

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 Hapgood
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.

TLT-8
THE AMERICAS

Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.

Juazeiro do Parde Cícero

January 31, 2000
JUAZEIRO DO NORTE, Ceará, Brazil

Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

From Brazil's most unforgiving landscape, the arid *sertão* — dry lands — of the Northeast, have risen the country's most compelling folk heroes. Messianic leaders sprouted from the desperate lives and pained hope of Brazil's poorest-of-the-poor, a people beaten down and hardened by the cruel combination of government neglect and inhospitable climate.

In the seventeenth century the mythical "Zumbi" ruled Palmares, a colony of 25,000 fugitive slaves in the interior of the state of Alagoas that endured for almost a century. Threatening the interests of a nation dependent on keeping its African slaves in the sugarcane fields, government forces annihilated Palmares, wiping its existence from the face of the land and — they hoped — from Brazilian memory.¹

Antonio Conselheiros (Anthony the Counselor), a monarchist and religious-leader-turned-revolutionary of the late nineteenth century, rejected the secularism of the new Brazilian Republic and led impoverished Northeasterners to form their own community, Canudos. Eking out an existence in Bahia's semi-arid backlands, the settlement was deemed a threat to the government power. After two military campaigns failed to rout the fortified community, a third succeeded and Canudos was burned to the ground.

In the 1920's and 30's Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, better known as the infamous "Lampião," became the most feared bandit of the Northeast. He ruthlessly terrorized wealthy landowners — pillaging supplies, stealing luxury goods and even cutting off fingers to get fancy rings. Though his type of banditry did not generally include "giving to the poor," the exploits of Lampião (Lamp) and his merry band gained him the reputation of a Robin Hood of sorts. He subverted the security and wealth of oppressive landowners and left humble families to themselves. That was enough to win the hearts of the tenant farmers and landless of the region.

Just as the names of other folk heroes are spoken with tenderness and reverence in the Northeast, even more so is the name of Padre Cícero. Padre Cícero threatened the strength of the Catholic hierarchy and became one of the most widely followed religious icons in northeast Brazil. Part hero, part rebel priest, part wealthy landowner, Padre Cícero emerged from the culture of

¹ *Quilombos: Resistance to Slavery*, by Clóvis Moura, 1993, Editora Ática S.A.

A group gathers on an outcropping of rocks with a cross. Many pilgrims carry a stone from town to the top of Santa Sepulcre as part of their penitence. It serves as a reminder of why they are making the journey.

