

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
William F. Foote
Peter Geithner
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Judith Mayer
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wriggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Haggood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

SLS-9
THE AMERICAS

Susan Sterner is a Fellow of the Institute writing and photographing the lives and status of Brazilian women.

“Sacred Walk”

1 December 1999
JUAZEIRO DO NORTE, Ceará, Brazil

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Four West Wheelock Road
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

Half awake and choking down a dry granola bar, I stepped from the car and into the cold drizzle of mist shrouding the hilltop. A swirl of little boys selling candles fluttered around me. I smiled them away, apologizing for not being a real pilgrim. Behind us, in the corner of the dirt parking lot, a haggard group of men sent bottle rockets and strings of firecrackers whistling and popping over the ridge. Daybreak was announced and the faithful welcomed.

Above me loomed a 25-meter-high statue of Padre Cícero, the unofficial patron saint of Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará State, an overgrown town nestled on the hilly edge of Ceará's *sertão* (drylands). Still partially obscured by the mist, the Padre's blank sandstone face stared out over the Cariri valley and the awakening town below.

He didn't look like a saint to me. His eyes weren't turned to heaven in pious supplication. He looked sour, up-tight, crisp and business-like, clutching his turn-of-the-century-style bowler hat. The sight of him moved others. Already people were climbing narrow stairs to the skirts of his vestments, bending their heads against the cool stone; praying, promising and crying.

We, my husband Tyrone and Marcelo, a friend from São Paulo, stopped at a small shack and washed down chunks of rough cornbread wrapped in pieces of butcher paper with coffee so sweet the last swallow was a chewable goo of coffee grounds and undissolved sugar. Few others stopped to eat. People passed quickly through the rain to the statue, to mass, to buy candles. A last dry bite of bread, and we joined the growing stream of believers through the cobblestone aisles and toward "*Santa sepulcre*," a small hill covered with smooth boulders and tiny chapels.

The muddy path cut a blood-red ribbon along the top of the four-kilometer ridge. Hills of reedy grass, colored green, yellow and smoky blue, sloped down and away. They went on forever, rolling soft colors glowing in the morning light, interrupted by the occasional scorched-tree skeletons left from field clearings.

We flowed with the pilgrims. Some were dressed in black sackcloth to symbolize their connection to Padre Cicero, some in Sunday finery, some prepared for the hike, many barefoot by choice, others in what seemed their only clothing. Voices were low: Hail Mary's, gossip, reminiscences of last

