

# The Amazonian Ox Dance Festival: An Anthropological Account<sup>1</sup>

Maria-Laura Cavalcanti

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro  
Brazil

## Abstract

The Ox Dance (**Boi-Bumbá**) festival, held yearly during the last three evenings of June in the town of Parintins, Amazonas, is the most spectacular folk festival staged in Northern Brazil. In recent decades, it has assumed massive proportions, combining traditional cultural themes with spectacular visual qualities, thematic innovations, and many sociological changes.

This paper analyzes the festival from an anthropological perspective, suggesting its interpretation as a contemporary cultural movement that, while enhancing regional indigenous roots, expresses a positive statement of a Brazilian *caboclo*, or *mestizo*, cultural identity.

The festival is a peculiar development of a folk play that has existed in Brazil since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is based on the motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox. An historical examination of the early records and studies of this play is undertaken in order to position the Parintins Ox Dance in this wider context. A brief ethnography focuses on its evolution from a small group of street players to the spectacular arena presentations of today's festival and on the basic structure of the current performances.



Pa Frank, the Ox, and Ma Katie in one Garantido's performance, 1997. (photograph by Evandro Teixeira)

Parintins is a small town on the island of Tupinambarana, in the Northern state of Amazonas, close to the border of the state of Pará. Every year the spectacular Ox Dance festival (*Festival dos Bois-Bumbás* in Portuguese), held in the last three evenings of June, transforms the quiet town. The festival is organized around a contest between two Ox groups: *Garantido* [Secure], represented by a white ox with a red heart on its forehead, and *Caprichoso* [Capricious], represented by a black ox with a blue star on its forehead. The performances are basically free sequences of danced dramatic actions, enacted by a set of characters, loosely related to a traditional motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox.

In the past few years, this festival has grown to massive proportions, exhibiting an unexpected and creative blend of traditional cultural themes with spectacular visual qualities, thematic innovations, and other changes of sociological significance. Today, it attracts tens of thousands of fans, coming not only from Manaus (the state capital) and nearby towns, but from all over the country. As the most spectacular folklore festival in

Northern Brazil, it has also become a badge of regional cultural identity. The taut relationship between permanence and change, as well as the beauty of the festival, draws attention to the celebration's deep-rooted cultural meanings.

The analysis of this festival also raises wide-ranging questions concerning the study of folklore and popular culture. In the Ox Dance's recent development, the Brazilian national media, the culture industry, tourism, government agencies, and different social groups have all participated in an expansion that, until now, has managed to preserve strong traditional characteristics. From a romantic standpoint, folk culture is often seen as the lost haven of a harmonious universe, threatened by the modern world. From this nostalgic perspective, widely publicized shows tend to be regarded as deviations from an original authenticity. In this analysis, on the contrary, I examine the evolution of the Ox Dance festival as an extraordinary example of the capacity of Brazilian folk culture to transform and update itself, not unlike the Carnival parade of the Rio de Janeiro samba teams (Cavalcanti 1994, 1999).

I argue that the Parintins Ox Dance is an integral part of a single ritual cycle that encompasses different forms of a very traditional and widespread Brazilian folk play. This play, designated as ox-play in what follows, is based on the mythical motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox, and has been enacted in different regions of the country since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although fragmentation and diversity pervade this universe, a con-

siderable unity derives from the always-present allusion to the same mythical motif. I propose an understanding of the Parintins Ox Dance having as background this ample horizon open to comparative analysis.

My aim is to understand the festival as it appears today, with an intense capacity for cultural integration but also with problems and contradictions inherent in its growth. My starting point is an anthropological perspective based on studies of symbolism and rituals (Durkheim 1968; Turner 1967, 1974; Bateson 1965; Da Matta 1979; Gennep 1960; Peacock 1974; Tambiah 1985). The festival is considered as a total fact (*fait total*), that mingles different dimensions of social life in a process that must be grasped in its entirety (Mauss 1978). As such, the Parintins Ox Dance is a diffuse ritual process that interconnects popular and elite cultural realms (Bakhtin 1987), as different artistic forms and social groups are all part of it, and it keeps pace with the historical evolution of its social context. Like carnival, soccer, music, and religious festivals, it is a fascinating forum for the tense and intense cultural exchanges characteristic of Brazilian culture.

In the first section, I consider briefly the history, early records, and study of the ox-play in Brazil, sketching its main features and defining some important research guidelines. I also review the available literature on its Northern version, called *Boi-Bumbá*, that is, the Ox Dance. In the second section, I present a brief ethnography of the Ox Dance held in the town of Parintins, focusing on its evolution from a small group of street

players to the spectacular arena performances of today's festival. Sketching the basic structure of the Parintins contemporary performances, I propose lastly an interpretation of the Parintins Ox Dance as a cultural movement that, while enhancing its regional indigenous roots, expresses a positive statement of Brazilian *caboclo*, or mestizo, cultural identity.

### I. The *Brincadeira do Boi* in Brazil

*Brincadeira do boi*, or the merrymaking of the ox, is the Brazilian term that designates different forms of the widespread ox-play. This expression illuminates the dual meaning of the English word "play." The participants of a *brincadeira* not only perform and appreciate a play (the theatrical performance) but all of them—performers and spectators—play a lot, that is, they enjoy themselves singing and dancing throughout the performance.

The *brincadeira do boi* has fascinated and challenged generations of scholars. It has been called by many different names, roughly corresponding to existing regional variations,<sup>2</sup> and its insertion in the annual calendar of Catholic festivities varies. In the Northern states, it occurs by the end of June, continuing through July, in the context of the celebrations of Saints Peter, John, Anthony and Marçal. In the Northeast, it happens more frequently during the Nativity celebrations, in December and January. In the Southeast, especially in Rio de Janeiro, it tends to occur during Carnival.

In the plays, the ox is represented by

a carcass of bamboo or similar material, covered with fabric and with an ox-mask as its head, animated by a player, and accompanied by other characters. The Portuguese words *bumba* or *bumbar* (sometimes corrupted to *bumbá*), which appear frequently in the regional names of the ox-play, have different suggestive interpretations. Borba Filho (1966, 10) offers two meanings: one is *bumba* as derived from the expression *Zabumba meu boi*, that is, the ox dancing to the beat of the *zabumba* drum (a large drum in an upright position played with only one drumstick). Thus, *bumba-meu-boi* would mean Dance-my-Ox. However, we also have the verb *bumbar* in Portuguese, which means to hit or beat something strongly. Borba Filho prefers the second meaning, owing to certain slapstick scenes in the farce. The great folklorist Câmara Cascudo adopts a similar interpretation: *Bumba* would be the same as an interjection giving the idea of a clash or brawl. To say *bumba-meu-boi* would be like exclaiming: "Strike! Gore them, my ox!" An excited refrain repeated in the dance (1984, 150). The relative merits of these arguments notwithstanding, it is unnecessary to resolve the question here; as Freud (1965) has suggested, ambivalence and over-determination are characteristic of this kind of symbolic processes.

The variety of names indicates many different developments as well as changes in context and meaning that are important issues in the research. Despite this diversity, all forms of the merrymaking display a certain unity. All of them allude to the mythical motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox.

Mythmaking activity is everywhere associated with the brincadeira. In many cases, oral narratives have developed around the basic motif of the death and resurrection of the ox. This theme, sung in many songs, is also enacted and danced in the performances. However, the relationship between myth and rite is not a mechanical one. The numerous variations of the legend are not necessarily present as explicit verbal narratives in the different forms of the merrymaking. But the action of the main characters always suggests the core of a plot that alludes to the legend.

In one abridged Northern version, taken here as my main reference, the legend goes as follows: A rich farmer gave a favorite ox as a gift to his beloved daughter, entrusting it to the care of a faithful ranch hand (*Pai Francisco*—Pa Frank—represented by a black man). *Pai Francisco*, however, kills the ox to satisfy his pregnant wife's (*Mãe Catirina*—Ma Katie's) craving for the ox tongue. The farmer notes the disappearance of the ox and sends the ranch foreman to investigate. The crime is discovered and, after some adventures, local Indians are called to help capture *Pai Francisco*, who has hidden in the forest. He is brought in before the farmer and threatened with severe punishment. In despair, he tries to resuscitate the ox and finally succeeds in doing so, with the help of a physician and/or a priest and/or a witchdoctor.

The long history and the current vitality of the brincadeira do boi in Brazil suggest a depth in this apparently simple legend warranting a specific analysis not undertaken here. The basic ethnic and social categories of the white, black, and

Indian figures from Brazilian history interact intimately and in a highly ambivalent way in the play. The resurrection of the ox, in its turn, always appears to symbolize the start of a new social order.<sup>3</sup>

### Historical records

The first written reference I have found to the merrymaking of the ox is from São Luis (the capital of the Northern state of Maranhão), where the variety section of a daily newspaper mentions the wanderings of “dance-my-ox” groups in the city's streets in July, 1829.<sup>4</sup> The first known description dates from January 1840, in Recife (the capital of the Northeastern state of Pernambuco). The article, “The Ox Dance folly,” by the Benedictine friar Lopes Gama, appeared then in the newspaper *O Carapuceiro* (Lopes Gama 1996). The friar disdained the performance as a “bunch of stupidities.” As the title suggests, the article was rather a collection of indignant comments (extremely biased but also very smart and amusing) on the pretext of offering a sermon against the play's mockery of a priest's character. According to the friar, this was a recent, and unwelcome, addition to the plot.

A second description dates from 1859 and comes from Manaus (the capital of the Northern state of Amazonas). The traveling physician Avé-Lallemant described a Bumba in that city, a pagan procession inserted into a celebration of St. John, in June.<sup>5</sup> His description emphasizes the characters of the ox and the witchdoctor dancing to the percussion beat, the death of the ox, and the won-

derful lighting effects from the torches during the dance around the “dead” ox. The priest’s character had been banned. The physician was also very impressed by the audacity displayed by the costume of a male player dressed as one of the “wives” of the *tuxáua* [Indian chief]. Avé-Lallemant acknowledged that there was, in the Ox Dance, “with its choirs and carefully harmonious soaring song, something attractive, something of a wild and pure poetry” (1961, 106).

In the interval between these two descriptions, Vicente Salles (1970, 27-29) came across reports about the Bumba in newspapers from Belém and Óbidos (both in the Northern state of Pará).

