



The Sacrifice, the Feast and the Power of the Priesthood in the Xangô Cult of Recife

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Even the most bizarre-seeming beliefs and practices turn out in closer inspection to be based on ordinary, banal, one might say ‘vulgar’ conditions, needs and activities. What I mean by a banal or vulgar solution is that it rests on the ground and that it is build up out of guts, sex, energy, wind, rain, and other palpable and ordinary phenomena.¹

Abstract

The Xangô religion of Recife is a the cult of the *orixás*, gods of West African (mainly Yoruba) derivation syncretized with the saints of Lusitanian popular Catholicism. The essential act of the cult consists of sacrifice and feasting: animal slaughter, during which the faithful sing, dance and experience trances. The cult characteristics imply a whole set of responses to environmental pressures of various kinds, with oppositions of a dialectical character between the community and domination; the initiate as a ritual son and the initiate as a client; the meat and the feast; and the sacrifice and the party. In other words, between the practical requirements of culture and its surplus that transpires as the feast and as the holy and the beautiful.

Keywords: Xangô cult, Brazil, sacrifice, feast

Słowa kluczowe: kult Xangô, Brazylia, ofiara, uczta

¹ M. Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture*, New York 1974, p. 5.

Introduction

This article is a result of ethnographic research (based on observation) of an Afro-Brazilian religious group, the Xangô Candomblé of Recife. It is assumed here that the religious phenomenon of Xangô, just like other religious experiences, does not exist isolated from its environment, understood here as a concrete reality that already is permeated by culture, but which nevertheless represents a milieu to which people have to find adaptive answers. For this reason we cannot do without making at least implicit references to some of its elements, such as the social organization, economy, and ways of life, limiting ourselves, however, to only those of them that seem to be essential for the understanding of the functioning of the Xangô cult amid its concrete setting in Recife. It is supposed that turning to some non-religious, non-symbolic aspects of the local culture in search for extra-cultural factors may provide us with some explanation of the existence, persistence and popularity of the Xangô cult in Recife – a cult based on animal sacrifice and community feasts with very high meat consumption.² We hypothesize that Xangô has important adaptive functions in the cult's environment, presenting a markedly utilitarian character concerned with the everyday lives of its devotees. The premises of our hypothesis concerning the adaptive function of the Xangô cult in the city of Recife are as follows:

1. Xangô is a 'dirty' religion, practiced among blood, sweat, and toil. Its basic feature consists of slaughtering animals in the chapels in order to feed the saints (*orixás*). There is no ritual in Xangô that does not lead to, or follow from, animal sacrifice.
2. Not all of the flesh of the sacrificed animals is used for the saints, as they have an exclusive right only to some organs. This should make adaptive sense, especially for those with caloric deficiencies, and when considering the necessities of counting on an institutionalized form of group solidarity.
3. The full meaning of a cultural phenomenon is not reducible to that of any or all of the functions it serves in a given setting. No function or sum of functions exhaust the whole energy of Xangô.

In order to understand Xangô with all its internal dialectical oppositions, we apply the concept of dialectics, borrowed primarily from Robert Murphy,³ and discuss:

- (1) The opposition between community and domination in the cult. The former presents itself in terms of love and kinship. Nevertheless Xangô leaders, who own or control the "means of religious production", expect and exact a profit from their use. No cultic act (no sacrifice) takes place without a concomitant transfer of income from the devotee to the priestly hierarchy. There is thus opposition between the ritual "son" and the client. The former, although made into a "son" by the rites of initiation, does not stop being a client, a buyer of

² J. Steward, *Theory of Cultural Change*, Urbana 1955, p. 36.

³ R. Murphy, *The Dialectics of Social Life: Alarms and Excursions in Anthropological Theory*, New York 1971.

religious goods and services, while the client, as a potential initiate, represents a virtual son.

- (2) The opposition between meat and feast and sacrifice and food. The devotee's hunger is attributed to the saints. Need is thereby negated and transmuted into worship. The presentation of hunger as sacrifice is immediately followed by the latter's metamorphosis into a regular meal. Ritual slaughtering provides food for the faithful, but the acquisition and preparation of this food is embedded in ritual. Pushed to its limits, function becomes more than function. It turns into feast.

Bibliographical setting

There is no scarcity of already classical publications on the cults of African origin in Brazil. Still, not many of them directly discuss Xangô in Recife, our main consideration. One of these studies is definitely the major work of René Ribeiro on the subject, providing a coherent description of the organization, ideology, and rituals.⁴ Although the fundamental role of animal sacrifices escapes him, he nevertheless provides the reader with a most useful outline of the economy and internal politics of the Xangô cult centers.

Herskovits also penned some by no means negligible works on the Afro-Brazilian cults, which, in spite of not dealing directly with Xangô in Recife, are interesting in the context of the objectives of our research:

The Candomblé [...] functions as an instrument of social adjustment and social control, which on the economic side operates as a means of furthering mutual self-aid. [...] The identification of members with the group and its activities are internalized to become primary mechanisms for individual adjustment by providing a sense of psychological security and the means of achieving social, economic, and status goals.⁵

He also authored pioneering research on the economic infrastructure, with the first (and so far only) assessment of the costs and income flows involved in the services and rituals of Candomblé.⁶ He might have used as the essay's epigraph the sentence he quotes in Portuguese: "*No Candomblé não se faz nada de graça*" [Nothing is done for free in Candomblé] – indeed, every single act of the cult entails some form of transfer of money from the devotee to the group leader or leaders and some measure of communal redistribution. In realistic terms, Herskovits adds that it is "basic for an understanding of any aspect of the economy of Candomblé [...] that while the work of the supernatural beings is in large measure that of bringing prosperity and well-being to those who worship them, the relationship is a reciprocal one which, with

⁴ R. Ribeiro, *Cultos Afro-Brasileiros do Recife*, Recife 1952.

