EAST COAST SOUTH AMERICA SERIES
Vol. XXI No. 3
(Brazil)

CARNIVAL AND GUAPIRA'S CHILDREN: THE MORAL CHALLENGE

Part II: Committed

by Richard Critchfield

April 1977

As though it needed a respite, or a chance to concentrate its energies for even greater exertions, Salvador returned to a semblance of normal life on Friday, February 18. Banks, offices, and the wharves went about their business and the downtown streets, cleared by an army of orange-uniformed street-sweepers and sanitation workers, were reopened to traffic. Friday night was given over to private parties and carnival balls, for the rich at the Yacht, Golf, Tennis, Portuguese, and Spanish clubs, for the poor in the streets of the slums.

Saturday night most of Guapira's children went to watch Salvador's *escolas da samba*, groups of sumptuously costumed dancers and bands of drummers, performing in competition in a long procession from Campo Grande to the municipal square. The winning dancers, the Diplomatas de Amaralina, were all black and dressed in Portuguese colonial costumes of white lace and red satin, white wigs, and long silk stockings. They were led by three statuesque transvestites, towering above the others in eight-inch platform shoes and enormous headdresses of white plumes; a beautiful mulatto girl in a hoopskirt came next, flanked by two footmen bearing parasols. Then came a group of dancing girls, clad in spangles, beads, and G-strings; youths in red satin who pranced around them with lascivious gestures, and some hundred drummers, all splendid-looking in red satin and white wigs. And still more dancing girls and men, aglitter with sequins, spangles, plumes, and feathers, their feet and hips moving in a quick-paced syncopated rhythm.

Florsina and Olympia were dazzled. But young men in the watching crowd kept trying to caress and seduce them. At first the girls giggled and dodged away; then, seeing even the least attractive women in the crowd were subject to the same advances, they felt insulted, grew disgusted, and went home early. Not far away an acquaintance, Neide, also a pretty young housemaid, was in trouble. A soldier, who she knew was waiting for her, was drunk, having spent the evening at a Carnival ball. When he tried to seize her on the stairs and she resisted, he hit her and she ran down the street to the nearest police post. The men on duty made light of the matter—was it not Carnival?—and she returned home. The soldier, Guilherme, was waiting on the stairs with a kitchen knife. Seeing it, she turned to escape, he threw the knife and it just missed her shoulder. He lunged forward, she seized the knife and, when he tried to wrest it from her, she stabbed him in the neck. He died a few hours later in Pronto Socorro, the emergency room of Getulio Vargas Hospital, which treated many of the Carnival casualties, thus becoming the Carnival's first homicide. Within hours a second murder followed: a laborer died from knife wounds in the stomach in the *favela* of Catu, after a drunken quarrel over a woman.

Sunday, February 20

This was the day Carnival really began and by midafternoon police estimated one-third of a million people were crowded into Praça Castro Alves alone, with more than that number lining the route of the *trios eletricos* and just over a hundred *blocos*—some with thousands of members—which were beginning to move in procession down Avenida Sete de Setembro and Carlos Gomez. Bikini-clad girls were already dancing on the small tables where thousands sat drinking beer. At the western end of the plaza, there was a brief skirmish when a group of male transvestites commandeered

the steps of the municipal post office; despite the attempts of policemen to chase them away, they held their ground and began performing grotesquely lewd dances, one by one, to the cheers and catcalls of the beer-drinking crowd below.

The largest *bloco* was the Apaches, some 6,000 of them, whom the police had ordered to march in three separate processions. There were also Comanches, Cheyennes, and Tupys, whose Indian costumes depicted brown-skinned braves burning a white man at the stake. Then there were ancient Egyptians, dressed in the white drapery of pharaonic times; Zulu warriors; a thousand drummers in the white robes and turbans of India, who carried stuffed goats, a huge painting of Mahatma Gandhi, and led an enormous papier mâché elephant bearing a small black boy dressed as a maharajah; the Internationals, members of Salvador's football teams, splendid in the bejeweled robes of Arab princes; the *blocos* of the university students, the Jacus and Corujas, collegiate with their long *mortalhas* and parasols, singing as they went:

Vira, vira, vira
Vira, vira, vira
Vira lobishomem....