These facts reveal that the diversity of the brincadeira do boi dates from its early days and suggest its simultaneous dissemination in Northern and Northeastern Brazilian provinces during the nineteenth century. They also permit one to characterize this diversity. First, there is its diverse insertion in the annual calendar of popular Catholic celebrations, suggesting compatibility with different Christian cosmological motifs. Then, there are the variations of its characters, with the recent addition of the priest in the Recife version and the witchdoctor in the Manaus record. This indicates the openness of the ox-play’s symbolic universe to its cultural surroundings. There is also the impression of plot looseness, especially implied by the word “bunch” used in the friar’s description. Two basic structural features can be inferred from these facts: the fragmentary nature of the performance’s plot and its flexibility and responsiveness to social context.

### The study of the merrymaking

When anchoring the unity of the merrymaking in the motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox, I follow a path suggested by many scholars. Many studies see this theme as providing a “central” or “basic structure,” a “fixed nucleus,” a “basic unit,” in short, an “axis” that characterizes one single, though complex, symbolic universe. Nonetheless, all previous writers also point out that this “basic structure” cannot fully explain the merrymaking. This relative unity is always accompanied by fragmentation, improvisation, and variety (Andrade 1982; Queiroz 1967; Galvão 1951; Meyer 1990; Monteiro 1972; Borba Filho 1966; Cascudo 1984; Salles 1970). The point here is that these last characteristics are mostly seen as negative traits, very frequently considered as an impoverishment or even a clear sign of the merrymaking’s decay, due to “modern times.” In my interpretation, the fragmentary nature and flexibility of the plot are fully integrated in the merrymaking’s general pattern, indicating dimensions that are essential for the understanding of its symbolic nature. These traits derive, at least partially, from the fact that the merrymaking’s focus is on action.

In this vein, one should observe that the mythical ox, around which a vast symbolic universe revolves, is also a badge for organizing the competing groups of players and instilling rivalry between them. The performing groups are called “Oxen,” and each is given its own special name: “Mysterious Ox,” “The Last Word,” “Young Sugarcane,” “St. John’s Favorite,” “Faith in God,” and

so on, all over the country. The ox group is a local, rural or urban organization based on a neighborhood and its outskirts, and the existence of one ox group anywhere attracts others, as rivalry is at the basis of the performances.

Scholars have defined the merrymaking in different ways, but some care is required in selecting the terminology employed to capture its nature. Very often it has been defined as a folk play—an initial definition that I kept—alluding to the allegorical forms of the medieval theatre and to the folk theatrical forms staged in the streets or public squares. Some prefer to categorize it as a farce, pointing to the burlesque, buffoonery, and grotesque elements of the performances. Between 1930 and 1940, the renowned folklorist and writer Mário de Andrade (1982) placed the merrymaking of the Ox in the context of the “dramatic dances” (dances that enact specific plots), an expression coined by him to demonstrate the formal unity underlying various cultural manifestations. In the 1950s, other folklorists considered it as a revelry (*folgado* in Portuguese) highlighting the festive nature of the performances that display a mix of music, dance, and drama.

The search for origins, generally more speculative than historical, has also attracted scholars. Câmara Cascudo mentions the powerful figure of the bull in worldwide mythical domains. Nevertheless, when dwelling on concrete historical origins, he mentions the *tourinhas*, a light version of bullfight, and the popularity of the ox figure in a number of Catholic processions in the Iberian Peninsula. Nonetheless, the Brazilian mer-

rymaking would be an original “ingenious creation of the mestizo. . . . The Portuguese humpbacked ox appeared at the peak of rural slavery, waltzing, leaping, and scattering the revelers, without the slightest resemblance to a bullfight” (1984, 150).

Câmara Cascudo described the merrymaking as “a play of breathtaking beauty with reminders of the past and deep social feeling” and as “the only Brazilian festivity in which thematic renewal dramatizes popular curiosity, making it contemporary. Its constant transformations are in no way detrimental to the dynamic essence of folklore that is of interest, but rather revives it in an incomparable expression of spontaneity and reality” (*ibid.*, 153).

### The Ox Dance in Amazonia

The permeability of the *brincadeira do boi* to the cultural milieu takes significance from concrete situations. It is therefore important to place each variant of the merrymaking in its own sociological background. In Amazonia, the merrymaking is called *Boi-Bumbá*, Ox Dance. The relative historic and cultural unity of the region provides the context in which the Parintins Ox Dance reverberates, alluding to many aspects of a troubled history (Souza 1994; Daou 2000; Reis 1931). The Parintins festival intentionally refers to this background, and this originality is surely one of the reasons for its contemporary popularity. Parintins is situated at almost equal distance from Manaus (upstream) and Belém (downstream) in a region known

as Médio Amazonas, because of its position in the middle of the river's course. The Ox Dance's evolution in the two major Amazonian capitals helps to illuminate the Parintins development.

Research by Salles suggests that the Amazonian Ox Dance spread from the city of Belém, where it took shape at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In Salles's interpretation, it could be linked to the African-Brazilian regional population, who practiced an "aggressive and strange revelry" that would wander through the streets, often culminating in a brawl among the *capoeira* (dance-cum-martial art) groups. The violence would provoke heavy police repression and the local legal codes several times forbade the revelry in the streets (Salles 1970, 28-33). In the mid-nineteenth century, the Ox Dance groups of Belém came under the influence of a different kind of folk theatre, developed in the festival of Our Lady of Nazareth.<sup>6</sup> Libretto poets, especially contracted to compose the annual play for the Nazareth festival, influenced the Ox Dance presentations in the direction of a type of operetta, keeping, however, "their original elements . . . and the whole court of traditional players intact" (ibid., 33) This new pattern was preserved when, after the Second World War, the Ox groups returned to their more exclusively popular environments, and it was revived in the 1960s, when tourist agencies and authorities began to organize other festivals with contests and prizes.

The mutual influence among different social realms resulted, in the case of Belém, in an artistic sophistication of the Ox Dance performances and in the ex-

pansion of its public. The evolution of the Parintins Ox Dance, with its spectacular quality and middle class artists occupying important roles in its making, displays some analogies with that of Belém.

The evolution of the Manaus Ox Dance followed a different path, where this kind of cultural exchange is absent. Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, at the time of the economic rubber boom in the region, the elite groups of the newly affluent city of Manaus especially insisted on their distinction from other social groups. The Amazonas Theatre, with its European operas, was the ultimate symbol of their aspirations (Daou 2000). The Ox Dance, however, has been documented there among popular groups since the mid-nineteenth century (Avé-Lallemant 1961; Monteiro 1972, 5).

The writer Márcio Souza (interview, 1999) recalls the Ox Dance groups in Manaus in the 1950s:

The Ox groups would rehearse in the enclosures and would go into the streets, performing at homes in response to the requests of the politicians, or at the invitation of wealthy townspeople; or the community would put some money together to pay for the presentation. A complete performance would last for four to five hours, with a maximum of two shows per evening. . . . And they were like warriors, they would not only roam the streets but would quarrel with each other. . . . This would cause the biggest fights in town and everyone would end up at the police station. . . . When the

folklore festivals began in the 1960s, their rivalry was controlled and the performances were shortened.

Belém, at the mouth of the Amazonas River, and Manaus, on the left bank of the Rio Negro far upstream, are at either end of a route along which flows the extensive river traffic of the region. The Ox Dance has certainly found its way to many riverside towns between the two largest Amazonian capitals. The field is open for future investigation.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, one of the Amazonian Ox Dances, the Parintins Ox Dance, captured the attention of researchers. Anthropologist Sérgio Teixeira (1992) remarked on its “magnificent breathtaking show.” Poet João de Jesus Paes Loureiro (1997, 396) considered it one of the important landmarks in contemporary Amazonian culture, commenting on “a rich and lively cannibalizing and carnivalizing process” in progress. In recent decades, the Parintins Ox Dance has clearly been providing Manaus, the state capital, with an unprecedented site of cultural exchange and integration.

## II. The Festival's Ethnography

The town of Parintins, located in the Tupinambarana Island in the middle course of the Amazonas River, has a population of around 42,000, and the surrounding county of the same name around 60,000.<sup>7</sup> In the sixteenth century, local groups were driven out or subordinated by the sweeping migrations of the Tupi Indians, who had

fled up the Amazonas River, escaping from Portuguese invaders. When the Jesuits arrived in the mid-seventeenth century, building special villages to convert the Indians, a group of Tupi Indians, the Tupinambás, dominated the region. Speaking a common language, this group would trade and mix with the Portuguese, helping them to capture other Indians. Tupinambarana, the name of the island where the town is located, means “false Tupi Indians,” and Parintins, the town's name, derives from another Tupi group, the Parintintins (Cerqua 1980).

In the mid-twentieth century, Parintins economy was based especially on sisal production and processing, which sustained regional economic development between 1940 and 1960. Nowadays the main economic activity is cattle and buffalo farming.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, the area is poor, with little infrastructure and few job opportunities, as formal employment is primarily in local government, retail trade, and small-scale business. Even the cattle are taken to slaughterhouses in Manaus. Few cars, many bicycles, and, more recently, motorbikes circulate in the town's streets.

Nevertheless, Parintins shelters extraordinary cultural wealth and, from this viewpoint, it is outstanding as a kind of local capital.<sup>9</sup> The town is the seat of an active Catholic diocese,<sup>10</sup> basic public utilities, good schools, and an advanced campus of the Federal University of Amazonas. Town leaders organize a large number of festivities, especially the pilgrimage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the town's patron saint, between July 6 and 16, and the Parintins Folklore

Festival in the last week of June. This festival, which includes the presentation of square dance groups, is nowadays known as the *Festival dos Bois-Bumbás* or Ox Dance Festival, due to the great recognition achieved by the Ox groups' performances in the last three evenings of June.

The closeness of these festivals indicates that the dry Amazonian "summer" season, when the rivers are at low levels, is the highpoint of the calendar of regional events. The two festivals combine to attract diverse visitors to the town. A mass is always celebrated in the cathedral in the week before the festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (that is, during the Ox Dance festival). During the Ox performances, the two rival groups render homage to the patron saint with refrains and scenes in the arena, asking for her blessing and protection. After the festival, the Ox groups decorate the saint's carriage. Only on July 17, after the end of the Carmel festivities, will the Ox groups hold their merry barbecues and stage the "escape of the ox," concluding their annual activities.

