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Carnival and the *Maracatu*

RECIFE, Brazil

April 15, 1999

By Tyrone Turner

Like a deer caught in headlights, I froze, camera in front of my face, as two lines of *Maracatu Baque Solto*¹ ran past me on either side in opposite directions. I had approached and begun photographing the unusual Carnival marching group when they exploded into action around me. Pointy wooden lances, striped ribbons and masses of sparkling mylar strands created a swirl of light and color, rivers raging in greens, reds, yellows and purples. The textures brushed my face and hands and I could smell the musty sweat of their bodies, sense the labor in their art. As they whizzed past me the cowbells on their backs clanked a percussive march in converging circles broken only by me, puzzled and delighted.

Escaping from the inside of their formation, I looked again at these warrior figures with their huge headdresses and bodies of sequined and beaded capes. They could have emerged from centuries past, if not for the mounds of glittering plastic, sunglasses and Nike tennis shoes. Slowing their circular motions to a halt, they jolted forward, opening a space in the cheering crowd.

CARNIVAL EXPERIENCES

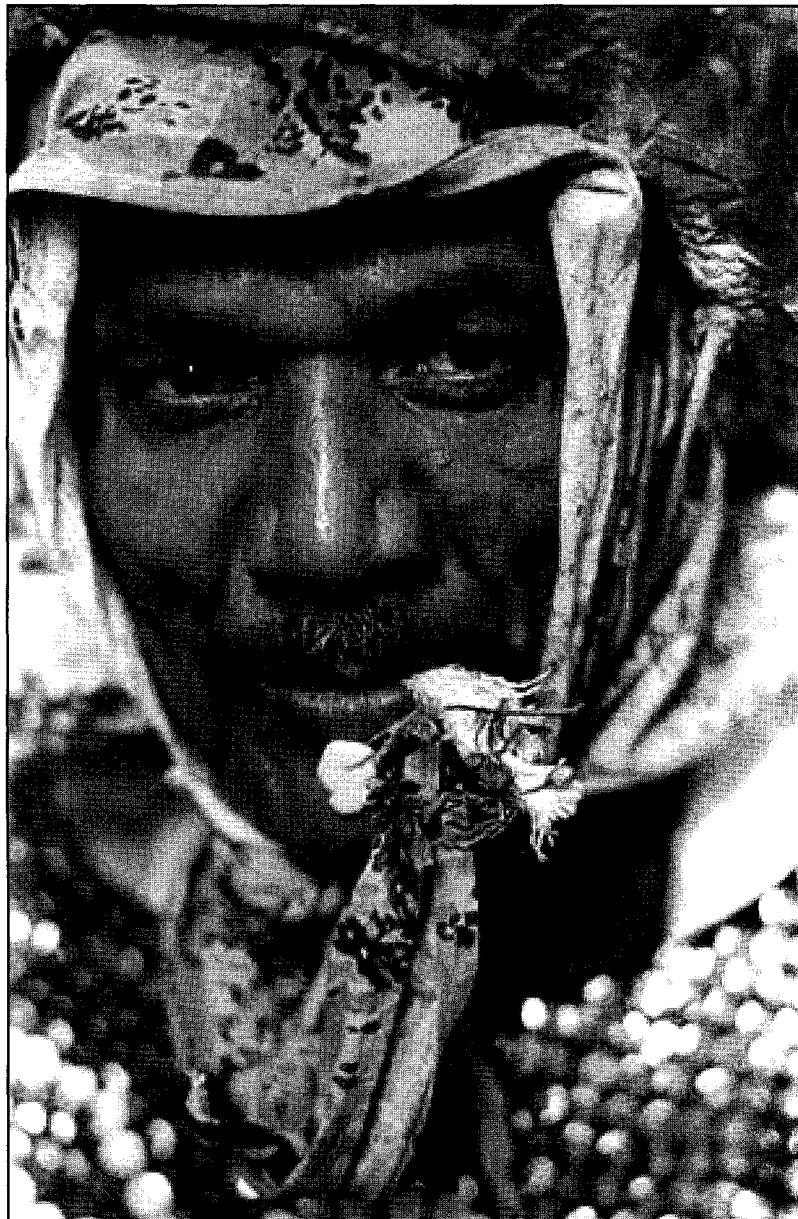
Susan and I had arrived in Recife, Pernambuco with only two days left of Carnival. We stepped off of the plane at 3 o'clock in the morning into a blast of 90-degree air, the welcome mat of the Northeast. We were moving here to live for the next year, but the only thing on our minds was catching the last two days of Carnival.