⁵ M. Herskovits, *Man and His Works*, New York 1948, p. 229.

⁶ *Idem*, *Some Economic Aspects of the Afrobahian Candomblé*, [in:] *Miscellanea Paul Rivet Dicata*, vol. II, Mexico, 1958, pp. 226–247.

hard-headed realism, is envisaged (by the cultists) in economic terms.”⁷ Herskovits provides some lists of the appurtenances of initiation and other rites, all, of course, charged to the devotees, and returns to the problem of structure and of that which we later call “the expropriation of the holy surplus value:” “In the tightly-knit structure of most Candomblé groupings, ultimate controls, on any level, and ultimate responsibility rests in the hands of priests and priestesses.”⁸ They are sellers of goods and services of a religious kind, including healing and provision with magic that protects from evil and assures success in undertakings.⁹ Herskovits also mentions the flat fee (*dinheiro do chão*) that cult heads are personally given for performing or presiding over the performance of rituals, making Candomblé houses small capitalist ventures geared towards profit, although this does not exhaust their total meaning.¹⁰ After all the wealth of the data he presents on the economy and the organization of Candomblé, Herskovits could be blamed, if anything, for reaching the too timid conclusion that “It is difficult to generalize as to the degree to which the income of the cult groups can be separated from that of its head [...] there is no question that in spiritual matters, ultimate controls rest in the hands of the cult head.”¹¹ In the Africa-rooted religions God is not a just father who rewards and punishes. Gods are powers released by correct ritual that makes them able to do what man wants. To be correct and fulfill their function, the rituals need to be performed by qualified religious specialists.

Our research is also only likely to gain from considering the Leacocks’¹² methodological strategies and theoretical strands on the Afro-Brazilian Batuque cult in Belém, which can be summed up in two major items: establishment of a correlation (akin to the concept and method of cultural ecology) between the cults and their extra-religious, urban environment, and explanation of religious change by a challenge-and-response paradigm reminiscent of the concept of multilineal evolution. In the urban setting of Belém, a determining factor of the religious experience of Batuque is, according to the authors, the concrete environmental challenge to which it provides an adaptive response. There apparently lies the theoretical cornerstone of the Leacocks’ book, related to the concept and method of cultural ecology, which “introduces the local environment as the extra-cultural factor.”¹³ Batuque, for the Leacocks, represents an adjustment to a particular social environment:

From the perspective of the members, the appeal of Batuque is not that it promises to change the world in which the members live, but that it will help them to survive in that world. [...] The awful problems that the poor must face are part of that world, and the only hope man has is to gain supernatural support in coping with them.¹⁴

⁷ *Idem*, *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afro-American Studies*, Bloomington 1966, p. 253.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 262.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 260.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 263.

¹² S. Leacock, R. Leacock, *Spirits of the Deep*, Garden City 1972, p. 112.

¹³ J. Steward, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁴ S. Leacock, R. Leacock, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

Supernatural support is sought by devotees in order to cope with the problems of their environment.

Batuque is an extremely instrumental religion, and in many respects it seems almost perfectly designed to serve the needs of the people who participate in it. Living in a very difficult environment [...] they find in Batuque a religion that promises direct, immediate, day-to-day support. For those individuals who have the requisite skills and adequate motivation [...].¹⁵

Some interesting aspects of the Batuque of Belém have also been studied by Napoleão Figueiredo, who is perfectly aware of the complexities of the environmental context of religion:

For about ten years, we observed, at a certain cult house, the evolution of Exu-Tranca-Rua (Exu-Who-Locks-The-Street). At first, he would eat sacrificed animals and drink cheap rum. Later he shifted to sirloin steak and wine. Now he only eats watermelon and drinks foreign red wine. It was explained to us that he had evolved spiritually. But as a matter of fact, we observed (socially upward) change in the clientele of that house.¹⁶

Assuming that Xangô should be equally approached against the background of the economic, social, organizational, and ideational aspects of the environment in which it exists, we will move on to verify the hypothesis that the cult is simply good in its setting and that helping to improve the adaptation of the poorest part of the population of Recife (its majority devotees) to their environment constitutes the secret of its continuity and popularity.

Xangô in its environmental setting

The fact that neither the available literature nor the field investigation has been able to discover the presence of other kinds of formal, non-kin based groupings among the people who make up the membership of Xangô is in itself indicative of this religion's paramount role in serving the function of congregating, organizing, and establishing links of solidarity for the cultists, both vis-à-vis one another and in the face of society at large. We believe that the nature of the social and economic structures of Recife represents, in itself, an indication of the environmental pressures that lead to the way of thinking and symbolizing of Xangô, with its strong emphasis on concreteness. We do not expect Xangô to constitute only a purely adaptive response to the functional requirements of the environment – there never appears to be a one-to-one rational fit in cultural things generally or in the economic, societal, and symbolic structures in particular of any religion or cult when seen against the background of their concrete settings. Still, we assume that turning to the socio-economic characteristics of Recife and its population by means of inspecting some of the available data might reveal

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 328.