Father Gino Malvestio, the local bishop, observed, "The Ox Dance festival finishes, and July 6 is the start of Our Lady of Mount Carmel's festival, in which everyone is interested with equal fervor" (interview, 1996).

Deputy mayor Osvaldo Ferreira commented:

There are 180 rural communities in the county and its surroundings, all with their own patron saints, and commemorations on their own

patron saint's day. Between July 6 and 16, most country folk swarm to Our Lady of Mount Carmel's festival. Here it gets quite busy, not as much as during the Ox Dance, which attracts around 50,000 visitors, but last year [1995] 15,000 people came to the procession. The visitors are mainly folk from the hinterlands, rural communities, and the Parintins parishioners. (interview, 1996)

While Our Lady of Mount Carmel's pilgrimage is an "inland festivity" that draws participants or visitors from the region, the Ox Dance is a festival that draws people from the whole country and overseas.

### The Ox Dance arena

The festival is held in a stadium, commonly called the *Bumbódromo*, in a clear allusion to the *Sambódromo* (the Samba Carnival parade venue built in 1984 by the Rio de Janeiro state government). Amazonino Mendes, the local state governor at the time, built the Ox Dance arena in 1988, on the site of the town's old airport. The concrete structures for the stands, seating 40,000, were built around a circular arena. Normally, the stadium is used for sporting events, and it houses a grammar school underneath its stands. On the festivity days, the classrooms turn into the Ox players' dressing rooms.

The stadium is in the middle of town, forming an imaginary line with the cathedral of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the local cemetery that separates Parintins into east and west. This is

significant because in all matters relating to the Ox Dance the town is divided into two parts. The stands of the stadium are divided into the western, red-painted half, belonging to the red fans of *Garantido* (the Safe Ox), and the blue-painted, eastern half, belonging to the blue fans of *Caprichoso* (the Capricious Ox). The fans are organized in *galeras*, informal youth groups with a strong sense of group identity and intense rivalry towards other groups (for instance, soccer or funk *galeras*).

The stands have only four neutral areas, located at the northern and southern ends of the stadium. To the south, between the two large gateways leading into the arena, there is a group of seats for the local government and eminent members of the community. The three other neutral areas are at the northern end at the arena, with an area for journalists and, at the top of the stadium, a long row of cabins especially built by Coca-Cola for its guests (socialites, actors, business VIPs, journalists, and Brazilian politicians). Since 1995, Coca-Cola has been one of the festival's sponsors, along with the state government, the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, and the Ox groups themselves, who now run their own businesses.

The town area outside the stadium is also divided into two parts. *Garantido's* enclosure (the rehearsal court) and its general headquarters, including the workshops for manufacturing the floats and costumes, are to the west of the arena, in the so-called upper town. *Caprichoso's* enclosure and general headquarters are to the east, in the lower

town.<sup>11</sup> This division is taken to such lengths that to walk “up” (west) or “down” (east) in the streets of Parintins always means to enter the networks of one or the other of the Ox groups.

### A brief history of the Ox groups

According to oral tradition, the Ox groups appeared in Parintins in the 1910s. Lindolfo Monteverde, whose parents were from the Azores, created the *Garantido Ox* in 1913. The *Caprichoso Ox* followed in its wake, some even say in the same year and others a year later, made by the brothers Roque and Antônio Cid (natives of Crato, Ceará) and by Furtado Belém, an eminent Parintins citizen.<sup>12</sup>

The Ox groups played in the local squares and roamed the streets, where they would challenge each other and quarrel at each chance encounter. Nor would they let the other pass or turn back: “It was really brutal, that was how it was, there was no middle term; when they met they would fight, and the policemen would come and put the fighters in jail” (Raimundo Muniz, interview, 1999). The wealthier townfolk would pay the groups to play in front of their homes, and others would give them a meal. Lindolfo Monteverde, the owner of the *Garantido Ox*, had a very good voice. His ox was “secure,” “guaranteed,” and would always leave the fights unscathed: “His head was unbreakable.” Consequently, the rival Ox would try to excel in singing and dancing. Other Ox groups existed, but only *Garantido* and *Caprichoso* survived. The reason was the gradual

and close association of each of them to the “upper” and “lower” halves of town, which enabled them to embody an important contrast in the social morphology and organization of Parintins. Their strong rivalry was soon able to represent the town as unified.

The shape taken by today’s Ox Dance is a result of the creation of the Parintins Folklore Festival in 1965. A group of friends from the local Catholic youth organization—Xisto Pereira, Lucenor Barros, and Raimundo Muniz—started the festival. Raimundo Muniz (interview, 1999) tells of how “we were three friends and Father Augusto, and we had a meeting on June 1, 1965. We left with the idea of getting the folklore groups together.” At that time, he says, the festivities were waning: “No one wanted to play any more. People would criticize and say, Oh! I don’t like the Ox Dance; it’s only for the poor, *caboclos*, fishermen, people like that, charcoal burners. So we thought of organizing a folklore festival to present the square dances.”

The festival was a watershed in the history of the Parintins Ox groups, which gradually became the stars of the show. When the festival was created, the focus was on the square dances: “The festival would start on June 12, and last for ten evenings, taking advantage of the weekends and Wednesday evenings. As a result, the country folk would arrive and there were, say, 20 to 22 groups of square dances. The Ox groups appeared only as a finale to the festivities” (Raimundo Muniz, interview, 1999). And even then, each Ox group arrived at its scheduled time to avoid the terrible street brawls. Raimundo Muniz explains

(interview, 1999):

The beginning meant a lot of sacrifice for us. We did not have the resources and everything was done with an amateur’s heart. The stands were called *perches*. Timber had to be bought, and we did this each year, we had to buy on credit and pay later. From 1965 to 1971, the festival was held in the cathedral square. We sold tickets to the seats at bar tables. The money was invested in the folk-groups and a part went towards the expenses of the festival, because the music was all to our own account. It had a different rhythm from today’s, but we didn’t record it, and we had no photographers at this time.

The festival soon became a big success. This success was due to the popular appeal of the two rival Ox groups, closely associated with the town’s image, and the cultivation of competition between the fans of the rival groups. In the words of Raimundo Muniz:

At the third festival, the town folks had already made up their minds. You could feel who was for Caprichoso and who was for Garantido, because when the former won, no Garantido fan would go down there from the Cathedral, they would rip the others’ clothes, that old quarrel. So we decided to separate the supporters: a stand for each group.

The cohesion of the Ox groups themselves was strengthened by the institution of a festival contest:

In 1965, it was a free show, while 1966 was the start of the contest. We

thought to ourselves, “What can we do for the Ox groups to get them together to enjoy themselves?” So we invented a trophy, a jury with judges, a lawyer. . . . And step by step came the first champion, then the second, and it caught on. (Raimundo Muniz, interview, 1999)

For a contest to be respected and successful, the contestants must basically agree on a common set of rules and criteria for judging. Such agreement tends to strengthen the leadership of associations and clubs representing the groups. The popularity of the Ox groups grew with the festival’s contest, as did the prominence of the Ox Dance show, giving the rival groups a powerful vehicle to express their traditional rivalries. Nowadays, for example, the square dances, which still precede the Ox Dance show, are less and less in the limelight, with much more attention directed to the festival’s main attraction.

The festival’s expansion led to the arrival of new social groups in its organization. Raimundo Muniz, for instance, stepped down in 1983 when the town hall, with the support of the Ox groups, took over the coordination of the festival.<sup>13</sup> He says of this move:

In 1970 and 1972, folks from Manaus made their first visits to our festival, not to the extent that they do today, but the Ox Dance has always been an attraction. . . . In 1980, I visited Manaus to ask Emamtur [the local tourism authority] to support the festival; they kept putting me off for three days. . . . Then they called me back: “Look, pal, the State doesn’t have any money. It only has money

for the festival here because, you know, this is the capital and ours is a very big festival.” So I invited one of the Emamtur directors to come and watch the Parintins festival. On the first evening, when *Caprichoso* came in, he turned to me and said: “My friend, I bow to you!” . . . We had here off-campus departments of the University of Rio de Janeiro, and there were always many visitors from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo. . . . The dean played a major role here, as part of the jury. People came, enjoyed, and kept talking about it. Then the press and television helped a lot. In 1987, governor Amazonino came to watch, where the arena is today, but then it was just a wooden stage. He enjoyed the festival, and decided: “I want to get a proper place for the Ox!” and ordered the stadium to be built in 1988.

In brief, the festival began as a community festivity in 1965, linked to the local Catholic youth organization and traditional Catholic commemorations. Early in the 1980s it developed to include the county authorities, and by the end of the decade it was already attracting local state investment. In the 1990s the federal Ministry of Culture and powerful sponsors (such as Coca-Cola) would arrive, bringing the festival to the nation’s view.

This growth also brought new dramatic elements to the ox-play and transformed its artistic components. The aesthetic and thematic innovation accomplished during the 1970s is worth mentioning. Odinéia Andrade (local researcher and active player in the festival, interview; 1996) mentions a

“decline” in the motif of the death and resurrection of the Ox at that time: “We added to it themes from the Amazonian culture: legends, myths and regional traditions.” Raimundo Muniz (interview, 1999) recalls other new features:

The original ox [he means the plastic representation of the ox in the play] did not have all this swing when it danced. The ox didn’t move its ears; it was an ox from the old folklore. The first to move its head, ear, and tail was Garantido. Its owner attached some wires to make them move. That’s how it began, Caprichoso was folksier. That was Jair Mendes, a very smart artist, who worked for Garantido. He was the one who gave this whole artistic drive to Garantido and later to Caprichoso, because after disagreeing with Garantido, he spent two years with Caprichoso. They also started doing everything Garantido did. And so it carried on.

Jair Mendes, the Parintins artist mentioned above, had worked in Rio de Janeiro’s carnival from 1970 to 1972. He tells us (interview, 1999):

I really enjoyed Rio’s carnival. Because I love all the new things . . . and when I came back to my hometown, Parintins, I wanted to do here what I had learned. But there was no carnival whatsoever in Parintins, nor in Manaus at that time. But they had the Ox Dance. I was a *Garantido* fan; it was in my area up here. So what did I do? I started adding some carnival features. Floats about regional legends such as Yara, the Giant Snake, River Dolphin, for instance. Before that, the Parintins Ox

Dance had nothing out of the ordinary, just the same as all the other towns still have: percussion, ox, ox owner, cowboys and all that.