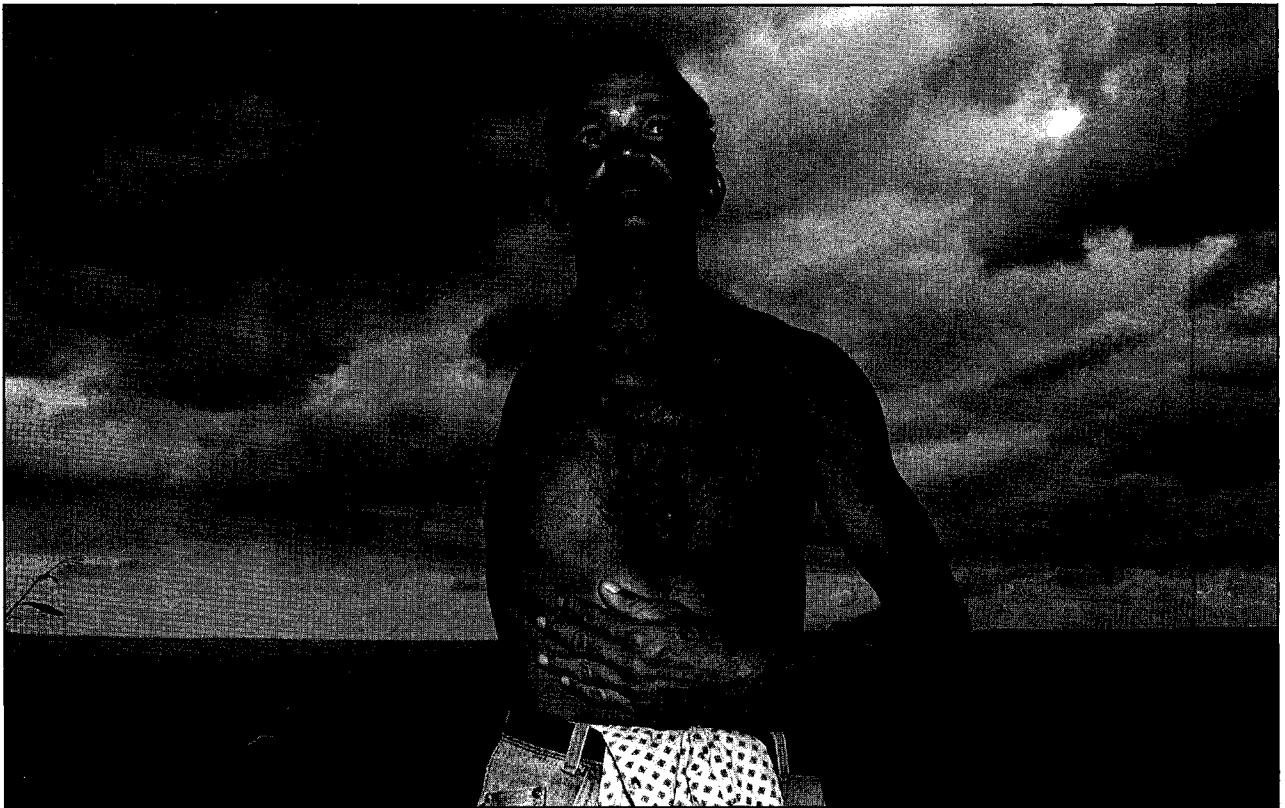


Photo: Tyrone Turner

Seu Valdo stands on the path to Santa Sepulcre at sunset on the last day of the pilgrimage. Years ago he was shot in the hand. The care he received in public hospital in Fortaleza, Ceará was so negligent that within days gangrene and tetanus set in. As a result, he lost the entire arm. Say Seu Valdo, "At night when I dream my arm is with me." His resilience and peace with his situation were inspiring and humbling.

year's pilgrimage. The scratchy voices of older women floated over us as they matched the momentum of their walk to slow, hymn-like songs in eerie minor keys. They sang the virtues of Padre Cícero, the defender of the people.

We passed clusters of children huddled under bits of plastic along the pathway. Their voices rose in simple melodies about pilgrims coming to thank Padre Cícero. Their raw, sweet voices sang in major keys, or slightly off-tune, and mixed with the tired, haunting laments of the women. The music stretched in the silence like an immeasurable distance. The rain continued, and we walked.

A man with one arm, Seu Valdo, tipped his hat and asked for a little help "in the name of God." How many times had people said that same phrase to me in the streets of Recife, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador? But here, knowing they thought I was walking with the mercy of God in my heart — the words meant more, the outstretched hand looked *more* empty (if that's possible). Seu Valdo had lost his arm after being shot though the hand and receiving negligent treatment in a public emergency room. Within days gangrene and tetanus set in. A small wound to the hand became the loss of an arm.

Yet, Seu Valdo has fond memories of that horrible

time in his life. The surgeon admired his fortitude. They keep in touch.

"Do you feel anger, Seu Valdo?"

"Anger, My Daughter? No I do not feel anger. I am alive and the Lord has blessed me. I am strong. At night when I dream my arm is with me."

Further up the path a man with legs so crippled he could not unbend them from his chest lay on a worn blanket like a frog stranded on its back. He talked into a microphone taped to his face. The cord ran to a dilapidated amplifier powered by a car battery. "Forgive," he wheezed. "Forgive and be generous of the heart." Coins dropped into the cracked Surfer-Barbie bucket by his chest.