On Monday evening we climbed aboard a city bus to the historic part of Recife to participate in the celebrations. Though it was barely 6 p.m., the light was gone from the tropical night sky. Through a dirty window we caught our first sights of downtown. A mixture of centuries-old buildings and churches, warehouses on the waterfront and modern office structures, the city looked beautifully eclectic, magical.

Now on foot, the path we took to the Carnival led across one of the main bridges connecting the mainland to the island of Old Recife. In the center of

¹ The Maracatu are traditional *Carnaval* groups from the Northeast that represent the soldiers of the kingdoms of Africa (Maracatu Baque Solto) and the courts of Africa (Maracatu Baque Virado). According to Francisco de Oliveira Gongorra, from the "Museum of the People of the Northeast" in Recife, the word "*Maracatu*" comes from the word "*maracá*", which is a gourd rattle from Africa that the slaves used as a percussive instrument. According to the *Jornal de Commercio*, one of the local Recife papers, the word '*Maracatu*' was a word that "served as a sign to announce the arrival of the police who repressed their gatherings" (*Jornal de Commercio*, May 5, 1998, found on the website http://www2.vol.com.br/JC/_1998/0705/e10405i.htm). Later in the newsletter I explain more fully the history of the *Maracatu* groups.

A Maracatu "Baque Solto" relaxes before a march in Old Recife during Carnaval. Maracatu means "gourd rattle" and "Baque Solto" means "free rhythm." These groups represent the soldiers of the African nations from which their ancestors were brought as slaves. The costumes that they wear — which take years to make — celebrate the link between the Indians and the African slaves in colonial Brazil. For this reason they are also called "Caboclos de Lança," meaning "Indians of the spear." They suck on clove in order to reduce the urge for cachaça or sugarcane brandy, their customary hard liquor. During Carnaval they are supposed to refrain from drinking while they are parading.



the bridge perched a 60-foot chicken: rising from the river water were equally tall, electrified figures of a man and woman, both black, in colonial dress. We picked our way through the crowd and around vendors. The latter, armed with small fires and grills, lined the railing of the bridge cooking all types of meats and hawking beverages.

Pushing into Old Recife, we headed for Rua Bom Jesus, or "Good Jesus" street, ground zero according to our tourist map. Along cobblestoned streets, restored 16th and 17th century buildings served as a perfect backdrop. The glow of TV lights, set up for local and national media coverage, bathed the area, illuminating it like a movie set. Sparse crowds mingled in the streets as families relaxed over dinner and drinks at the tables of the sidewalk restaurants.

Scarcely one block off the route, though, the scene changed dramatically. No new paint hid the scars of neglect and the passage of time. Facades crumbled from neglect on abandoned streets. One friend told us that the city was trying to stimulate a rejuvenation of Old Recife, but so far had only succeeded along the main street. Later I would come to know more of Recife, an interesting but tired city, in need of much attention and repair.

As the hour grew later, what I thought was a calm, almost sedate, scene turned into a madhouse as the first Carnival groups passed. A *bloco de frevo*², with its fast-paced rhythms and mountains of people following behind, pushed the crowds from the streets to the sidewalk.

² A *bloco* is a neighborhood marching group united by a certain theme at Carnival. *Frevo*, a style of fast-paced music popular in Recife, literally means a "wild dance" and comes from the word *ferver* meaning "boiling".



A group of Maracatu Baque Solto walk toward their marching area in Old Recife. Under the back of their beaded capes are cow bells that clank a percussive beat as they walk. They often, they are march for 14 hours a day, and so have incorporated tennis shoes as a modern improvement.

However, since the sidewalks were already packed with people at the restaurant tables, no exit was offered. The resulting bottleneck jammed the crowd together violently. After the parading *bloco* passed and the tide of people ebbed, the crowd turned their attention back to their meals.

Behind another of these *blocos* stretched a block-long piece of fabric, a type of Chinese New Year-style dragon, suspended by hundreds of people. As we tried to move along between the snake and the sidewalk, we were swept into the wave of people, with the crush propelling us along forcefully. I think that if we had lifted our feet, the crowd would have carried us. Suffocating in this street body-press, we dove to the side, climbing over tables and chairs until we reached the next corner.

Surprisingly, in spite of the thronging mass of people, no one erupted in anger. Children and seniors alike strong-armed their way through with smiles. In fact, everyone seemed to expect and enjoy it.