¹⁶ N. Figueiredo, *Os caminhos de Exu*, [in:] *Sete Brasileiros e seu universo: artes, ofícios, origens, permanências*, G. Magalhães, I. Arestizábal (eds.), Brasília 1974, p. 78.

more precise specificities of the Xangô against the background of the cult's environment.

The city of Recife is the setting of Xangô. It is located in the humid coastal belt of the northeast of Brazil (Zona da Mata), an area devoted to the growth of sugar cane since the sixteenth century. In historical terms, the growth of Recife is connected with the role played first by the intensive agricultural production based on the slave labor and by the city's harbor and later with its political importance as the capital of what eventually became the state of Pernambuco. The city and its surrounding area are nowadays the seat of a sizable industrial concentration.

According to the national census conducted by IBGE (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) in 2010, the population of Recife amounted to 1,537,740 inhabitants, with almost all the population classed as urban, the majority of it young (between 10 and 39 years of age), and 7.48% classified as "black" and 56.43% as "dark" (which implies African descent). The rate of diseases related to inadequate environmental sanitation is still quite high, although it has slightly decreased in the past decades, at 330.5 per 100,000 inhabitants. Both the city and the region are perceived as violent: in 2010 the murder rate was 39.5 per 100,000. The economically active population is 55.79% of the overall population (counting from the age of 10 up) and is slowly, but steadily decreasing from the year of 2003, when it was at the level of 58.84%. At the same time, 22.28% of the families living in Recife have overall monthly household incomes of less than one minimum wage, which means that their members live in poverty, suffering from regular caloric deficiency. Among those who work, only 22.07% possess formal labor contracts and thus any kind of social security. Education represents a clear advantage in the Recife labor market and the issue is related to the general problem of employment and income, with around 17% of the population classified as illiterate.¹⁷

There is a clear correlation between educational attainment and income in Recife and a constant increase in income in direct proportion to years of formal schooling. Let us add that the range of income distribution suggested by the less precise information of the census would point to still wider gaps between the living standards of people placed in different classes of educational attainment. There are no indications of the existence, in the area of Recife, of significant rates of unemployment among the well-educated. Indeed, as might be surmised, the local economy, which has exhibited an increasing sophistication in its industrial sector, seems hungry for technically qualified or skilled labor. We here face a vicious circle: the acquisition of skills depends on education, which depends on income, which depends on employment... The unskilled have to find subsidiary or marginal niches. The same works also in the field of religion and all services of a religious kind. In the Roman Catholic or in the historical Protestant denominations such as the Presbyterian Church, those services

¹⁷ Although Brazil's gross national income is not low, it has persistently had one of the highest rates of inequality in the world, which is visible in its high GINI index and low position in the rankings on the Human Development Index, combining indicators of life expectancy, educational attainment and national income (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html> [access: 12.11.2018]). All the national statistics presented in the text have been retrieved from respective subpages of the official IBGE site: www.ibge.gov.br [access: 12.11.2018].

will require, in order to be effectively and legitimately offered on the market, educational curricula that represent variants of the formal education. Here precisely lies one of the major advantages of Xangô (and, currently, also Neo-Pentecostal churches, which stand in clear opposition to all Afro-Brazilian religions, obviously competing for the faithful in the same market segment): it does require education in the sense that it requires strenuous and lengthy training under specialized tutors. But while it involves costs – nothing in Xangô is done without some transfer of income – its price is much more accessible than that of the qualifications acquired through formal education. Thus the growth and the persistence of Xangô is, at least partly, explainable by competition in the offering of services, including religious services, in Recife. Xangô assumes the character of employment within unemployment.

The preceding remarks on the non-culture characteristics of the Recife population, economy, education and Xangô can be summed up in the twin conclusion that, on the one hand, Xangô represents ersatz education, or, it represents a kind of education in its own right. Given the environment as it is and the concrete opportunities it offers, this sort of on-the-ritual-job training is, to a limited but significant extent, able to break the vicious circle that leads from poverty to a lack of formal, Western-style education and vice-versa. On the other hand, however, it also seems to create a vicious circle of its own. Access to goods and services of Xangô requires, as we have already mentioned, expenses of its own and thus implies a living standard at least occasionally above subsistence level. Advancement within its internal hierarchy is associated with income up to a certain limit and down to a certain minimum.

Recife is, so to speak, a city of scavengers, in which the underprivileged must try to find ways and means to circumvent their alienation vis-à-vis the economic and social system. Therefore concreteness is always at a premium, that is, whatever represents a concrete opportunity for obtaining gained or transferred income is functional in Recife's setting. This is also likely to pervade religion, which suffers from environmental pressure toward adopting more than purely symbolic exchanges or transfers in its ritual and organizational structures. We presume, therefore, that Xangô, not constituting of course the only result of nor the only answer to such pressure, represents one of the means to circumvent the contradiction between, on the one hand, people's needs and, on the other, the inadequacy of the economy and rigidity of social structures in Recife.

