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## NIGHT OF THE ORIXAS

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## **Night of the Orixas**

By Tula Neal

Noelene hugged her bookbag to her chest as the car hurtled down a narrow exit off the freeway, entering a neighborhood of neat, concrete houses in pastel colors. The coast was about a half hour behind them now, the high-rises and impressive colonials left behind as they raced through the vanishing night to Sao Pedro.

A squeal of the brakes and they came to a shuddering stop.

‘Do not worry, pequena,’ the taxi-driver said over his shoulder as he grabbed a spray of anthuriums beside him and threw himself out the car. ‘You will be there on time. I’ll be back in un momentinho.’

Noelene bristled. He’d irritated her from the start. First, he’d been late. She’d been waiting in the lobby since four thirty that morning before he showed up, beaming and giving her the once over just like they were meeting in some bar. Second, he hadn’t even really apologized, just said something about his life being bagunça, whatever the hell that meant. She’d never heard the word before, was pretty sure it wasn’t on her language tapes. And now, third, they hadn’t even made it out of the city proper before but here he was stopping someplace. Hadn’t even asked her permission, just drawn up in front of the pink house and gone inside before she’d even realized what he was up to. She wondered who the flowers were for and why they couldn’t wait. She supposed he’d bought them from some roadside stall before he picked her up but she hadn’t even noticed them when she’d got in the car.

Noelene folded her arms and waited. People got kidnapped nearly every week in Brazil but she wasn’t afraid. The houses glowed pink-gold as the sun rose to reclaim the sky. Small gardens in front of each house flaunted blooms in hot, tropical colors. Somewhere in the neighbourhood, a radio played. A woman’s thin voice floated over an insistent drum beat. Noelene

was pleased her Portuguese was good enough to follow along. The song told the story of a happily married woman who fell in love with a beach boy, the same age as her only son. Noelene had never heard it before but she hummed a few bars, experimentally, as if testing her affinity with the adulteress. She leaned forward until her head rested on the seat in front of her and closed her eyes. Darkness dissolved behind her eyelids. She was not Noelene. She was the woman in the song. Older, her skin looser, her belly marked by pregnancy. She lay on a bed in a light-filled room and heard the boy's quickened breathing as his smooth, lithe body jerked over hers. She watched his face contort, looked into his eyes, dark with need and a gloating sense of his own power over her. "Bite me," she whispered. The boy bent his head to her breast, suckled her nipple, bit down on the hardened flesh. He was her obsession. The life she lived with her husband and her family became a dream. She came to life only with the boy. When she was not with him she yearned for him with every fiber of her being. When they were together she could not stop touching him, loved to tear his clothes off. He was a pool of clear water into which she dove again and again, rising naked, her hair slicked back, her loins trembling, a raunchy Venus. She left her husband and moved in with her boy-lover. Her boss fired her because she came to work late and left early. What would become of her, the singer asked? Can a woman live on love? Can pleasure clothe and feed her? The singer suggested it could the way she sang the words.

A door slammed. The music stopped abruptly. Noelene lifted her head and pushed herself back in the seat. What was happening to her? Since arriving in Brazil her senses had come alive, rubbed raw by the hot sun, the music, the sensuality of the people. Even sitting at the desk in her hotel room she'd felt it wafting in through the window from the pulsing streets, the teeming beaches, like the sound of samba or the smell of mangoes.

The taxi driver was coming down the walk. A curvy, coffee-coloured woman hung on his arm. Noelene half-expected him to bring the woman into the car, was just getting ready to protest

when he laughed, pulling the woman to him. They kissed, his hand sliding down her back to grab at her behind through the thin cotton dress she wore. Instead of swatting him away, the woman opened her legs, curving her body against his. His hand disappeared between the folds of her dress. Noelene turned away. She had half a mind to lean on the horn but what if he told her to get out his car? Left her here in the middle of nowhere with no way to get back to her hotel or on to her destination?

The taxi driver got back behind the wheel. ‘Adios, mi dulce,’ he said, his voice thick.

The woman pushed her head in the car for a last kiss, her arm around his neck to bring him to her. As they kissed, the woman sighed deep down in her throat. The taxi driver turned on the ignition. The woman stood back from the car. He blew her a kiss.

“Adios.”

