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## A CULT MATRIARCHATE AND MALE HOMOSEXUALITY

BY RUTH LANDES

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MALE homosexuality occurs very widely, but the extent to which it becomes a social problem varies with the attitudes taken towards it by different cultures. One of these special attitudes is that which distinguishes sharply between the active homosexual and the passive. Either one or the other may be the object of strong social condemnation and hence must live as an outcaste, while the other is given a recognized role in society.

Among certain American Indian tribes of the last century, the *berdache* or passive homosexual was protected, encouraged to adopt the social and sexual roles of women, sometimes to assume sacred responsibilities, and, less often, allowed to cultivate with social approval the lewd conduct that we attribute to professional prostitutes. His "husband" was not considered as a homosexual but merely as a man who could make no more advantageous match. The active homosexual, however, who sought young partners, was an object of contempt. On the other hand, among the contemporary Tanala of Madagascar (communication from Ralph Linton), the passive homosexual arouses no comment at all provided he assumes the dress and occupations of a woman and eventually "marries" a man. In our own culture homosexuals have incurred disapproval whether they were active or passive; understandably enough, therefore, homosexuals are not so clearly differentiated into these two types as they are in cultures which distinguish sharply between them.

In the Negro community of Bahia, in northern Brazil, unusual circumstances encourage certain of the passive homosexuals to forge a new and respected status for themselves. Both individual and social changes have resulted which are important and easy to observe; but their special interest to psychology lies in demonstrating the way in which an outcaste group has made a new adaptation by taking advantage of changed circumstances.

In Brazil, condemnation of passive homosexuals puts them into the outcaste group while their partners pass unremarked

and are often men of importance. Yet they are not hounded. The passive homosexuals solicit on the street in obscene whispers, and make themselves conspicuous by mincing with sickening exaggeration, overdoing the falsetto tones, and using women's turns of phrase. All their energies are focussed upon arranging the sexual act in which they take the female role. Rebuffed by a man they desire, they are said to drag themselves on their knees and plead sobbingly. They usually solicit normal men, who take advantage of them only when deprived of women. It is said that such men treat them most offensively. Solicitation, however, cannot provide a livelihood. They do not, like women prostitutes in Bahia, have a legal status, the right to claim a certain wage and to live in protected streets; rather, they are petty criminals hounded from the streets and with no right to claim pay.

It is this class, nevertheless, which has today provided leaders in dominant *candomble* cults of Bahia. In order to understand the change that is occurring, it is necessary to sketch the main features of these cults and the role they play in Bahia.

Bahia, also called Salvador, is the old capital of Brazil. It lies diagonally opposite the western horn of Africa and directly opposite the Angola coast. For centuries it was a teeming slave market, and a port of entry for freely migrating Negroes; today its population is preponderantly Negro and its folkways predominantly African. The lustiness of their life is everwhelmingly evident on holidays, when the sun beats down upon miles of gleaming streets packed with blacks swarming in from the outlying forests. The great squares are choked with people surging to insistent dance rhythms that are both mournful and lilting. At one point there is a deep hum as they sing, "Ah-h, Bahia, land of gold and luxury, land of *samba* and *candomble*!"

*Candomble* is an African fetish worship organized in some eighty cults and including in its membership most of the several hundred thousand Negroes of the city and its surrounding forests. Worship revolves around some ten West African gods; and each cult influences the whole lives of its followers. The greatest *candombles* today the Bahians trace to the Yoruba, the "Nagô" of Bahian speech, one of the greatest tribes of Nigeria and one which furnished many slaves in former days. These Nago priesthoods in Bahia are all but exclusively female. Tra-

dition says baldly that only women are suited by their sex to nurse the deities, and that the service of men is blasphemous and unsexing. Although some men become priests, nevertheless, the ratio is hardly one male to fifty female priests. Most people feel that men should not be made priests, and so a man comes to this office only under exceptional circumstances. In any case he can never function as fully as a woman.

