyrations are seen simply as artistic expressions of the human form. Nevertheless, when time came for his students to try it, some—including me—began feeling the weight of sexual inhibitions and began moving clumsily, as if our backs and butts had been welded into one stiff board.

No rhythm. No roll.

"A lot of black people who live in Brazil don't know how to dance," Cozido said. "Why? Because if you don't listen to the music, your body won't register the movement and the feeling and the vision. That's what happens when people don't live the life of their culture."

Even in Bahia—authentic capital of Afro Brazilian culture in a nation with the largest black population outside of Africa—living in a culture that is often viewed by Western standards as merely exotic, if not primitive, can be difficult. But for those who have lost their groove, which apparently I had a rich variety of deeply rooted artists and art forms can help show the way home.

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"Look out over the horizon," Mario Paula, one of my translators, said as we drove along Salvador's Atlantic coastline. "If you get in the water and let the trade winds take you as far as you can go, you end up in Africa. This is the shortest distance from Africa to the Americas."

Look at a world map and note how snugly the continents of Africa and South America would fit if they were pressed together—as they once were several millennia ago. You'll find Bahia nestled near Nigeria, Benin and what used to be known as Congo-Brazzaville, among other vast areas that made up the ancient kingdom of Yourbaland—home of the Yoruba, black Africa's largest population and creators of one of the world's premier civilizations.

During more than four centuries, 3 million slaves—the vast majority of them Yoruba—arrived in Salvador's massive slave port. Today, 80 percent of Salvador's 3 million residents consider themselves Afro-Bahian. And the Yoruba

tradition is Bahia's most enduring cultural tap root.

"These ancient African civilizations [of which Yourbaland was the most advanced] were not only impressive for their urban density, refinement and complexity, but were empowered with an inner momentum of conviction and poise that sent them spiraling out in the world, overcoming accidents of class, status and political oppression," writes Robert Farris Thompson in his book, "Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy."



*Dance Instructor Antonio Cozido*

## HOME AWAY FROM HOME:

Thompson notes that the Yoruba believed they descended from goddesses and gods in the spiritual capital of Yorubaland known as Ille-Ile. They worshipped thousands of deities, known as orishas. But only a few dozen or so of the most important ones survived the Atlantic slave trade.

Nevertheless, Thompson writes, the influence of those few surviving orishas was so powerful that “the impact of the mind and spirit of millions of Yoruba in West Africa can still be felt on key black urban populations in the Americas, most notably in Havana, Salvador, Brazil, and the heavily Hispanic barrios of certain cities of the United States, especially Miami and New York.”

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Eneida Sanches, an acclaimed visual artist, spoke of a near mystical hold the orishas have on her and her art. “I’ve been enamored of the orishas since I was a girl,” she said while working in her studio located high on a



*Visual Artist Eneida Sanches*

lush hillside in Salvador. “I often think of the orishas as my god mothers and god fathers.”

And whatever guidance the gods and goddess offer is always appreciated.

“Once I choose to work with certain cultural themes, I know I have a huge wall to go up against,” she said. “We all know that Euro-centric ideas are ruling the

world of art and those cultural ideas from Bahia are generally viewed as regional and not acknowledged as something important.”

Surrounded by banana, coconut, pineapple and passion fruit trees in her open air studio, Sanches used a large press to produce etchings she’d drawn for a book by a local priest about Afro-Bahian folk tales.

“The problem in Bahia is odd because in one way, I think the state of Bahia practices the most prejudice against black people,” she said. “What the machine of the state does is use the authentic Afro-Bahian symbols and artistic forms as a way to attract tourists. But there is no real support for the black community, for the health of the people who make the art.”

For the most gifted artist in Brazil, getting exposure often means moving from the culturally rooted areas where their talents were formed to more glitzy cities like Rio de Janeiro or San Paulo, the nation’s capital. Then comes the process of reshaping the art to make it more palatable for Western tastes.

To survive, Sanches said, “I have to be something of a tightrope walker, trying to keep a balance, to keep things in perspective. But I just can’t get the orishas out of my mind. For a while, I wanted to try something else that didn’t involve them. But the more I tried to shake it off, the more I got into it and now I just have to go on.”