Beyond him, a small tent covered a woman wrapped in bandages. Her daughter forgot all holy messages and just begged: "Please help this woman. Please help my family."

The sun burned away the mist and boiled the air to a just-breathable humidity. Pilgrims rested under makeshift tents set up by families camping there to sell drinks, snacks, roasted chicken and official "Padre Cicero healing salve." Enterprising individuals hustled through the crowds to find a bit of shade and a nice rock on which to

set up shop. Everything was for sale: hair brushes, perfume, hats, sandals — presumably to spiff up on the descent.

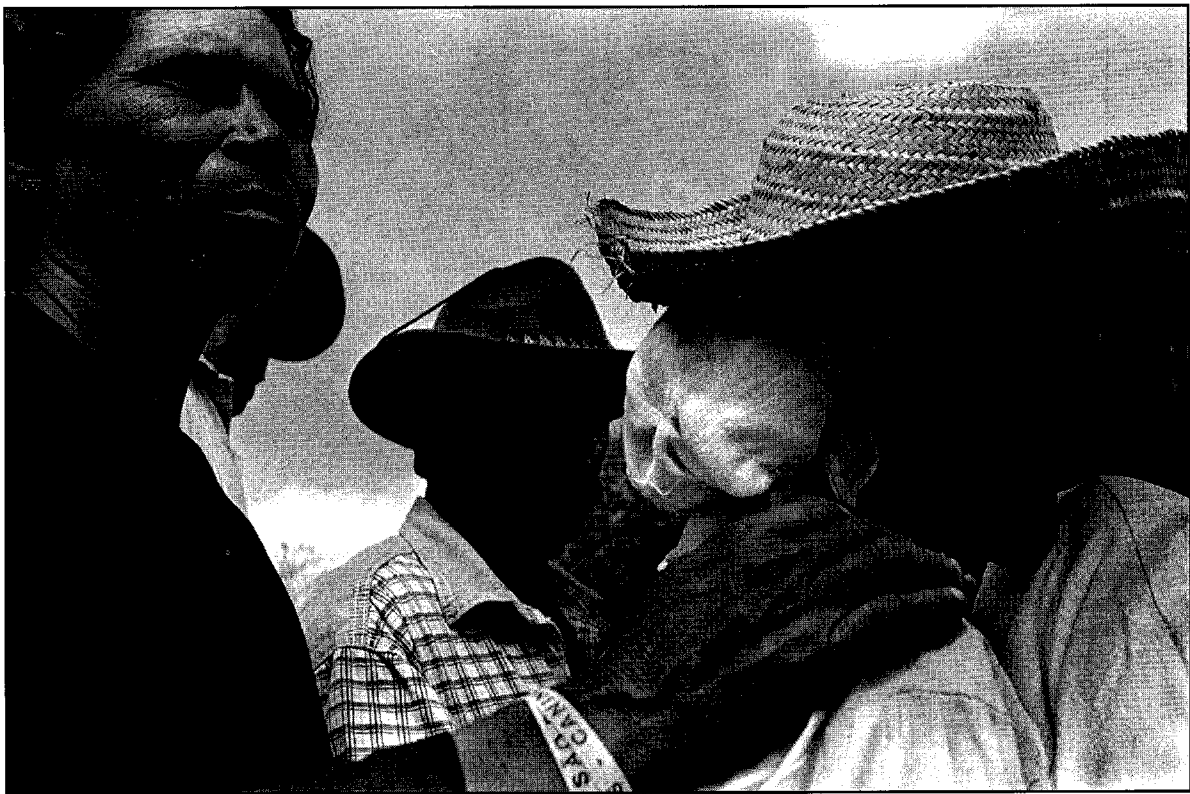
We slipped through rocks marking the entrance to *Santa Sepulcre*, a rocky outcropping covered with twisting paths, giant boulders, beautiful old trees and a few tiny chapels. Pilgrims snapped up boxes of candles, three for four *reais* a piece, and climbed all over the chapels and rocks. The air was acrid with smoke from the candles and filled with the sound of hot wax sizzling on the rain-soaked ground. “Crackle! Pop!” and the “Our Father” mixed together.

