

*** New writings and mediations in health**

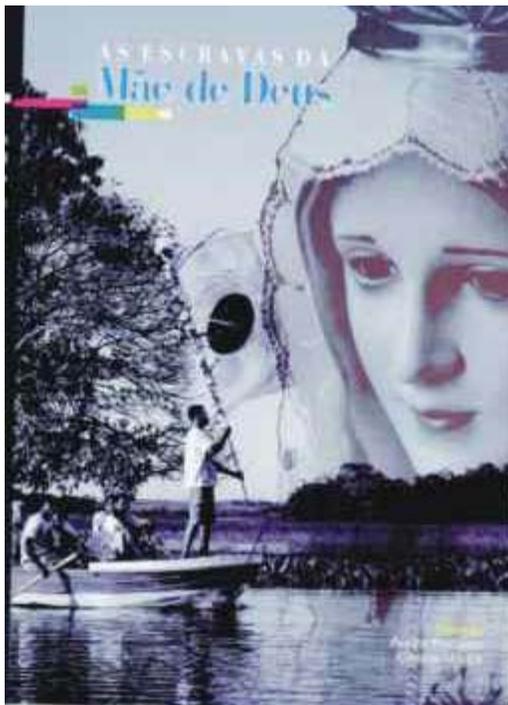
"The Slaves of the Mother of God" or an ethnohistory through image and sounds"

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Synopsis

In a small community of Afro-descendants in the Santana district of the state of Amapá, a festival in honor of Our Lady of Mercy, called "The Slaves of the Mother of God", is performed annually during the months of June and July. During this festival, the devotees celebrate and participate in beliefs that are centuries old and perform rituals full of symbols and meanings that typify the diversity and coexistence of peoples and cultures that have been present since the beginning of Brazilian colonization.

Technical Specifications

Duration: 26 minutes

Release Date: 2011.

Project Design: Decleoma Lobato .

Screenplay: Áurea Pinheiro.

Director: Áurea Pinheiro e Cássia Moura.

Editing: Cássia Moura.

Editing: Mário Platão.

Original Soundtrack: Sergio Matos.

Production: Educar: artes e ofícios. E-mail:educararteseoficios@gmail.com

The movie

The ethnographic documentary "The Slaves of the Mother of God", which I now have the pleasure and great responsibility of introducing to the reader, was directed by the historian Áurea Pinheiro and the photographer and filmmaker Cássia Moura. The film allows one not only to consider the intangible cultural heritage of one of the many and almost completely unknown "bits of Brazil" but also to ponder the place where the film was produced, thus bringing together culture, history, and cinema in a very balanced fashion. This balance, along with the methodological rigor, informational richness, and the simple beauty that defines each moment of the film, is greatly due to the commitment to ethics and professional development that these two directors gained in producing two other films, "Steps of Oeiras" (2008) and "Congos: Rhythm and Devotion" (2009), both of which were recognized and financed by national and international agencies.

Despite the various readings and impressions that different members of the audience may cull from the images and sounds of the documentary, this work has already proven to be doubly successful. First, its creation was only possible because of financing from institutions such as Capes and Petrobras, demonstrating the viability and importance of the initial screenplay, which after its production was one of the winners of the highly competitive Etnodoc 2009 competition sponsored by the Brazilian State Oil Company, finishing 10th out of 706 submitted projects. "The Slaves" is also successful because it delivers an honest and accurate view of cultural experiences unknown to the general public without presuming to undertake a search for the "truth", which is almost always futile.

"The Slaves of the Mother of God" chronicles one of the cultural practices of Igarapé do Lago, a small community in rural Amapá. There, a popular festival in honor of Our Lady of Mercy is held every year during June and July. In this festival, the participants are referred to using a nickname that also serves as the film's name (although women are permitted to attend, the majority of the participants are men). The faithful, or "revelers," as the participants evocatively call themselves, perpetuate a series of practices involving music and dance that are reminiscent of the drumming in other cultural displays of indigenous or African origin that exist in Brazil. These displays also involve various characters (Master of Ceremonies, Disciplinarian, Guardian, Cross-bearer, Flag-bearer, Drummers, and Paddlers), symbols (sacred images, crosses, flags, drums, repentance stone, and boats), and rituals (begging, preparation of promise tables, and making ginger rum) that provide a rich example of the cultural hybridity that characterizes the daily life of the local population.



