

Iyá Nassô

(c. 1780–c. 1850),

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alias Francisca da Silva, an important priestess of the Yoruba *orixá* (deity) Shango who was widely believed to have played a formative role in shaping Afro-Brazilian Candomblé into a new religious form distinct from its African antecedents. Born in Yorubaland, she was enslaved as an adult and shipped to the city of Salvador da Bahia. As a freedwoman, she eventually returned to West Africa, a journey that has become central to oral narratives about the early history of Candomblé. Before leaving Bahia, she founded a temple, Ilê Iyá Nassô Oká, which has always been led by women, as have several others claiming spiritual descent from it. In 1986 Ilê Iyá Nassô Oká became the first Afro-Brazilian temple to be recognized by the Brazilian federal government as a national historic heritage site.

Until recently, almost nothing was known about Francisca da Silva's life before her enslavement, but the Yoruba name ascribed to her, Iyá Nassô, provided important clues. In the royal court of the Oyo empire, "Iyá Naso" was the title of one of the highest positions in the religious hierarchy, used by the king's personal priestess of Xangô, a legendary ancestor of the royal family and one of the kingdom's most important deities. The palace shrine to Xangô was located within her living quarters and she was entrusted with absolute authority over the organization of rituals related to him.

At the time of Francisca da Silva/Iyá Nassô's enslavement, Oyo had been a major regional military and economic power for well over a century, receiving tribute from other Yoruba states and also holding some sway over neighboring kingdoms such as Nupe and Dahomey. By the late 1780s, however, Oyo was rocked by internal power struggles, with one armed revolt after another. After decades of decline, Oyo fell in 1835 to the armies of a neighboring empire, the Sokoto Caliphate. Huge numbers of war captives from the fallen kingdom were sold into Atlantic slavery, with Brazil and Cuba receiving the vast majority. It is not known which of the many battles fought during this period was responsible for the enslavement of Iyá Nassô, but she and one of her sons arrived in Brazil probably around 1810. Nothing is known about their enslavement, except that they were baptized, respectively, as Francisca and Domingos. They obtained their freedom sometime before 1822, adopting the surname da Silva, probably their former master's last name.

Recently uncovered evidence has shed light on Iyá Nassô's life as a *liberta* (freedwoman) in Brazil and her legendary return to Africa. By 1824 she had formed a relationship with *liberto* José Pedro Autran. Records show that he and Francisca da Silva, as Iyá Nassô was officially known in Brazil, were married according to Catholic rites in 1832. Also a Yoruba speaker, Autran was an important individual in his own right, a member of a prominent black Catholic brotherhood devoted to Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos (Our Lady of the Black Rosary). Like many other prosperous freedmen, he utilized the Catholic institution of godparenting to establish ties with newly arriving Africans, especially people

from his own language group. Some of the many enslaved godchildren linked to him and by extension to his wife were blood relatives or otherwise known to them. For example, in 1824, Autran became godfather to a captive baptized as Thomé, another son of his wife's who had been separated from her at the time of her enslavement. The fact that José Pedro became the boy's godfather shows that Iyá Nassô had been informed of her son's arrival and was taking steps to symbolically recreate her kinship to him using the means available in the slave society. Some years later, when Thomé's master died, his mother and her husband provided the funds to purchase his freedom.

By the early 1830s, the family had attained a privileged degree of economic prosperity and material comfort. They owned at least two houses and, like many other freed Africans in Brazil, they also owned slaves, mostly Yoruba-speaking women. One, Marcelina da Silva, better known as "Obatossi" (c. 1800–27 June 1885), was an active participant in the religious community led by her mistress. In its early years, the temple is said to have been located in a district of Salvador called Barroquinha, but in the early 1830s, when Iyá Nassô and her family moved to another parish, it apparently functioned in their home. In 1835 their comfortable life was shattered by the political fallout of a slave revolt led by Islamicized Yoruba speakers, known as the Malê Rebellion. In its wake, anti-African, anti-Muslim hysteria swept the city. More than three hundred Africans, both enslaved and free, were imprisoned, among them Iyá Nassô's two sons, Thomé and Domingos. In the police repression that followed the frustrated rebellion, around two hundred Africans were convicted and two hundred others, absolved for want of evidence, were deported to Africa.

As with many other defendants, the evidence against Iyá Nassô's sons was weak, but they were nonetheless condemned to eight years in prison. Their mother appealed for their sentence to be commuted to deportation, offering to pay their passage herself and swearing to follow them, never to return to Brazil. Her request was granted, and at the end of 1837, she and her husband departed for the West African coast, taking around ten of their slaves with them, including Marcelina's two young children. Marcelina, who had recently purchased her freedom, also accompanied them.

According to one version of the oral tradition, the group's voyage ended in the Yoruba city-state of Ketu. However, new evidence shows that they went to Ouidah, where, like most other returnees from this period, they were offered land. There, Iyá Nassô and her husband established a new religious community. They also were involved in export trade to Brazil. Two years later Marcelina returned to Bahia and assumed leadership of Ile Iyá Nassô Oká. It is unclear how long Iyá Nassô lived after resettling in Ouidah, but she appears to have died before 1859. Her sons, who were barred from returning to Brazil, probably remained in Ouidah with their mother and stepfather, but no evidence of descendants exists there. A family in Ouidah, the Villaças, traces its descent from José Pedro Autran, but apparently the genealogical link is via another wife, not Iyá Nassô.

[See also Silva, Marcelina da "Obatossi."]

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See also

Silva, Marcelina da "Obatossi" <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-75120>>