Leaving Old Recife we headed for the samba-school parade area on the other side of the river. We eyed the backside of the audience stands, and looked for the entrance. Arriving at the hole in a plywood wall that served as the official ticket window, we found no one attending. From behind, an older gentleman immediately stepped up and offered us tickets. I thought he might be 'scalping' or in-



Photo by Susan Sterner

Besides the parading participants, many others don costume for Carnaval, including these sisters dressed as French maids in Old Recife.

flating the price, but a quick inquiry proved that he wasn't. We paid him and he handed us the stubs.

At the entrance to the stands, the guard took our tickets, inspecting them closely. "These are for yesterday," he barked. I wasn't surprised that upon turning around the older man had disappeared. After learning a R\$14 (U.S.\$8) lesson, we returned to the same official ticket window and bought valid tickets.

The benches were full, and we perched on the shaky wooden walls of the makeshift stands. Compared to the Sambódromo in Rio de Janeiro,³ which we had only seen in the live TV broadcasts, this was like a school production. Not even the media from the other side of the river in Old Recife had ventured here. Only streetlamps illuminated the scene and the music blared from a parked van with speakers on its roof.

However, what Recife's "sambódromo" lacked in size and splendor, it made up for in spirit. In worn outfits, the samba schools of area *favelas* (urban slums) and *bairros populares*, (poor neighborhoods) danced and swayed, letting their feet lead the way. A few men pushed the simple wooden floats, which carried the school's

theme, as well as a more elaborately dressed female dancer. One transvestite stole the show as he lit up the crowd with his smile and steps. He connected to each part of the audience, samba-ing to the sides of the stands as people roared and cheered.

Returning to the hotel, Susan and I talked about how the warnings of violence that had been issued by various people did not seem warranted. In spite of the crowds, we hadn't witnessed any sort of problems. Flipping through channels on the TV later, though, we stopped at a news broadcast showing 12 burned-out and vandalized city buses from earlier that night.

We started Carnival day in Olinda, the beautiful old city just north of Recife. During the height of the sugar market in Brazil, Olinda was one of the most powerful cities in South America. The incredible wealth of the area prompted the Dutch, in an attempt to gain prominence of the world sugar market, to invade and capture the city in 1630.⁴

Olinda was overrun again each year during Carnival, with thousands descending upon the hilltop town for nonstop partying. The infusion of people stimulated the celebration and the local economy. One homeowner



A boy peers out from the bags of cans he and his family collected during the festivities in Olinda. Poorer families come from the surrounding regions of Recife to camp and make extra money collecting and selling cans to recycling agents.

³ The Sambódromo is the permanent mile-long samba parading area in Rio de Janeiro, where every year the huge samba schools vie to be the best of Carnival.

⁴ The Dutch were defeated and expelled 24 years later.

said that this year he charged R\$10,000 (U.S.\$6,060) for the four-day rental of his place. Fifty people packed the house to share the costs.

After Carnival, Olinda's charms lured us back as we searched for an apartment. Finding few ads or signs for vacancies, we resorted to knocking on doors and asking if the residents knew of anything available. We learned that, though there are empty apartment and houses, few bother with renting apart from Carnival. The premium prices tide the owners over for the whole year.

As the Olinda Carnival raged, the winding stone streets take on a 'frat-party' feel. Drunken teenagers battle each other in water fights in the hot midday sun. The smell of urine and beer overpowers the nose at times and confirms the lack of public toilets in the area. Though organized *blocos* parade through the area, Sergio Vila Nova, an artist and resident, told us that groups spontaneously form to lead processions. He witnessed the 'old-chair *bloco*' being formed on the sidewalk in front of his Olinda house. A group simply raised Sergio's own discarded, broken chair above their heads and started down the street.

One of the families collecting cans in Olinda escapes the midday sun. Many of the families set up tarps under which they camp during the length of Carnaval to collect cans for money.

Trying to escape the water bombs and crowds of Olinda, we wandered behind a group of food stands at the base of the *Igreja do Carmo*, or the Church of the Carmelites. An encampment of tents — plastic sheets tied to trees — populated one area. As some of the inhabitants escaped the sun, other adults and children filled huge plastic bags with aluminum cans. One of the women, grabbing a handful of dirty metal, said that most of these people camp in Olinda for the whole of Carnival not to drink and dance, but to work. The men, women and children scour the streets, gutters and trashcans day and night for soda and beer cans, filling these bags, and selling them to recycling agents. Indeed, neither my wife Susan nor I could remember seeing a single can in the streets, though other garbage was overflowing.