Old women crawled through the brush collecting berries, peeling bark from trees and stabbing into branches above them to make fruit fall: home remedies were said to be more potent with ingredients gathered

from holy sites. Herbalists thought so. They had hauled pounds of powders, plants and barks and set up shop along the pathways. Pray for your health, and to be on the safe side, drink this.

I crawled above on the rocks, photographing and trying to capture what was happening before me. I wandered and came across a group of people wiggling through a rock tunnel — a test of faith, they said. Over the 37-year-history of the pilgrimage every nook and cranny had become a test of faith. There was laughing and panicked faces as the challenges were calculated.

The minor-key voices of the women singing passed again. I hopped over rocks and wriggled through the crowds until I found them. Leading was Maria, 72, dressed in white sackcloth and her gray hair untied and



Pilgrims wait in line under a grueling sun for their chance to scrape their backs against a boulder said to cure spinal ills.



A mother and daughter wade through puddles as they slide their backs against a giant boulder said to cure spinal ills and general back aches.



Seventy-year-old Maria sings and moans her way through a holy test of rock. Maria has never missed a pilgrimage in 37 years and has taken it as her mission to teach younger women about the proper way to pay their promises.

wild. She was leading a group of women through the obstacle course of faith. She climbed the “rock of sins,” a boulder with a huge branch poking vertically from a crack running through the center. She sang, “Padre Cicero guides my heart...” and wiggled through safely.

“What does this mean?” I asked the woman nearest me.

“This is the rock of sins. If you can not pass through, then your heart is heavy with sin.”

“What happens if you get stuck?”

“You have to stay there. Someone goes to get the priest [4km away] and he comes to hear your confession. You cleanse yourself and then you are free [of sin and the rock].

“What if you’re just a little too fat to fit through?”

“Maybe your sin is at the table.”

“I see.”

I followed Maria and her companions, all from a tiny hamlet 20 truck-hours away in the state of Bahia, “Do you mind if I follow your group for while? I want to pho-

tograph what is happening here. I’m not sure I understand it all.”

“Oh, yes. You come with us. We’ll teach you how it is,” replied Maria.

Still singing, Maria led her group into the woods. There were no other pilgrims around. She approached a boulder 15 feet in height with a narrow crack through the center — as if struck by a thunderbolt. Maria fretted: Was she still pure enough to get through? I wondered if she was still agile enough. I had visions of running four kilometers, not for the priest but for an ambulance. Almost reading my mind, Maria rubbed her belly and said she’d put on a little weight this year and her strength wasn’t what it used to be. The other women eyed the crack and looked nervous. Resolute, Maria slapped the side of the rock and took up her hymn.

She climbed up and slipped her right foot gingerly into the base of the opening. She inhaled and pulled the rest of her body after her; all the while humming and inhaling more deeply, trying to get thinner. Her toes barely reached to the ground as she inched her way through the crack, looking up, breathing hard and concentrating. Her journey lasted ten agonized minutes. On the other side she refused help in climbing down, her ankles bloody from the tight fit and her breath coming in

gulps. The others smiled. They wanted to be just as holy.

“Did you take my picture?” Maria gasped.