Turn, turn, turn
Turn, turn, turn
Turn into a wolfman....

There were the all-white *blocos* of the very rich, Sniff and the Barons, shuffling through a pallid samba, highball glasses in hand, with their hired black drummers and men to carry the ropes that encircled each *bloco*. They would vanish from the streets early each evening, to their private clubs and balls. Many *blocos* sang as they advanced:

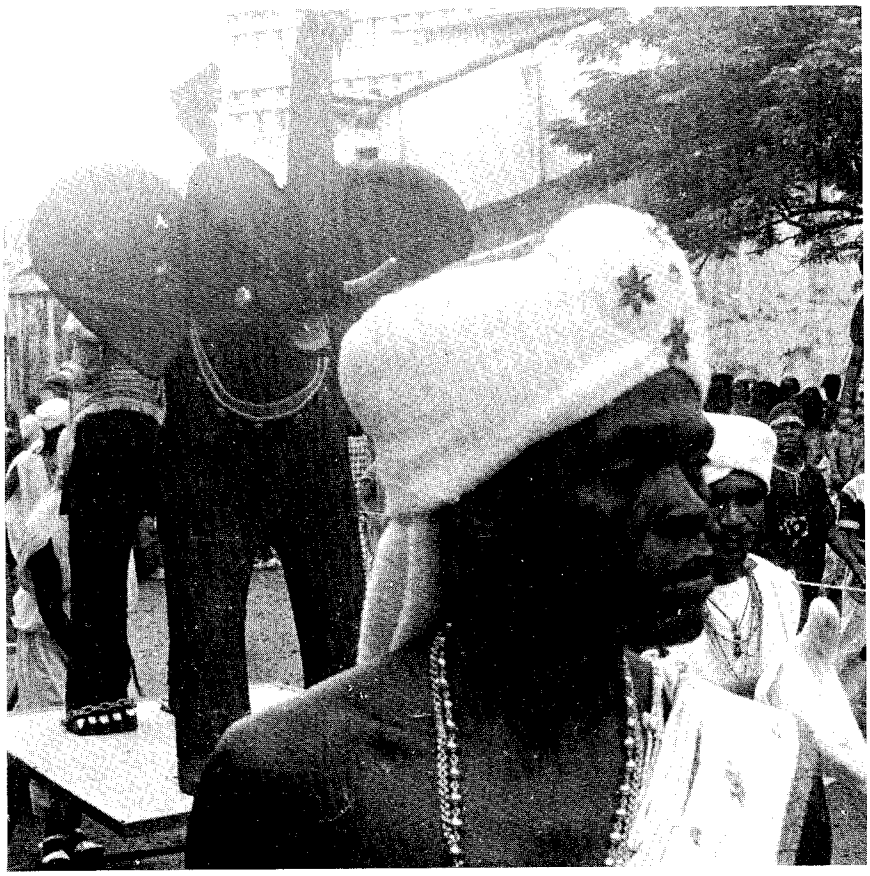
Chuva, soar e cerveja....
Rain, sweat and beer....
or
Ele esta de olho e na buceta dela....
an obscene parody of a popular song
Ele esta de olho e na botique dela....
He has his eye on her boutique....

Sometimes the sky darkened and there would be a sudden shower, but nothing dampened the exuberance of the dancing processions. Florsina, running to seek shelter under a vendor's canvas,

