

Carolina Cantarino

# Baianas of the acarajé: a story of resistance

**T**he craft of the *Baianas of the acarajé* is a cultural heritage of Brazil. Soon after its announcement, equivocations about “declaring the *acarajé* a cultural heritage” and other misunderstandings hid the true value of a woman’s profession historically present in the country: the *Baianas* with their trays. The pride in such acknowledgement could be seen on the faces of the young and old black women who were present at the ceremony of certification of the craft, held on August 15, 2005, at the headquarters of the National Institute of Artistic and Historic Heritage (Iphan), in Salvador.

Baiana. Source: O Rio antigo do fotógrafo Marc Ferrez, 3<sup>a</sup> edição, 1989, Ex Libris Press Limited.



On the occasion, the *Baianas of the acarajé* used their traditional attire. Its main characteristic is the round skirt, complemented by other ornaments like the shawl on their backs, the turban on their heads, the smock and the necklaces with the colors of their personal *orixás*<sup>1</sup>. In the streets of Salvador and other cities in the state of Bahia (less often in other regions of the country), the traditional *Baianas* are always accompanied by their trays that carry not only the *acarajé* and likely complements such as *vatapá* and dried shrimp, but also other “saintly food”: *abará*, *lelê*, *queijada*, *passarinha*, *bolo de estudante*, white and brown *cocada*. The trays of many *Baianas* from Salvador have gained sophistication: made with glass panes, several contain expensive aluminum pans and wooden spoons.

The *acarajé*, the main attraction on the tray, is a small cake characteristic of the Candomblé religion. The *acarajé* is a compound word which derives from the Yoruba language: “*acará*” (ball of fire) and “*jé*” (to eat), that is “to eat a ball of fire”. Its origin is explained by a myth about the relationship between *Xangô* and his wives, *Oxum* and *Iansã*. The cake became an offering to these *orixás*.

Despite being sold in a profane context, the *acarajé* is considered a sacred food by the *Baianas*. For them, the small cake made of black-eyed beans and fried in palm oil cannot be dissociated from the Candomblé. So, even though it is not a secret, its recipe cannot be modified and must be prepared only by the “daughters-/sons-of-saints”.

“It may seem we give greater importance to *acarajé* than to the craft of the *Baianas of the acarajé*, but this has a reason: in this cultural scenario, the *acarajé* is the central element. The craft would not have such importance if the *acarajé* were only a

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traditional food”, says Roque Laraia, an anthropologist at the University of Brasilia and member of the Consultative Council of Iphan in his report on the proposal for registering the craft of the *Baianas of acarajé* as a cultural heritage. The inventory that informed the registration process was carried out by the National Folklore and Popular Culture Center.

Raul Lody and Elizabeth de Castro Mendonça were the anthropologists that carried out the research which includes interviews, bibliographical research, registers on tape and, among other things, visits to places in the city of Salvador, such as Bonfim, Pelourinho, Barra, Ondina, Rio Vermelho and Piatã, where the *Baianas of the acarajé* are to be found. The visit to the neighborhood of Brotas was attributed to the presence of an evangelical *Baiano* (male) with his tray.

The *Baianas* increasingly suffer the competition from bars, supermarkets and restaurants that sell the *acarajé* as fast food. This appropriation of the *acarajé* goes against its original cultural context. Their selling as “Jesus’s cakes” by followers of evangelical religions – who lay Bibles on their trays – has stirred up many discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: *Orixás* are Yoruba deities (see also *orishas*).



*Baianas of acarajé. Carolina Cantarino*

“If you have a religion that goes against the Candomblé, why do you sell *acarajé* and not any other tidbits?” questions Dona Dica sitting next to her tray at Quincas Berro D’Água Plaza, in Pelourinho. She notes that to most *Baianas* with their trays, daughters-of-saints, the *acarajé* is indissociable from the Candomblé. This indissolubility is also a strategy to differentiate their products, in the increasingly competitive market of Salvador, a city that attracts many tourists for being considered the *locus* of the Africanism in Brazil, from which an undeniable commerce of black culture has developed.

Despite resisting appropriations of the religious significance of the *acarajé*, the *Baianas* have welcomed other changes. “In the past it was very difficult because we would have to peel and crush the beans on the rock. Today there is no more suffering, the girls use the electric grinder or even the blender,” comments Arlinda Pinto Nery. She has worked with her tray for more than 50 years and learned the craft from her mother.

Dona Arlinda is a member of the Association of the *Baianas of the Acarajé and Mush*, which has been active for 14 years in the state of Bahia and claims two thousand associates, among

*Baianas* and *Baianos* of the *acarajé* as well as vendors of such foods as mush, *pamonha* and cous-cous. The association works to promote the professionalization of the activity and has succeeded in obtaining its seal of approval: through partnerships with Sebrae (Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service) and Senac (National Commercial Training Service), the associates have access to courses on food manipulation, hygiene norms and finances, so they can better administrate their earnings.

### THE WOMEN WITH THEIR TRAYS YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The trade of *acarajé* had its beginning back in the years of slavery when the so-called earning slave women (*escravas de ganho*) who worked on the streets for their mistresses (usually small impoverished owners), carried out several activities, among them, selling delicacies on their trays. Back on the East Coast of Africa, the women already carried out the itinerant trade of edible products, which gave them some autonomy in relation to men and many times the role of family provider.

The street trade in Brazilian cities enabled slave women to raise their condition above that of merely servicing their masters: they guaranteed, on several occasions, the subsistence of their own families, they were important for the establishment of community bonds among urban slaves and also for the creation of the religious sisterhoods and the *Candomblé*. Many daughters-of-saints started to sell the *acarajé* in order to fulfill their religious obligations, which had to be renewed periodically.

Nevertheless, suspicions that such freedom of movement enjoyed by those slave

women with their trays rendered them dangerous turned them the target of repressive behaviors and laws.

Selling the *acarajé* continued to be a relevant economic activity for many women after the abolishment of slavery. Today, entire families depend on the earnings of the *Baianas*: 70% of the women belonging to the Association of the *Baianas of the Acarajé and Mush* in the state of Bahia are family providers. It is part of these women's routine to purchase the ingredients for the preparation of the *acarajé*, a hard and daily job: they need to rise early, to go to the market, to search for good quality products at accessible prices. The prices of shrimp and palm oil vary the most. Many women cannot afford to purchase new trays or even to safely store their old ones, which are then left on the beach.

"Sometimes we feel like orphans because we work alone with our trays, from dawn to dusk, exposed to the cold, heat and even violence. But we're persevering black women: if we do not sell today, we will sell tomorrow. We are a symbol of resistance since the days of slavery", argues Maria Leda Marques, president of the Association that, together with the *Candomblé House Ilê Axé Opo Afonjá* and the Center for East African Studies of the Federal University of Bahia, have requested the registration of the *acarajé* with the National Institute of National Artistic and Historical Heritage (Iphan).

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