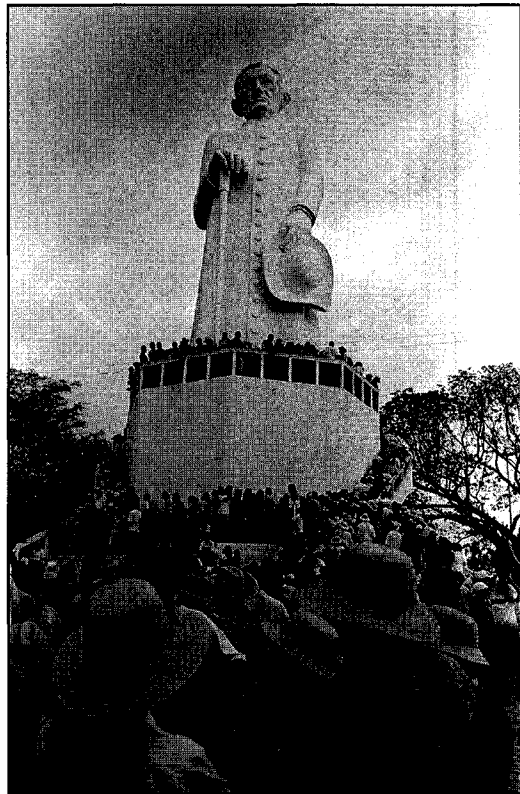
“Yes, I think I made a nice image of you. Do you want me to send it to you?”

“No, keep it. I want you to have a remembrance of me, and this, my faith.”

Maria sang and guided the women through the rest of the trials. I left them wiggling their backsides against a holy rock to bless their backs and cure spinal-column problems. I found Marcelo and Tyrone and we walked the path, now dried to a dull orange stir of dust and bottlenecked with pilgrims.

The atmosphere had changed from a sacred walk to a boisterous outing. The hundreds of pilgrims who had fulfilled their promises, slipped through rocks, kissed images, lit candles and knelt to pray at *santa sepulcre* were lightheaded with redemption. Chatter was loud, laughter giddy. Makeshift bar-and-grills overflowed with the faithful munching on chicken, guzzling soft drinks and sipping grain alcohol.

As they made their way back to the giant Padre Cicero, weaving through the surge of penitents coming up the hill, many pilgrims parsimoniously doled out spare change to the children and crippled singing and praying patiently along the pathway. It was as if they had reviewed the gallery of poor and judged who would



The looming statue of Padre Cicero stands over crowds of faithful. The statue is said to be the third largest in the world, following only the Statue of Liberty and the Christ overlooking Rio de Janeiro. I was struck by how cranky the guy looks.



Photo: Tyrone Turner

Children, the sick and the destitute lined the paths leading to the statue of Padre Cicero and into all of the churches. But the most unsettling were those that rose well before dawn and hiked up to the hill path leading to Santa Sepulcre. The children huddled under rags and bits of old plastic as protection against the morning rains. They sang about Padre Cicero and held out their cups to passing pilgrims in hopes change or food.



Two women from the neighboring state of Pernambuco take a smokers' break between crawling through, over and under holy rock on Santa Sepulcre, where every corner of the hill has been turned into a holy test, shrine or prayer site.



The pilgrimages of Juazeiro do Norte are a time of celebration. One family we met gathered up old theater and Carnival costumes and handed them out to neighborhood children. They then marched and danced through town. For fun. And for tips.

be helped most by their precious pennies. The poor, sharing with the miserable.

* * *

The front of the hill leading from town up to Padre Cicero is lined with colorfully painted adobe homes. Their small doors open into common spaces decorated with homemade altars. The houses ramble back through a series of additions, porches and communal kitchens. Hammocks hang on hooks. Belongings are few.

We peered into a house alive with dancing and fiddle music, only to find it was a church as well, the Church of São Gonçalvo — the saint who protects prostitutes, vulnerable women and others exploited by Society's powerful. It seemed apt that São Gonçalvo be celebrated during the pilgrimage for Padre Cicero, since the latter also had the reputation of defending the weak, addicted and exploited. The altar was filled with statues of saints and The Virgin. The dancers, all middle-aged or older women dressed in white, swirled in the small meeting room to the beat of a tambourine and the melody of a fiddle.