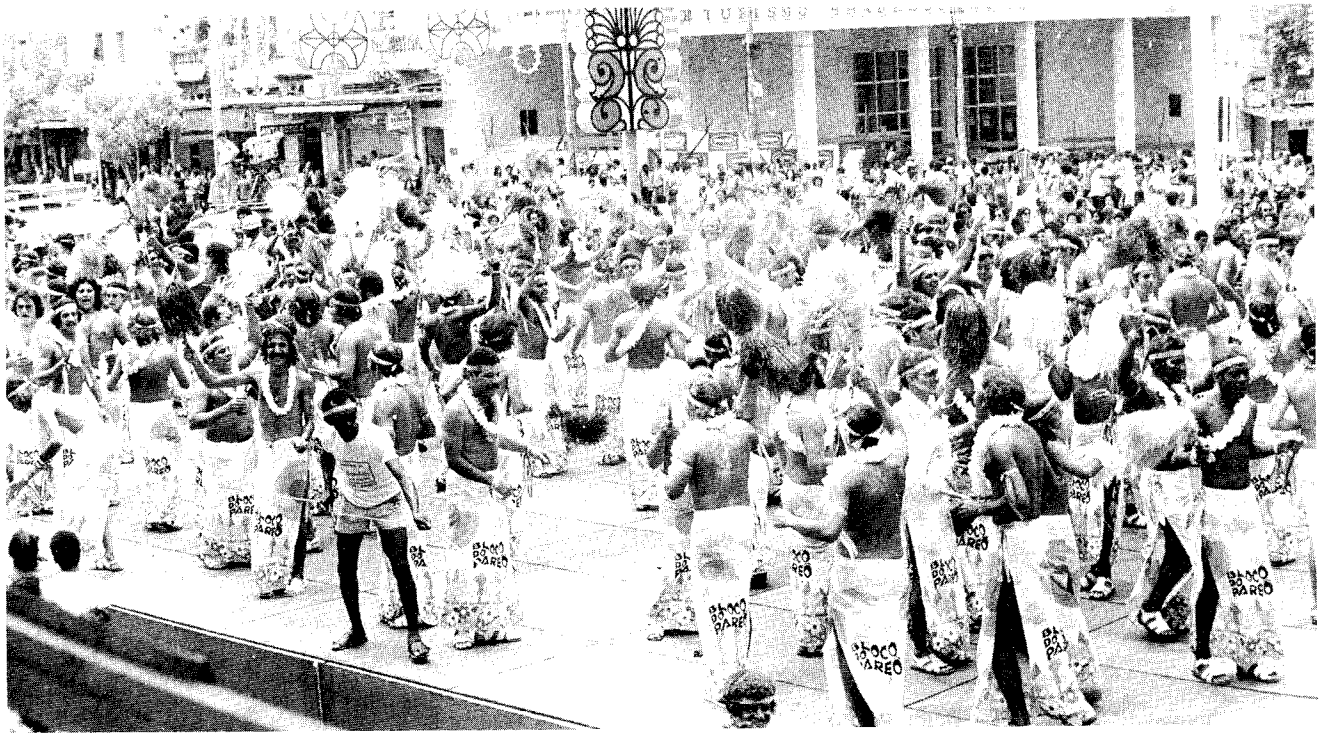
Revelers in a bar in Praça Castro Alves.

told Olympia, "It's so hot in the street with everybody jumping, God decided to throw some water on them." Olympia laughed. "Well, everybody always says God is a Baiano anyway." When three small boys in *mortalhas* came up asking for money Florsina asked them what they did in Carnival. One grinned and told her, "We go out in the middle of the asphalt, we dance, we hit and we get hit."

Once a band of *sertão* Indians of mixed ancestry, dressed as traditional bandits or *cangaceiros* and playing triangles, tambourines, and accordions, came through the crowd, playing old Brazilian folk tunes and holding up wooden rifles, pistols, and swords to everyone's head until a cruzeiro or two



A procession of white-turbaned marchers from the *bloco* "Sons of Ghandi."



A typical *bloco* in full swing.

was goodnaturedly paid them in a mock robbery. The biggest crowds moved with the *trios eletricos*; when one passed, Florsina and Olympia feared they might be pushed back into the vendors' stalls. Here plump black women, dressed in traditional costumes and known as *baianas*, were frying popular *acaraje* bean cakes in pots of boiling palm oil. Other vendors were broiling meat over charcoal fires. During the next three days many people were to suffer burns when they were suddenly pushed backward, their long *mortalhas* catching fire. In the din of the passing *trios* and marching drummers, neither girl heard the gunshots as, across in Campo Grande, a military policeman fired at two thieves trying to break into a parked car. One bullet went wild, hit a young spectator who was watching the passing *blocos* and killed him instantly, the third death of Carnival.