The principal fact in a Bahian Negro's world is the neighborhood in which he lives, and this is usually within sight and sound of some *candomble*. Everyone visits the cult house at least once a month, some several times a week. They pay social calls to the priestesses and bring the gossip of the outside world. Some come only to idle away the hours, but at one time or another all are obliged to consult the head priestess, called *iyalorixa* in Nago (Brazilian spelling) and meaning "mother in goodhood." The "mother," surrounded by the lesser priestesses, lives in the house of worship, both in order to be in the company of the gods she tends and to serve clients who need her intercession with the gods. Many are the sayings in honor of these cult women, famous throughout Brazil for their kindness. A "mother's" sure speech and poised walk predispose her subordinates to obedience, at least in her own house and before her eyes. Under her guidance there flourishes a realm of peace and security.

The "mother" is aided by priestesses who are called her "daughters in godhood"—"daughters" because she has trained or "made" them over from creatures of common flesh to dedicated vessels for the manifestations of the gods. Clients usually need to be cured of an illness, for the people are always ailing; they come to the cult house to fulfill Catholic-like vows to the African deities or *orixas*; they come to fetch a magical remedy for disciplining an errant husband, an unwilling lover, an unfriendly employer; they beg strong measures for "despatching" rivals in love, business or friendship; they request ceremonial treatment to protect an unborn baby or an infant, or they want treatment for sterility. Any problem is brought to the "mother," whose fame thereupon spreads until some "mothers" are sought by highly placed whites. Some grow wealthy and justify the local belief that all experienced "daughters" of *candomble* are "rich."

Cult "daughters" are "made" for different reasons. A few

are made when still in the uterus because a priestess has dreamed so. Others are made in childhood to cure a disease. Sickness is often regarded as the castigation of a god, or as a god's way of putting his sign on a votary. The cult "mother" analyzes the situation by divining with African cowrie shells that have been treated ritually; besides, sometimes an elder "daughter" receives a dream from her god diagnosing the ailment. Most "daughters" are made, however, in adulthood with the hope of curing chronic headaches or stomach trouble; such votaries usually trace the beginnings of their ailments back to infancy, and explain that they delayed initiation or cure for economic reasons chiefly. Initiation requires a great expense of time and money, since it demands three months of absolute seclusion in the cult house, abstention from sex and rich foods and amusements, and charges of anything from fifty to a hundred dollars. Since money is hard to come by in Bahia, the large sums are paid off in various ways—in service, in kind, and in installments. After her formal release from the cult house, the novice observes awkward taboos for the remainder of the year; indeed, certain difficult taboos and proscriptions remain with her to her death, though in lessening severity. The taboos usually concern sex and foods, and exposure to heat and cold. The object is apparently to maintain the priestess in a removed half-ascetic state of diminished interest in fleshly affairs.

Occasionally little boys are "made" like girl children. Such a situation comes about because a child pledged before birth is born a boy, or because the illness of a boy child excites the sympathies of some priestess' god. These novices become "sons in godhood," but the mother of a Nago cult tries to avoid making "sons." She prefers instead an inconclusive ritual or cure called "seating the god," which confers no priestly status; and in fact she urges men to "seat" their gods so as to win divine protection for life. At the same time she fills the treasury of her house.

Boy "sons" may be called passive or inadvertent initiates in contrast with the men who persistently request initiation. A Nago "mother" hesitates before "making" men even after they have fallen into the ritual trance during which they dance possessed by a god who has entered them, and speak the god's message in his voice. She tries the man by traditional tests of

fire and boiling oil, just as she tries a woman suspected of counterfeiting trance. Once I saw a "mother" eject a young man who habitually fell into trance, and she had this sharp notice pinned on the center post of the ceremonial room: "Gentlemen will kindly refrain from disturbing the rites or dancing in the space reserved for women"—and "women" meant the priestesses.