Xangô appears to Western observers as being of extreme concreteness, or, to put it in Victor Turner's vocabulary, it is markedly "iconophile" in character.¹⁸ The touchable, visible, audible enactment of its theology practically excludes an abstract dogmatic system – by no means is Xangô a religion of the book and, as shown by the central aspects of its liturgy, it is far and away from being purely an arrangement of abstract symbols. Xangô is a very concrete religion in that its theological matrices, which either preside over or legitimize the economic and organizational strands of the cult groups, are always conceived by the devotees as embedded – one might say as inhabiting – concrete, touchable, visible things and states.

¹⁸ V. Turner, *Symbolic Studies*, "Annual Review of Anthropology" 1975, vol. 4, pp. 145–162.

What are the conclusions at this stage? Firstly, Xangô is partly understandable as an institutionalized device to secure income by apparently non-economic means. Within the economic and social setting of Recife, Xangô implies that some people try to increase their incomes by the use of an overtly non-economic institution whose presence in the city is not, however, an *ad hoc* invention but a by-product of the ethnic, social, economic and cultural history of the area, including the African heritage of the majority of the population (both genetic, visible in skin colour, and cultural, including religious needs and traditions). Secondly, Xangô is opportunistic and lives off the occasional gains and the occasional savings of its members. However it is, presumably, also solidary, redistributing them, no matter how internally unequally, within the cult groups by means of access to high-quality, protein-rich nutrition. When one considers the central role food plays in the rituals of Xangô, it appears convenient to treat the problems of poverty and possible nutritional deficiencies of the majority of the population of Recife as more than implicit. We cannot only see that food redistribution is functional in Recife in a general way, but also that the environment sets a definite premium on the slaughter of animals which constitutes the backbone of the ritual of Xangô. Whatever redirects or redistributes food towards the needy is functional in our setting. Xangô, working under the assumption that some people, at a given time, are less hungry than others and thus can share their surplus with saints and brothers, plays a functional role within this environment. While its existence cannot be logically predicted or deduced, given the setting as it is, Xangô would have to be invented if it did not exist.

Characteristics of the cult

If theology is understood as the rational interpretation of religious faith, practice, and experience, then Xangô lacks a theology. It is not a religion of the book – Xangô possesses no holy writ. There are no statements of faith such as creeds or dogmatic definitions. Xangô is, rather, an enacted religion, and it only exists to the extent that it is ritually practiced.

All religious behaviour in Xangô revolves around certain supernatural beings, each of them designated both by the Portuguese word *santo* or by the liturgical Yoruba term *orixá*. Xangô saints are present where they can be fed and where they can interact with people. Indeed offers of food are the essential way to reach the *orixás*, who behave like humans. Nevertheless, they are immune to disease, decay, and death (even though they experience hunger). They are also far more powerful than ordinary human beings. They can control people, things, and situations, and, in fact, this is why they are worshipped.

On the other hand, they do not set shining examples of virtue: the saints/*orixás* are quite exacting, vengeful, envious, capricious, and unpredictable. In no sense do they play the role of upholders of an ethical code. Some of them are really mischievous: Exu¹⁹

¹⁹ Exú: extremely capricious and mischievous, although the easiest to appease when given his due; he inhabits streets, especially crossroads; he is particularly related to witchcraft, and therefore should never be underestimated; associated with the Devil.

is always ready to do untoward things, not only droll but outright harmful, and this is the reason why Xangozeiros engage in no ritual activity whatsoever without propitiating him in the first place. Xangô²⁰ has the reputation of a first-rate Don Juan and is known to have had affairs with female *orixás* other than his faithful consort Iansã.²¹ Oxum²² is vain and coquettish. While saints such as Oxalá²³ or Iemanjá,²⁴ and Ogum²⁵ are above even the thought of misbehaviour (some devotees going so far as to claim that Iemanjá, although the mother of several other *orixás*, has kept her virginity intact), it seems to derive from their personal preferences and tastes rather than from adherence to general moral rules.

Researchers would look in vain for mythology and a general cosmogony in the Xangô of Recife. In fact, it is pointless to even look for the complete life stories of the *orixás*. There is not even a general agreement concerning some more immediate relationships between the saints. The individual character of the saints is, nevertheless, well-marked. This is shown at least in two main ways: the behaviour of devotees during the ritual dances and, especially, while possessed by their respective saints; indications provided by the divinatory game, on which occasion priests explain the everyday behaviour of the devotees by the characteristics of their respective *orixás*.

Saints are protectors and patrons. They are also parents. To a Xangozeiro, the standard way to inquire about someone's saint is "Of which saint is he the son?" Although the fathers and mothers of their devotees, the saints are nevertheless very exacting and are apt to punish any forms of neglect. That's why Xangozeiros are, first of all, very practical – they ask practical questions and expect of their priests (reading through divination for which cowries – shells of a mollusc – are used) very operational answers conveying, in as simple and concrete an idiom as possible, what steps should be immediately taken in order to change undesirable situations for the better and appease their *orixá*. In most situations, the parents are simply hungry and the only way to change that is to invest in the animal sacrifice.

