

## Cowboy Mass: A Show of Faith and Folklore in the Brazilian Backlands

Contributed by Marco Bahé  
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The day is dawning and they are on their way. The image of the cowboy from the Northeast of Brazil, mounted on his unsteady horse, is imposing within the dry vegetation.

Sun cracked faces and thorn marks in the body; they wear chaps, chest protector, jacket, gloves and hat. Everything in leather, as tradition would have it and the job demands. There aren't more elegant clothes for that occasion.

The day is the 24th of July and the place is Sítio Lages, in the interior of the state of Pernambuco, part of the region known as the 'sertão' (the backlands). The Cowboy Service (Missa do Vaqueiro) is about to begin, one of the greatest faith manifestations of the sertão.

Exactly 51 years have passed since the death of Raimundo Jacó, which took place on that same piece of land in the city of Serrita, 544 kilometers away from Recife, capital city of the state of Pernambuco.

Jacó was a man famous in the region for his prowess and also for the 'aboio', a sort of singing inspired by Arab chanting, brought to the country during colonization by Iberian peoples.

On a July night in 1954, he went after a steer his master said was missing. But another worker at the farm, a Miguel Lopes, bet he could catch the animal before him. The two went out into the woods.

Jacó arrived first and was already roping the steer by the feet when Miguel realized he had lost. Taken by anger, he hit Jacó on the head with a rock, and he died right on the spot.

Story goes that the dog that belonged to Raimundo Jacó witnessed the murder and stayed by his owner until the body was found. After that he followed the wake and lay by the grave, rejecting food and water until he died.

Sítio Lages, place of the homicide and burial, became a pilgrimage spot, since many miracles have been attributed to the dead cowboy.

On the third Sunday of July every year, cowboys in the whole northeastern region gather to strengthen their faith and the union amongst them.

The tradition started, in 1971, when the singer and composer Luiz Gonzaga (cousin of Raimundo Jacó) and the famous poet Pedro Bandeira, organized a mass service in homage to the cowboy, celebrated by the priest João Cândia - who would later change the cassock for the leather jacket.

Gonzaga composed 'A Morte do Vaqueiro' (The Death of the Cowboy), which goes like this:

"Numa tarde bem tristonha / Gado muge sem parar / Lamentando seu vaqueiro / Que não vem mais aboiar / Não vem mais aboiar / Tão valente a cantar..."

"On a very sad afternoon / Cattle bellows without stopping / Grieving for his cowboy / Who won't come back to sing / Won't come back to sing / So brave in his singing..."

Standing in front of the altar, about 500 cowboys take off their hats, in respect to the occasion. Before the celebration, one by one, they come closer and place a piece from their outfit as an offering. Harnesses, saddles, chest protectors,

chaps and jackets have been placed.

The preaching starts and the cowboys sing their 'aboios'. At the end, the communion. But there is no wheat host. Manioc flour, sugar candy and cheese represent the body of Jesus. The priest's blessings and the cowboys part with the feeling of duty accomplished.

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