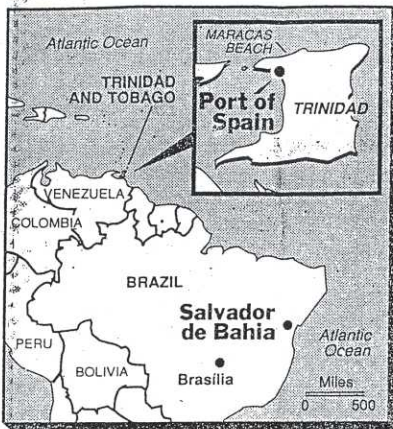


A Feast of the Sacred and the Profane

In Bahia, Brazil, the street dancing is said to call down the gods



The New York Times/Feb. 11, 1990

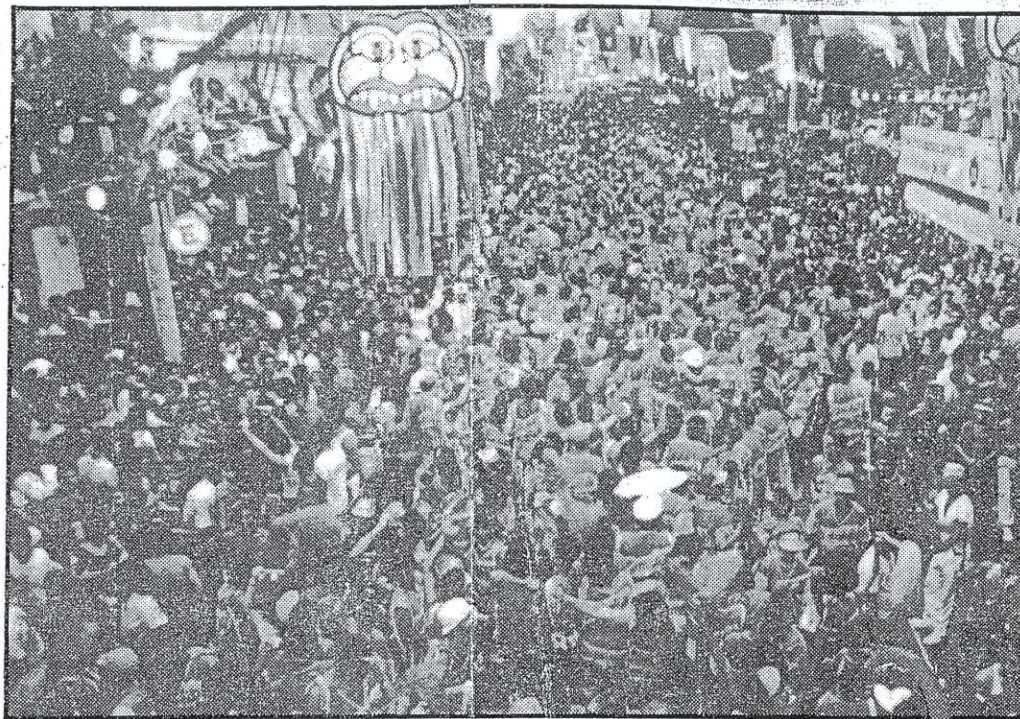
By ELIZABETH HANLY

YOU couldn't see past them. There were perhaps 2,000 men standing shoulder to shoulder at an intersection in the center of Salvador, Brazil's fourth most populous city. Dressed in white and startling blue — some topped with terry-cloth turbans and all with blue socks, and blue and white beads draped in great loops across their chests — they moved in slow motion with the stomp, almost a shuffle, that they hold sacred.

This is carnival in Salvador — familiarly called Bahia — which takes place on the five days preceding Ash Wednesday (this year, Feb. 23 to 27). Like just about everything else in Bahia, it has to do with reverence, with devotion to the orixás, the deities of the African faith that became Candomblé in Brazil. On this Sunday afternoon during last year's carnival, 2,000 men carried perfume, also deemed sacred, which they would pour over the head, or into the cleavage, of whoever might catch their fancy as they moved through the streets. Two thousand men, some brandishing an African percussion instrument — a large bead-covered gourd called the chekere or a horseshoe-shaped agogo, two clapperless bells beat with an iron stick — formed an honor guard around a truck carrying an orchestra of congeros, about a hundred old men, each working a conga.

Blue and white are the colors of Iemanjá, goddess of the waters, the orixá who watches over the coastal city. And it was with cries of

ELIZABETH HANLY writes about Latin America for newspapers and magazines.