From the beginning, cultural borrowings from Rio de Janeiro’s carnival have been adapted to local requirements and meanings. The Ox Dance floats, for example, express local themes based on regional legends. They also adapt themselves to what Jair Mendes calls the “public taste,” the anticipation that something must “happen.” In the huge warehouse where the Garantido floats are made, he pointed to a large alligator that, in his opinion, would certainly be a success in 1999, since its feet, head, and tail would all move at the performance. He even boasted of once having made a sculpture smile! In 1975, acting as “owner of the ox” in the performance for the first time, Jair was in a position to introduce other innovations. He told me about his revolutionary insight that corresponds to his finely tuned understanding of the dramatic nature of the Ox Dance:

Something incredible at that time, something very simple that suddenly came to my mind: what do people like? They like happenings. It’s not just something good to watch, like the splendor of a carnival parade passing by. Something has to happen. . . . I was the ox owner. So I decided to brand the ox. I designed a “brand iron” with the letters “JM” (his initials), and used black ink to make a mark. . . . There I went with the iron, branding the ox and the ox went “Moo!”

He explained that he had had to coordinate that the sound of the ox be made by someone else each time he “branded” it, since there was no tape recorder. “Well, there was an uproar, people loved it, and it was just a very simple idea. You see, I know what people like here.”

Another important change occurred early in the 1980s. In the merrymaking’s traditional pattern, each Ox group belonged to an owner, respected by his comrades and in charge of the performances. This social role overlapped with the play’s character of the ox owner (*amo do boi*). In the 1980s, the Ox groups became formal organizations, each run by a board of directors. They had no individual owners anymore. In Garantido, however, the traditional owner Lindolfo Monteverde continued to act as the ox owner character in the play until his death in 1979. The Monteverde family kept this role until 1995; since then, new talents, especially good singers, have taken it on.

In the 1990s, another major change brought us to the festival’s current pattern: the growing emphasis on the indigenous and regional elements in the theme’s development. In the opinion of Simão Assayag, art director for Caprichoso, the forest Indian from Amazonian folklore would inevitably have to play a role somewhere, and that came to be in the Parintins Ox Dance. In 1995, a new dramatic scene, called the “ritual,” was included, continuing the same trend. The main character of this scene, the witchdoctor, became the main star of each evening’s presentation of the Ox groups.

### **Marketing and the Ox groups as organizations**

Today both Ox groups are formal organizations. Not only do they run the artistic aspects of the festival, but they are also responsible for its production and marketing. Their main sources of income are: (1) the official patronage of the state and federal governments, the latter through the Ministry of Culture, (2) Coca-Cola sponsorship since 1995 (which, in exchange, may advertise its products in the arena and in specially built booths),<sup>14</sup> (3) the sale of the arena rights to television networks,<sup>15</sup> (4) the sale of festival CDs, with its annual music, (5) ticket sales for the festival in Parintins and for the rehearsals held in Manaus.<sup>16</sup> Their symbols have become registered trademarks at the federal Patent and Trademark Office. Fundraising associations have been created in Manaus for the festival. Garantido and Caprichoso have created fan clubs, setting up dancing spaces, called the mainland enclosures, to hold shows and rehearsals in Manaus.

Their influence has also extended up and down the middle-Amazonas river, to small towns close to Parintins, such as Maués, Nhamundá, Barreirinha, and even Santarém, located downstream, and mainly to Manaus, upstream. “The folk come here, see how it is, and go away with the ideas for themselves,” comments a Parintins hotel owner. The Parintins Ox Dance has clearly achieved a regional hegemony. At festival time, Manaus’s role as a capital is subverted, and it becomes, in the words of a Parintins citizen, “a kind of

neighborhood of the island of Tupinambarana.”

The Manaus-Parintins relationship, entwined around the Ox Dance, causes some rivalry. Manaus has its own, and older, folklore festival.<sup>17</sup> Its players talk about the past revelries, now “suffocated by the festival of Parintins.” The Manaus festival stops and the capital’s streets become empty during the last three days of June. However, the Manaus fan clubs, with their mainland enclosures, also ensure a vast network of collaboration between Manaus and Parintins. Today, even at the preparatory stage, Manaus youth “prefer to go to the rehearsals of *toadas* (the typical music of the Parintins Ox Dance) for the Parintins festival than to the rehearsals of the local Ox groups.”

As highlighted by the preference of Manaus’s population, the *toadas* are at the front line of the festival’s increased popularity. The *toadas* are a social fact in their own right; they anticipate, participate in, and surpass the Ox Dance festival. For some years now, they have been the top regional hits. In 1996, they burst onto the national and international scene as hopeful candidates to become a new national hit, following the example of Bahia’s *axé*-music.<sup>18</sup>

The river steamers (*gaiolas*) sailing up and down the Amazonas River generally have a bar on the top deck, flanked by two enormous speakers constantly playing the Ox Dance *toadas* on their voyages back and forth. As the festival draws nearer, small groups of passengers rehearse their dance steps while drinking and chatting. The visitor arriving in Manaus at this time is also immediately caught up in the characteristic festival

musical environment, with the town resounding to the music playing incessantly on the radio and in local stores.

At the old Parintins harbor, the visitors are greeted with *toadas* blasting from powerful speakers beside the river steamers and small canoes, shortly to be moored alongside motorboats and modern yachts. The town resonates with the music’s beat and melodies. Silence is no longer, nor the gentle murmur of the river. Everything is immersed in an overwhelming chaotic musical atmosphere, since even the smallest bars (some makeshift, and multiplying as the festival approaches) and households constantly play their favorite *toadas*.

The success of the *toadas* has increased the number of bands in Manaus. In addition to independent bands, each Ox group has its own officially accredited band and its own local radio program. Every year the bands travel through Northern Brazil contracted to play at special events and festivals.<sup>19</sup>

The mainland enclosures in Manaus must be seen in this context. After Easter Saturday, at the end of Lent, the Ox groups begin to hold events and rehearsals in their enclosures and in Manaus neighborhoods, raising an important part of the funds necessary for the Parintins festival. On the eve of the last rehearsal, one week before the festivities, the Ox groups organize an electric bandwagon, jokingly called the “electronic Ox-cart,” with bands playing *toadas*. Their activities culminate in a huge party in the enclosure. This is the start of the “Ox caravan” towards

Parintins, a procession of large and small river craft carrying thousands of people to the island and “to the biggest folklore festival in Brazil.”

The geographic location of Parintins, at the far eastern tip of the Tupinambarana Island, is well positioned to showcase the festival. As one looks upstream, the vast river stretches to the horizon. From that distant line, all the vessels sailing down the river appear like specks on the water. On the eve of the festival, river steamers and yachts approach, sailing round the island and displaying their blue or red pennants, sputtering fireworks before they anchor in the harbor. Wealthier tourists arrive in catamarans, with food and accommodation guaranteed. Tourist agencies, which previously would only become busy in June, now begin selling their package deals in October of the prior year. Local people arrive mostly on the traditional steamers, with their hammocks. Everyone is looking forward to *brincar de boi* (that is to play the ox, in the sense of enjoying themselves, singing and dancing).

Cars and motorbikes are off-loaded from barges from Manaus. The state military police and health department set up special operations. The harbor authorities increase the supervision of river traffic, concerned about overcrowding, a recurring cause of shipwrecks. Flights between Manaus and Parintins increase in frequency.

The people of Parintins get ready to welcome the visitors. The local town hall distributes the winning festival poster, the result of a contest organized in March and April among local artists. They clean

up the streets. Traffic police close and open the streets to the traffic of the few cars, the many bicycles, and the growing number of motorbikes. Street vendors are in profusion, setting up their stalls of food and handicrafts in the square near the harbor, between the town hall and the marketplace. Some of them are also members of indigenous groups from nearby, whose stalls are visited at the last minute by the Ox artists for the final touches to this or that adornment of their groups. Many of the residents of Parintins set up food stalls along the main street.

The Caprichoso and Garantido Ox groups, in turn, have been at work for some time. An art director is in charge of the design and supervises the festival arrangements. The preparations are basically made in the enclosures, the central headquarters, and the many other workshops. At the central headquarters, a team of artists works, making the floats.<sup>20</sup> Other headquarters are scattered throughout the town. The youth groups that compose the basis of the Ox performances are called tribes. Each tribe has its own costume and rehearses its own choreography. The artist in charge of the tribe’s rehearsals and the making of its costumes is called the tribe’s chief and organizes its own tribe’s headquarter. The *toadas* are composed in January and February, and house competitions decide which eighteen *toadas* are to be included on the groups’ official CDs. These selected *toadas* are then going to “animate the Ox” (Ronaldo Barbosa, composer for Caprichoso; interview, 1996). At the enclosures, the band, percussion, and

lead singer rehearse, and the fans show off and rehearse the different dance steps of each toada.

As festival time approaches, the two Ox groups avoid each other more than ever. The collective behavior is full of prohibitions and taboos: the name of the other Ox group is never mentioned; it is merely called “the other.” The strong colors representing each Ox are blue (Caprichoso) and red (Garantido). It is unimaginable (or pure provocation) to attend the rehearsal of an Ox wearing the other’s colors, even if discreetly. Anything that is a reminder of the other Ox group must be avoided. The Portuguese verbs *garantir* (to guarantee) and *caprichar* (to elaborate something very carefully, trying to excel) are each banished from the vocabulary of the other group.<sup>21</sup> The townspeople joke and comment that, at this time, husbands and wives who cheer for opposing Ox groups separate. When it is time for the festival, the townspeople and fans mark out their territories, decorating the streets with flags and paintings in their Ox colors.

Behind the scenes and at rehearsals, this rivalry means secrecy. Nothing must be disclosed to the other group, especially the surprise effects that are shared exclusively within the Ox’s art director’s team, to be revealed only at the performance.

On the eve of the festival, representatives of each group sign a document with the contest’s rules. When the square dances have ended at the arena, the Ox groups offer a small preview of their display to test the sound and light equipment.

