

THE GOLD DAMBALA

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In the past, through no fault of their own, it has been the fate of many Africans to find themselves being treated as though they were material objects to be bought and sold. They can scarcely be blamed if they too begin to treat themselves and each other as though they really were material objects to be used and discarded.

Silvio was African, yes, but he was born in Maracas, near São Salvador, not long before Brazil gained its independence from Portugal.

Like all slaves, he was a man with bitterness locked in his heart. He and his kind were nobody people. Even those who might have been chiefs or medicine men in the old country had no authority here in Brazil, and no respect from their masters either. All they had was hope. They could only cling to the belief that somewhere across the water the dignity of their people still lived, that the old kings and their chiefs still ruled the land and the people, still possessed power and wealth.

Stories were passed down of the old ones, of palaces and courtyards, and long caravans laden with gold and jewels, ivory, spices and incense. The spirit of wealth and material strength gathered mythical force with solid form, and became projected as a figure of worship – the lord Ngune, the black one, the symbol of Africa itself.

Ngune may have been himself a symbol, but Silvio possessed a personal symbol of Ngune – a sacred dambala of segmented gold hinged together to make a headband, and set with a precious ruby. At least, that is what Silvio believed it to be, and none had yet disputed it. He had acquired the dambala from one of the favoured ones, and he in turn had acquired it from an importer of slaves who had brought it from Africa. It was rumoured to have been stolen from the fabled treasure house of Nyanza. At all events it was the most valuable link they had with their ancestral land, their spiritual home.

The favoured ones were the master's personal slaves who lived in the big house, and were allowed to have possessions of their own. The slaves who worked in the plantations had no real possessions, beyond what they could fashion for themselves. But they did have a place that they could call their own: a special private place reserved for Ngune and the people who worshipped him. Silvio was very proud of the dambala which he had dedicated to Ngune, and for many years it had been hanging on the centre pole in this special place.



They were strange people, the favoured ones. For their daily tasks they would wait on the master's table and clean his house. There was even a special attendant whose job it was to stand by while the family sat on the toilet bucket, one by one. The lives and deaths of these favoured ones, it seemed, were still controlled by the master's whim, but their special status often led them to look down on the workforce with disdain.

From time to time one of the slaves would have an idea, an ambition. It was always the same idea, and it never passed beyond the planning stage: an ambition to rise in revolt and put the masters to the knife, to the axe, to the fire, and then to seize their boats and return at last to the ancestral home across the sea. The favoured ones had the opportunity to put these ideas into practice, but every time the subject was raised they would look down their noses and curl their lips. Perhaps they knew too much about the ways of the masters.

Such hopes and ambitions were always frustrated, leaving nothing but despair or sullen resignation. How could emotions like these be put into words? Their fathers sprang from a hundred different tribes with a hundred different languages. The common parlance developed by the slaves had no words for expressing deep thoughts. Their words were expressive of actions and things. When thoughts reached into abstract places where no words made sense, there was only sullen silence. The silence, it could be said, was 'voo', like the throb of a swan's wing. Practical thoughts were 'doo', like the thud of an axe. Brought together, these things could be expressed as voodoo. The people could sing, and dance, and beat the drum, and feel the spirit of Africa, the presence of Ngune, in the cabana which was their own special place.

The slaves had their own medicine-workers, their ngangas with their own dark handed-down skills, and they had discovered secret, bitter ways that even

Africa never knew. And through these secret ways, through voodoo, a plan was hatched. Not even the favoured ones could live for ever, and when they died the ngangas found the power to bring them back to life – of a sort – and then set them to work as the people willed, and let them taste the whip. They had been favoured ones for long enough, and they had to know that their time had come.

Tio Manolo, one of the favoured ones, was nearing his time. He was dying, and voodoo priestess Mama Poupal was helping him to die by sneaking him a very special potion. It was a perfect plan, perfect voodoo. After the magic was done, Manolo himself would kill the masters. Being already dead, threats could not stop him, nor could he incriminate anyone else.

When Manolo died, they gave his body to the slaves to bury in the graveyard below the compound. The master and his family stayed at home, of course, watching from the farmhouse steps as the workforce marched in solemn procession, carrying the bier aloft.

Contra-mestre Pele should have been supervising the funeral, but one of the slave girls had been working her charms on him and he was not there; he was enjoying those charms behind the shack where the slaves ate. The procession reached the graveyard, but there was no funeral. The slaves merely raised a mound of dirt on the surface to look like a grave. Why should they give themselves extra work? Manolo was hurried away and hidden in the special place.