The Nago cults formerly had associated with them certain men who practised divination and sorcery but who were not cult heads. One or two such old men still operate in Bahia, and are called *babala.o* "father in godhood." They were consulted by the whole population, including the *candombles*, though sorcery is forbidden in Bahia. "Father in godhood" is as exalted as "mother," and, because of his claim to sorcery, may once have been even more powerful. When a "father" visits a cult ceremony today, he is received with deep bows and hand-kissing, the "mother" enthrones him by her right hand and calls him "brother," and the "daughters" call him "uncle." He may dance to honorific songs that are drummed out for him, but he dances wide-awake and alone. When he feels dangerously near to yielding to possession, as can happen when many of his god's songs are drummed and sung, he runs from the spot, fearing to profane the mysteries and unsex himself. The "father" is a dying institution now, and the two old men in Bahia unable to attract followers.

In very rare instances in the past men have acted as the heads of Nago cults, and then they too were called "father." Like the "mothers" they made few sons and many daughters, forbade male sacerdots to dance with the women or to dance publicly when possessed, and debarred male novices from certain female mysteries. In comparison with the women, they were only partially initiated, and tolerated in view of certain anomalies. The more strictly a "father" observed the cult's restrictions, the more he improved his reputation, especially if he developed in the direction of a father-diviner. In cult affairs, as also in *babala.o* sorcery, a woman had to assist as "lesser mother in godhood," and eventually she succeeded the "father."

The cult structure requires men as *ogans*, "providers," "protectors." An *ogan* is expected to pay for the elaborate ceremonies, to keep the cult house in repair, and to help finance at least one of the priestesses in her ritual obligations. At times the *ogan*

is obliged to defend the cult before the police. After he has been "confirmed" he is called "father" by all the women, who kiss his hand and beg his blessing, but he addresses the head as "mother" and usually stoops to kiss her hand and beg her blessing (as everyone does in greeting the Catholic *padres*), and the other priestesses he calls "daughter." A cult group tries to attract as many such "fathers" as possible, some even succeeding in ensnaring white men of means. This service by men who are in secular matters most patriarchally minded is striking; yet the situation bears a certain analogy to their own household arrangements in that each man is expected to take care of one woman, that is, of one priestess and her god. And the dominating "mother" is paralleled by the elder women who rule Brazilian families.

Among the *ogans* of each cult, three are charged with special duties. One supervises the three drums and drummers, which are fundamental in the rites, since "the voice of the drums calls the gods." One assists the "mother" in ritually slaughtering sacrificial cows, goats, cocks, chickens, and pigeons, being required to cut off and lay aside the genitals of male sacrifices; the third *ogan* assists him. Whenever these two approach the deep mysteries, they are subjected to the same taboos as are the priestesses.

Friction within the Nago cults is not due to masculine jealousy, for the men in the cult rarely complain of the authority and demands of the women, and more strongly even than the women they condemn grown "sons" as "sissies." The ancient *babala.os* are now negligible; instead, "mothers" are encouraged to take on their divining functions. When there is conflict within the Nago cults, it is usually the work of women ambitious to become "mothers," and it is due to such friction that new houses and small variations in ritual appear.

The most important rift appeared about a generation ago, when a Nago "mother" named Sylvina set up the so-called *caboclo* cult. *Caboclo* in this region of Brazil means an Indian-white mixed blood; Sylvina appropriated the term because she claimed to receive visions of ancient Brazilian Indians. She organized the worship of the first owners of the land, the Indian dead. Probably she had two or three sources for her inspiration: one, the Bantu practice of worshipping the ghosts of ancestors

and ancient landowners; another, the Brazilian's romantic interest in Indian history, which is taught to every school child and which is especially interesting to mulattoes who prefer to describe themselves as *caboclos*; and a third, the ubiquitousness of European spiritualism and of "sessions" that invoke Indian "guides." Sylvina's schismatic ideas, immediately successful because of her prestige as a Nago "daughter," have resulted today in dozens of *caboclo* cults in Bahia. Nago gods still remain primary in *caboclo* ritual, and only after they are worshipped are the newer supernaturals invoked.