Alone of Guapira's children, Florsina and Olympia, in their apprehension, resisted the power of the *trios*; Jorge was elsewhere, fiercely beating on his drum. But like the rest, Antônio was soon caught up in the dance and forgot his determination only to stand and watch. This power was greatest after darkness fell Sunday night and began with excitement and suspense, and a nervous curiosity about what was coming. After hours of seeing the passing *blocos* and moving through the streets of expectant, excited milling crowds, his senses were all aroused. Far ahead on Sete de Setembro, another *trio* approached, first a rumble, then a roar, piercing, blaring, thundering. Shrill shouts punctuated the ta-ta-ta-*ta*, ta-ta-ta-*ta* of the drums, first high, then low, the beats joyously, ominously, interspersed with and dominated by the high-pitched, amplified guitars whose melody penetrated the body and the mind, simultaneously, shamelessly. Rumbling toward him, the flashing lights of the *trio* formed a monster aglow with vaporous fire, colors ever changing like some giant, upturned jukebox, dazzling Antônio. Under the fire of a thousand colored lightbulbs, pushing and thronging past the watching crowds, came people, a mass of bobbing heads and raised, flailing arms, a mob plunging, twisting, stamping, twirling, its path a swarm of seething, sweating bodies, light, tumult, and riotous rhythmic dance.

Antônio could resist no longer and out in the street, now part of it, he saw only fragments as he moved furiously with the rhythm: pretty mulatto girls, tripped by their overlong cotton *mortalhas*, which hung loosely from their shoulders, held up their arms and gestured violently. Streamers and mists of colored confetti were tossed down from

Jorge dancing with his fellow commanchees.

Apaches dancing on Avenida Sete de Setembro.

open windows and rooftops. Youths masquerading as satyrs, with sequined beards and horns on their foreheads, shaggy-haired, girded in plumes or naked save for the scantiest of loincloths, bent back their necks or raised sweat-shiny arms and thighs, whirling in wild, furious circles. Tall blacks beat frenziedly on kettledrums, while others with clenched fists like boxers threw out their arms and legs to the ever-faster throbbing drums, some being tossed high in the air by their fellows and landing with shouts as they bounded back into the mass. Here and there Antônio caught glimpses of a sweat-streaked Apache, white war paint glistening against a brown skin; a prince in jeweled turban; mulattos in bright yellow wigs; hooded, white-cloaked specters with slit holes for anonymous eyes; gorgeous girls in G-strings and spangles; plumed and painted transvestites, their cheeks aglitter with sequins and their narrow hips awash with beads, bangles, and sweat. And he saw these baccantes twist, stamp, shuffle, and leap as in a trance, at once sweet and savage, like nothing he had ever seen before.

Florsina and Olympia, watching near Campo Grande, found themselves mimicking the dancers' measured stamping as they stood among the sidewalk spectators, feet still, yet dancing with their whole weight. A group of costumed mulatto girls passed them; they seemed to be in a hypnotic state, moving slowly, always on the point of letting the beat get ahead of them, their eyes closed and yet body erect, swaying slightly on their toes. Among them a slim girl, all glitter and white plumes, staggered forward as if half asleep, her eyes closed, as if the beat of the drums supported her languid arabesques. Olympia felt the compulsive power of

the dance and would have moved into the street herself to join them had not Florsina held her back.