### **Rivalry and differentiation between the Ox groups**

On the evenings of June 28, 29, and 30, Caprichoso and Garantido confront each other in a renewed contest. Each Ox has around 3,500 players, and every evening, the costumes, floats, and legends are varied in performances that last no more than three hours. Around 45,000 people fill the arena’s stands. A great part of them belong to the Ox groups’ *galeras* (each with about 15,000 fans), who have free seats in the red (western) or blue (eastern) painted halves of the stands. The *galeras* arrive early in the afternoon and wait with strong anticipation for the performance to begin. They will sing, dance, and produce many visual special effects throughout the show. While one *galera* is intensely participating in its Ox group performance, the other will be seated very quietly. It will of course lose important points if it disturbs the opponent’s presentation.

From the *galera*’s viewpoint, each evening brings alternating experiences of passion towards its own Ox group and attentive and lucid observation of the opponent’s performance. A famous toadas composer, Chico da Silva, says very perceptively, “In Parintins, people will always love one Ox group and appreciate the other” (interview, 1996). The best observer of an Ox performance is likely to be a member of the opponent *galera* who, watching quietly, carefully, and very critically the other’s presentation, becomes, in spite of himself, the other’s greatest admirer. Knowledge and admiration are, however, part of the strong rivalry that

links one Ox group to the other, and these will be transformed into the deep humiliation of the loser when the winner is announced. On July 1, after the announcement of the contest's result, when the tourists and visitors are already gone, the winning group gathers at its enclosure from whence it starts an informal parade through the streets. At the central street that divides the town into the two Ox groups' moities, fights and quarrels occur. The parade's destination is the stadium arena, which then belongs entirely to the winner, whose victory celebrations consist basically in humiliating and offending the absent loser with jokes and degrading allusions to their players, and in subverting their toadas' poetry with joking motifs.

At the evening performances, however, rivalry is controlled by formal rules and is mediated by artistic expression. The competition's limitation to two contesting groups is countered by repetition—each Ox group presents itself three times—and has resulted in the expansion and elaborate internal sophistication of the performances. The Parintins Ox groups have added another annual theme to the traditional motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox. In doing so, they have expanded and opened the performances to incorporate the vast symbolic universe of Amazonian myths, the modern ecological banner, and a new look at the native Indian groups. From the 1980s onwards, this new approach, especially with the enhancement of the indigenous elements and the ecological banner, has joined the contemporary trends that now

pervade Amazonian environmentalism and indigenist policies.<sup>22</sup>

This superposition of motifs is the basis of the performance's artistic richness. The sequence of scenes, composed by different dramatic actions, work as fragments of meaning loosely connected to each other, relating the multiplicity of motifs that find their way into the performance. Roughly speaking, the scenes can be divided in two ideal types: those that relate to the Ox mythical motif and those that derive from the annual slogan based on regional and indigenous motifs. A very clear example of this second type is, for instance, a scene called "Amazonian legend" that enacts each evening a different legend, bringing to the arena its respective characters.

The content of the annual variable theme, emphasizing regional and indigenous motifs, expresses therefore an agreement between the Ox groups. Nevertheless, their way of doing this greatly distinguishes their respective styles today. Where Garantido defends "tradition," Caprichoso adopts a more innovative discourse. Garantido has, however, been demanding a freer rein in addressing the annual slogan. In their view, "People must understand that one of the Ox Dance features is not to adopt one single theme uniting the three evenings' performances." Or: "We want to play; we are committed not to the theme but rather to the toadas and to the folklore characters. . . . The Ox Dance is not concerned with logical sequences. We perform freely, we . . . are in the context of the merrymaking tradition . . ." (Emília Faria, Art Director for Garantido; interview, 1996). Caprichoso,

on the other hand, has been innovating specifically toward more unity in the three-evening sequence. Art Director Simão Assayag wrote an elaborate libretto for the 1996 show, naming it a “*caboclo* (mestizo) folk opera,” in which each evening’s performance was conceived as a different act integrating one single story.

It would, however, be misleading simply to interpret the history of the Garantido Ox group as more “traditional” and that of Caprichoso as more “modern.” The current opposition is to be understood as a particular moment in the Ox Dance’s evolution. In previous years, the “traditionalist” and “modernizing” positions had actually been inverted. In the festival’s context, these terms are mainly discourse devices, serving to create separate identities for the two Ox groups, who must remain opposed, no matter how closely linked they are to each other. The stabilization of new aesthetic standards and thematic emphases also requires the construction of differences in style.

### The Ox Dance performances

It is interesting to contrast the Ox Dance to another awesome festival, the samba schools’ parade in Rio de Janeiro (Cavalcanti 1994, 1999). Both festivals are magnificent contests and displays of massive proportions. They do, however, differ greatly in their structure and symbolic meaning.

The carnival parade is a danced procession: A samba school passes in a continuous linear flow before the

spectator, who participates freely, singing and dancing together with the schools, cheering them on, or merely appreciating the show. It is an open championship, as befits a large urban center. There are five rankings, gathering together around 60 samba schools coming from different neighborhoods. Each year the winners and the losers of each ranking are promoted or demoted one level up or down. The parade’s narrative pattern is organized by a specific theme, renewed each year, sung to a samba tune and visually represented by floats, costumes, and special parade components. The combination of the unvarying formal elements with the yearly-renewed theme makes the parade a rich and flexible event. The samba school parade has accompanied the changes in the city of Rio de Janeiro throughout the twentieth century, spreading to many other Brazilian cities.

The Parintins Ox Dance is a June festival, with deep roots in the region and in the Catholic religious calendar around it. It is a radical contest between two contenders in a small Amazonian town. One will win and the other must lose. Parintins, however, intends to address all Brazil, and has organized a festival of rare beauty and complexity that follows its own original pattern.

On the first night of the festival, a speaker announces, “Brazil will judge the Ox Dance.” The phrase indicates how the jury is composed. Presided over by representatives of each Ox group, it consists of six members, appointed after a lottery among the Brazilian states, excepting Northern ones and those drawn in the previous year.<sup>23</sup> The jury is

presented to the public, and the show of the first group opens with the entrance of the master of ceremonies, followed by the lead singer and the percussion orchestra that accompanies all the toadas, who take positions on the side of the arena that belongs to its Ox group.

The master of ceremonies plays a key role requiring a communicative and charismatic personality. He will stay in the arena throughout the show, mediating the relation of the Ox group players to the public in the stadium. He introduces all the play's characters and the different scenes that compose the performance. Together with the lead singer, he establishes a very intense and close communication with the galera, fully integrating it into the Ox group presentation, inviting the singing of the appropriate toadas for both characters and scenes. With the three elements of master of ceremonies, lead singer, and percussion orchestra, the artistic background for the performance's development is set.

The performance consists of a loose sequence of scenes of danced dramatic actions, built around specific motifs, centered in certain characters, and always accompanied by appropriate toadas. These sequences have no necessary order except for the ritual scene that always closes the performances. Different allegorical floats (6 in each evening) compose the visual background for the different scenes. Brought on in separate parts that are assembled in the arena before the spectators' eyes, these floats also provide for many surprises and visual effects. Youths in colorful costumes, divided into

male and female "tribes" (100 members of each tribe, 30 tribes in each Ox group, and fifteen tribes per evening) enter the arena displaying their own choreography. They continue entering the arena until it is totally filled up with the entire Ox group. Their constant and gradual entry fills the intermissions between the different scenes, in which they also participate. Similarly, the *galeras* activities in the stands assist in the arrival of mythical creatures or important characters that may sometimes enter the arena from the stands.

The characters in the performance are in accordance with the diversity of motifs that underlies the composition of the scenes. There are the constant characters, related to the Ox mythical motif, such as the farmer's daughter (*Sinhazinha*), the ox itself, the ox owner (*amo do boi*), Pa Frank (*Pai Francisco*) and Ma Katie (*Mãe Catirina*), the witchdoctor, and even the recently renamed *Cunhã Poranga* ("beautiful girl" in the Tupi language). Some of the group characters like the cowboys (*vaquejada*), the Indian tribes, and the Indian chiefs (*tuxáuas*) may also be rooted in this traditional motif.

Other characters, however, derive from the variable annual motifs drawn from the wide universe of Amazonian legends and history. These different levels of meaning frequently interweave, never coinciding totally with each other. For instance, in 1996, one long scene (of about an hour and a half) presented by Caprichoso had Brazil's discovery by the Portuguese as its central motif. The Tupinambarana Island, where Parintins is located, was the imagined site of the first encounter of the Portuguese with the

native Indians. In this context, the characters of Pa Frank and Ma Katie, coming from the Ox motif, appeared as the jesters of the Portuguese royal family. Finally, characters like the Queen of Folklore or the Flag Bearer seem to be derived simply from the festival's expanding artistic needs.

The arrival of individual characters is always designed to elicit surprise. They may arrive from the stands, from the sky as if hanging in the air, or from the interior of an allegorical float. They are greeted with fireworks, special effects, and specific toadas. Major events and high points, one after the other, punctuate each sequence they enact. Some, such as the marvelous tuxauas, come on stage, parade, and soon leave. Most of the players, however, stay in the arena. The ritual is performed when the whole Ox group has gathered. It is the culmination of each evening's performance, a climax that marks the witchdoctor's main appearance, and a wonderful dance. After that, the Ox group moves in circles as it leaves the arena.

Well-defined scenes revolve around the Ox motif. Dancing and swaying to the music, the appearance of the ox is one of the evening's highpoints. Manipulated by its *tripa* (that is, the dancer who manipulates it from within the "entrails"), it is accompanied by a set of characters appearing in the legend's versions. The cowboys dance around it; the owner of the ox (*amo do boi*) calls his ox to play in the arena with a special *toada*; Pa Frank and Ma Katie appear as clowns, falling and stumbling around the ox; the farmer's daughter (*Sinhazinha da*

*fazenda*), a darling young lady, performs a graceful dance.

But the native characters relating originally to this group have gradually come to the fore, gaining in importance. Their roles and actions have been enhanced and transformed by other levels of meaning brought to the performance by the annually varying motifs related to the different regional legends and historical accounts. This is very clearly the case with the witchdoctor, who has become central to new scenes (especially the ritual climactic scene). In a different way, this is also the case of the tuxáuas (Indian chiefs) who, divided into two categories, luxury and originality, multiplied to fifteen tuxáuas in each category. The tuxáuas were cut off from any specific scene, and now simply parade exhibiting their huge and wonderful costumes, each representing a different regional legend. This is also the case of the young men and women of the tribes, whose names, costumes, and dances are inspired by native history and legends.