*Caboclo* cults have immensely relaxed the restrictions surrounding "mothers." A Nago "mother" must pass through at least seven years of strenuous training before her colleagues sanction her accession to office; as a rule she has gone through many more. There is also a tendency for a woman to inherit the office from a relative or close friend with whom she has served as assistant. *Caboclo* "mothers," however, assert the right to function without previous service, often without having been "made." They shape their shortcomings into a virtue, claiming that no human intermediaries placed hands on them in confirmation, but only the *caboclo* spirits themselves. They train novices in a very sketchy manner, requiring only seven days of seclusion, imposing few taboos for the remainder of the year, and so on. They visit the ceremonies of other cult houses far more frequently than the Nago priestesses, who in fact are warned against such gadding about, and it is believed that they eavesdrop to pick up portions of ritual knowledge. Their usual attitude is hostile and sulky, with the result that they have contributed notably to the Afro-Brazilian's collection of songs of defiance.

Their most radical departure from Nago tradition is that men may become *caboclo* cult-heads. In their rites, men abandon themselves like women to the pre-dance tremors and groans and to the final frenzied leaps. I am told of one *caboclo* house where men are in the majority, but the women in other priesthoods still far exceed the men. Although in one ceremony I saw five "sons" among ten "daughters," in another I saw only two "sons" among about a dozen "daughters." I never saw a *caboclo* ceremonial that did not include one or more "sons," a circumstance which is impossible in a Nago ceremonial.

Even though *caboclo* "mothers" still agree with the Nago in the dogma that no man should be made a "father," inevitably



they defeat themselves in consequence of freely making "sons." In a partial enumeration made by a Bahian ethnologist, Edison Carneiro, the proportion stood:

MOTHERS		FATHERS
Nago	20	3
Caboclo	10	34

This count is a fair sample. People claim that the *caboclo* "fathers" have appeared in numbers only in the present generation, an assertion substantiated by the fact that the non-Nago "fathers" are all under forty-five years of age and a large number in their early twenties.

The most facile explanation of this development in the non-Nago cults is that the men who play the role of priest are striving for oneness with the "mother" figure. Although an exposition of this sort is obvious, it does not go deep enough to explain why these *candomble* priests are all drawn from the outcaste homosexual solicitors of the Bahia underworld. Most of these *caboclo* "fathers" and "sons" are passive homosexuals of note, and were vagrants and casuals of the streets.

The relaxation of the strict taboos in the non-Nago cults, and especially the fact that the bars were let down to men, did not, however, obliterate the fundamental tenet that femininity alone could nurse the gods. All men considered normal in Bahia were, therefore, still debarred. Only one group fulfilled the requirements. The fact that they were a group which stood under the strongest social condemnation did not weigh against this basic tenet. When "sons" were made, they were made from among the solicitors, who in spite of their status were alone "feminine." Having made their entry into the influential *candomble*, as priests they have now a voice in all vital activities. They are supported and even adored by those normal men of whom they were before the butt and object of derision.

This metamorphosis has not taken place without changing both the men who have become *caboclo* priests and the *candomble* cults in which they now have leading roles. In contrast with the "mothers," the "fathers" seem combative and frustrated. They desire simple personal satisfactions usually, and rarely glimpse the social ends that are the stated goals of Nago fetishism. But as the voice of a hitherto voiceless group, they may be path-breakers to new institutions. They do not consider themselves rebels, "masculinists" to be grouped with our

"feminists"; on the contrary, they aspire to a feeling of oneness with the "mother" tradition. The situation does not result in group solidarity, and the men are masters of slander. Least of all do they reflect the masculinity of the patriarchal culture in whose heart they live. They want one thing, for which the *candomble* provides widest opportunities: they want to be women.