Down Sete de Setembro, where Antônio now danced in mindless rapture, the drums all at once began to beat violently once more, and then faster and faster until it was as if thunder were rising from the pavement. The dancers broke loose, eyes flashing, faces laughing. Their four limbs whirled, speeding up to the rhythm, defying equilibrium. Then Antônio saw one youth totter, lose his footing, and fall. The dancers, held by the power of the drums, did not, could not, stop. The youth seemed to be trampled underfoot. For an instant Antônio saw his face, his mouth opened in a soundless scream. He tried to move toward him, but the mass of flailing fists and whirling bodies kept dancing, pushing and shoving forward, and Antônio was carried along with it. The heat was suffocating, distorting sight and sound. He tried to shove his way to the side of the street and was shoved heedlessly back. Bodies were shaken from feet to head by convulsive motions that grew more violent upon reaching the shoulders. Heads wagged backward and forward, as though separated from decapitated bodies. To Antônio, struggling to free himself from this frenzied mass, it was now a nightmare. No one seemed to stop for breath, as if their bodies were nothing but tightly knotted muscles and nerves moving to the drums' furious rhythm.

Antônio reached the curb and roughly pushed his way through the watching crowd; his clothes were sodden and he staggered like a drunken man. Looking back across the mass of bobbing bodies there was no sign where the man had fallen. Nor did Antônio know that just ahead on the hill that sloped down to seething Praça Castro Alves a killer in a blue shirt carrying a *peixeira* or machete, such as all villagers wore in their belts, was about to plunge his weapon into the back of one of the dancing revelers. This homicide, the fourth of Carnival, would never be solved and it would be days before the police could identify the victim.

Daybreak Monday arrived unexpectedly fast. José Carlos, Eleandro, Jorge, and hundreds of thousands of young village immigrants like them—those like Antônio and the girls had quit the scene long before—returned home spent, psychologically exhausted, muscles taut from the long dance, yet exhilarated, as if awakening from a

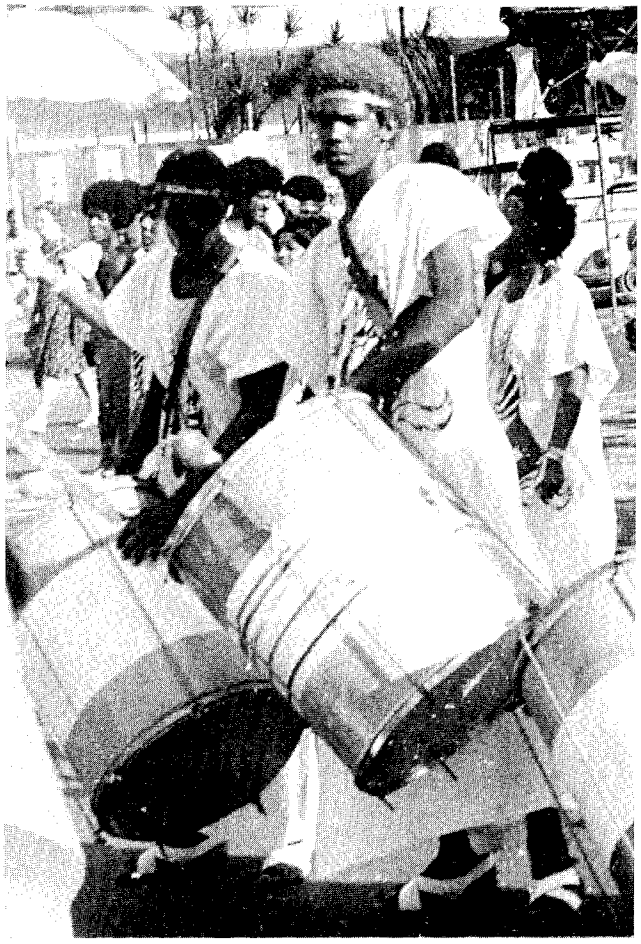
A satyr.

dream. Faces grimy, clothing stiffened by sweat and dust, they no longer avoided the inquisitive glances of other people in the street; they were now part of Carnival.

