

The June Festivities

The night of St. John – the most important day of the year for the Santo Daime church (although I’ve also heard that said about the Day of Kings, in January). The night of St. John – the time of transformation, when the energy gets really intense (as if it weren’t already!). A time in which we sing and dance Mestre’s beautiful hinário, all night.

However, before I dive into the night of St. John as it is celebrated in our line of the Santo Daime, I think it’s important to at least note that the celebration of the night of St. John isn’t just limited to the Santo Daime – it is a major holiday throughout Brazil; it is a crucial part of the June festival, a series of back-to-back celebrations of various saints.

Therefore, a day or so before the night of St. John, I walked for half an hour from the inn to the school grounds, in order to watch the June festival as they celebrate it in Céu do Mapiá. When I arrived, Rick and Jorge were sitting around in the area outside of the school office, where there were some tables and chairs. We just sort of hung out, watching as more and more kids came streaming past, headed to one of the wings of the school where they were served bowls of rice pudding and some cake (we were also given some of these delicious desserts by a lovely smiling man who specifically came over to make sure that we had some). Then, after about ½ an hour of lounging around, we followed the crowds, and strolled over to another part of the school grounds: a flat rectangle of concrete, sort of like a basketball court that was open to the sky, the borders of which were decorated with the ubiquitous hanging paper streamers.

The festival was, at least in the eyes of this enthusiastically-appreciative gringo, quintessentially Brazilian: lots of good natured people milling around; a woman periodically making forceful announcements into a microphone asking the teachers to get the students ready for the dances and/or asking the teachers to bring them to the court (with little if any effect; no one paid her the least bit of attention); people crowding around a little house where you could buy tickets for the various types of food that they were preparing (even though the food wasn't quite ready yet); and regional music blaring over the loudspeaker. No one, of course, paid the least attention to us gringos. They were too busy just living life: the teenagers enthusiastically jostling around with each other; the younger boys playing around on the court with a makeshift "soccer" ball while other boys their age zipped around here and there on their rough and ready bikes; and a little boy, not more than a year and 1/2 old, decked out with a tiny fake goatee dangling from his chin trundling around with his little stick, attempting to chase away a dog that was quite a bit bigger than he was, but which he (boldly! triumphantly!) overcame by continuing to march forward with his stick, until the dog finally slunk away, looking at him reproachfully.

The official dances began with the young children, ranging I'd guess from five to eleven years old. They came onto the court in a long line of male and female pairs, with the extra twist that during this festival, some of the girls were dressed up as men – wearing fake beards, painted on mustaches, etc. These girls (and some of the boys as well), also often wore straw hats, ragged jeans, and mismatched shoes. Apparently, by doing so, they were pretending to be the "hillbillies" of the region (this actually was the word that one Brazilian man used to describe them).

Anyhow, while the music blared from the loudspeaker, these kids tromped around the edge of the court with great gusto, most of them appearing to enjoy themselves immensely, carrying little paper bags decorated with stars and crescent moons and so on that were lit from within with small taper candles. These bags were then deposited around the edge of the court, forming a sort of very loose boundary line. Periodically, however, the candle inside a bag would catch the bag on fire, and then some adult would either stamp the flaming bag out, or at times, people would just watch it burn. Several different teachers also rather frequently had to chase away young boys who seemed to glory in the opportunity to dash into the court while the different dances were happening, showing the authority figures that they weren't about to be intimidated. Another teacher at one point even rather forcefully picked up a bike, with the child still on it, and huffily deposited both the bike and the child outside the candle-lit boundary of the court.

The dances were fun, even if they were, shall we say, rather less than professional. All of the dances were choreographed as a group – there wasn't any solitary pair dancing happening. Instead, everyone as a group would, for example, raise up their arms while holding hands with others on both sides, creating an arm-raised tunnel that various pairs would then hive off from, duck underneath, only to then themselves form the far end of the “tunnel” through which yet other pairs would pass – all of this happening with a lot of smiles and laughter.

The various adults (I'm guessing that they were primarily teachers in the school) that either at times joined in the dances themselves or directed the children in their various dance moves, seemed to have had at least as much fun as the kids, if not more (it was cute to see the kids screaming in delight at the sight of their teachers romping around on the concrete slab, enjoying themselves immensely).

Then, after the young kids finished up, there was more milling around, until finally (taa taa: imaginary horns blaring!) the teenagers took the court. They were, of course, much more skilled in their dance moves than the young kids, and the dance moves themselves were more ornate, and many of them seemed to really relish the opportunity, either to flounce their skirts, or (particularly the older boys), to tromp around acting like their stereotype of how a “hillbilly” man would behave. There was also a lot of sexual energy flying around, as this dance was clearly a type of socially sanctioned opportunity for the teenage boys and girls to interact with each other quasi-romantically, without having to overtly acknowledge this fact. So, they could put their arms around each others’ shoulders, or waists, and twirl each other around, and move together and then apart, bowing and smiling, all with the very evident approval of the adults who were watching and making comments to each other (only about the quality of the dancing, I’m sure.)

All in all: it was wonderful to have the chance to see the people of Mapiá in a sorta-outside-of-Daime context, just people enjoying themselves, laughing, dancing, eating food, telling stories.

And then – what a transformation! – it was also wonderful to see them again, a day or so later, in the church, in their fardas, getting ready to sing and dance Mestre’s hinário, going back and forth, each in their place in their line, singing and dancing hymn after hymn, all night long, during the ultra-amplified, Santo Daime night of St. John.