Albano Guattti/Stock Market

Hundreds of thousands throng Bahia's streets on carnival days.

"Axé," a Nigerian word that manages to encompass the concepts of fertility, creativity and holiness, that the 2,000 would punctuate the congas and the dance and the perfuming. Occasionally somebody from the crowd would join the ranks or be pulled in, as I was, by one of the blue-socked communion. Hip brushed hip endlessly as musicians and spectators moved to the same sure rhythm. There was nothing on the horizon except blue and white and then the ocean. A man dressed as Mahatma Gandhi (and bearing an uncanny resemblance to him) led the procession with a life-size clay elephant on wheels — for all the knife scars on their faces and arms, the fellowship calls itself Los Filhos de Gandhi, in honor of the great advocate of nonviolence.

These men are the most popular musicians of Bahia, as well as holy men; members play at parties, Candomblé ceremonies and festivals year round. There's no difference here between pop culture and religion. Reverence has far more to do with movement than meditation; the dancing is believed to call down the gods. And there's a chicki-chicki-chicki rhythm that seems the subtext

of the city itself. Brazilians claim it's impossible to rest in Bahia. They also claim, referring to the myriad religious festivals on either side of it, that carnival in Bahia goes on for five months, not five days, as elsewhere in Brazil.

IHAD seen Los Filhos de Gandhi before. It was on the beach during the Festival of Iemanjá, which falls on Feb. 2 each year. On this day boats gather just off the beach: fast-moving "pencil schooners," fancy yachts, even the traditional fishing rafts of Bahia. In the afternoon women dressed in white and blue waded out to them with big baskets of roses and hyacinths. The boats then sail out past the horizon and scatter the flowers on the deep waters ruled by Iemanjá as a prayer for her protection.

During last year's festival, it was gray all day; still, the beach was vibrant with that Bahia motion. Kids splashed around the boats as women in layers of lace hawked spiced shrimp and bean dumplings fried on the spat in palm oil. Everybody had a beer or a bottle of cachaça, a sugar-cane liquor.

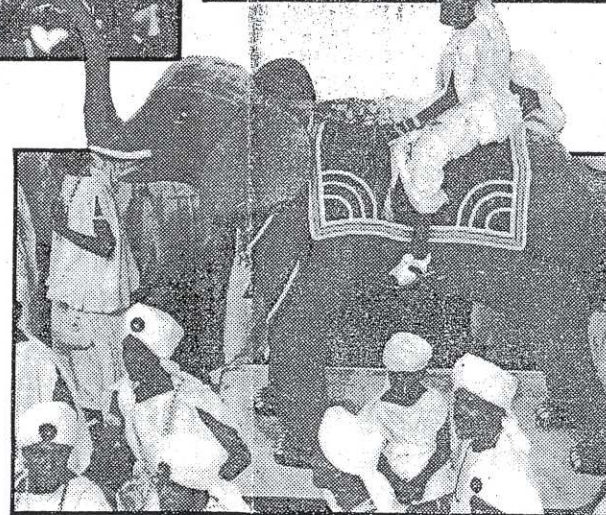
Everybody had whistles. Everybody was listening to music or making it. Here and there people were dancing, but everybody was swaying. A man would take a woman's hips; somebody else would join in. The lines grew long, then seemed to melt away.

When Los Filhos de Gandhi arrived, at around 4 in the afternoon, with their army of



Harvey Lloyd/Stock Market

ABOVE Bahians work all year on costumes for the celebration. Reverence has more to do with movement than meditation.



LEFT Los Filhos de Gandhi, musicians and holy men, honor their namesake with a clay elephant they "ride" in the procession.

congas, the scene finally was able to climax. Congeros slipped into a boat on the beach. And although many of the smaller boats had been coming and going all afternoon, great fleets of them were moving out now with the congeros, heading far from shore. Just as

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Ricardo Azoury/Black Star

Candomblé festivals go on all year long in Bahia.

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they disappeared, the sun broke through. Light became thick. The blues of the water kept changing, getting brighter and brighter until everything was in silhouette. For weeks to come, roses would wash up on the beaches.

BAHIA runs up hills and down. It's a city made of plazas. The buildings are squat, with turrets and filigree. The ubiquitous Portuguese tiles of Bahia are, curiously, usually blue and white. So are most of Bahia's homes.