* * * * *

Monday, February 21

By now the sirens of ambulances and police cars grew frequent as casualties were rushed to the free public emergency room of Getulio Vargas Hospital.[1] The scene was as cruelly bizarre as any Federico Fellini fantasy: in the cavernous, neon-lit hall, the Carnival revelers milled about as, in the streets, the girls in sequins and plumes, musicians carrying drums, men in gaudy *mortalhas*; but now they were battered and bleeding, costumes torn, smeared with blood and hanging in shreds. Some clutched stomach wounds, others held improvised bandages to their heads, a few lay unconscious on



Drummers.

Dancers.

operating tables. Interns and nurses in white smocks, haggard from strain and sleeplessness, went about stitching up wounds, transfusing blood, wrapping bandages, giving injections. A young girl whose leg had been crushed screamed and screamed, an earsplitting shriek of pain and fear. An old black woman went from one to another, swabbing wounds with disinfectant and scraping hair away with a razor blade.

Within the next 48 hours, or until dawn of Ash Wednesday, Getulio Vargas alone would treat just under 600 cases, including 106 victims of assault; 36 of knifings; 7 gun wounds; 3 trampled upon; 36 hurt in falls; 9 cases of exhaustion; 5 attempted suicides; and 3 found unconscious in the street. There would also be 71 victims of collisions, 82 persons knocked down or run over by cars, 47 injured in wrecks, and 7 from falls from moving

1. The injured American was this writer, whose left leg was cut when a bandstand collapsed as he was dancing the *samba* at 2 A.M., beer bottle in hand, just below it, hence becoming one of Getulio Vargas Hospital's more than 600 Carnival casualties.

vehicles. No statistics were kept for others treated at private clinics that specialized in traumatic injuries or by their own doctors. The death toll for the six days of Carnival would eventually rise to 8 homicides and 10 traffic fatalities, with the injured estimated at close to 2,000 people. The city authorities were to announce it had been the most violent Carnival in Salvador's history.

* * * * *

Monday evening, as at least 500,000 revelers once more took to the streets, Salvador's Secretary for Public Security, Colonel Luiz Arthur de Carvalho, met with the Carnival organizers to report more than a hundred arrests had been made. Colonel Arthur was particularly concerned about reports that gangs of youth, mostly from the Apache *bloco*, were threatening people and starting fights with policemen. That afternoon four detectives of the city's robbery division had been surrounded and beaten by youths wearing the Apaches' red and white Indian costumes; one detective's loaded revolver had been taken.

Crime was sweeping the city. A 17-year-old girl was found on a beach, raped by 7 youths. A four-year-old boy was rushed to Getulio Vargas Hospital, the victim of a sexual assault by his uncle. In Liberdade, youths in *mortalhas* smashed up a bar. Dozens of complaints came from girls that they had been attacked and molested. One man told the police he had been beaten with the parasols of some revelers, another with the poles of some youths costumed as fishermen. Monday evening a 40-year-old construction laborer was shot in his sleep in Pernambues; neighbors said a homosexual ex-convict had threatened to kill him during Carnival for protecting a small boy some days before. Near Praça Castro Alves a stevedore died when his head struck the pavement during a drunken fight with a notorious pimp and drug pusher known as One Tooth, who was found to be carrying 30 grams of marijuana. In the twilight before dawn (*madrugada*), a group of student merrymakers stormed the poolside bar of the luxurious Hotel da Bahia, situated on the Carnival route of Sete de Setembro. In the noise and confusion of the crowded bar, one drunken student climbed the diving platform and plunged into the pool. It was some time before anyone realized that his body, floating on the surface in a loose *mortalha*, was lifeless.

* * * * *

Tuesday, February 22

Early in the morning rumors swept Pau Miudu *favela* that hundreds of *favelados* were going to take advantage of the police preoccupation with Carnival to storm some empty government-owned land near a low-cost housing project known as IAPI. Carolina gathered her two children and hastened to join what became a huge crowd, more than 1,500 people. As they marched into the IAPI land, tearing down fences and frantically rushing to seize a plot of ground for themselves, this squatters' army sang the Apache Carnival song:

> My body is inviolate, it is mine and what does it have?
> Come close to me, come close to me, you will find out.