That night all the slaves stood around the naked corpse. They had drums, a gourd rattle, and a bell. Mama Poupal was in charge of the ceremony, but everyone took a part. Two men seized the corpse's arms and held them stretched out and back, close to his ears on either side. The drums made deep rhythms like heartbeats, the handbell clanging in time with every third beat. The rhythm was slow at first, then gradually gathered speed and raced ever faster before sinking to slowness again, rising and falling, over and over,

Chanting, Mama Poupal twirled a sharp slender quill between the palms of her hands, weaving closer until the whirling point pressed between Manolo's ribs, over the heart. The quill seemed to grow shorter as it slowly disappeared into his chest. As it penetrated deeply and the magical drops which it contained seeped through the point, Manolo's heart began to twitch and jump. Feeling the vibration shaking the quill, Poupal withdrew it and held it up triumphantly.

As his dead heart began to pump blood through his veins, Manolo stirred, then felt agony and writhed on the ground, moaning. The two men who had been holding his arms released them. Manolo, a zombie now, stopped writhing and sat up, staring without understanding. The two men drew short heavy whips from their hiding place, pulled Manolo to his feet, and stood on either side, waiting.

Mama Poupal swayed to the drumbeat and commanded the zombie:

"Manolo," she cried. "Dance! Come, join the dance!"

The drums became more urgent and the two whips swung in time with the beat. Lurching, the dead man moved forwards, his arms trying to ward off the lashes, but his reactions were too slow. He staggered around the floor between the dancers, his limbs moving slowly and stiffly.

"Dance, Manolo! Dance!"

The insistent pulse of drum and scourge moved the bedevilled corpse at their bidding, now coaxing, now demanding, driving out what remained of the obstinacy of the living. Relinquishing the last of his will, ungainly yet but gaining strength, the zombie swayed in time to the leather thongs falling on his bare flesh.

Faster and faster grew the rhythm of the dance, and the chanting swelled, until the throbbing and wailing seemed to move the dancer's limbs without effort. Then the beat slowed and the dance stopped. The time had come to instruct the zombie. They leaned the dead man against the centre post below where the dambala hung. Poupal faced him now with gourd and handbell.

"Bona Manolo! Bo Manolo! Mata mestres! Kill the masters!"

The rattling gourd made an insistent sound, and the zombie stared with mouth agape. At each shake of the gourd the two whips cracked together across his grey skin.

"Bona Manolo! Bo Manolo! Mata mestres! Kill the masters!"

Manolo tried to understand with his dead brain, and croaked back at his tormentors: "Serve the masters!"

The whips cracked. "Kill the masters!"

"Kill the chickens?"

Crack! "Kill the masters!"

"Kill the ..."

Crack! "Kill the masters!"

"Kill the masters?"

"Bo Manolo! Kill the masters!"

"Mata mestres!"

"Bona Manolo! Mata mestres!"

Till the time was ripe, Manolo could stay hidden in the special place. Even *contra-mestre* Pele was afraid to enter there, though he would often joke and sneer about it. He had mixed blood, and he knew the power of voodoo.

On the night the *contra-mestre* was paid his wage, it was his custom to harness the *carriola* and drive down to São Salvador to buy drink. So it was that in the early hours of the morning Silvio saw the light of a lantern and heard loud drunken singing at the gate. He listened, fearful lest Manolo should be disturbed or discovered before his time. Cautiously, he crept out of the slave-shack, making sure he remained unobserved.

Two men were staggering arm in arm, and one of them looked like a white sailor. Pele had brought a drinking companion back with him. Together they swayed dangerously close to the special place, and Silvio slipped quickly after them through the shadows, listening to their drunken talk.

From what he heard, it seemed that the sailor was celebrating his last night in Brazil before sailing for Africa, and could not afford to miss the early morning tide. But Pele was more interested in looking for the girl who had been entertaining him during Manolo's funeral.

"Bela jiggi-jig!" he crooned. *"Bona jiggi-jig!"*

"What's in here?" the sailor slurred. "Here, what's in here?" He grabbed Pele's lantern, lurching towards the voodoo cabana and staggering heavily against the door.