The sun rises around 4:30 during carnival. People are still dancing in the streets and on the beach from the night before. They go on for another 12 hours or so. Carnival by day is chaos. After about 11 A.M. many of the streets are closed. Bus service stops. The soft baroque churches are practically inaccessible because of the crowds in the streets, as is the Cathedral of Bonfim, where some Candomblé ritual is welcomed. It's even more difficult to move beyond the city to the lace-making islands or the beaches a little to the north.

From 11 A.M. on, Bahia belongs to the blocos, as the city's often funky equivalent to Rio's samba schools are called. Neighborhoods and social clubs work most of the year on costumes and music, then mount the trucks for three or four hours at a stretch each day. There were Mickey Mouse blocos, Charlie Chaplin blocos, baby doll blocos, tranvestite blocos, all playing a frenetic country twang, very nearly a merengue. Occasionally these blocos would meet up with the Mexican mariachi blocos or the Cuban bolero "Besa Me" blocos. Those dancing at such convergences, hard-pressed to choose a rhythm, would resort to crazed hip-hopping — a fast-forwarded hokeypokey.

Under a sun too strong, vendors were selling sugar cane to suck on and coconut candies, or frying tapioca cakes and porridge of peanuts and cashews to scoop over codfish. The children — and the chickens — of Bahia had taken over the beaches, even those outside posh hotels.

By dusk Bahia was still. Blocos were parked along roads. The musicians who gathered around them, for all their cachaça, seemed to speak in whispers. Everyone was waiting.

On Saturday of carnival I walked down an avenue with a young Bahian woman, past wedding-cake mansions still with barred windows on what had been slave quarters. Lucia had taken me in hand earlier in the day, when we met in the oldest part of town, the steepest, the most beautiful, the poorest — Nazaré. A dozen boys had lined up on a street in parallel columns. There was no way past them. To go through them was to be bruised at best. Lucia had guided me up some steps and over a bridge. I turned in time to see a huge man from the mariachi bloco confronting the boys: "If you want to fight" — they were already on the run — "take me on."

Lucia had talked with me then about some friends working on a bloco honoring Dahomey (now Benin, in West Africa), home to many of the

great-grandparents of the group. We were in search of them on Bahia's quiet streets now.

I wasn't prepared for what we found. I should have been, after *Ços Filhos de Gandhi*. I had left the realm of Mickey Mouse. There were a few hundred people in striped garments of gold and orange and green. Lucia introduced me to several women so old and so enormous I couldn't believe they could walk. They were the "mothers of the saints" — the heads of several Bahian houses of Candomblé, which are said to outnumber churches in the city 70 to 1. They held me, blessed me, offered me their cigars and cachaça. There on the street, as the quiet was beginning to break, they explained which of the orixás watched over me. These women would dance all night around their bloco as it moved through Bahia. They'd sing in Portuguese "How beautiful Dahomey," until it became a chant.

Just behind them were perhaps a hundred men in fuchsia suits and fuchsia bowlers. And behind them a hundred men all in lilac, with straw headdresses and fast feet. Then came men covered with the sacred cowrie shells and sowing them like seeds. The chicki-chicki-chicki-chicki of the chekeres wouldn't let up. Neither would the congas, the small cylindrical drums, the giant surdo drums, endless thunder, endlessly commanding for all their sweetness, pushing row streets and wide stairs all around the city.

Couples were dancing in trees. Sometimes they were naked. Some were on the cupola of an old palace turned pizza parlor. Prayer flags hung from every telephone wire. Little ladies who looked like school-boys danced together on ledges 12 stories from the ground. Wizen, toothless men did the same, sometimes with little granddaughters in glitzy bikinis.

I COULDN'T understand how the blocos could move, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people, all dancing not so much the glorious samba of Rio, even when a bloco played samba, preferring instead Bahia's mad free-for-all. The trucks seemed lifted through the crowds, become somehow animate. They seemed to ride the shoulders of the crowd like a procession from another world. Occasionally a fight would break out, always in the dreamy slow motion of capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art so like a dance that no one hip-hopping around the fights would miss a beat.

There was a bloco with a woman all in blue and white and silver, moons and stars around her! She moved like a prayer flag in a breeze. Behind her were hundreds of women in moons and stars with wands. Beyond that more striped robes, more golds and greens, coppers and teals, reds. It was the night of the African lords.

Much later, when I had had enough and was making my way slowly to my hotel, I saw a little boy standing alone in a plaza. He wasn't more than 7, and he was asking, not for money but for blessings. Each woman who passed he stopped with the same question: "Are you Iemanjá?"