In one room beyond the dancing, a few women lovingly decorated litters to carry likenesses of Padre Cicero, the Virgin Mary and Jesus. Branches of plastic flowers and bits of used ribbon were sewn onto aprons wrapped

around the base of each statue. Finally, candles were lit and prayers said. The owner of the church (the fact that the church had an owner was a hint that the services were also rooted in *condomblé*, a syncretic religion born of the melding of African slave and European Christian traditions) organized the procession and led everyone out onto the street. A little girl was chosen to carry the statue of São Gonçalvo and a man carried a large cross. The Virgin Mary, Jesus and Padre Cicero followed in a very solemn procession down the hill, through a jumble of vendors and goods spread out in the town streets, and stopped before the tomb of Padre Cicero in the *Praça do Socorro*.

The São Gonçalvos arrived at the plaza just as a mass was concluding. Inside, the priest called for everyone to wave their arms in thanks. The Gonçalvos stopped before the tomb and waved with rest of the crowd. They tried to dance but there was not enough room and they moved on.

In the confusion I got separated from the dancers and stumbled upon three women and their seven children seated in the middle of the plaza. The children, mostly naked with bloated bellies and the tell-tale rusty hair of malnutrition, played with broken boxes and pieces of metal. When they needed to, they relieved themselves on the spot. The toddlers hooked and unhooked at will



The four annual pilgrimages hosted by Juazeiro do Norte are not only huge money makers for the Catholic Church, the city and local merchants, but also a good place for the miserably poor to beg for handouts from those who have a bit more. These women have been coming to Juazeiro from a nearby village to beg since they were children themselves. They endure brutal heat and searing criticism but claim it's worth it for the meager change and food they're given.



Photo: Tyrone Turner

A young girl leans against a wooden cross dedicated to Padre Cicero as she waits for her family to join her. The tomb behind her was once believed to be the gravesite of Maria de Arujó, the blessed one, whose mouth allegedly bled every time Padre Cicero gave her the holy host. In fact, it is not known where Maria was buried. After the controversy surrounding her "miracles," she was essentially placed under house arrest and forbidden to attend public mass ever again.

from their mothers' breasts. Meanwhile, the voice of the priest continued to boom through loudspeakers hung above the church doors and worshippers pressed in, ignoring the families at their feet except for odd, condemning comments: "What misery!" "What filth!" "What embarrassment to bring children you can not care for into the world!" "What an absurdity!" "Tsk, tsk".

The beggar women were from a town 30 kilometers away. They could not remember a time when they did not come to Juazeiro do Norte during each of the four annual pilgrimages and religious festivals hosted by the town. Their mothers had brought them as children in hopes of capitalizing on the "opened hearts" of pilgrims. It was a good time and place to beg and had become a family tradition and necessity. The women always arrived on the first day of the pilgrimage, claimed a portion of the plaza, and stayed in place for all four days — not daring to leave for more than a few minutes for fear that someone else might take their begging spot. Although some people said cruel things, the donations of odd change, food and even clothing outweighed the abuse and filthy conditions.

Walking a straight line through the plazas and streets of town was nearly impossible. Getting from one point to another required dodging, zig-zagging and hopping over vendors. Everything was for sale, neatly piled on

display shelves, stacked on cloths, carried on heads. There were food, auto parts, pin-up-girl posters, crockery, bras and of course endless versions of Padre Cícero memorabilia: glow-in-the-dark, on the half-shell, life-sized, pocket-sized and painted on beer mugs. The whole town was selling something. I was reminded of Jesus at the Temple, and for the first time since hearing the passage read aloud in Sunday school, I had a good visual image to go with the story.

* * *

From Recife, the BR232 highway cuts west through the state. Leaving behind the coastal palms and cool breezes, we passed first through deforested foothills spotted with ranches and small towns and descended on the other side into the semi-arid zone known as the *sertão*. Vegetation thinned. The landscape turned to endless stretches of sandy brown earth and scrappy bushes, broken only by the random green of cactus. In the distance the valley rose to flat plateaus colored pink and pale yellow in the dusty haze of midday. Kilometer after kilometer would click by without a sign of life, then suddenly a man leading a donkey would appear along the roadside without hint of either where he was going or from where he came.