Pele tried to steer him away. *"Não, amigo! Mau lugar. Lugar de voodoo – mau voodoo. Fora 'gora! Bela jiggi-jig lá!"*

With drunken insistence the seaman shook off the *contra-mestre's* restraining arm as the door burst open under his weight, and he lurched inside. Pele followed, still trying to dissuade him. Following in the shadows, Silvio crept closer and peered in through the doorway.

The white man was staring at the sacred things hanging on the walls and in the rafters. Then his eye fell on Silvio's dambala hanging on the centre post.

"Here, I'm having that," he said, grabbing the dambala. He studied it closely. "Cor, that's bloody gold, that is! That's a bloody ruby, that is!" He thrust it into his pocket.

At that moment the zombie rose from where he had been lying in the blackness by the wall and stared at the intruders, mouth agape. Contra-mestre Pele stared back, his brain befuddled with drink.

"Manolo!" he exclaimed. *"Mas ... tu es morto!"*

The zombie lurched forwards and Pele staggered back.

"Santa Maria! Tu es morto!" He collided heavily with the sailor who was looking for more loot.

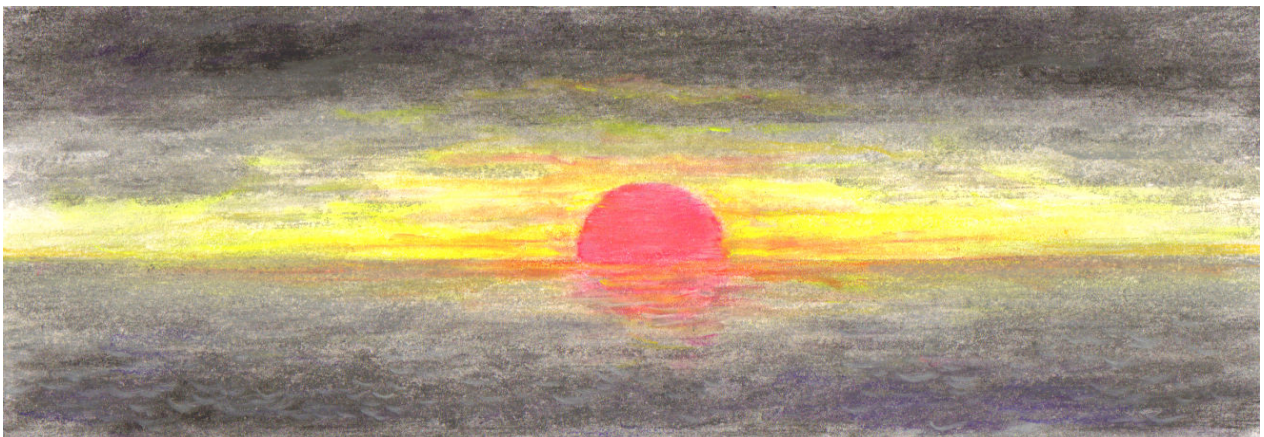
"Gerroff!" shouted the sailor, and gave Pele a push so that he fell against the dead man. Manolo caught him by the throat.

"Mata mestres," croaked the zombie. *"Mata mestres!"*

Silvio dodged back into the darkness as the sailor emerged, babbling to himself, and ran staggering across the yard. At the gate he grabbed the mare by the reins and clambered into the *cariola*, edged the beast round in the track, and trundled away in the direction of São Salvador, carrying the stolen dambala with him.

Silvio hesitated for a moment, then slipped out of the gate and followed the cart, keeping to the shadows at the side of the road. Where the track wound round the bank in a series of sharp bends, he ran straight down the hill through the plantations, and arrived at the bottom of the hill first. He had lived on the *fazenda* all his life, and knew the land as well as anyone.

Lying hidden in the darkness, feeling the air fresh and damp off the sea, he waited for the cart. When it passed he got up and followed it to the edge of town and along the deserted wharf. A big ship lay out in the bay, masts swaying gently against the sky.



The seaman stumbled out of the cart and abandoned it there on the quay, heedless of the mare's welfare. After a while, Silvio heard the creak of oars and saw a small boat glide away, bobbing on the water.

As Silvio stood there, wondering what to do, the edge of the sea suddenly began to shine with a beautiful glow. A dark red moon was rising over the horizon, lighting up a great curve of sea and clouds like a dambala of gold. It seemed to be inviting him to follow. Ngune was showing him the way back to Africa!

He jumped down to the water's edge and waded in, the waves plucking, lapping coolly. He would follow his dambala to the ancestral land! His feet left the sand and he floated blissfully, arms outstretched to Ngune.