Saints are the owners of people's heads (*donos da cabeça*): they inhabit the very heads of properly initiated persons. In fact, initiation consists of having one's saint installed in one's head, thereby accepting or validating the saint's claim to it. Hence it is called "to make up the head" (*fazer a cabeça*). A standard way to inquire about

²⁰ Xangô: male; fierce, vital, ebullient, unpredictable; he delights in the offering of fat rams and wears a double axe symbol of his might; his colours are red and white in combination; Saint John the Baptist is his Catholic counterpart.

²¹ Iansã: female; proud, active, fearless; Xangô's jealous wife; she has a special link with lightning and thunder; her colour is pink or coral; she is associated with Saint Barbara.

²² Oxum: female; coquettish, vain, takes great care of her charm and beauty; as a lady of gold (*dona do ouro*), she helps in financial gains; her colour is yellow; she is found in rivers, streams, and waterfalls; she has Our Lady of the Carmel (Recife's patron saint) as her Catholic counterpart.

²³ Oxalá: male; fatherly and elderly; discrete and restrained; father of all other *orixás*; represents the spiritual power within the cult; his colour is white; his Catholic counterpart is Our Lord, on solemn occasions Oxalá's devotees dress like Catholic bishops.

²⁴ Iemanjá: female; chaste, the mother of *orixás*; her color is blue; associated with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, to whom is dedicated Recife's most popular shrine.

²⁵ Ogum: male; hard-working; the protector of car drivers, soldiers, and policemen; the lord of war, his ritual colours are red or red and green; Saint George is his Catholic counterpart.

somebody's ritual attainment is "*Ele tem a cabeça feita?*" [Is his head made up?]. The claim of saints on heads is an absolute one in the sense that it does not depend on the devotees' agreement to such ownership. People innately belong to the saints. Devotees, once they have ascertained their exact saint through divination properly performed by a qualified *pai de santo*, should urgently give *obrigação* (an offer of food) and take steps to be initiated as regular Xangozeiros. Neglect and delays are considered very risky. Theoretically the whole of mankind can be incorporated into Xangô, irrespective of nationality, race, sex, age, etc. The priests, however, show no concern for the spiritual welfare of, say, the inhabitants of Poland. Xangô actually appeals to those who have heard of it and show an interest in further information.

The strongly utilitarian character of devotion in Xangô is clear. Saints are supposed to interfere in matters of practical concern. By no means is this to be considered an ethical religion. Indeed Xangô does not propose, in strict terms, any moral rules for the devotees. Rather it represents a system of contractual exchanges between saints and people. Inward feelings or states are unimportant on either side of the relationship. What matters is the ability to deliver the goods (food, protection) covered by the terms of the religious contract. Similarly, Xangozeiros do not apparently think that people or the society that is concretely theirs can be changed or improved in any way whatsoever. Their religion is geared to reaping maximum benefits from saints, people, and the social and economic order as they now stand.

Hence the irrelevance of abstract faith to Xangô, that is, of faith expressed in creeds or dogmatic statements. Whether saints were African heroes of olden times, or are but the translation of some Roman Catholic devotions to Yoruba language and ritual practice, or else (as Spiritism is prone to suggest) represent disembodied spirits of a given rank, does not impinge on ritual practice. The fundamental belief is that saints must be fed, according to existing contracts. Xangozeiros also play eminently practical roles in the lives of *orixás*, as there is a clear exchange of gifts between them. Saints help in matters of health, money, employment, love, etc. People give them food. Society and life are capricious – devotion is a means of manipulating or taming disorder.

Therefore, there is a set of mutual obligations between people and their saints. This entails the concept of a dyadic contract, in which religious responsibility belongs to the isolated believer. One's saint is not served by what is given to another *orixá*. There is no such thing as a transfer or a commonality of gifts or of devotional merits or credits. Each individual stands alone before each of his or her saints. There are, therefore, no corporate alliances between men and saints. Religion is fundamentally a personal matter, and such "salvation" as it offers (in this-worldly matters) does not come to a group as a whole but only to those individuals who have fulfilled their ritual duties.

Yet the existence of apparently corporate groups of Xangozeiros seems to constitute an obvious fact. People do gather for sacrifices and dances, and they definitely belong together in the same *terreiros* (cult centres). Furthermore, Xangô is very markedly a priestly religion, for no matter how great the individual's responsibilities, all his or her contracts with the supernatural are either made through certain

religious officers or at least are validated by the latter's approval of their authenticity and legitimacy. Saints are far from being subject to the vagaries of individual inspiration. Their minds become known according to prescribed ways and through properly appointed interpreters. The relationship between saints and humans is mediated by priests and priestesses who represent both the saints vis-à-vis the devotees and the latter vis-à-vis the former.

Indeed Xangô could be succinctly described as a cult of the saints. The whole of the religion could equally be viewed as a set of activities with the aim of pleasing the saints and obtaining from them protection and patronage in various circumstances of life. The saints are above all pleased by offerings of food. This is the supreme cultic act.

Sacrifice and feast

Researchers of Xangô are at times so enthralled with what they see and hear, with, say, the exquisite character of the liturgical music, with the exhilaration of the dance after a heavy day of animal sacrifices, that they often ask for admission into the cult groups as regular members. Nevertheless, researchers are not necessarily fit to become good Xangozeiros, unless they come from Recife and from the same social, cultural and economic background as the majority of the cult members. It is difficult for someone reared under Western notions of hygiene and even remotely acquainted with the germ theory of disease to be ready to undergo the full ritual of initiation, which requires protracted seclusion in the same room where sacrifices are performed and meat is left "under the feet of the saints" for three days until finally being disposed of as *despacho* and abandoned in desert grounds.

