

## DON SEBASTIAN'S MARANHENSE ENCHANTMENT

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**Abstract:** On moonlit nights, in the sands of the Isle of Sheets in Maranhão, Dom Sebastião appears as an enchanted bull, and some can see its treasures in the dunes. A family of Don Sebastian, with children, members of the court, knights, cowboys and soldiers, consists of enchanted beings that are received in a trance in healing and tambor de mina rituals. The bull of Don Sebastian is one of the strands forming the festival Bumba-meu-boi and other popular demonstrations in Maranhão. Through observations in the christening of the "bozinho de Dom Sebastião" (Don Sebastian's little bull), a healing ritual, we try to understand the elements of Sebastianism in Maranhão, analyzing the presence of syncretism and hybridism as ways of understanding religion and culture.

**Keywords:** Syncretism; Hybridism; Sebastianism; Pajelança; Myth; Ritual

### **Extended Abstract**

There is in many regions a belief in an enchanted king who will come to save his people, something which could be considered a manifestation of messianism or a myth related to waiting for a messiah or a savior. In Brazil this idea of Sebastianism was brought by the Portuguese, it has been registered in several different times and places and is principally related to the cult of The King Don Sebastian who didn't actually die in a war against the Moors in Morocco but rather he was "enchanted".

Located between the Amazonic Region and the Northeast of the country, the State of Maranhão was isolated from the rest of Brazil for a long time and, in the colonial period, actually was, more than once, a province separated from the rest of the country. On its coastline there are regions called 'lençóis' which are made up of sand dunes, among them is Lençóis Island, considered to be an enchanted island which serves as a living place or enchantment for Don Sebastian and his court. In other places like the neighboring Pará State there are also areas known as homes or enchantments of Don Sebastian.

The presence of 'Sebastianism' can be studied as a case of cultural hybridism or religious syncretism, bringing together Portuguese elements with the cultural and religious traditions of Amerindians and Afro-Brazilians. The myth of the coming of Don Sebastian and the rites related to his presence constitute an interesting example of imaginary myths of origin "which seek to forge an identity in a sacred time and space".

In popular Afro-Maranhense culture, and also in Amazonia among other areas, there are two specific religious manifestations, the Tambor de Mina and the Cure or Pajelança, where the Cult of Don Sebastian is present. The Tambor de Mina, known as the "salty water line" is mainly practiced in the capital and is characterized by predominantly African entities, voduns and orixás and the inclusion of Brazilian caboclos or ones of other precedence.

The other religious theme or manifestation, called "the fresh water line", more widespread in the low lying and coastal regions of Maranhão is the 'Cure' or Pajelança. It gets its influences from Amerindian religions and also has elements from Africa and Europe and there are some similarities with the Jurema Cult from the northeast. In Mina several people go into trances at the same time and dance in a circle. In Cure the trance usually happens to one person, the pajé, who receives successive different entities. In São Luís many worship centers, parallel to the Mina rituals, organize a ritual once or twice a year called the cure game to greet the entities of the pajelança.

One of the most important and well known families of entities in these religions is that of the King of Turkey. Mundicarmo Ferretti (1989) stated that the source of information in the genesis of this family was the novel "The History of the Emperor Charlemagne and the Twelve Pairs of France", well known in Brazil in the nineteenth century, it spread in the form of mini-novel publications and in traditional popular parties called cheganças or cavalhadas and it took the form of performances depicting fights against Moors and Christians.

This imaginarium of Afro-Maranhense religion is influenced by traditions of a variety of precedences, including from Europe. Another family of enchanted entities present in Tambor de Mina and in Pajelança is Don Sebastian's family. The Saint Sebastian party, on the 20th of January, is one of the most important and is celebrated in almost all of the worship centers. The tradition of the cult of Don Sebastian, related to the myth of Sebastianism, constitutes one of the sources of religious imagination and of popular culture and includes entities considered nobles and gentle.

In some worship centers King Sebastian is embodied for the devout in the form of a Bull called Bull Turino and the person who receives him dances while kneeling with their hands scraping the floor and imitating the sound of a Bull but this trance generally lasts for quite a short time. As affirmed by M. Ferretti, by 1877, Don Sebastian was already a celebrated figure in worship centers of São Luis.

Houses of Tambor de Mina and of Umbanda in Maranhão usually organize diverse popular cultural parties like that of the Divine Holy Spirit, the dances of Tambor de

Crioula and the Bumba-Meu-Boi festival among others, which offered for entities which appreciate these cultural manifestations.