The two-lane road rose and fell gently. As if flipping through a stack of sepia-toned black and white images, we drove through a landscape almost devoid of color. In

some spots recent dustings of rain had created what locals refer to as “false green,” a light covering of quick-growing grasses and weeds that revive with little water and spread across the ground creating the illusion of verdure. Meters away, over the next rise, the scene would return to stark, dried brown. And over the next, even worse: infertile sands and the charred nubs of bushes and trees burned to make charcoal for cooking and to sell to regional pottery kilns.¹

As we headed farther west a light pall of apprehension settled over us. We were worried about two things: police and bandits. The BR232 skirts the edge of the valley of the São Francisco river — Pernambuco’s fertile crescent. Mega-producers grow everything from mangos to tender white asparagus, which is exported worldwide. It’s Brazil’s second most important wine region (trailing behind the southern states). It’s also riddled with big-time marijuana production, drug runners and bandits. News reports and firsthand accounts of car-jacking and face-to-face encounters with gun barrels had us on alert.

It is illegal in Brazil to not stop and offer help to stranded motorists or the injured. But as we prepared for our trip we were cautioned to keep a distance from

other cars and stop for no one. In response to assaults on buses, cargo trucks and private vehicles, the state has bumped up police presence on the highways. Police set up roadblocks and perform random document inspections to find stolen vehicles. They search trucks and keep an eye peeled in general. But the police are not known for sterling reputations and we were worried about inevitable encounters and possible trumped-up infractions at the road checks.

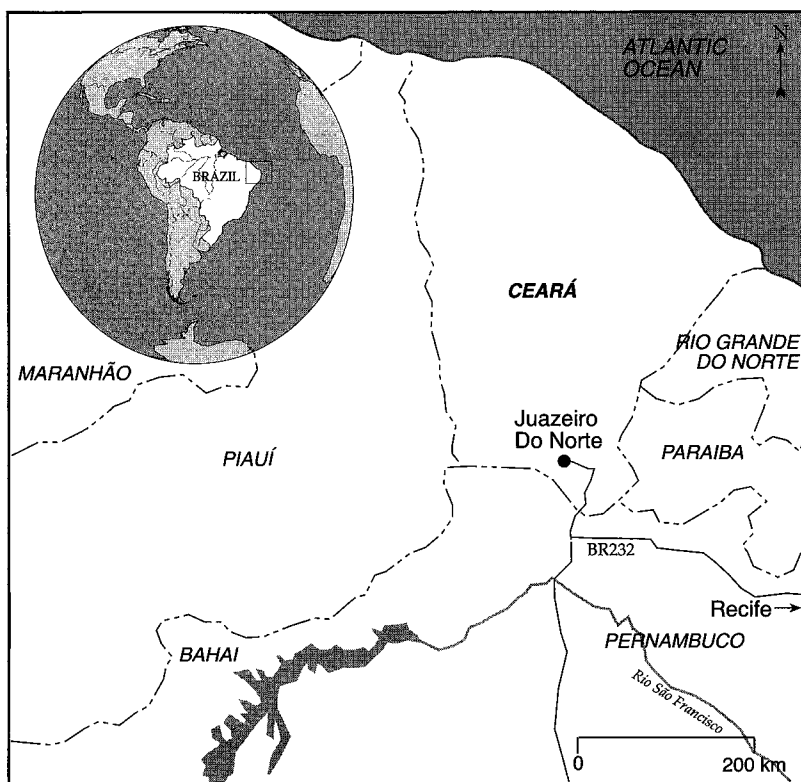
This apprehension in mind, we crested a hill to see two figures in hooded, brown cloaks. One held a naked baby. The other held a sign that read “fome” (hunger). We slowed but did not stop, stunned by the spooky scene. A few yards beyond, a cluster of skinny children held out their hands to the car. As we passed a young pregnant woman, I rolled down the window and tried to hand her a bottle of water and a bag of old clothing we had in the car. The children ripped everything from my hands. They screamed and slapped at each other. As we drove away I looked back to see the children shredding open the bag.