Physically they have certain advantages, for many of the "fathers" are handsome in a boyish way, and all I have seen are mulattoes. *Caboclo* "fathers" and "sons" also have female mannerisms, emulating not the quiet authority and composed movements of the cult matriarchs, but the nervous coquettishness of the homosexuals. Instead, however, of soliciting affection and sexual satisfaction from casuals, they solicit and are approached by worshippers who are usually *ogans*; instead of meriting contemptuous talk and kicks, they are installed in comfortable houses, served by cult subordinates, and sometimes grow rich. Within the *candomble* they insist upon their womanliness and ritualize it in priestly trance; banking upon the prestige of Nago "mothers" and "daughters," they endow themselves with comparable titles of "fathers" and "sons." Passive homosexual fantasies are realizable under the protection of the cult, as men dance with women in the roles of women, wearing skirts and acting as mediums. One of the most conspicuous attributes of the prominent "fathers" is their style of dancing in the rites. This is stereotyped in the women's style, especially in being slow and sensuous (*dengoso*), and is markedly different from the athletic forms cultivated by men in the secular dances. It makes a bulky man, like the famous "father" Bernardino, seem feminine, softening his bare back and shoulders, his bloomed legs and small naked feet into the body of a woman. They partially displace the women doing women's work; but they do not view themselves as women's sexual rivals. Simply, they care to *be* women, and constantly surround themselves with women priests. The "sons" increase in these surroundings, and one day may assume the major offices which are today in the sole hands of women.

Established "fathers" cultivate different types of behavior for the world of *candomble* and for the world outside. They confine their femaleness more and more to cult occasions, in secular life striving to imitate the actions of men. This conduct is part of the psychology of keeping cult activities secret. In public the

"fathers" wear trousers and roughen their gestures. Even in public they are protected by the cult, since they never venture forth without the company of some "sons" or *ogans*. Even so, they always have an air of challenge, of slight hostility.

Some "fathers" cherish friendships with important Nago "mothers" and "daughters," and a few strive to resemble them in priestly consecration. The ordinary "father" is interested solely in the opportunity for personal display, while the great "mothers" have primarily a tremendous pride in their office. To herself and to others, the "mother" is first and foremost the sacred head of African worship, and only secondarily the preening woman; but to himself and to others the "father" is first and foremost a sexual anomaly, and only secondarily the head of a cult. Yet the famous "fathers" Bernardino and Procopio worry about masking the cruder signs of homosexuality—though they never abandon its practice—and devote themselves to their mystical duties, like their women colleagues.

Most "fathers" are votaries of Yansan, the African goddess identified with the English St. Barbara. Psychologically this is an apt situation, for in African tradition Yansan is a masculine woman, or even a man. She is a warrior; at times she is the wife of the warrior-king, Shango, and at times she is his sister. Old wood carvings found in Bahia, made there or in Africa, represent Shango as a male figure and as a female. Yansan controls the wind and lightning; hence her emblematic colors of maroon, red, and blue. Shango lives in the sky ruling the thunder, and his colors are similar to hers—red, and red and white. Like male gods, Yansan wears trousers, and an abbreviated wide ballet skirt; "she is the man-woman."

Men have brought a hitherto foreign element into the atmosphere of *candomble*, a kind of terrorism expressed in their harsh and callous direction of the group, in their furtive but widely known use of sorcery, and in their actual whipping of priestesses. A "mother" knows how to use sorcery, and she owns a sacred whip or stick that hangs in the main altar room; but she uses neither instrument, for her simple command suffices. In resorting to violence, a "father" admits that though he has captured the office of "mother," he has failed to enter into its character. Because his purposes are different, he changes the nature of the office.

His terrorism derives in part from the diviner-sorcerer.