The few policemen along the way made no attempt to stop them. Soon everyone was running about the large field, marking out lots and starting to clear away brush; some of the men had brought lumber with them and at once began putting up crude shacks. Carolina left a friend to guard her piece of ground and the children and hurried through the nearest streets, desperately searching for lumber, branches, boxes, anything to start a hut.

Two policemen came and confiscated one family's tools, tearing down their hut frame. But the squatters had swollen to more than 300 families now and people stood about, silently staring at the policemen. Some couples held hands and in front of the adults a row of black children, with bulging bellies and spindly legs, gaped at them out of round eyes. Frightened when reinforcements did not arrive, the policemen went away.

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After the scattered showers of the previous days, the sky Tuesday was blue and cloudless. Every *bloco* was out in full force and in Praça Castro

Alves the sheer mass of people was awesome; the crowds laughed, drank beer in great quantities, and seemed pitched to high excitement by the deafening music of the *trios* and the awareness that this was the final day of Carnival. There was an undercurrent of apprehension too, a touch of anxiety; a Salvador newspaper, *A Tarde*, had reported the evening before: "Almost like a horde of real Indians, furious and bloodthirsty, the Apaches returned this year to mark their participation in Carnival with violence, becoming a major preoccupation of the police authorities. On the streets of Salvador, the Apaches are visited with animosity and their name pronounced with terror."

This was unfair. More than 300 youths had been refused membership in the Apaches because they had police records; most of those allowed to join were young, black, village immigrants as law-abiding as José Carlos had always been. The majority were no more unruly than the Comanches, Tupis, or Cheyennes, who, perhaps inspired by the Kung Fu, Tarzan, and spaghetti westerns that were their standard cultural fare, also plunged through the crowds in single file, whooping and opening a path with their elbows and fists.

Then Tuesday afternoon a more serious incident occurred. A young man in a red and white Apache outfit attempted to caress one of the members of an all-girl *bloco, La Vem Elas* (Here They Come), which had a reputation for militant feminism. Instead of dodging away as most girls did, she had hit him across the face. When he slapped her back, a free-for-all erupted between the girls and a gang of Apache-dressed youth, which it took the police to break up. The Secretary of Public Security at once met with the Apache leaders and announced he was ordering all Apaches off Salvador's streets. Anyone found in a red and white Indian costume, he told them, would be arrested.

José Carlos heard the news with disbelief and anger. Some of his friends refused to comply with the order and for a few hours pitched battles between small bands of police and Apaches erupted along the Carnival route. Truckloads of military troops were rushed in and, armed with bludgeons, they soon rounded up 124 Apaches and took them to jail. It was announced Apache membership would be restricted to 1,000 members in the coming year. By evening,as the revelry reached its height, they were all gone from the streets. José Carlos returned home, changed, and went to relieve Pedro at the hotel; for him, as for Antônio after seeing the man trampled, Carnival was over.

* * * * *

Mrs. Suzanne Converse of Columbus, Ohio, sat down at the bar to order an *agua de coco*; she was hot and tired after watching the Carnival processions with her tour group and found coconut milk refreshing. When the three young bartenders paid her no attention but stood excitedly talking among themselves in Portuguese, she drummed her fingers impatiently on the bar. But the muscular young man who finally took her order could not have been more attentive and polite. Mrs. Converse watched, fascinated, as he lifted a green coconut in the air and, with a large machete such as peasants use, sliced away the top of the coconut with deft, quick, sure strokes. Then she looked away. Perhaps she was being foolish, she said later, but somehow, watching him, she had felt a vague, unpleasant sense of cold and nameless dread.

* * * * *

Truckloads of policemen arrived at the IAPI grounds Tuesday evening and began systematically tearing down the hastily built squatters' shacks. Carolina stayed beside the dying fire she had made in the center of her shelter, a patchwork of lumber, branches, canvas, and old cardboard boxes. She had moved her possessions from Pau Miudo that morning: a bare, broken mattress, a box covered with earthenware dishes, and above it a faded colored print of St. George. Nothing else but a pile of rags to the right of the entrance and, hanging from the ceiling, some neighbors' laundry she was trying to dry over the fire.