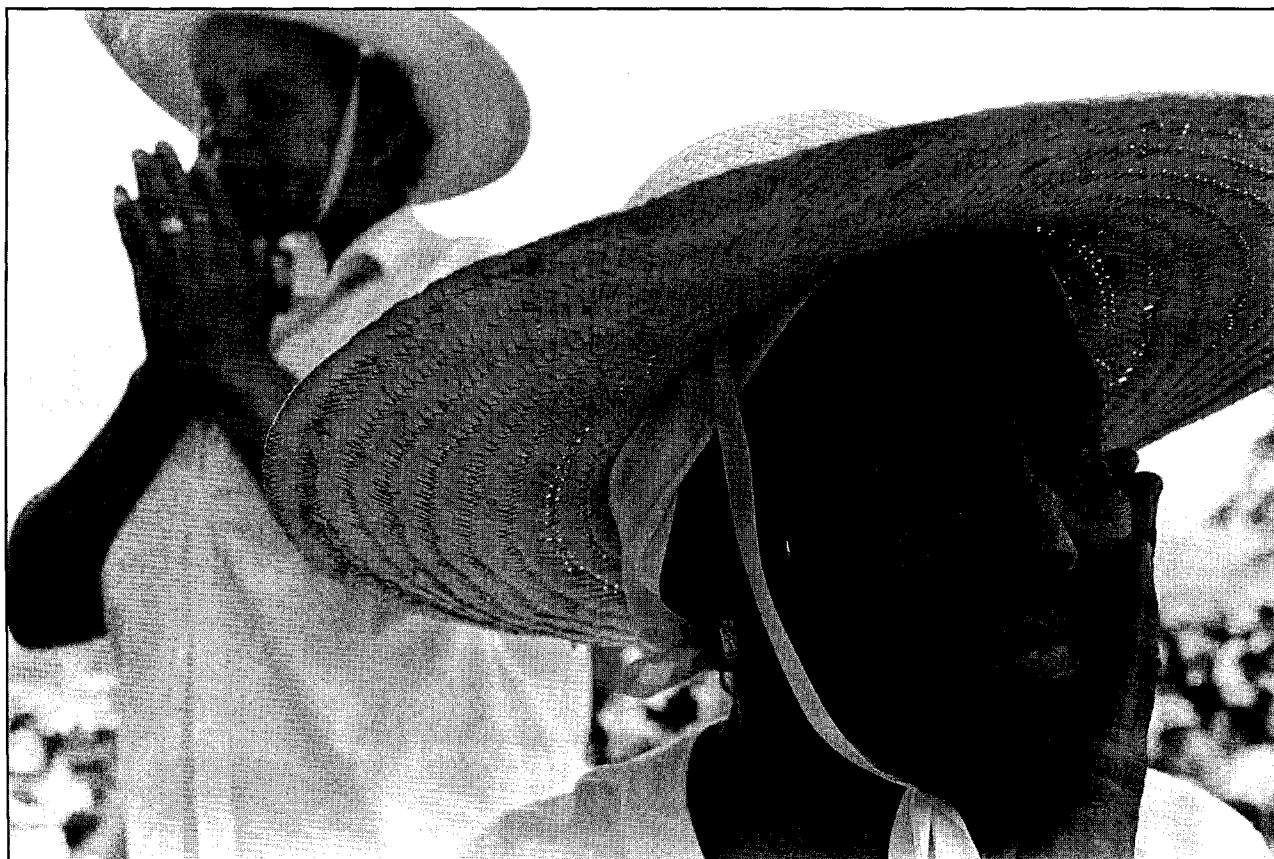
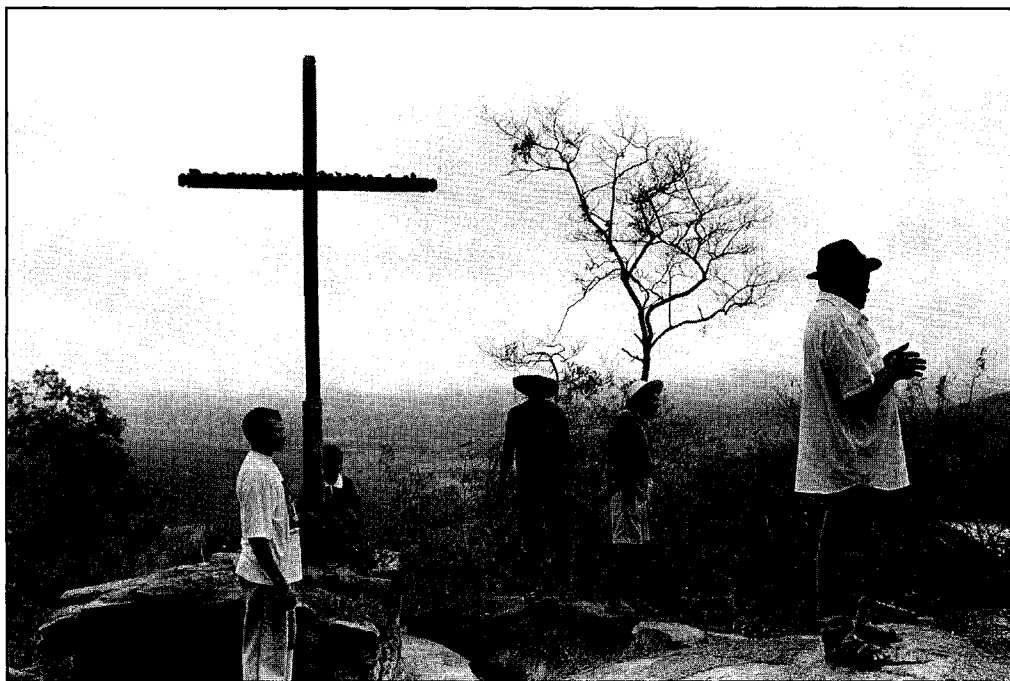


Photo: Susan Sterner

Women pray and reflect at the base of the statue of Padre Cícero. Nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ million pilgrim were expected to have passed through Juazeiro do Norte between October 30th and November 2nd.



