



Exploring Bahia

Eyitayo Aloh

“Bahia presents an African flavour that cannot be found anywhere else outside the coast of Africa and while most of that may not be exactly like the original, you cannot help but credit these folks for their effort to connect with their African roots.”

I would be going to Brazil. The thought excited me for two reasons that, strangely, are connected by music: one, I was going to step my feet somewhere close to the video location of one my favourite musician, Michael Jackson; two, I would be giving a lecture about another of my favourite musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

My excitement did not wane in any way all through the 30-hour trip from Lagos to Bahia, Salvador State in Brazil. In fact, rather than being jet lagged and tired, I was pumped up with energy; the air around me seemed to have the same effect of a performance-enhancing drug. As my host Ann Sobotta drove from the airport and hit the central avenue, I could not help but notice how steeped the city of Bahia was in culture -- Yoruba culture.

Along the way, I spotted a woman dressed in an all-white iro, buba and gele, though the wrapper was not tied around her waist the same way a Yoruba woman in south-west Nigeria did. She handed out flowers to everyone who cared to collect it from her.

Ann must have noticed my shock as my gaze stayed on the woman.

“Welcome to Bahia, the largest population of black people outside Africa. You will find that the black community in Bahia are all descendants of the slaves who were shipped here to work in the sugarcane plantation of Bahia.”

Bahia presents an African flavour that cannot be found anywhere else outside the coast of Africa and while most of that may not be exactly like the original, you cannot help but credit these folks for their effort to connect with their African roots.

Also at the main avenue in the centre of Bahia, right there in the centre, were statues of all the Yoruba gods, moving to a song that seemed to be coming out of the water upon which they were erected. The statues were moving in a circle and the names of each deity came up with each rotation. Sango (which is spelt Xango) also 'breathed' some pyrotechnic fire; Exu (by now I am thinking they must have replaced all 's' with 'x'), the god of cunning, had his own space of blackness emphasised.

No, I could not be in Brazil. This must be the centre of Ife or Ibadan, I thought. But, yes, it was Brazil and I was in Bahia. I felt a fusion of pride and distress. How come something like this is in Brazil? The Yoruba culture has been transplanted and it blossoms in this South American soil. Deep inside me, I knew I was going to enjoy this place.

My first stop the following morning was the Centre for Cultural Studies in the middle of Bahia, located in one of the locales that has been beamed to the whole world through Michael Jackson's music video *They Don't Really Care About Us*. The yellow-painted building overlooks the hills and the sea on one side and the 'Favelas' (think rows of houses that tend to rise from the foot of a mountain and continue right to the top) on the other. There were a handful of students and academics seated in the hall listening to me talk about Fela's music and how it serves as a weapon against oppression.

However, a certain man caught my eye. All grey and reflective in candour the man dropped a tear or two and as the lecture progressed. I must be touching a soul with my speech, I thought. At the end of the lecture, he walked up to me and said, 'That was very good. You have done justice to Fela's legacy.'

'Meet Carlos Moore, Fela's official biographer,' Ann said, before I could ask.

I felt the ground should open and swallow me. I have spoken about a man I know of before the man who knew him. Did I say anything wrong? The old man smiled as we shook hands and as if reading my thoughts, he reassured me that I had done well with the lecture. In fact, I had done well enough to earn an invitation to his house. But first, a drink for a job well done.

As we stepped onto the foyer of the Centre, my nose picked the aroma of freshly made Akara.

“Have you tried 'Akaraje' yet?” Moore asked, pointing ahead. I followed his hand and saw the same woman I had seen the night before, dressed still in that same all-white dress. Except that this time, she was not handing out flowers, but seated opposite a very big pot of hot oil and frying Akara like any other Akara seller in Ketu market or Osu, the capital of Akara worldwide.

But it wasn't just one woman doing the frying; there was a long line of women, all dressed in resplendent white and frying Akara for sale. We strolled to one of them and I sampled it. Aside from being harder than the ones in Nigeria, it was as tasty. No one had an explanation for why they call it Akaraje though.

Why must every Akara sellers in Bahia dress in white?

“Because Akara is linked to the 'Candomble', the traditional religion of the Yoruba descendants in Brazil,” Moore volunteered. “Usually it is fried during the Festival of the Orisas (Yes, you guessed right, they spell it Orixá) at the community of the worshippers. However, along the line, peopled like it and so it became available all year round and so the people you see frying the Akara are members of the Candomble.”

As it turned out, the next stop on my lecture tour was the Candomble temple (or shrine if you prefer). Fela believed in

the Orisas and the traditional gods, so it had been arranged for me to deliver a lecture and conduct a workshop for children there. The temple is an all-white building located at the top of the mountain and it served as a monastery for the worshippers of the Orisas and the other Yoruba gods. I even had the rare privilege of meeting the head of the Candomble, an amiable elderly lady who simply introduced herself as Iya L'orisa Ajikutu (She actually said it in Yoruba).

Iya L'orisa Ajikutu was surrounded by women, all dressed in white. According to her, all the orisas are revered, but she was a servant of Yemoja. It was obvious they had gone a great extent to research Yoruba history and mythology. There was even a Yoruba inscription on the wall that she told me was presented by a visitor from Nigeria.

Aside from the Candomble, music also plays a great part in the drive by the black community in Bahia to connect with their African roots. This is well exemplified by the 'Ile Aiye' Musical movement. While the group plays a mixture of Afrobeat and heavy percussion, they have an educational arm that teaches African music and commissions research. They have a music venue, similar to the African Shrine, that also doubles as a resource centre for the teaching and propagation of African culture.

My lecture there was well received and I got an invitation to attend the Friday night performance by the group and it brought back memories of the African Shrine back in Lagos. While I cannot claim that I understood what they were singing, even though they called it Yoruba, I enjoyed the rhythm and admired their desire to connect with their roots.

Closely linked to the music is dance and martial arts. Please step into the world of Capoeira. The best way to describe this

will be 'Dancing Kung Fu'. Side step both ways and kick out into the air, sway your hips to the left and the right and then duck an air blow. My guess is, this is linked more with Angolan culture, but it seems everywhere you turn, everyone is doing a Capoeira jig; keeping fit and keeping in touch with their heritage.

At the end of the week, I eventually made it to Carlos Moore's home, a high-rise modern building, popularly known as Condomino. Close to the top and giving a spectacular view of the modern and ancient side of the city, Moore's apartment is just the perfect setting for the fertile mind for the man of letters.

Our discussion centred mainly on Fela and my experience in the city. We agreed that so much had gone into reconnecting with their roots and it seemed that the people were proud of it and willing to do more.

When it was time to leave Bahia, I didn't feel like it. The city had grown on me and being a Yoruba man, it is the closest I have been to home away from my Ilesha home. As the plane taxied out of the runway, I took one final look at the city, blew a kiss at its mountains and sandy beaches and I told myself: "I am proud to be African."

Eyitayo Aloh is a widely travelled Literary Art journalist and writer; he has previously worked for New Age, Post Express and ThisDay Newspapers. He lives in the United Kingdom.