A neighbor woman had come to tell her what the police were doing. "What can I do, Carolina?" she had sobbed. "I've got eight children but only two can go to school because I don't have the money. I had to pay 250 cruzeiros in Pau Miudo just for one room. They can't take away this chance to find land for nothing. Nobody's using this land."

But they could. A few minutes later a young policeman appeared in Carolina's doorway. "It's

much better you leave now, *senhora*," he said, "as we are going to tear down everything."

* * * * *

By midnight the revelry along Avenida Sete de Setembro had started to die and the trucks and men of the city sanitation department arrived to sweep the streets and haul the debris away. But in Praça Castro Alves it would go on until dawn with no signs of letting up.[2] In one place the drums would beat out a figured bass and everyone marked time by stamping, and shouts, amid thousands of upraised arms, in wild triumph, would come from another—"*Bahia! Bahia! Bahia!*"[3] With fierce cries the revelers incited one another to dance ever more furiously, their limbs powered by the vibrations of the thrilling, coaxing guitars of the *trios eletricos*. However one might resist, fearing the violence and the excesses, the guitars would win. One's anxiety might be strong—the flailing fists, the sweating bodies, the clamor, mingling and seething of the dancing mob, the riotous twisting and jumping, all foes to discipline and rationality. But the noise prodded the body into a fury of excitement. Odors oppressed the senses, the pungent smell of frying bean cakes and broiling meat, the scent of moist bodies, and a waft of beer, with another smell, something familiar, the stench of urine that seeped from the flooded alleyways onto the asphalt under the dancers' feet. At the beating of the drums, the heart fluttered, the head spun, and one was caught up in it, in the blinding, deafening joy of freedom unrestrained. Sweat streaming down their faces, the dancers never stopped until the eastern sky across the bay grew light and the full flush of dawn burst upon the exhausted city. Laughter flared into angry shrieks or subsided with a caress. Flailing arms provoked answering blows with broken beer bottles or fists; bloodied victims might push their way to safety or tear like wounded animals screaming through the mass; but the gap would always quickly close in this dance of chaotic, liberated flesh as all were once more absorbed into the swirling, laughing, tumultuous frenzy.

* * * * *

In the Cathedral, Avelar Brandão Vilela, the Cardinal of Salvador, waited for the disturbance in the back to quiet down before he began his Ash Wednesday sermon. The band of drunken revelers who had staggered in, limp and grimy in their tarnished costumes, panting and noisy, now settled down on their knees to pray.

"There is nothing but bombardment and violence against the Brazilian family and its moral code today," he began in his sonorous voice.

> Elements both of a moral nature and of an economic nature can be blamed for the family's disintegration. When morality fails it leads to the destruction of the family and of the human being. The financial situation under which most of our people are forced to live is a further cause for perturbation. Trying to uphold the old customs of life, the moral code handed down for generations, on only the most meager of livelihoods, frustrates every plan the family makes, if such plans indeed still exist. In the hour of trying to solve its greatest problems, the family is deeply troubled.
>
> Our people have an inexhaustible patience; in their suffering, they somehow endure. But we cannot abuse this strength. It should not be permitted. We must avoid confusing the strength of endurance, the Christian response to unavoidable fate, with that blind conformity of deadened spirits which makes it possible for men to accept the unacceptable. We must return to our traditional moral code, that acquired naturally over centuries, and through belief in God.

2. The danger of a panic and stampede in such large, excited crowds was ever-present. In Rio de Janeiro, when a cylinder of chloro used to clean a swimming pool burst open during a Carnival ball, some 3,500 revelers panicked and in the stampede to escape the fumes, 192 persons were trampled upon and hospitalized with serious injuries.

3. Here Bahia refers to a local football (soccer) team, not the state. It is commonly said that the Brazilian obsession with football, Carnival, and other *festas* explains their relative political passivity; this could be true.