All cultic acts either lead to, or follow from, the slaughter of animals in order to please and feed the saints: during one of the ceremonies we witnessed, there were 5 four-legged animals (4 goats and 1 ram) and 35 birds. A relatively well-off house will not do with less than 15 beasts and three times that number of birds, no matter how bad the year. In times of affluence, over 30 goats and rams are sacrificed. No meaningful experience of Xangô will be gained if one does not witness the slaughter of a dozen four-legged beasts, each of them "covered" by at least 2 birds, during a single morning or afternoon. This is the essence of the liturgy: the sight and the smell of blood, bowels, severed heads, and feathers, the constant libations of rum poured from the priests' mouths, the joy, the songs, the trances of the faithful. There is nothing like it in Western worship, yet it is proper to say that animal slaughter in Xangô is as central as Mass in the Roman Catholic Church: every other ceremony leads to it or follows from it. No blood, no Xangô. The more blood, the greater the prestige of the house. Sacrifice is a transfer of life. The gods live by it. Hence their jealous claim to the *axé*,²⁶ that is, to the blood and the vital organs (heart, lungs, liver,

²⁶ Blood and meat have *axé*, which primarily corresponds to what causes and restores health and wholesomeness, to what causes and restores life. Thus for Xangozeiros, whose thought has such a markedly concrete character, blood is the supreme *axé*, expressing better than anything the wholesomeness and the quickness of life itself. Xangô sacrifices, those transfusions of life, are primarily transfusions of

kidneys, spleen, etc.) of their animal victims. The remainder is eaten by the devotees, and a meal is very often started even before all the animals have been slaughtered during a given ritual. Indeed sacrifices are meals. Saints and men eat, communicate, commingle, and assimilate one another. They feast together – by far the largest share of the flesh of animal victims is eaten by people. The saints do receive and keep some eminently edible sections of the birds and beasts. Yet what reverts to their devotees comprises much more than that which is deposited “at the feet of the saints” and later discarded or sent away (*despachado*) to the bush, a crossroads, a body of water, or some other appropriate spot.

Heads of animals are cut off in sacrifice with a sharp knife. Victims are bled to the last drop of the blood that falls upon either the stones, or the heads of people, or both – animal heads are often superimposed upon the heads of the devotees. Trance is *de rigueur* on such occasions.²⁷ Sometimes people, even non-initiates, kneel and rub their heads against those of goats and rams (if the latter are properly immobilized); at other times the presiding priest touches the human and animal forefronts; but even if all such gestures were omitted, which they seldom are, sacrifices would still be offered, as previously remarked, for, if not precisely on, the heads of people, where *orixás* are present. Initiates bear (*carregam*) their saints. But the saints are not, of course, confined only to the heads of people. They also inhabit stones and pieces of metal, which constitute the basic liturgical equipment of the Xangô cult, and offers of blood are primarily made to them. Likewise, they are the prime objects of the many gestures of obeisance required by the protocol of Xangô. They rank higher than plain devotees, initiates whether in their normal states or in trance, and even priests and priestesses.²⁸ Stones and metals are not inherently, or naturally, sacred. They must be properly set – consecrated (*assentados*)²⁹ in order to become so, and, once again, only properly appointed priests, with the help of sacrifice, a good deal of blood, are capable of effecting the metamorphosis of the profane into the holy.

blood, which flowing transubstantiates anything it touches into the nature of the gods. Every sacrifice (*matança* – sacrificial slaughter) means a renewal of life.

²⁷ In the Xangô cult, trance is eminently ecstatic, as the individual is much too full of, and overwhelmed by, his *orixá*. One's trance is accorded as much respect as one enjoys it in the general context of the cult. It is a rule that admits of no exceptions that personal charismas do not take precedence over the established hierarchy of Xangô. Private revelations, visions, trances are by no means precluded. But the hierarchy are their ultimate judges.

²⁸ Upon entering a Xangô house, a person with good manners will say “*Agô!*” (“May I?”) and will utter no further word until he or she has prostrated himself or herself, or at least deeply bowed (while touching the floor with both hands) before the holy *orixás* present in the stones and pieces of metal kept at the chapel of cult houses. Those who happen to be ritually unclean – women during their period and persons of either sex who engaged in sexual intercourse less than a day before visiting the *terreiro* – are well advised to pay no visits at all for the duration of their impurity.

²⁹ *Assentar o santo* (“setting the saint”), the consecration of the stones and irons, is a basic part of the ritual cycle of Xangô. After being consecrated, the stones and the pieces of iron become the saints and are treated as such. The treatment they receive is quite different than that given to the sculpted images of the saints. Catholic images, while respected and cherished, are never the objects of the same gestures of worship as are the stones and metals. They are never fed, nor do they receive obeisance; they represent no more than visual symbols.