Photo: Susan Sterner

A young girl from the state of Bahia lies in a crack in a large boulder and prays three Hail Marys for protection for her being.

the rugged backlands. He filled a vacuum left by politicians who begrudged giving even lip service to the region's poor.

Cícero Romano Batista was born in 1844 to a farming family in Crato, in the Northeast state of Ceará. But Crato is not where Padre Cícero made his name. As a young priest he was assigned to the neighboring hamlet, Juazeiro do Norte. He quickly defined his mission as one of "clean-up," and took on the moral reform of the small town, combating drunkenness and prostitution.

But this hard line, and even the scores of single women and widows that he recruited into a lay moral army, did not make him into the force that he was to become. On March 10th, 1889, just 17 years after he had begun his work in Juazeiro do Norte, the "miracles" started. It is said that when Padre Cícero served the host to Maria de Aruajo, the host turned to blood in her mouth. This did not happen once, but 92 times. Many claimed to witness the occurrence. Rags used to wipe the blood from Maria's mouth were saved as evidence of the miracles.

As word of the "miracles" spread, legions of faithful arrived in Juazeiro and claimed it to be the new Prom-

ised land.² The influx of pilgrims and poor migrants to Juazeiro do Norte spurred commercial and agricultural growth. Padre Cícero's reputation grew alongside the prosperity.

As news spread of the miracle of the *beata*, as Aruajo was called, religious authorities took notice. The Bishop of Ceará, Joaquim José Vieira, a faithful follower of Rome, opened an investigation into the matter in 1891. The inquiry found that the facts of the case were a mystery that defied scientific explanation.

This did not sit well with the Bishop, who wanted this growing cult squashed. As a result, ecclesiastical opinions attacked the source of the miracles, personally humiliating Maria de Aruajo.

An example of the ensuing racist slander were the words of Father Alencar Peixoto, a priest who lived near Juazeiro. In 1914 he was quoted as saying, "Maria de Aruajo is a product of the crossing of two worthless races [black and indian], resulting in a horrible hybrid, a monstrosity made woman. She is a supremely cursed soul."³

Vieira announced another investigation, this one to

² "The Saint of the Agreste," *Epoca*, November 8, 1999

³ Ibid



At noon on the last day of the pilgrimage, the town and pilgrims cram into the main church for the farewell mass. Everyone brings anything they want blessed and wave their hats in a farewell gesture.

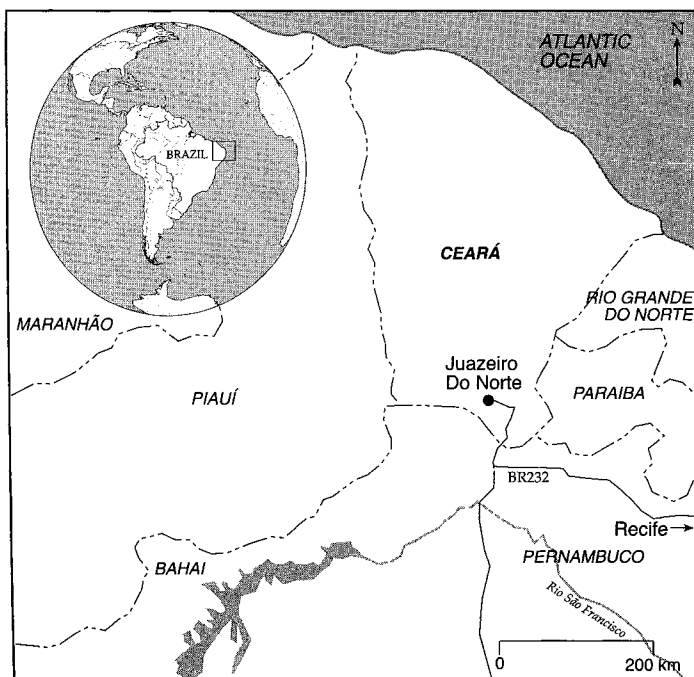
be headed by a priest from rival Crato. Predictably, the results of the second inquiry found that the “miracles” in Juazeiro were not of a supernatural nature. No other explanation was offered. Bishop Joaquim then ordered Padre Cícero to deny that the transformations had ever

happened. Padre Cícero refused, and as a result was stripped of his right to administer sacraments or have a parish.