Locally invented old-time characters have been transformed by this new trend, as in the case of the old "Miss," a winner of beauty contests in the region, who is now the *Cunhã Poranga*. The *Cunhã* is a wonderful and sensual dancer who accompanies the witchdoctor and can be related to the female Indian character that appears in some variants of the merrymaking. The themes of the toadas have undergone a similar transformation. In 1992, one toada referred to the Indian as the "humble partner of the ox." There would be no room for this today, when the toadas'

poetry gives much more emphasis to indigenous and regional motifs.

During the 1990s, the gradual but firm and conscious emphasis on regional elements of the play has created a new atmosphere. An emerging nativism, that is, a valorization of the indigenous and caboclo cultural elements, is present in the Parintins Ox Dance. This enhancement has created a new symbolic universe, which implies significant changes in relation to the traditional pattern of the play. This new universe, although linked to the ox theme, corresponds to major displacements. The motif of death and resurrection has faded in the scenes that center around the ox theme, and has come to seem like an allusion to something that was once part of the play. There is no enactment of the ox death and resurrection in the performance. Interestingly enough, the death and resurrection motif migrated to the newly created indigenous symbolic universe, and gave new life to the Ox Dance.

This movement has also altered the nature of the Ox Dance as an art form. All previous descriptions of the merrymaking stress the burlesque features of the play. This comic trait is still present in the Parintins Ox Dance, basically in the satirical performance of Pa Frank and Ma Katie, the couple of workers who are represented as buffoons in the ox theme sequences. But the tragic and solemn character of the ritual scene (the witchdoctor's main performance) nowadays outmatches this naïve humor. This scene is always a chanted plea for the dead Indians and their survivors, "those who once owned the land,"

according to one *toada* from 1996. The sad recognition of the destruction of many native Indian groups is, however, accompanied by regional pride, by the valorization of the rainforest and the survival of current Indian groups, the caboclo type and culture, and the richness of Amazonian history and its mythical universe. Festive joy is here linked to tragic worldviews in a unique mixing of feelings. Maybe something new and different really comes to life through the Parintins Ox Dance. As in the Durkheimian original rite (Durkheim 1968)—the realization of society's consciousness of itself—the Parintins Ox Dance festival seems to be engaged in the making of a contemporary vision of an Amazonian and caboclo Brazil on its more conscious levels of meaning.

The open, fragmentary, and malleable character of the merrymaking of the ox, a key feature since its early descriptions in the nineteenth century, is very clear in this new development. The Parintins Ox Dance is an integral part of this wider traditional universe, a fascinating chapter in the long history of the *brincadeira do boi* in Brazil. Its evolution emerges as a cultural movement that has adopted indigenous images as metaphors stressing a regional caboclo identity. Through this powerful ritual process, the small town, and with it the whole Northern region, has quite successfully achieved its objective of displaying itself to Brazil and the world.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a first account from research in progress. CAPES/Fulbright, the Institute for Latin American and Iberian Studies/University of Columbia, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and the Brazilian Folklore Museum supported this study. The people of Parintins and Manaus and the directors, players, and artists of the Ox Dance groups offered me generous assistance. Roberto Da Matta, José Reginaldo Gonçalves, and two anonymous referees provided welcome comments. My warmest thanks to them all. The data presented here are the result of my research from 1996 to 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Boi-Bumbá* in the Amazonia (Salles 1970; Monteiro 1972; Menezes 1972; Bordallo 1981); *Bumba-meu-boi* in Maranhão (Azevedo 1983; Pinho de Carvalho 1995) and Pernambuco (Borba Filho 1966); *Boi Calemba* in Rio Grande do Norte; *Cavalo-Marinho* in Paraíba (Carvalho 1971) and also in Pernambuco (Murphy 1994); *Bumba de reis* or *Reis de boi* in Espírito Santo; *Boi Pintadinho* in Rio de Janeiro; *Boi de mamão* in Santa Catarina (Soares 1978).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the “Myth of the three races” as a foundation of the Brazilian nationality, see Da Matta 1987.

<sup>4</sup> *O Farol Maranhense* [The Maranhense Lighthouse]. 1829. 7 July.

<sup>5</sup> Avé-Lallémant (1812-1884), physician, was born in Lübeck, Germany. He practiced medicine in Brazil between 1838 and 1855, and made two reported trips, one to the province of Rio Grande do Sul and the other to the Amazonia. Cf. Cascudo 1965, 137-140.

<sup>6</sup> For the idea of a “Brazilian Catholic nationality” and a discussion of the importance of the festivals for the “aesthetic melting pot” in the formation of nineteenth century Brazilian culture, see Abreu 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Current official data is 41,591 inhabitants in the urban zone; 17,192 inhabitants in the

rural zone, totaling 58,783 inhabitants in the county. The neighboring town to the North is Nhamundá; to the South, Barreirinha; to the West, Urucurituba; and to the East the state of Pará.

<sup>8</sup> Parintins has the largest herd of cattle and buffaloes in the Amazonas state, with 120,000 heads. Wood production and fishing are also major activities. Wood and furniture firms are the highlights of the small industrial sector, considered to be the most developed upstate. Parintins has around 700 retail and wholesale stores selling a wide range of goods. Source: Parintins Town Hall.

<sup>9</sup> Slater (1994) chose the town as the basic center for her research on the Amazonian legend of the dolphin.

<sup>10</sup> The importance of the Diocese is related to the provision of formal education by local Catholic schools and by the priests’ activities in the hinterlands. Protestant denominations, especially Baptists, are also present.

<sup>11</sup> Although the terrain is completely flat, the citizens refer to the area upstream in this way, taking the Amazonas river course as the main reference of direction.

<sup>12</sup> The precise dates vary in a history that is basically oral and in which there is a rivalry factor.

<sup>13</sup> Raimundo Muniz was elected town council member three times. He comments, with his lively eyes sparkling with emotion: “I don’t have any resentment at all for what the town hall did, I think that I did my duty, and I am rightfully proud of what I did, making a festival that is known all over the country today. When my eyes close, I shall be leaving everyone dancing and singing” (interview, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> From 1995 onward, a few other industries joined in the patronage of the festival.

<sup>15</sup> In 1995, the Ox groups sold the arena rights to TV Amazonas, local broadcaster for the

Globo network (the main television broadcaster in Brazil) until 1999. The contract was then renewed.

<sup>16</sup> In 1996, the budget for the festival was around one million dollars. The state government gave \$250,000; the Federal Ministry of Culture gave \$250,000; TV Amazonas, \$80,000; and Coca-Cola, \$100,000. Other Brazilian corporations, such as Suvinil Painting Industry and Havaianas Footwear, and the Ox group themselves provided the rest.

<sup>17</sup> In 1997, Manaus held its fiftieth festival and Parintins its thirty-second.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of contemporary Brazilian folk music, see Vianna 1998. Despite the publicity in 1996, the toadas remain a regional beat.

<sup>19</sup> The bands generally consist of a solo singer and musicians who play the synthesizer, ukelele, guitar, bass, drum, *caixetas*, and rattle. In 1997, in the wake of the toadas' success on the national and international market, Polygram bought the recording and marketing rights to the Ox groups' official CDs.

<sup>20</sup> Approximately one hundred and fifty-five people work for two months at the central headquarters, in addition to another fifty who push the floats to the arena during the festival days.

<sup>21</sup> Coca-Cola itself, whose brand color is red, had to bow to these taboos. Its advertising on the Caprichoso side of the arena is blue.

<sup>22</sup> Discussing contemporary indigenist policies in the Amazon region, Conklin (1997) has pointed out how the election of visual exoticism (nudity, body paint, colorful ornaments), as a kind of political badge for transnational audiences, implied a commodification of indigenous images, and could ultimately work against Brazilian Indians' interests. The use of Indian images, motifs, and costumes by the Parintins Ox

Dance should, however, be considered in the context of another wider and older trend. Brazilian folklore has included representations of Indians since at least the eighteenth century. The Romantic Brazilian Movement, dating from the nineteenth century, has also made the Indian a kind of a cultural hero.

<sup>23</sup> The jury grades twenty-two items: Master of ceremonies; Lead singer; Percussion; Ritual; Standard bearer; Owner of the ox; Farmer's daughter; Queen of the folklore; *Cunhã Poranga* (pretty girl); Ox; Toadas (lyrics and music); Witchdoctor; Male tribes; Female tribes; Tuxaua (Indian chief) luxury; Tuxaua (Indian chief) originality; Typical regional figures; Allegoric floats; Amazon legend; Cowboys; Galeras; Ox group.

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## Responses

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Jeffrey G. Snodgrass  
Colorado State University  
USA

**B**y way of response to Maria Cavalcanti's vivid ethnography, I would like to compare the Amazonian Ox Dance Festival to a ritual feast practiced by a South Asian community known as *Bhats*. *Bhats*—literally, “Bards”—are semi-nomadic entertainers of low status from the Indian state of Rajasthan; I have conducted nearly three years of ethnographic research with members of this caste community.<sup>1</sup> On the birth of sons, though not daughters, *Bhats* offer gifts to the Hindu god *Bhaironji*, a pan-Indian “boss” of the underworld. Any number of Indian castes mark the births of children with gifts to this god, who is believed to place child-spirits in wombs of mothers. But *Bhats* do so in a manner particularly grotesque to those not familiar to the ritual. They extract a goat's stomach, slice it open, and pass their wailing newborn through the dripping slit seven times. All this takes place over a “well” (*kund*) dug into the ground in which the goat's blood and entrails—the goat's throat is ritually slit before disembowelment—are dumped. This “well” is symbolically equated with the *Bhaironji*'s stomach; and *Bhaironji*, ruled by his stomach, is said to scream for the blood of animals and children. The child, who is passed over and at times into this well-stomach, is believed to be “digested” by *Bhaironji*, symbolically satiating this god's ravenous

hunger for human flesh, and assuring that the deity will not actually “eat” the child.