They were off again.

‘Is she your girlfriend?’

‘No, no. I live with my woman in Betafogo. La negra is, she is, how to say it?’

‘Your piece on the side?’ She supposed his good looks, the long-lashed eyes and the high conquistador cheekbones, gave him license to have as many women as he wanted in this anything-goes country.

‘No. No. She is the love of my life. She is not a piece. Mi negra es mi vida. Usually, I take her to work every morning. She is a receptionist at an important law firm on la Avenida Presidente Wilson.’ His voice brimmed with pride. ‘But today I take you to Sao Pedro so I bring her flowers to, how you say, make up. Why are you interested in the orixas?’ he asked, changing the subject without warning.

‘Research,’ she answered crisply, wishing he’d keep his eyes on the road instead of swiveling around to look at her.

‘Research, research, research,’ he said, repeating it as if the word held some clue to its meaning that was presently beyond him at that hour of the morning.

'I'm doing my Ph.d thesis on African religions in the New World.' Did he even know what a Ph.d was? She thought of him as perhaps only semi-literate. This allowed her to create some distance between them and to erase any idea of other possible intimacies.

'Ah. So you research only, you do not believe?'

'In the orixas?' She was surprised anyone could think so. In Brazil, candomble followers came from all social classes but she wasn't Brazilian. She was a Philly-girl, from Germantown to be exact. 'No, I don't believe in them.' They fascinated her, though. The whole colorful, swirling, pantheon of them.

'The orixas are. It is not necessary you believe.' He fiddled with the volume dial on the radio, samba filled the car.

Carnaval was just days away but Noelene had done her best to ignore the whole frantic atmosphere. Loud music, large crowds, they weren't her thing.

'My bloco dances tonight, would you like to come, pequena? I will take you. We will dance till our legs can hold us up no longer.'

'No, thanks.'

'You are in Brazil and you do not want to go see a parade?' He sounded as if he couldn't believe his ears.

'Not really, no. It's not what I came for.' She gave him a half-hearted smile.

'That's right.' His voice became mock-serious. 'You came to do research. For your Ph.d.' He adjusted the rear-view mirror to look at her. 'Maybe if you go with me, I make you enjoy yourself.' He raised his hand, wagging the fingers that had been on the other woman's backside just minutes before.

It was like he'd touched her. A wanting flared deep down in her belly. Noelene tore her eyes away from his, focused on the passing countryside.

'No,' she said, clamping her legs shut lest she betrayed herself again. 'I don't...I'm not that kind of woman.'

He laughed, his shoulders shaking. 'What kind? The kind that gives her body the pleasure it craves? The kind that knows there is no sin in love? That kind?'

Noelene closed her eyes and ignored him, concentrating on the feel of the wind rushing against her face. The music got louder. He'd turned the radio up. It was like being behind one of those trucks crammed with huge speakers that drove through Rio blaring music at all hours of the day. But she refused to ask him to turn it down. The taxi climbed into the hills. She supposed they had arrived in Sao Pedro. People turned their heads to look at them, smiling, shaking themselves to the beat before the car flashed past, stirring up dust.

The taxi driver pulled up in front of a two-story house, red bougainvillea overflowed from pots flanking the door.

'This is the house you are looking for,' he shouted over the music.

'Will you...are you coming in?'

'I have to go somewhere. I'll be back in a couple hours.'

He drove off, leaving her in front of the door feeling angry and abandoned. Before she could knock, a girl let her in.

Noelene told her who she was, explaining that she'd called, that the pai de santos expected her. The girl nodded. Noelene followed her through a kitchen where several women were busy over pots, black with use, to a small, dirt yard. A tall man the color of dark honey was supervising the construction of some kind of plywood box. Seeing them, he said something to one of the other men and walked over. He wore a fancy red shirt with billowing sleeves over white pants.

'I am Don Gilberto. You must be the student,' he said.

'Yes, I'm Noelene Edwards. Thanks very much for allowing me to come.' He

was younger than she'd imagined from his voice.

He nodded. 'I will give you a quick tour, yes, but as I explained, I am too

busy to sit down with you. You must observe and take note of everything. What you do not understand I can explain tomorrow, if you come back. Or over the phone.'