All the acts of the cult centre around sacrifice – *obrigação*, the offer of food to the saints. And this, from a functional and material standpoint, makes adaptive sense to people suffering from economic deficiencies. The seemingly bizarre convictions of Xangozeiros regarding the fondness of the *orixás* for blood and meat stem originally from guts and hunger, from such banal phenomena as the human appetite and need for calories. Everyone eats from the meat which does not go to the feet of the saints. And part of the meat is distributed to the neediest sons and daughters of the *terreiro* immediately after the slaughter (*matança*). What communion really means is everyone with a full belly. However, it also comprises the bonds of affection, love, and desire that rise and grow with the exhilaration of worship practiced amid the basic fluids and noises of human life, amid blood and sweat and tears, prayer and praise, song and dancing. One is not just an eater – humans are certainly members of groups or collectivities, which are the source of their very existence and consistency as beings, and they are also thinkers who must find or develop answers to the riddles of life and culture. They obviously cannot think if they do not eat. Yet they do not live for or by food alone. Meal and worship push against each other and change into each other; neither exhausts the meaning of Xangô sacrifice. Rituals provide victuals. But the acquisition and preparation of food is embedded in worship. A meaningful account of Xangô meets more than meat; it also meets “mana and manners.” Sacrifice and communion overcome, but do not annul, the adaptive requirements of nature and society.

The power of the priesthood

It has been assumed that, while it cannot in any way be claimed, that the liturgy of Xangô was invented in order to meet some pressures of the social and economic setting. The ritual stress on meat cannot quite be understood without reference to the poverty existing in Recife. To most Recifenses food is subject, as Claude Lévi-Strauss would put it, to “the system of the scarce product.”³⁰ Here we refer to what we have called the “expropriation of the holy surplus value.” Cult group leaders, as owners or controllers of the means of religious production, require and receive a material profit from their use. Priests oversee the process of meat redistribution and see to its not fully egalitarian character. Reciprocity does not wholly disappear from Xangô, but it is truncated by the power of the priesthood. Xangô above all benefits the priestly hierarchy, who, after all, do also belong among the overwhelming numbers of the poor and the needy. The average devotee also receives his share, however. This is a matter of common observation. Something like a pecking order is established in Xangô houses. Some people eat much and soon; others receive less and later; still others have to make do with leftovers; and some would eat but get no meat.

The distribution of food is full of subtleties and, in its way, reflects a code of manners that might rival the etiquette of the Versailles court of the French Kings. In order to favour some devotees and to disadvantage others, it is enough that dishes, cutlery,

³⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston 1969, p. 32.

and seats at the dining table be fewer than the number of participants at a given ceremony. This leaves ample leeway to fathers and mothers. Open disputes for such tangible rewards are very rare in Recife. The Xangô is a religion in which, as the Leacocks say, people “know their place and keep to it.”³¹ Xangozeiros know that rebellion leads to disgrace and excommunication, while compliance and submission may eventually carry the devotee to even the highest ranks of the cult group hierarchy.

If Xangô’s priesthood domination were only about food, we might be limited to describing the slaughter of animals and the way meat is redistributed by cult leaders, but it is also, as we have already exposed, about a process of assimilation of the saint by the devotee, about consecration and communion. This requires initiation in which people devote themselves to one given saint, their *orixá*, the master of the head. They must know for sure which saint it is in order to avoid serious trouble with misplacing homages. Such necessity also strengthens the power of priests, who are the only ones to tell exactly which *orixá* one’s head belongs to. Divination is, thus, the threshold of initiation and depends entirely on the *pai de santo*. Possession by the saints is another important form of personal revelation – repeated possessions by the same saint create the expectation that one’s head belongs to that saint. However, doubts may be, and often are, raised concerning the legitimacy of trance as revelation, due, on the one hand, to the infallibility of any single individual’s inspiration and, on the other hand, to the at times overly ambitious character of the saints themselves, who may try, helped by the devotee’s inexperience, to take hold of heads not really their own. Private revelations, even if they take place on public occasions, must be, therefore, also confirmed by the priest’s authority.

The power of the priest asserts itself through the very ambiguities of divination. He will decide how many times to throw the cowries in each *séance*. He will ponder the several oracles that turn up and will chose the one, if any, he finds most appropriate for the consulter. He will select the passages he finds relevant for the circumstances that he will know from what the consulter himself asks or states, from previous personal acquaintance, from references given by other priests and devotees, from dress and demeanour, or at the very least from the age and the sex of the consulter. His psychological acumen plays a major role in this connection. The wise diviner will, therefore, take due note of the peculiarities of the consulter that either limit or enhance his authority. In any event, he is left much room to manoeuvre. Priests have much leeway – the limits are bound to be set by realizing what the devotees’ resources are. Xangô is markedly a priestly religion. The relationship between the devotee and the diviner and father has, as already pointed out, an intensely personal character. Sainthood is transferred from the latter to the former. The devotee, therefore, is supposed to be loyal and refrain from consulting other priests and priestesses, and doing so will be construed as a shift of allegiance or as an outright breach of faith.

