

Egipcíaca, Rosa

(1719–1771),

Luiz Mott

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.73870>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

also known as Rosa Maria Egipcíaca da Vera Cruz, was a slave and later freedwoman, a renowned religious mystic and author, and the founder of a convent for former prostitutes in colonial Rio de Janeiro. She arrived in Rio as a 6-year-old slave, having come from lands occupied by the Coura people in present-day Lagos, Nigeria. Upon her arrival in Rio, she was baptized at Igreja da Candelária (Candelária Church). When she was 12, she suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her master and was subsequently sold to the Inficcionado plantation in the gold-prospecting region of Minas Gerais, some 300 kilometers northwest of Rio. She lived there for fifteen years as a prostitute, the only female in a troop of seventy-seven male slaves.

According to Rosa's own testimony to ecclesiastical authorities, at the age of 29, she came to be possessed by a demon and to receive regular exorcisms from Francisco Gonçalves Lopes (1694–?), a priest originally from Minho, Portugal, who was known as the "scourge of demons." Rosa and Lopes developed an intimate bond that led to the suspicion of the authorities and, eventually, their persecution and imprisonment by the Inquisition. They were declaimed as lovers.

Upon her release, Rosa abandoned prostitution, donated her meager possessions to the church, and became a fervent Catholic devotee. She claimed to have once been possessed by seven demons and began preaching to crowds and prophesying the future. She was also known to expel parishioners from church if they misbehaved during services. This behavior led to her veneration as a saint: her own master and his family paid homage to her on their knees in one well-documented instance. Following the instructions of a mystical vision, she renamed herself Rosa Maria Egipcíaca da Vera Cruz, a name inspired by the famous saint from Egypt, also a former prostitute. Presumably in response to her growing popularity and influence over the local Catholic laity, the bishop of Mariana, D. Manuel da Cruz, had her severely flogged at the town whipping post (still standing in the main square of Mariana, Minas Gerais). As a result of this flogging, Rosa's right side was partially paralyzed for the rest of her life. After this ordeal, her former exorcist, Father Lopes, bought and then freed her. They left Minas for Rio de Janeiro, a city of 30,000 inhabitants, which at that time was a religious hub, with twenty-three churches, seventy private chapels, and five hundred friars and monks. Rosa would live there for twelve years.

After arriving in Rio, Rosa's visions and ecstatic experiences grew more frequent and elaborate. Brother Agostinho de São José, a Franciscan monk, became her spiritual adviser and the mystical side of Rosa's religious devotion made a profound impression on the other, more junior, monks of the order: she outdid them in all manner of pious exercises, including fasting, self-flagellation, wearing a cilice (a

coarse undergarment for penitents), and daily confession. These same monks gave her the title of “Flower of Rio de Janeiro.” They saw in this holy black woman the possibility of future beatification by Rome—a model of saintliness for the African and Afro-Brazilian population of Luso America.

During this time, Rosa received a vision from the Virgin Mary instructing her to learn to read and write, a task that she was able to fulfill reasonably well, thus becoming the first African known in Brazil to not only learn the alphabet but also to have written a book, of which only a half dozen pages have survived. Making use of the financial support of the bishop of Rio de Janeiro, D. Antônio de Desterro, Rosa founded, in 1754, the *Recolhimento de Nossa Senhora do Parto* (Retreat of Our Lady of Labor) for the “former women of the world.” This pious house, situated in the present-day Rua da Assembléia, came to shelter more than twenty former prostitutes and other women in need, most of whom were either black or of mixed race. There, Rosa wrote and dictated more than 250 pages of her book *Sagrada teologia do amor de Deus luz brilhante das almas peregrinas* (The Sacred Theology of Love of God Brilliant Light of Pilgrim Souls), claiming that the baby Jesus came every day to suckle at her bosom; that afterward, to thank her, he would comb out her hair; that Jesus exchanged hearts with her; that in her breast she kept the sacrament of Jesus Christ, who had died and been resurrected; and that she herself was the wife of the Holy Trinity and the new Redeemer of the world. These writings and other proclamations made Rosa the main devotee and exponent, in Brazilian lands, of the Sacred Heart devotions, which incorporated, in addition to Jesus and Mary, a cult worship of the hearts of Saint Joseph and Christ’s grandparents.

It did not take long for Rosa to amass a core group of followers who began worshipping her person, often venerating her on their knees, fighting over her belongings, and treating her writings as though they were divine revelation. In addition, Rosa’s own worship embraced a heterodoxy clearly bordering on heresy, often combining the Catholic liturgy with African practices such as frenetic dances in the style of so-called *batuque*. Mother Rosa could not resist temptation and developed a fantastical religious megalomania. She counted on Father Francisco, the scourge of demons and her biggest supporter, who commissioned a portrait of her in which she is surrounded by all the symbols of sainthood. Her gatherings exalt her as “Girl with the eyes of Christ, Theater of diving Love, Arc of the New and Old Testament, Sister consort of Our Lady, Daughter of Santana, Arc and Safe of the Holiest Trinity, glorious Judith who will have to cut off the infernal dragon’s head”

Beginning in 1756, Rosa prophesied that Rio de Janeiro would be destroyed with a flood just as Lisbon had been reduced to ruin by a terrible earthquake in 1755. Mother Rosa convinced dozens of families to take refuge with her. She foresaw a new Noah’s Ark that would cross the sea to meet Sebastian, the Portuguese king who had gone missing nearly two centuries earlier in the sands of Morocco, and who had chosen Rosa as his wife, and from this union and from her womb would be born the new Redeemer of humanity.

In 1762 Rosa and Father Lopes were arrested by order of the bishop, and after serving one year in prison, they appeared before the Tribunal of the Sainly Office in Lisbon in August 1763. After several interrogations, Father Lopes confessed to having been fooled by Rosa’s stories, claiming his lack of book learning and theological naiveté, as well as the provincial Franciscans’ very high opinion of Rosa, as mitigating factors. He was remanded to the Algarve, in the extreme south of Portugal, for five years, and also lost the ability to hear confession and exorcize demons.

Rosa, in contrast, insisted that she never lied or invented anything, claiming instead, "I saw and heard everything!" In June 1765 Rosa's last interrogation took place, and after that, inexplicably, the sessions seem to end. Like other "impostors," she was probably sentenced to be whipped and remanded to the south of Portugal for five years. However, existing information suggests that she stayed on in the household of the Inquisition, working in the kitchen as a servant, where she was found dead on 12 October 1771, dying a "natural death" according to the Inquisition's own physician.

Until the discovery of the legal case against her in Lisbon and publication of her biography, in 1993, Rosa Egipcíaca had never once before been cited in Brazilian history.

Bibliography

Lisbon Inquisition, Prosecutions nos. 9065 and 18078. Arquivos Nacionais-Torre do Tombo.

Mott, Luiz. *Rosa Egipcíaca: Uma santa Africana no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Editors, 1993.