Bernardino, Procopio, and Cyriaco are the most noted "fathers" in Bahia, but their fame as priests is overshadowed by their fame as sorcerers (*feiticeiros*). Their clients include distinguished white persons who protect them from the police, for the police occasionally round them up to be jailed and whipped.

Each father is an interesting variation of the prevailing type. A real psychological understanding is impossible without the intimate acquaintance that was closed to me as a woman; but a great deal could be gathered, and some observations that seem to block out the general situation are now offered.

The ten or so "fathers" whom I knew had come from the ranks of the street prostitutes and boy delinquents, and from the town's ruffians. Not all were natives of the city of Bahia; João, for example, came at the age of ten from the remote cattle land of the state, and lived in the town with the riff-raff of the streets. The place of birth is unimportant, for the same sorts of abnormal sex behavior characterize all parts of Brazil, and very few men have not been exposed to some one type. Naturally, as an outcaste João was a delinquent.

Some "fathers," like Bernardino, break their street ties completely and cultivate cult followers who are normal men dazzled by the mystery that surrounds a cult head. Others, however, like *pãe* João, retain the old ties along with the new. These contrasting attitudes towards the disreputable past are linked with other forms of behavior. Thus Bernardino struggles to hide his homosexuality, confining it to his home and the temple's terrain. He wears severe white clothes and shaves his woolly head. João, on the contrary, is quite unashamed, half mincing in the streets, writing love letters to the men of his heart, wearing fancy blouses whose color and cut set off his fine shoulders and skin—and he straightens his hair. Straightened hair, forbidden by Nago standards, is the symbol of male homosexuals.

"Fathers" are on the whole distinctly cold to women, a fact which is more conspicuous in Brazil than it would be in the States. But Bernardino and Procopio cultivate close professional and personal ties with important priestesses of other cult houses. In view of the bitter rivalry and mistrust normally existing among cult heads, their attitude is very striking. It is probably based on a peculiar kind of desexualized love and hero-worship; at the same time it guarantees the "father's" admission into a select small

circle of leading priestesses. Bernardino likes to offer expensive gifts to these friends, but he also explodes into shocking abuse.

Men like João cultivate women prostitutes. He is famous for visting them in their houses and playing innocently. This habit of his recalls Wilhelm Stekel's interesting cases of homosexuals who derived their highest excitement from the company of easy women who had entertained the men they themselves desired.

Still others, like Vavá, are bisexual. He seems the most contained, and also one of the least interesting, of the group. Like João, he allows his cult grounds to be used for assignations, thus attaining for himself access to the men who visit there originally from heterosexual motives. At the same time he is happily married to an attractive white girl, having been married several times in his twenty-five years.

Others, like Cyriaco and Manuelzinho, are quite staid in their homosexual attachments. The first lives with three "sons," and the quartet is inseparable. The second, sunk in an apathetic adoration of the doll-like Vavá, never flirts in João's heartless fashion.

Some are shy and self-conscious, like Octavio; others are hostile and rude, like Bernardino and Procopio; others still are lewd like Vidal. Some are impudent, like Paím, and some are quite serene, like Cyriaco. Obviously homosexuality has different personal meanings to each of them.

"Fathers" are not equally devoted to their religious responsibilities. Procopio and Bernardino, like many "mothers," devote all their time to them. Vavá and João have white-collar jobs in the schools. Cyriaco operates a successful grocery. Others, like Paím, are wasters who have no other occupation, and who eventually lose prestige and their cult following.

It is clear, therefore, that when the bars were let down which had excluded men from cult leadership, the fact that the only group which qualified was made up of outcastes and vagrants did not militate against certain of these men playing the highest roles in *candomble*. It is clear also that *candomble* has been radically changed by their assumption of such roles. Many of the outcaste group of passive homosexuals who have become priests have broken with the outcaste group; all have persevered in the face of powerful hostility, taken over the roles of the priestly "mothers," and exploited the priestly offices to their own ends.