The resulting uproar reached Rome. The Vatican entered the scene by ordering that the bloody rags, evidence of the miracle and objects of adoration, be burned — and thus closed the issue to public debate. Maria Aruajo was whisked away from Juazeiro and forced into seclusion where she was never again permitted to attend public mass. This poor, black, illiterate woman, the person to whom the purported “miracle” actually happened, was erased from the history of the event, only having been recently re-discovered by authors and filmmakers.

Not until nine years later, in 1898, when Padre Cícero traveled to Rome to meet with Pope Leo XIII, did he back down to church authority. This rebellious little priest accepted imposed “silence” in spiritual matters only to dedicate himself fully to worldly concerns and launch his political life.

In 1911, Padre Cícero was elected mayor of Juazeiro, and a year later deputy vice-president of the state of Ceará. In 1914, his influence expanded as he aligned himself with the federal



government against the state president, Franco Rabelo. Cícero militarily defended Juazeiro against the "Rabelistas" and then helped government troops march on and depose the state government.

In a case of politics making strange bedfellows, the most famous priest of the poor also aligned himself with the infamous bandit of the poor. In 1926, Padre Cícero invited Lampião to the city of Juazeiro do Norte where he and his men were given commissions in the Brazilian army. Their task was to pursue a renegade military group, the Prestes Column, which was whipping up dissent against the young Brazilian Republic.⁴

Referring to Padre Cícero in a 1926 interview, Lampião said, "I have always respected and continue to respect the State of Ceará, because it is the State of Padre Cícero. As you must know, I have the greatest veneration for this saintly priest because he is the protector of the humble and the unhappy."⁵

Lampião never did catch up with the Prestes column, nor did he really try. Instead, he went back to robbing land-owners and sacking towns. His fortunes reversed again, and in 1938 Lampião and his band were ambushed, shot, and beheaded by soldiers in Sergipe.

By the end of his life in 1934, Padre Cícero's influence and vision had built the town. He had constructed a church and three chapels, donated lands for soccer fields and the airport and helped found the local newspaper. It is on his land that a huge statue in his likeness looms from a mountain top.

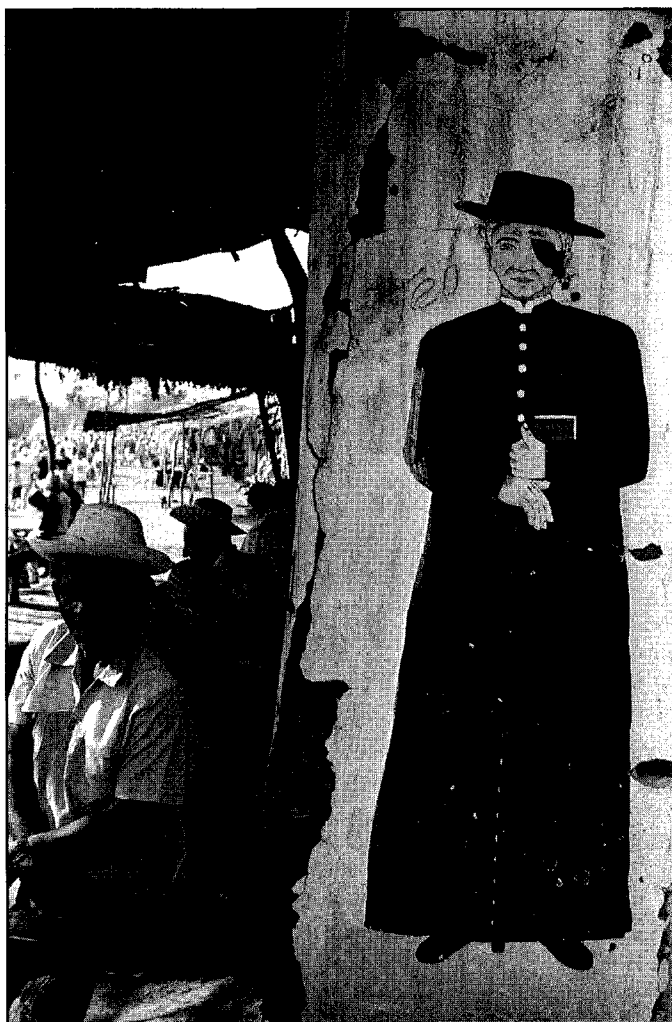
So, when people use the description Juazeiro "do Padre Cícero" to differentiate the Cearense town from a town of Juazeiro in the state of Ba-