³¹ S. Leacock, R. Leacock, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

Conclusions

The Xangô cult in Recife presents, as we have tried to depict, a markedly utilitarian character, concerned with the everyday lives of the devotees. All the acts of the Xangô cult can be subsumed in the concept of *obrigação*, the basic act of which consists in slaughtering animals (mainly goats, sheep, and chickens) and feeding the saints with blood and flesh. But not all of the sacrificed animals belong to the saints – they have an exclusive right only to some organs (head, heart, liver, spleen, kidneys and the like). The remainder is shared by the saints with their devotees (according to the rules established by the priests), who, due to caloric deficiencies, count on an institutionalized form of group solidarity. The utilitarianism is also very clear in the cult's rituals, which are oriented toward solving problems of money, health, sex, jealousy, competition... The concreteness and opportunism of Xangô makes it very much a this-worldly religion. In strict terms it intends to save no-one's soul.

The Xangô cult is rent, on the level of its organization, by the opposition between community and domination. Priests require a profit from their goods and services. Their control over the means of the religious production, which are at the same time the means of the psychological and social production of the devotees, allows the cult group leaders to subjugate and sometimes even exploit their children-in-sainthood. The contradiction between community and domination pervades the fabric of Xangô. The opposition (which, besides its psychological concomitants, expresses itself in plain material and economic aspects) takes also the form of a contradiction between child and client: sons and daughters pay for the services of their ritual parents. They are, therefore, clients or customers of commodities of a religious kind "manufacture" in their parents' small enterprises. However, the logic of the market orientation is only one among the other logics of Xangô. Family and love, the kinship terminology adopted within the cult groups, also have their requirements. A client is virtually a son. Cult groups present themselves, to their own members and to outsiders, in the idiom of family.

The ritual kinship ties of Xangô lead to currents of exchange and psychological support among devotees and thus mean an inducement to ritual initiation, since there are advantages, in the struggle for survival and welfare, for those who belong to the cult groups. Xangô is an attempt to bridge the alienation of man from his fellow man in the larger society. The ritual family represents a new venue in the process of elevation of activity to culture, of transition from the isolation of estranged individuals to the generality of a group.

Subject to some limitations (chiefly the "expropriation of the holy surplus value"), the ritual family provides, nevertheless, the faithful with economic and psychological support. Thus, in a sense, Xangô congregations constitute the social superstructure of a certain form of economic activity, trying to compensate for the existing inadequacies. This explains the cults' persistence and popularity, especially among the poorest population of Recife constituting the visible majority of the faithful. The cult groups stress exchange and reciprocity – they also constitute the locus of love and recognition. Belonging to Xangô is in itself a source of existence and consistency for

devotees; they gain thereby a personal and social identity that tends to coincide with their identity as human beings.

The cult group organization is the scenery upon which social action activates the structure of thought and classification of people, things, and events. The saints represent the basic categories of an overall process of classification, embracing people, people's behaviour, things, and events. The initiation also manifests how eminently good the saints of Xangô are for the individual devotee to think about himself or herself, since initiation is geared towards creating a second personality.

Xangô's liturgy, as we have already stated, centring around the slaughter of animals, makes adaptive sense to people with serious deficiencies of calorie intake. That is why sacrifice and food are in Xangô absolutely indispensable, representing a primary value and a primary experience in its rituals. They suffuse all other values and experiences, even more so when, due to environmental or social pressures, food appears as scarce and eating – at least eating plentifully – as relatively rare. However, the full meaning of a cultural phenomenon is not reducible to that of any or all of the functions it serves in a given setting. Instead of viewing the cultists as a group of people who believe that the saints, just like themselves, simply like meat, we admit that the sacrifice and feast ritual, while indeed serving an important nutritional function, changes a sheer need into culture. Food in Xangô becomes more than food. It turns into the expression of thought and it acquires the value of a symbol, a cultural universal, which is certainly also visible in the Seder of Pesach and in the Holy Mass. Ritual and the sacred bridge the distance between humans and saints and mediate the alienation of man from his fellow man.³² Blood, meat, and other victuals are food, but at the same time they represent thought, identification, assimilation, and communion.

And this is what leads us to the final conclusion: we do admit that Xangô certainly helps in everyday life. The cult responds to some pressures of its non-religious environment, but the challenges of the Recife environment admit to multiple responses and Xangô is only one of them, not necessarily the best one – there is apparently no *a priori* way to predict which one or ones will be adopted by a given person or a group. No practical function, no sum of practical functions exhaust, therefore, the meaning of the Xangô cult. Xangô is a full-fledged experience of the mixture of meal and sacrifice, meat and feast, “mana and manners,” which constitutes the hallmark of the cult. The ritual slaughter far surpasses any requirements of survival and adaptation; it responds to a practical challenge, the need for food; yet it goes far beyond need. It is much, much better – it displays joy that transpires in religious activities. The beautiful and the holy are, if we trust Xangô, a part of the pristine forms of culture, the fullness of man, whose first cultural task is turned towards survival, yet, in interacting with his environment, he finds himself transcending any determination and function. Survival is transcended as food becomes more than food. It turns into a new identity. Animals represent food and altogether are the middle term of the symbol of sainthood and immortality. Their consecration and slaughter, besides converting them into meat for the *orixá*-worshippers, fuse them with the saints and symbolize the fusion of the body and soul of the devotees with their gods. Feast,

³² R. Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

dance, and trance correspond to experiences that cannot be parsimoniously explained in terms of utility and function; during them the constraints of nature and adaptation are apparently surpassed and overwhelmed. Meat is overcome by feast. This is the fullness of Xangô.

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Druk i oprawa: Drukarnia Eikon