The celebrations in honor of Our Lady of Mercy integrate popular faith, societal practices, and familiar and beloved memories. The demonstrations of crying, which are inspired by the experience of reliving memories of dead relatives and friends who also dedicated their lives to the celebration or by the simple excitement of having the image of the saint enter the home, are not gratuitous. In fact, it may be difficult for the reader to fully understand the magnitude of such emotion until he or she sees the documentary. These demonstrations of faith lack the expressions of sorrow, suffering, and pain that are part of the majority of productions that invoke the theme of popular faith. The comments by the interviewed individuals demonstrate more of a longing and a sense of gratitude for the memory of those who have passed than they express pain at these individuals' not being present at the festival. Similarly, many of the sayings common among those being interviewed—such as "the saint will visit" or "I like this saint so much"—show that the respect and devotion that they feel for this sacred object coexist with a certain feeling of closeness and affection (or even complicity) among those who participate in the celebration.



The richness of these details of the rites that occur in the festival of The Slaves of the Mother of God is effectively communicated because of the mastery and sensitivity with which the documentary was conceived. At no moment is there any effort to anticipate the actions of the participants or to explain them to the viewer (throughout the film, the image sequences simply document the actions of the faithful). Similarly, the screenplay (which was well written and executed, allowed the individuals to be relaxed and encouraged them to open their homes and memories to strangers) made it possible for the participants to explain their respective roles in the celebration. In this way, the film avoided presenting the information as it might be disseminated in a class given by a famous scholarly anthropologist or historian who might worry about finding a “historical” explanation for everything.



In this sense, “The Slaves of the Mother of God” demonstrates a maturity that has only been seen in the best documentary productions from Brazil in recent decades. The creators of the documentary know that the true stars are the individuals and not the interviewers. They know that the voices the viewer wants to hear are those of real people—and thus, the documentary does not use “the voice of God,” that of a speaker who appears to know everything and everyone. They know that the viewer is capable of making his or her own conclusions. They know that sometimes specific feelings cannot or simply should not be rationally explained. Finally, the creators of the documentary know that there is no need to appear in front of the camera or monopolize the discourse to have the work acknowledged.

To promote an accurate perspective on the film, I would like to draw attention to three aspects of the film that I believe might remain unnoticed by discerning viewers. The first is the opportunity and the invitation that the film extends to the viewer to encounter the ‘other’ and in doing so to recognize himself or herself, whether through the unfamiliarity of a previously unknown culture or through the surprising sense of cultural similarity that may arise even from such unavoidable and uncomfortable unfamiliarity.



The second essential quality of the film is that the directors intentionally avoid places where religious practices, especially those dictated by the people, are portrayed. Áurea and Cássia do not attempt to explain the community or their subjects even though they are aware that the camera and the microphone function as their eyes and ears. They are not impartial, and the historian and the photographer do not silence or seek to speak for their "subjects". They perceived from the beginning that their work would be valuable and significant not because it detailed the possible causes or origins of the religious acts that they recorded but because of the religious practices themselves, which are where the true value lies. They realized that the power of their work would come from the everyday women and men whose concerns, fears, and dislikes no one knows – women and men who periodically leave their daily chores to dedicate themselves to a centuries-old ritual that, as they themselves recognize, sets this place apart from others.

Finally, we must recognize the boldness that was required to make a cinematographic production that is nonetheless a historical and historiographical work, even though this historical record is portrayed through images and sound. "The Slaves of the Mother of God" shows us how feasible the practices are that purport to work on the borders between Historiography, Cinema, and Ethnography. In the film, the boundaries of these territories teach us an important lesson about the real meaning of the term "border": it is a line that delimits the end and the beginning of a territory at any given time and that both separates and joins distinct entities. These three fields of knowledge must maintain their particularities as a healthy way to demarcate each area and not to run the risk of their being diluted by other fields. However, the film "The Slaves of the Mother of God" shows us that dialogue between and the combination of the three fields not only is possible but also is beneficial for all if it is well executed.