In the historic section of the city known as Pelourinho, many paintings of Africans are on display, and the features are done with obvious pride and care. Like their predecessors, Afro-Bahians place a high value on the creation of art.

As one ancient Yoruban hunter’s ballad put it:

*Not the brave alone, they also praise those who know how to shape images in wood or compose a song.*

“The Yoruba accesses everything aesthetically—from the taste and color of a yam to the qualities of a dye, to the dress and deportment of a man or woman,” Thompson notes. One of the first words in the Yoruba dictionary is amewa, which literally means “knower of beauty, or “connoisseur.”

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Still, as Sanches noted, artistic compromises are made. At the Pomerot Restaurant, a popular dance and supper club popular among tourists, a recent show began with the smooth, international sounds of a group

called Band Fenix. Those in the audience danced a slow bossa nova.

Later in the evening, a group called Beto Jamaica took to the stage. That's when local Afro Bahians took over the dance floor, with the hips of both men and women all a blur as they kept pace with the groups congo and bongo players.

Bryan McCann, a professor of Brazilian history at Georgetown University believes artistic compromise is an inevitable result of modernization. And the changes are not always bad, he said.

"Both the United States and Brazil began turning to the music of the African Diaspora just at the moment when the commercial entertainment industry was taking off," said McCann, author of the book, "Hello, Hello Brazil."

"So jazz became America's popular music and samba became recognized as Brazil's popular music. At first, there was tension in both places because of recognition that both musical styles are based on African forms, which left some in the elite uncomfortable with Africa having that kind of cultural influence."

A more enduring tension grew out of the way market forces were transforming the musical genres, McCann said. "The way jazz grew from Louis Armstrong to Lester Young, samba went through a similar process. People who wanted the music to remain pure and folkloric saw the changes as a debasement. I argue that pure folkloric musical forms never really existed and to the degree they did, they were largely unknown. Samba is still being invented and, like Brazil itself, is being modernized and changing with the times."

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But modernization can have an adverse affect on a culture. Dance instructor Cozido knows that first hand. He started his own dance school ten years ago after noticing what he calls "industrialization of the arts" in Bahia.

"People used to dance even as they were walking down the streets," he said. "But then came all the commercialization of the carnivals and the music became industrialized, old and tired. It's not dancing when the singer has to tell you, 'get up and put your hands in the air' and 'shake your booty like you just don't care.'"



*Afro Bahian artist's work on display in Pelourinho*

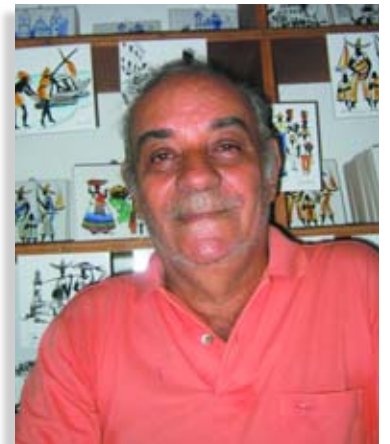
So Cozido created Swing Afro Bahianol (Bahianol means someone born in Bahia), an especially energized dance to go with an emerging new musical form known as axe.

Cozido was performing some of the dance routine as he spoke, stretching his arms towards the ceiling, making powerful steps forward then quickly pulling backwards, bending forward and letting his hands fall nearly to the floor.

The move was part of a classic Yoruba tribal dance, a familiar mainstay among African-American dance troupes throughout the United States—from the Dance Theater of Harlem to ballet ensembles at urban elementary schools.

"Authentic African inspired dance reconnects us with our inner selves, with the essence we lose when we deal with our material selves all the time," he said. And as for losing that groove, Cozido assured his students that it's not really lost at all.

"The rhythm of Africa is already encoded in our bodies," he said. "All you have to do is get out of your head. Stop thinking so much. Get back into your body and start feeling again."



*Afro Brazilian tile print maker (the only one who makes his own tile, bakes them and does the art work on them in Bahia) Art Prentice*