We returned to Old Recife for the afternoon light to photograph the *Maracatu* groups. Though the schedule said that they were to march at three o'clock, and my watch said three o'clock, none were around. In fact, the

few people I asked didn't know when or where they would arrive. The schedule seemed to be more of a suggestion than anything. Fortunately, about two hours later, distant cowbells announced the first groups' arrival. Without knowing exactly their background or history, we spent the next four hours transfixed by the different *Maracatu* groups.

HISTORY OF THE MARACATU

It was only later, at the *Museu Do Homen Do Nordeste* (Museum of the People of the Northeast), that I understood better what we had seen. I showed the pictures that are included in this newsletter to Francisco de Oliveira Gongorra, a cultural-affairs expert at the mu-



seum. He explained the figures in my photographs: the two main types of *Maracatu*, rural and urban, and their historical connection to sugar and slavery in Pernambuco and to Candomblé,⁵ one of the Afro-Brazilian religions.

The 200-year-old tradition started with the slaves who worked in the sugarcane fields. The rural *Maracatu* represented soldiers that guarded the kingdoms of Africa. According to Gongorra, the slave owners allowed the practice because the rural *Maracatu* originally paraded at Easter time in homage of Jesus Christ. Eventually they marched mostly during Carnival.

The rural *Maracatu* are called *Maracatu "Baque Solto,"*⁶ which means 'free rhythm.' This refers to the fact that the rural "soldiers" did not march in a structured group, but in twos.⁷ The dominant colors on their costumes are green and red, referring to Saint George in Catholicism, patron saint of armies, and *Ogum* in Candomblé, the god of war. They carry a lance draped with ribbons of differ-

⁵ One of the Afro-Brazilian religions, in Candomblé the "*orixás*," or African deities, are central. As an example of the syncretism that occurred when Catholicism was imposed on the slaves, each Catholic saint has a corresponding "*orixá*" in the Candomblé religion. For more refer to the chapter on *orixás* in *The Brazilians*, by Joseph A. Page (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.: Reading, Massachusetts, 1995).

⁶ Yet another name for the rural *Maracatu* is "*caboclos de lança*," which means "Indians of the spear."

⁷ although at Carnival these two's come together to parade.



Baianas in their hoop-skirts fight against a gust of wind along one of the cobblestone streets of Old Recife. The Baianas come from the Recife area and parade with the Maracatu as well as with the blocos, or groups of revelers.



A Caboclo de Lança waits for directions from the leader of the group during their Carnaval marching in Old Recife. These Maracatu are from the rural sugar-cane areas of Pernambuco, with many coming from the city of Nazarre de Mata, about an hour by car northwest of Recife.



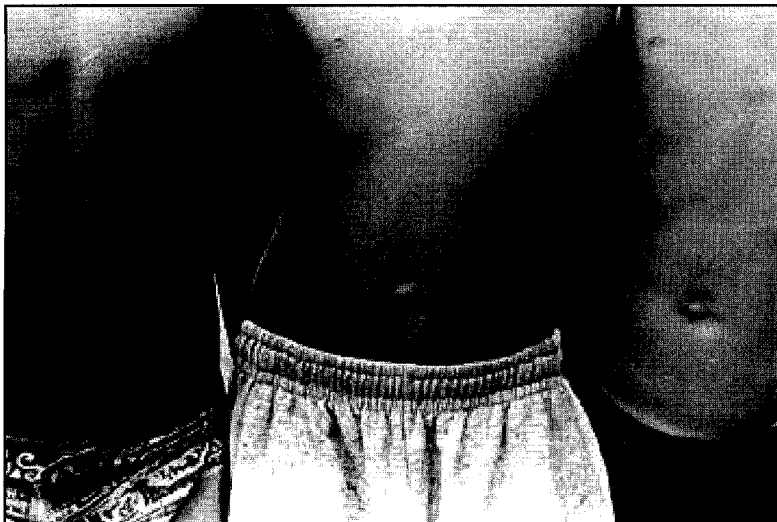
As their marching begins, the Caboclos de Lança run in converging circles, moving with grace in their large headdresses, heavy beaded capes and decorated spears. Photographed in Old Recife.

ent colors as their weapon. This represents the cane fields, the source of their sugar and their humble livelihoods. With cowbells on their backs they create their own music by which to march.