hia, it is in more than one way true.

* * *

Before November, the only image of Padre Cícero I had seen was a small, broken statue on the outskirts of Recife. The figure of an old man, with a slight hunch, in a floor-length black cassock and rimmed black hat, stood within a shattered glass box. His statue was our signal to turn left to go to a ceramics atelier we loved to visit. Little did we know how much a landmark Padre Cícero was for so many people of the Northeast, or that we would soon possess our own illuminated statuette of the man.

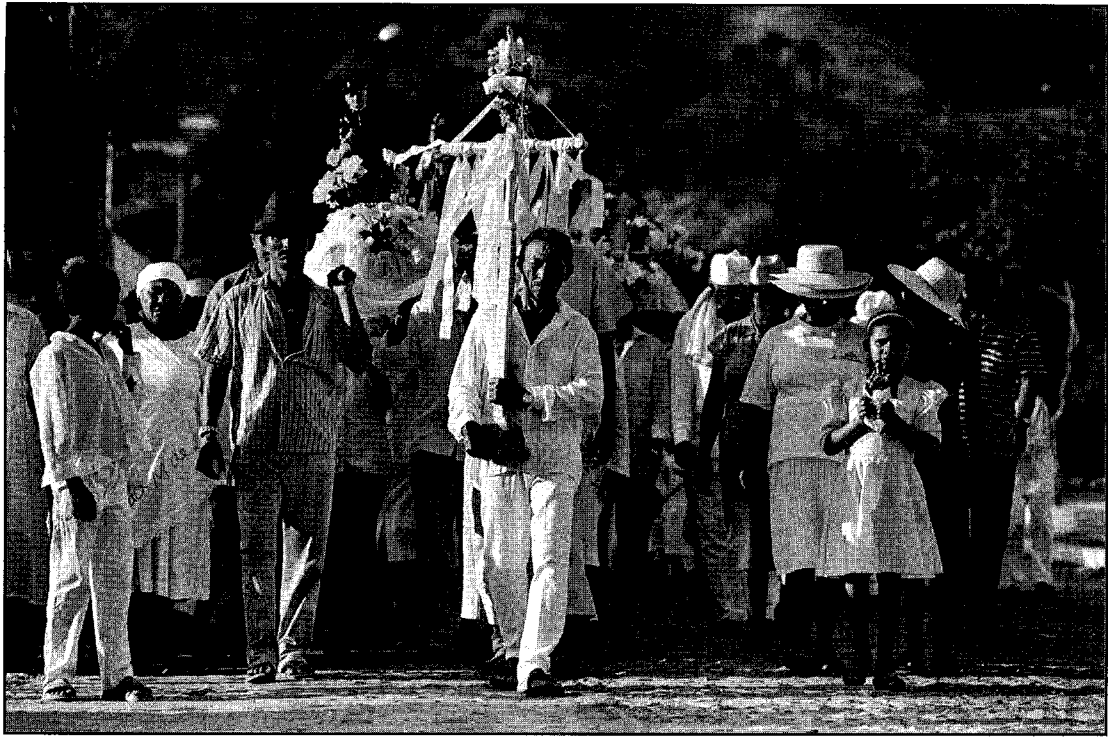
We arrived in Juazeiro do Norte for the Padre Cícero pilgrimage on one of the first days of November. In this green oasis in the desert, what hit me were the veri-



A man rests against the wall of a makeshift bar and grill set up at the exit from the loop of holy rocks and shrines at Santa Sepulcre. Just after dawn the bars opened and supplied the weary and jubilant pilgrims with alcohol, water and grilled meats. Along the path were other shacks featuring medicinal herbs, souvenirs and ice cream. Ambulatory vendors hawked everything from shoes to hair grease.