This birth ritual is framed by a myth describing the birth of the god *Bhaironji* himself—or at least one local incarnation of this god referred to as *Malasi-Bhaironji*. As the story goes, *Malasi-Bhaironji* was a *Jat*, a member of a Rajasthani agricultural caste. He was visiting his wife's sister in the town of *Malasi*. He was in a lustful mood, teasing the women of the village, and especially his sister-in-law, with sexual innuendo. He also touched his sister-in-law's body in “dirty” ways, caressing her genitals through her clothing, thus hoping to entice her into intercourse. In one version of the story, he successfully seduced his sister-in-law, and the two engaged in consensual sex. In another, he raped her. In either case, the two were caught in the act—and in some versions of the tale, the woman became pregnant. The enraged men of the village of *Malasi* subsequently grabbed the lecherous man, hung him upside-down in a well, slammed him forcefully against the well's walls, and bludgeoned him to death. After his untimely death, however, the murdered man's spirit lingered, haunting the villagers' dreams. Though terrifying, this spirit would inform the women of *Malasi* when they could expect to become pregnant. As many of the predictions proved to be true and the spirit's fame grew, a temple was set up next to the well where this man was killed. Infertile women hoping to be blessed with offspring now travel from afar to

make offerings to the shrine of this murder victim, worshipped as a kind of fertility god.

This Bhat ritual, and especially in its underlying myth, seems to me reminiscent of the Amazonian festival described by Cavalcanti. In the Brazilian case, a pregnant wife—Ma Katie—craves a forbidden food object—the tongue of an ox owned by her husband’s boss. Such craving leads Ma Katie’s husband, the black ranch hand Pa Frank, to steal and then kill his employer’s ox. Pa Frank subsequently flees into the forest, but is hunted down by local Indians hired by his boss. However, with a magical helper, and after a few misadventures, Pa Frank manages to resuscitate the slaughtered ox, thus avoiding punishment from his boss’s cronies. In the Bhat case, the lusty Jat—and in some cases his wife’s younger sister—craves forbidden sex. Such desire leads to illicit intercourse and an unwanted pregnancy. The Jat man, who like Pa Frank is described as black, presumably tries to flee from the town of Malasi into the Rajasthani jungle—taking refuge in the jungle is a common motif in local folk-tales. But, unlike Pa Frank, the unlucky Jat is caught and murdered. The Bhat tale, then, concerns a desire for forbidden sex rather than for forbidden meat as in the Brazilian example. But, in the Bhats’ ritual sacrifice to the god Bhaironji, such desires get jumbled. As an example, the young Bhat mother is said to be perceived by the god Bhaironji as “tasty”—sexually and thus metaphorically as well as literally.

Moreover, this young mother is said to be herself ravenous for food, and sometimes for sex, like the god Bhaironji; she thus demands the choicest items from the sacrificial goat—its testicles, eyeballs, and *tongue*—thus bringing this Bhat ritual even closer to the Brazilian festival.

Each of these myths seems to comment on the dangerous nature of human desire—dangerous, perhaps, because such desires do not respect social boundaries of class (Brazil) and kin (India). In the Amazonian tale, sexual desire leads to a pregnancy which in turn sets in motion a series of transgressions—a forbidden theft of an ox for its tongue, and the hunting down of poor Pa Frank. In the story of Bhaironji, likewise, sexual desire leads to forbidden intercourse, unwanted pregnancy, murder, and the birth of a dangerously unpredictable if alluring god of the underworld—who, I might add, is seen by Bhats as almost humorous in his grotesquely forward expressions of desire, “howling” for food and sex as he does. But, however dangerous, human desire also figures in each of these mythic contexts as essential to social and biological reproduction. The two tales along with their ritual contexts, then, are not simple condemnations of desire. Rather, each comments—in a vocabulary of pregnancy, race (blackness), craving for tongues, animal sacrifice, and murder—on the way human desire inevitably brings death as well as rebirth. These, then, are myths of transformation in which beginnings bring ends which in turn

lead to new beginnings.

The ambivalent commentary of the tales on human desire would seem to explain, at least in part, the multiplicity of tone characteristic of these two celebrations. For example, the dances, songs, and processions of the two neighborhood Ox Dance groups—the red fans of Garantido (the Safe Ox) and the blue fans of Caprichoso (the Capricious Ox)—are not mere merrymaking. Rather, the desires, pleasures, and skills of one group are always pitted against the desires, pleasures, and skills of an opposing group—manifested, for example, in playfully taunting songs and provocative dances. In the festival, then, as in the underlying myth, the expression of desire is inextricably bound up with danger and violence—and, according to Cavalcanti, the two groups do sometimes come to blows. One might imagine, moreover, that similar conflicts emerged historically between Amazonian Indians and the Catholic Church—especially given that local festivities such as the Ox Dance sometimes explicitly parody Christian personages. The Bhat feast, too, on many levels, is a bawdy and raucous celebration of desire—the gift of the goat-stomach is offered in a chaotically revelous atmosphere, replete with kisses dripping with saliva and sweat, monumental over-eating, passing out, bone-crushing hugs, and occasional vomiting. Even closer to Bhaironji's expression of desire, Bhats engage in flirting and even groping of other persons' wives and husbands—behavior which on this particular

occasion is sanctioned (it imitates the model of the god), though not always tolerated, leading in some cases to rock fights. This Bhat feast, though in some sense a celebration of desire, is therefore also encircled by a dangerous undercurrent of violence. This is seemingly exacerbated by the fact that the Bhat feast violates certain dominant codes of propriety related to bodily impurity—for example, bringing Bhats and their progeny into intimate contact with, by Brahmanic standards, the most disgusting substances, not the least of which, a disembodied goat stomach coated with partially digested grasses and garbage (goats scavenge), feces, and blood. As an affront to dominant sensibilities—perhaps akin to the Ox Dance Festival's mockery of Catholic morality—this feast, however celebratory of desire and pleasure, is further tainted by danger.

But here the similarities between the two ritual celebrations would seem to end. With all the new innovations in the Ox Dance, Cavalcanti suggests that the underlying myth of the death and resurrection of the ox has been for the most part lost. Instead, the festival has become a slickly organized mass spectacle, modeled loosely on Carnival, which in some way is perceived as emblematic of national Brazilian—that is, mestizo or caboclo—identity. Bhats, too, market their “folk” culture in various ways. Working now as so-called “traditional” puppeteers (though this work is relatively new for them), they pose for tourists in state-organized folklore festivals; they hawk puppets to tourists in five-star hotels

throughout India; and some Bhats record traditional folk ballads for All India Radio, even making their own cassettes and CDs for sale in the market. Bhats, like the Ox Dance Festival, have thus become emblematic of a “traditional” national identity; they are sold, and sell themselves, as living artifacts of the nation’s past. Bhats, however, do not allow their ritual offering to the god Bhaironji to be used in such a manner. Bhats do not even let outsiders (besides the occasional anthropologist) view it. It is an eminently private, even secret, affair. As a result, its intricate relationship to the underlying myth—and thus to the themes of desire, death, and birth—remain central to the festivities.

As to why these two feasts which undoubtedly share many features have been used so variously in the national arena, I do not have an easy answer. I might suggest that we return to themes of desire, so central to each of these feasts, as they have been uniquely figured in Brazilian and Indian national stereotypes. In Brazil, as I understand it, the celebration of physical desire has become the very emblem of national identity, especially as it is sold to outsiders such as tourists. It is not surprising to me that the Ox Dance Festival, commenting as it does on bodily desire, is drawn into such a discourse; nor is it surprising that the more ambivalent commentaries on desire, the underlying theme of the dangers associated with human want as expressed in the death and resurrection of the ox, for example, drop out in order to bring the ritual

more in line with the national stereotype of libertine excess. India, however, is sold to tourists and Indians alike as a place with an ancient history. Such a history, moreover, is said to be rooted in ancient religions—in various local ethics of restraint and moral uprightness. To simplify, tourists visit India for enlightenment rather than sex. This explains why Bhats, when they are used to market India to outsiders, put on puppet plays describing ancient battles between upright Hindu kings and outsider invaders (Muslim and Christian)—that is, dramas describing the moral defense of a culturally rich and religiously unique homeland. It would also seem to explain why the Bhats’ ritual offering to Bhaironji, given its ambivalent and typically bawdy commentary on human desire, would not be so used. Bhats, not wishing to reveal how out of sync with dominant morality they might be, would not allow it; the Indian state, for similar reasons, does not desire it.

Ritual performances are languages through which groups establish their character by identification and opposition with other groups. Such languages are undoubtedly in part universalistic—articulating, for example, a certain relationship to the universal theme of human desire, be it for meat, sex, or the blood of others. But these languages seem to be culturally specific: after all, Pa Frank survives the threat to his person brought on by his and his wife’s transgressions (at least in one Northern version of the Brazilian Ox Dance tale), while the young Jat

from Rajasthan is not so lucky. Such cultural specificity becomes even more pronounced when one takes into account the projects of the world's various nation-states—reworking folk traditions either to celebrate debauchery or to condemn it. Cavalcanti's description of the Amazonian Ox Dance Feast, and hopefully my description of a similar Bhat celebration, then, would seem to point to a kind of double elaboration which may be characteristic of myth and ritual in each of these contexts. The human body provides a fertile reservoir of images and themes which are elaborated into culturally specific myths and rituals. Such myths and rituals, in turn, can be further manipulated by the nation-state to say new kinds of things. Nature becomes culture, and then culture again. And, in the process, myth and ritual, already fertile languages, yield even more bounties.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Articles on Bhat religion and ritual practice by the author may be found in forthcoming issues of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (December 2001), *Cultural Anthropology* (February 2002), and *American Ethnologist*.

Francisco Vaz da Silva  
*University of Lisbon*  
*Portugal*

**I**n this stimulating article, Maria-Laura Cavalcanti proposes to understand the Boi-Bumbá festival in relation to the dynamics of its sociological background in a specific context, the Amazonian town of Parintins. Rightly implying that a romantic standpoint concerning folk culture tends to miss what is actually out there, Cavalcanti uses her own ethnographic inquiry to show the capacity of Brazilian folk culture to transform and update itself. The author acknowledges that the festival has managed to preserve, through and despite changes, strong traditional characteristics; and she states that, in the overall development she studies, “the taut relationship between permanence and change . . . draws attention to the celebration’s deep-rooted cultural meanings.” Moreover, refusing to consider such meanings “as the lost haven of a harmonious universe, threatened by the modern world,” Cavalcanti suggests that they are put to use, through symbolic action, to promote cultural identity in a changing context.