These rural *Maracatu* come mostly from a small city called Nazare da Mata in the middle of the sugarcane region. Poor sugarcane workers, farmers or brickmakers, they spend years saving the R\$5,000, about (U.S.\$3,030

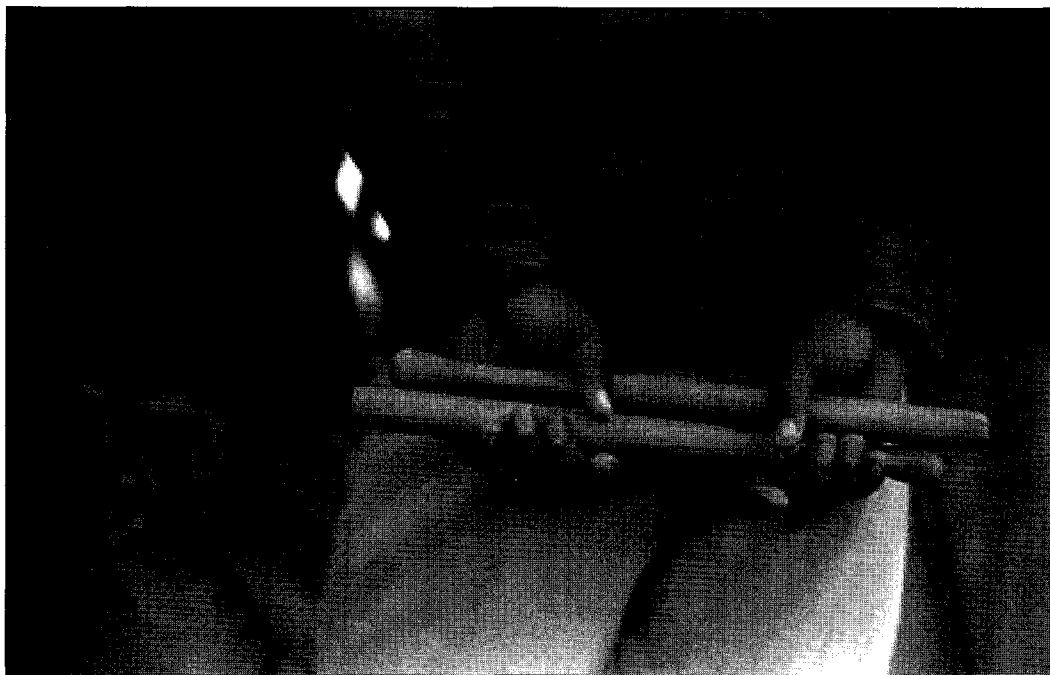
at U.S.\$1.65), in order to buy the materials: The sequins, the ribbons, the feathers, the leather, the mylar. Once they have these things, each *Maracatu* sews his own outfit by hand.

As preparation, the *Maracatu* refrain from drinking *cachaça* and having sexual relations with women for a few days before Carnival. On the day they travel to Recife for Carnival, they exit their homes walking backwards to



Portrait of the stomachs of three of the young boys who help their families by collecting cans in Olinda.

Photo by Susan Sterner



As the drummers wait for the start of their Maracatu parade, they watch another percussion group march by in Old Recife.

ward off any bad occurrences. During Carnival they continue their abstinence from drinking except for one shot in the early morning — a potent mixture of *cachaça*, vegetable oil and gunpowder. They become “*irradiados*” (irradiated or energized) and gain the strength to withstand hours of marching.

The urban *Maracatu* are called *Maracatu “Baque Virado”*, which means “playful rhythm.” As opposed to the *Baque Solto*, the urban *Maracatu* parade as a group including a king and queen, prince and princess, “*damas de honras*” (ladies of honor), “*passistas*” (women dancers) and a music section. These urban *Maracatu* dress in the style of the Portuguese court during colonial times and come from the poorer neighborhoods in Recife and Olinda.

The tradition of the *Maracatu Baque Virado* is older than that of the *Baque Solto*. The urban processions began soon after slaves were brought from Africa to work the sugarcane fields in the early 1500’s. The slave-owners purposefully separated Africans of similar ethnicities and language to isolate them and prevent revolts. As a result, many slaves committed suicide or tried to escape.⁸

According to Gongorra, the slave-owners and the Catholic Church created churches called the “*Nossa*



These drummers form the last line of the Maracatu Baque Virado parade, marking the tempo of the dancing with their instruments.

Senhora dos Rosarios dos Pretos” (Our Lady of the Rosaries of the Blacks) in sugar-dominated cities like Olinda and Salvador da Bahia. For ceremonies in homage to *Nossa Senhora*, (Our Lady) a mock ‘king’ and ‘queen’ of the slaves were crowned and their ‘court’ would parade.