⁴ During a time when the Republican government was run by coffee-plantation owners, the military provided one source of resistance, especially among young officers who wanted to see a more modern Brazil. One of these officers, Lt. Luís Carlos Prestes, led a military force through the backlands of the Northeast to whip up dissent among the population. The "Prestes Column" operated for two years before calling it quits in Bolivia. Years later, under the administration of populist President Getúlio Vargas, Prestes became the leader of the Brazilian Communist Party. Source: *Brazil: The Once and Future Country*, by Marshall Eakin. St. Martin's Griffin: New York, 1998.

⁵ *Lampião, Uma Viagem Pelo Cangaço*, a booklet put out by the Dana Itinerant Culture Project.



The church of São Gonçalvo enters the town of Juazeiro do Norte with a procession honoring Jesus, Mary and Padre Cícero. The facts that the Catholic Church stripped Padre Cícero of his power to administer holy sacraments and that he is not even under consideration for sainthood, means little to his followers, who continue to pay him homage 60 years after his death.



Photo: Susan Sterner

Members of the private church of São Gonçalvo use plastic flowers and old ribbon to decorate a litter to carry the image of Padre Cicero.



A young pilgrim sits at an entrance of one of the many chapels at Santa Sepulcre as pilgrims come and go.

table floods — inundations of images and people all pointing to one thing — faith in this man, Padre Cícero, and in the miracles he allegedly performed.

Scepticism was washed away by sheer repetition. Truth became based on seeing the same picture and same statute of Padre Cícero so many times. Truth, that is, magnified by size: a 90-foot white statue hovering above the city imposed his presence and memory. And there was also the truth of peer pressure: half a million people journeying to this backlands town served as unmitigated pressure to believe.

As my wife Susan and I discussed what we were witnessing in Juazeiro, I weighed the contradictions. I saw the pilgrimage as good, because of its organic beginning and growth despite official Church admonitions. However, I would have been blind not to see how the same church that once stripped Padre Cícero of his vocation, today, in conjunction with the city, takes advantage of his memory. It's a huge boon for town merchants and the Church.

Also, this kind of faith in Padre Cicero, in his power as intercessor, lulls believers into thinking that their ailing health or desperate poverty are specific to the individual and not linked to wider social injustices.

This wasn't liberation theology, the kind of socially

and politically active faith that Brazil gave birth to in the 1950's and 60's, but whose strength is diluted today. I had witnessed liberation theology in Christian-Base Communities in southern Mexico. That faith had the goal of social change and economic improvements in the here and now — what I consider to be God helping people who help themselves. That was the kind of religion that neither governments nor the Catholic hierarchy appreciated.

However, the religion that I saw in Juazeiro do Norte was in the eyes of the pilgrims, in their sweat and toil, laid bare in the fact that they chose to spend the little money they had to journey packed in trucks, cattle-car style. They stayed in overcrowded *ranchos* (ranches, as the houses that sheltered them were known) with as many as 20 per room. They climbed the mountain laboriously. They were *pagando as promesas*, paying for promises fulfilled and those still unanswered.

And though the Catholic Church benefits from the pilgrimages, it does not "own" them. Padre Cícero, after all, was prohibited from practicing his vocation and the miracle that was claimed on his watch was tossed aside as charlatanism. The people interpreted Padre Cícero for themselves, as they needed him. All I had to do was look at any of the 300,000 pilgrims and the harsh environment that was their home, to know that

this was a poor people, a suffering people.

In Juazeiro do Norte, the government was as far away as the moon, farther away even than the intercession of a priest dead for over 60 years. They prayed to Padre Cícero and believed with all their hearts that he could help change their humble lives.

* * *

Walking along one of the pilgrimage trails, a friend from São Paulo, Marcelo Greco, pointed to a side trail and motioned for us to follow him. He explained that the rock we were approaching had a small hole in it. This was a very special rock; like many of the boulders in the area, it was said to hold curative powers. Insert whatever body part was ailing, recite the prayer, and you were supposed to notice a difference.