Arguably, the two notions of symbolic action and cultural identity provide the main unifying thread to Cavalcanti’s essay. One basic idea in her article is that, although an original “mythical motif of the death and resurrection of a precious ox” provides an axis to the Parintins Ox Dance, the “fragmentary nature and flexibility of the plot” allows for the integration of

local requirements and meanings. More precisely, Cavalcanti suggests that the festival's evolution has broadly consisted in, on the one hand, the gradual incorporation of locally pertinent themes—"the vast symbolic universe of Amazonian myths, the modern ecological banner, and a new look at the native Indian groups"—to the constant framework of rivalry between two oxen; and, on the other hand, in the institutionalization of this rivalry into a festival contest, so as to "embody an important contrast in the social morphology and organization of Parintins." Hence, Cavalcanti argues, this festival has become a badge of regional cultural identity as well as a badge for organizing competing groups of players. Indeed, she maintains, the festival is able to represent the town as a unified whole by embodying an important contrast in the social morphology and organization of Parintins. Cavalcanti aptly summarizes this trend of her analysis by invoking "the Durkheimian original rite"—"the realization of society's consciousness of itself"—before going on to suggest that the overall evolution of the Parintins Ox Dance "emerges as a cultural movement that has adopted indigenous images as metaphors stressing a regional caboclo identity. Through this powerful ritual process, the small town, and with it the whole Northern region, has quite successfully achieved its objective of displaying itself to Brazil and the world."

This overall argument seems to me very plausible as far as it goes. Through it, we do get a clear idea about the

function of the festival in terms of the assessment of a caboclo regional identity. My one regret is that we are left with but scarce clues as to how the present-day integration of local elements fits within the traditional theme that still gives the festival its framework—for this theme itself is scarcely considered in the first place. Although Cavalcanti acknowledges that "the Parintins Ox Dance is an integral part of a single ritual cycle that encompasses different forms of a very traditional and widespread Brazilian folk play," and adds that in this wider universe "a considerable unity derives from the always-present allusion to the same mythical motif," she explicitly foregoes a specific analysis of this motif. I am not sure that this is a productive option, for it amounts to considering details while disregarding their thematic context. Cavalcanti herself allows that, through the momentous changes she describes, "the death and resurrection motif migrated to the newly created indigenous symbolic universe, and gave new life to the Ox Dance." Which amounts to saying that a fundamental connection of the Ox Dance to a theme of death and resurrection prevails despite, or rather through, changes.

To my mind, this raises the possibility that what Cavalcanti calls "a new symbolic universe" of emerging nativism need not be opposed to "the traditional pattern of the play"—that, in other words, the "new symbolic universe" could be best seen as a local transformation of the traditional pattern that still frames it. In what follows, I wish to explore briefly this

possibility. Not being a specialist in Brazilian folklore, I will rely on both ethnographical data provided by Cavalcanti and on a homeopathic use of comparative elements. I have to stress that what I am about to offer is assumedly speculative; no more than a preliminary venture into the symbolic possibilities of some leads left unexplored in Cavalcanti's rich article.

Let me start from the author's clear assertion that the "mythical motif" of the death and resurrection of a precious ox "always appears to symbolize the start of a new social order." Here I would note that, since the festivities associated with it throughout Brazil happen at such liminal times as solstices and Carnival, a cosmic dimension seems to be involved. In this light, the death and resurrection of an ox, of all animals, might start to make sense. On a transcultural scale, the ox's horns make this animal singularly apt as a symbol of the lunar process of cyclic rebirth through death (Briffault 1927, 3: 191–95; Gimbutas 1982, 91–93; 1989, 265–72; cf. Chassany 1989, 194–96; Gaignebet and Florentin 1974, 135–36, 158–61; Ginzburg 1991, 226–49). Thus, in African ritual for example, transitions between the old and a new social order famously involve the sacrifice of oxen (Kuper 1961, chap. 13; cf. Beidelman 1966; Heusch 1985, chap. 5; Kuper 1973); and African data suggest the identity, in a cosmological setting, of the dead king with the sacrificed ox, from the grave of which the new king will mystically arise along with a new social order (Cartry 1987; cf. Fortes 1967, 12, 15). In this light, could the killing and resuscitation of

the ox by African characters, as well as the involvement of Indians—"those who once owned the land," standing for the regenerative land itself—in the process leading to rebirth, make some sense? At any rate, this parallelism calls attention to the link between Indians and a liminal phase of death ending in regeneration in the "myth," of which the "sad recognition of the destruction of many native Indian groups . . . accompanied by . . . the valorization of the rainforest and the survival of current Indian groups" is, seemingly, a thematic transformation in the modern play.

The comparative hypothesis of a death and rebirth with cosmological implications may be furthered, in strictly local terms, by exploring the link between the "mythic" theme of the dead and resuscitated ox and the ritual play consisting of a fight between oxen. Apparently, violence was always a part of the Amazonian Boi-Bumbá, the very name of which evokes the idea of a clash or brawl, and—as Cavalcanti puts it, in short—"rivalry is at the basis of the performances." In order to understand how this all-important clash between oxen in praxis corresponds to the background theme of the death and resurrection of the ox, note that in this theme of death and resurrection the usual biological axis: life (youth) → death (old age) is reversed into the metaphysical axis: death → new life. Let us consider, in this light, some coherent features of the rival oxen in Parintins. Note that their very opposition is keyed to that of East and West—the quarters, that is, of the rising and setting of heavenly bodies.

This being so, it might be significant that the ox associated with the East is “Capricious” as a youth would be, is associated to blue as a young star should be, and is linked to “lower” (the “lower” section of town) as a rising star would be; whereas the ox associated with the West is “Secure” as a senior would be, is linked to red as an old star should be, and is associated to “upper” (the “upper” section of town) as an ascended star would be. Whatever other social dimensions may be involved, these attributes are mutually supporting in suggesting an overall model of young stars rising in the East and setting in the West, oldish, in order to rejuvenate and rise again in the East. Again, this background model corresponds to the “mythical” idea of the death and resurrection of the precious ox, for both involve the same theme of death leading to new life. In other words, the possible cosmological connotation of the oxen helps to explain how a seemingly prosaic brawl between rival oxen enacts the “mythical” theme of death leading to new life, in an overall image of cyclic renovation that is essentially in tune with the seasonal setting of the Ox Dance.

Let me explore this. If I am right, the indispensable annual victory of one ox over the other reenacts the prototypical theme of the death of the precious ox leading to his rebirth, on the model of a star disappearing in order to reappear with a promise of rejuvenation. Note that, for the Indians in the Amazonian region, the Pleiades—that most constant astronomical marker of season change in South America, as elsewhere

(Lévi-Strauss 1964, 222–29)—would disappear in May, staying supposedly hidden for a short period of time at the bottom of a well, to reappear in June (the time of the Ox Dance, at the height of the dry season) “announcing the rains, the molting of birds, and the renewal of vegetation” (224). The annual brawl reenacts, therefore, the death and rebirth of the ox at the very time period in which the reappearance of the Pleiades announces the renewal of life on a cosmic scale. Maybe, in this perspective, the contrastive marking of the two oxen with respectively a blue star and a red heart could be associated to the conceptual opposition of the Pleiades and Corvus, sometimes conceived as a heart-shaped constellation (236), in a common role of seasonal markers (224–37)? Whatever the answer to this particular question may be, the setting of the oxen brawl at a time of dramatic seasonal changing would seem to confirm the cosmological symbolism of the ox image as proposed, above, in a comparative perspective.

But then, beyond the visible celestial axis in which stars go from Eastern “birth” to Western “death,” the blue and the red oxen together would represent in their clash the invisible, antipode/underground (cf. Krappe 1944), process of seasonal regeneration through death into new life. Note that the two oxen are interchangeable insofar as, in any given year, either one can be the defeated party; and Cavalcanti comments on the overall reversibility of their positions by saying that what matters is that they “must remain opposed, no matter how closely

linked they are to each other.” Moreover, the association of blue and red with death (whence springs new life) is widespread on a transcultural scale. For example, in a Japanese tale, a mountain woman standing for her dead mother gives an orphaned girl riches conducive to marriage. The girl must, however, feign being a rotten corpse with worms swarming out of her mouth when the old woman’s sons, a blue and a red *ôni* (a kind of troll), go by her (Seki 1963, 130–34; cf. Mayer 1984, 44–46). In Japan, these red and blue *ôni* are clearly reminiscent of the classical blue and red dragons connoting *mizuchi*, or water spirits (Mauclair 1991, 71; cf. 1982, 89, 106 n. 3); and the image of worms swarming in a rotten corpse evokes that of the primordial goddess Izanami, from the netherworld impurity of which her husband Izanagi brings about a fundamental spurt of creation (Aston 1990, 1:24, 29–30; Mauclair 1982, 94; Philippi 1992, 61–63). Let me take my second example from Europe. Here, for instance in Burgundy, red and blue would be the colors for mourning (Verdier 1979, 138 n. 4). And a group of Danish tales presents an old woman, standing for a dead mother according to two versions and dressed in blue and red according to a third, who assists a bride into marriage (Holbek 1998, 460–75). Taken together, these examples chosen from faraway parts of the world present a constant association of red and blue to death and renovation—the very same “mythical” theme that the red and blue oxen of Boi-Bumbá enact, in Brazil, every year.

Here my speculations come to a term. Overall, I have argued that to forsake viewing the festival as a “superposition of motifs” falling into “two ideal types”—the “Ox mythical motif” and the “regional and indigenous motifs”—may be of some help in perceiving an overall coherence that informs the ever-creative adaptation of the “mythic” theme in the terms of contemporary local culture. As I proposed, there is arguably a fundamental continuity between the “traditional” theme that associates death and renewal to the Indian population on the one hand, and the present-day “festive joy . . . linked to tragic worldviews” on the other. The very time of the festival is one of death and renovation according to native Indian conceptions (which are actually compatible with the Christian association of the June solstice to the wane of Saint John the Baptist in preparation for the redeeming birth of Christ; Gennep 1949, 1809, cf. 1733). And, of course, the witchdoctor “ritual” that always closes contemporary performances refers back to the same encompassing motif of death and resurrection. The “mythic” story, in turn, blends into this coherent frame the very three ethnic elements that seem to have contributed elements to the Boi-Bumbá festival, as we know it today thanks to the rich analysis of Maria-Laura Cavalcanti.

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