The processions took on a second and more important meaning for the slaves, representing and honoring the kings and queens of the African kingdoms from which they had come. The songs that the court sang talked of returning. The flowers that they carried and threw into the sea were for Jesus Christ in Catholicism but the cor-

⁸ *Quilombos* were communities of runaway slaves. As Page, *op. cit.*, writes (p.67), “In the countryside the *quilombos* were often modest-sized settlements, some of which replicated the African villages from which the blacks had been torn.” The largest *quilombo* was Palmares in Northeastern Brazil, which had 20,000 inhabitants until it was destroyed by the military in 1695. All of the residents were slaughtered (also from Page, pp.67-68).

responding deity *Oxalá* in Candomblé, praying for help getting back to their homeland. Their banners displayed figures of elephants and lions, symbols of Africa. Even the dances that the women performed had a motion imitating the rowing of a boat back across the Atlantic.

The tradition lives on today in the groups of young children and adults that don the regalia of kings and

queens. And the weathered and wrinkled *passistas*, for whom the memory of slavery is not so distant, still thrash from side to side, rowing their way back home.

CONCLUSION

As I ran to keep up with the *Maracatu*, I was reminded of my youth in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. Back



Part of the Maracatu Baque Virado, or urban Maracatu, this “passista”, or dancer, twirls her dress in a traditional dance that imitates the rowing of a boat back to Africa. Many of the elements of the Maracatu parades refer to a pride in Africa, or the actually desire of the slaves, who initiated the tradition, to return to their homeland. Photographed in Old Recife.



A king of one of the Maracatu “Baque Virado”, or Maracatu “playful rhythm” spreads his arms in a regal pose during the parading on Carnaval day in Old Recife. The Baque Virado are the urban Maracatu, coming from around the Recife area. They represent the courts of the African nations from which the slaves came, though they dress in the Portuguese colonial style.



A group of young girls from a "frevo bloco," or a group that dances to the fast-moving tempo of the local "frevo" music, pose for a picture before they perform in Old Recife.



An Olinda resident shows off her costume from her front window as crowds pass by in the street.

then I chased the huge, elaborate floats on Napoleon Avenue in order to catch trinkets, beads and doubloons. We'd pause for the high-school bands, but only to catch our breath before resuming the hunt. Later, my siblings and I would spill the grocery bags of booty and compare takes.

Though the fact that nothing is thrown or caught during Carnival in Recife seems small, it points to a basic difference. In New Orleans, one has to have money to belong to a *Krewe*,⁹ ride on a float, and throw hundreds or even thousands of dollars' worth of plastic trinkets to the screaming crowds. Here, traditionally, the Carnival of the streets is the domain of the poor, who take the spotlight with their samba schools, *blocos*, *Maracatu*, etc... The only 'thing' offered is the enjoyment of the costumes, the dance and the song.¹⁰

In spite of these differences, what I couldn't escape was how much the Carnival in Recife reminded me of

New Orleans. In the elaborate costumes and fierce pride of the *Maracatu "Baque Solto"* I saw the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans. The latter come from the poorer black neighborhoods, where members don expansive handmade feather and beaded costumes that can cost upwards of \$10,000. Their handiwork, marches and French-Creole songs pay tribute to the relationship between the runaway African slaves and Native Americans.¹¹ Like the *Maracatu*, the spectacle of the Mardi Gras Indians touches the hearts of their own communities and amazes those outside of their mysterious circles.

In general, the spirit of Carnival transcends geography. In both places it is a time to release inhibitions, to dance in the streets, and escape the burdens of the rest of the year. A great mix of peoples of different ages, classes and colors come together, uniting in a frenzy of celebration. And though each place has its own music, costumes and history, when I closed my eyes the *Rua De Bom Jesus* felt a lot like home. □



Caboclos , or Indians, dance in rhythm with Baianas in Old Recife.

⁹ A *Krewe* is the name of the Mardi Gras clubs that parade.

¹⁰ I write "traditionally" because the samba schools, especially in Rio de Janeiro, have become a million-dollar industry.

¹¹ Information from talks with Andrew Justin, the Big Chief of the Wild Treme Mardi Gras Indians. Andrew, a personal friend and an incredible artist, allowed me to document his preparation for and parading in the 1998 Mardi Gras in New Orleans.



A younger Maracatu Baque Solto marches through the streets of Old Recife accompanied by a group of Baianas, or women dancers in the long dress style of Bahia.



On the day after, the remnants of Carnival include both trash in the streets and the people sleeping on the sidewalks as Olinda is evacuated.

Recife