Five years ago I had to quit running due to pains in my left knee. I never went to the doctor because I never wanted to deal with possible surgery or physical therapy. I simply stopped running, and opted for other sports. But

still, I missed running. So I figured I'd try out the rock.

Said rock was shaded by a tarpaulin suspended on crooked tree branches. A woman dressed in black sackcloth and a straw hat sat to one side. I handed off my cameras to my wife and slid my left knee into a soft, worn groove in the stone. The woman told me to repeat a prayer. I can not remember any of the words because I was concentrating so hard on pronouncing everything just right. She smiled when we had finished. I thanked her and gave her a tip for her help. Marcelo, Susan and I continued our descent down the hill.

I don't run a lot yet, but the knee feels solid. And with a little faith...

Until the next journey,

Tyron

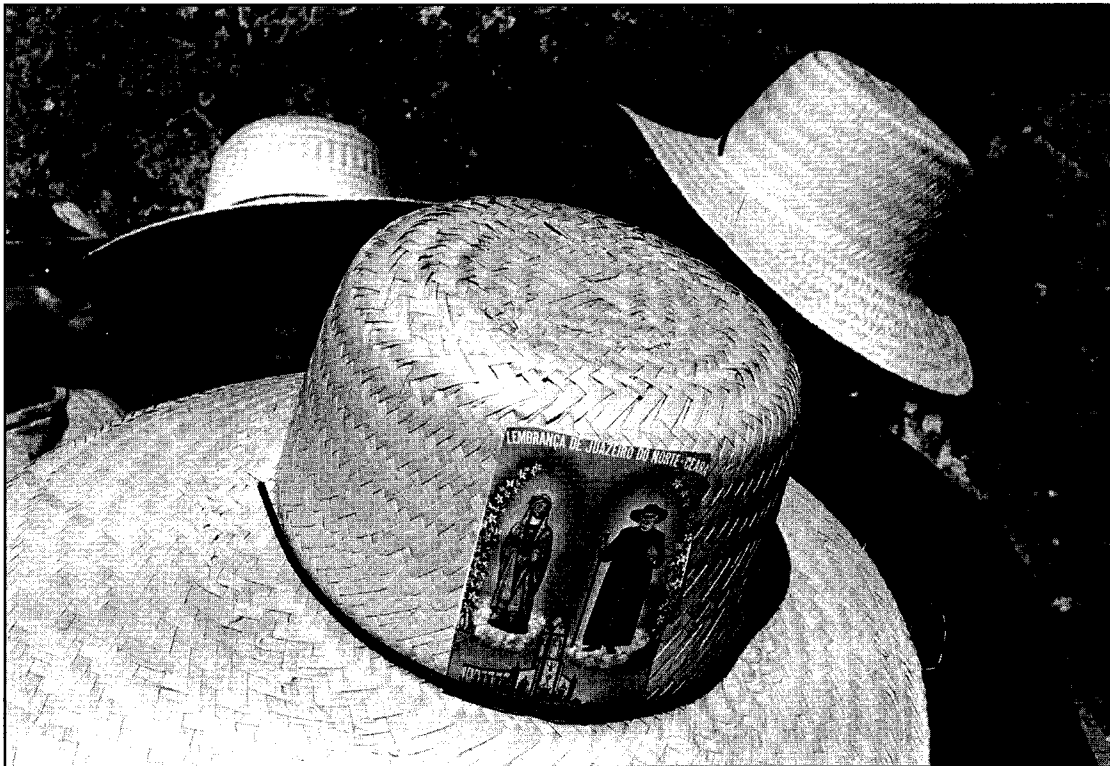


Photo: Susan Sterner

Pilgrims with their straw hats to protect them from the sun, carrying images of the Virgin Mary and Padre Cicero, as they make their way to the different prayer areas of the pilgrimage.



A woman is blessed and prayed over by "Sei Luis." Behind her a crowd awaits their turn. When we asked who the man was, a women replied, " I don't know. But he looks holy and I want his blessing." Turns out Sei Luis is known as a holy man and has been standing on Padre Cícero's grave and blessing believers for over 30 years.