What had we just seen? Were the shrouded adults on the crest of the hill a trick, like so many of the decoy stories we had heard, or had we just turned our backs on a hamlet of desperation? (How could they wear such outfits in this outrageous heat?) Had we been warped and jaded by sensational media coverage? We drove on, rattled and saddened. Maybe because we were on our way to the first pilgrimage I had ever attended, I was reminded of the biblical story of “The Good Samaritan.” Had it been a test? The violence of the children’s fight for the water and clothing was certainly real, but were the shrouded figures wolves in sheep’s clothing, or just part of Brazil’s huge abandoned flock?

* * *

The city of Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará, is nestled in the Cariri Valley, the self-proclaimed “Oasis of the *Sertão*.” Entering the valley, everything became green and lush and the air more humid. Sugar cane waved in the evening breeze. The warming light of day’s end played off the red and yellow fruits of the cashew orchards making them glitter like Christmas ornaments. We had arrived in a land of plenty.

And we had plenty of company.



¹ The charcoal “harvested” in the *sertão* is sometimes the only form of income for families unable to grow even subsistence crops due to severe cyclical droughts. Ironically, the burning and cutting of trees feeds the family for the short term and destroys the balance of water in the long term, adding to the accelerating process of “desertification” of the Northeast. The cutting and burning for charcoal is not likely to stop soon, since that would be at odds with one of the region’s biggest tourist-linked industries: pottery. The clay in the region is excellent for ceramics. The region is noted for its folk art and ceramic interpretations of life. The charcoal fuels the kilns. People have also made a business of digging up the clay on their property and either selling it to artists or making both sun-dried and fired bricks for sale.



The Gonçalves women raise their arms in prayer at the sunset mass said at the Church of Help, a favorite of pilgrims because it is near the cemetery where family members and Padre Cícero are buried.

Huge open-bed trucks rigged with benches and covered in flapping tarps rolled with us. We following the road to town, they for love of Padre Cícero, we out of curiosity. It was a powerful tide. Based on the previous year's attendance, 300-400 thousand individuals were expected to roll through the town over the four days of festivities.

The pilgrimage business seemed to be a good one. As we entered the outer limits of Juazeiro do Norte we were on the best roads we had encountered in Brazil. The medians were neat and manicured, storefronts brightly painted. And as we drove through town I did not see a single abandoned building.

We parked and made our way to the main plaza. As the sun set, we watched truck after truck rumble in from across the Northeast. Families, widows, farmers, unemployed, handicapped and athletes jumped down from the trucks and stepped off buses and disappeared into the shadowy paths and alleys of town.

The Church was in high gear. Confessions and masses were available 24 hours a day. Everywhere we looked the city was filled with pilgrims and people who made their living off pilgrims. Only by night when worship-

pers in storefront Protestant churches could be heard singing and praying, was there real evidence of spiritual alternatives to the cultish following of Padre Cícero.

* * *

Padre Cícero is not a saint. Not yet, anyway. The Catholic Church views him as a priest who helped his flock but went astray. Padre Cícero died in 1934. In his time he had the support of the poor because he was of humble origin. He had the support of local landowners because he was one of them. He had the respect of politicians because he was a politician. And he had protection from the great bandits of the era because, some say, he was one of them, too.

Official saint or not, his following is large and fervent in its adoration. A very common saying in Brazil is *Ai, meu Deus de Ceu!* or Oh, My God in Heaven! It flows equally from tongues in fiery exclamations or sweet sighs. But in Juazeiro do Norte the saying is *Ai, meu Padre Cícero de Ceu!* (Oh my Padre Cicero in Heaven!)

All the best,

SWOM