Lençóis Island is the place where Don Sebastian is found enchanted. The people who visit, above all umbandistas, mineiros curadores or pajés, tell of having seen the enchanted king on a Bull and had a vision of his treasures. It is said that Don Sebastian also appears as a prince mounted on horseback. He appears in June during the bumba-meu-boi festival, in August, on the anniversary of the battle of Alcácer-Quibir, or in January during the Saint Sebastian party.

The enchanted ship of Don Sebastian is seen by travelers mostly at the Lençóis Island. In 1970, at the construction of Itaqui Port there were serious accidents and some divers died. News was spread that the port was the place of enchantment of Princess Iná, Don Sebastian's daughter, who was disgusted when her palace was disturbed by the construction work. Followers organized a large party in her honor and the accidents stopped but it is said that they may begin again.

Dona Raimundinha has an annual ritual of cure to honour Don Sebastian's bull. She had her preparation in Umbanda, in Curing and in Candomblé, appreciates the esoteric and practices alternative therapy. She states that Lealdino, King Sebastian's cowhand, lives in the sands and the narrow waterways of Lençóis Island and he is manifested at her party. She has already seen the palace of the King which is small, blue and white with stairs leading to the front where there is a flag from the crusades which bears a red cross, Don Sebastian is followed by cowhands, princes and princesses. Princess Iná is his daughter and she lives at Itaqui Port. Don Manuel lives at the Boqueirão, Urubarana is a noble, enchanted as a mermaid. Princess Flora is from Ponta da Areia. The bull Turino is from Maitá, the name of a sea stone. The cowhand was a warrior loyal to Don Sebastian and was always at his side. It is said that Don Sebastian is an elderly man who during his life on earth liked pig racing and bulls and this is why he is enchanted as a bull, called Bull Turino.

The party is realized through the healing touch. The players beat drums. friends, clients and revelers clap their hands and sing songs for enchanted princesses, nobles and for animals like the butterfly, lizards, fish and others. After that there are hymns for the baptism of the Bull. Dona Raimundinha wears a colored dress which she later changes. There are new clothes worn every year. After a break she comes back dressed as a cowhand with trousers and a velvet waistcoat with colored seams, worn over a blouse, she wears a hat and has colored ribbons on her arms, she holds a shaker and those are the ritual objects used by the pajés in the cure. In a trance Dona Raimundinha urges all

to sing and complains when they aren't singing enough, she also directs people to serve more drinks.

Dona Maria Raimunda is a leader who uses various alternative curing practices to help her clients with their afflictions, she has clients from all the social classes. She is white and she comes from the city of Codó, a place in Maranhão which has a large black population and where there is a significant voice for religions of African origin. The hymns of her cure have beautiful music and lyrics and they identify specific entities. The texts are not so easy to understand because of the pronunciation and the use of highly figurative language. Some are poetic and they express a philosophy of life, like the one that says: "time has been my master and has taught me to cure", or "I sought advice from the wind". Some are related to saints and other elements of Catholicism, they also refer to terms and places which are known or mythical.

In the mythology and in the hymns we find a confluence of elements from local nature like animals and places together with historical figures or other figures which inhabit the popular imagination. We can understand the bull of Don Sebastian through the perspective of the circularity of cultures, hybridism, syncretism, transculturalism or cultural borrowing, in the context of Sebastianism in the possession cults, of the anthropology of performance and of agreement with other visions which highlight the interest in this Afro religious ritual and illustrate the complexity of popular cultural phenomenon.

As we know, syncretism happens in all cultures and in all religions but in some it seems to be more evident. The term itself is neutral but at times there are pejorative connotations. Cultural Hybridism is another old concept which has been developed and used by some post-modernist theorists.

The religious imagination assumes particular configurations reflecting the dialogue between different origins and nationalities. For Malinowski (1988) the myth constitutes a living reality which is related to the landscape, has roots in tradition and is realized through rites. According to Eliade (1986, p. 25), "all of mythical history which related to the origin of something presupposes and prolongs the cosmogony." Eliade considers that the myth has a ritual function in the cures and a majority of the therapeutic rituals evoke and reiterate the creation of the world.

The diverse elements present in the myths and cure rituals contribute to the representation of the show which is played out and lived. The rituals can be observed and shows whose description and interpretation help to understand the meaning of the symbolic actions within them. The Afro-Brazilian religions, like all religions, present

variables, borrowings, syncretisms and hybridisms which are manifested in the rituals and reflect the origin myths. The presence of Don Sebastian in Maranhense enchantment demonstrates the strength of these myths, of syncretism and the influence of the environment and history in the elaboration of the rooted beliefs of popular society.

In the perspective of this conference we state that "the origin myths are intimately connected to symbolic production" and that "historical memory must be dealt with as a factor of cultural diversity", which well illustrates the wealth of cultural traditions of luso-afro-brazilian origin.

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