Noelene nodded. She would not have expected to interview a priest during mass. The pai was occupied.

'This is where everything happens.' He led her back into the house through another door that opened on a large room where a group of men sat on the floor around what Noelene knew were the bata drums, the drums that would call the orixas into the world when things got going. The men turned to nod at her.

The room was empty of furniture except for the altar on which stood a tall black doll richly clothed in a red satin gown trimmed in white lace. A string of white beads hung down the doll's neck. If Noelene hadn't known better she would have assumed it was a girl doll but it wasn't. This was Xango, the pai's protector, god of lightning and thunder. Several red candles, a necklace of red and black beads, a bottle of Florida water and a few rocks were scattered around in front of the god. A wooden, double-bladed axe lay at the god's feet.

'Do you know what everything means?'

'I think so, yes.' The altar was very similar to what she'd seen in a textbook. 'The red candles symbolize both fire and lightning which are under Xango's control. They are red because that is his special color.' The pai nodded as she continued. 'He wields thunder and lightning from his axe.' She went on repeating what she'd learned from all her books.

'Very good,' he said when she was finished. 'You speak like an initiate.' He smiled at her and Noelene felt ridiculously proud to have pleased him.

'I will throw the buzios for you and then I must return to what I was doing. You are welcome to walk around, help the women, or do as you wish.'

He opened the small leather pouch that hung at his waist and drew out a handful of cowrie shells. With a quick flick of his wrist he threw them on the floor.



‘Hmm.’ He sank down on his haunches to look at the pattern the sixteen seashells made on the linoleum floor.

‘What do they say? Will I be happy, healthy and wise all the days of my life?’ Noelene laughed nervously. She had always declined to have her fortune told before. Why hadn’t she stopped him? ‘Will I have eight husbands?’

The pai gathered up his shells and dropped them into their pouch, his expression non-committal. ‘You have come to Brazil asleep, but you will leave awake.’ He strode back out the door.

Oh, hmm, was that all? Noelene felt a little disappointed. She didn’t even understand what it meant. Like the orixas themselves she didn’t take the buzios seriously.

She went into the kitchen but there was nothing for her to do. She wandered around talking to people, asking questions about their faith in the orixas and answering theirs about her. The house began to fill up fast. Newcomers walked up to the pai and made their obeisance. Every now and then one would draw him away from the crowd and speak to him in urgent whispers. Noelene was never close enough to hear what was said but she knew they were asking him for guidance from the orixas. He threw the buzios to answer them, sometimes using more complicated measures than he’d used with her own divination. The people watched intently, their eyes fastening on the pai’s face as he explained what the orixas were saying through the seashells.

At an unspoken signal everyone went into the room. The plywood box the men had been working on was brought in and served as a stage for the bata drummers. The pai formally welcomed the people to his house. The drumming began. Noelene knew that each orixa was called by a different drumbeat. First would come the orixa of the crossroads to open the way for the others.

Not far from where Noelene stood a stout, middle-aged woman began to twitch, her shoulders jerked up and down. This did not last long before she bent over as if age were a heavy bundle she carried on her back. Someone handed her a stick and she began to dance, slowly, pounding the stick, stamping her feet. The

orixa of the crossroads had arrived. He was present in the woman. Noelene watched, fascinated.

Then it was the turn of an orixa who announced himself by the swiping motions of his devotee. The room grew hotter as more and more of the orixas entered, blessing the pai with their presence. Noelene stood still among the crush of dancing bodies.

The beat changed yet again, becoming more martial in tone, more insistent. Now it was the pai's turn. The drums called to Xango. The pai's head rolled back, he lifted his arms, his shoulders jerked. Xango was one of the strongest of the gods. The pai danced before the drums, stamping his feet in time to the drums. His face changed. He seemed different. He was different. His eyes were wide, unearthly. He danced around the room, stopping now and then to talk. This was the interaction she'd read about between gods and devotees. She watched intently. He teased a woman, harangued an old man who talked back to him, determined to give as good as he got. Around them the people laughed.

Xango got the better of the exchange and danced away, turning toward her. Something shifted in the air. Her head felt heavy and clear at the same time. Xango stood in front of her, his expression expectant. She had no doubt it was the god.

'Come, my love,' he said, his voice deep and warm.

The drumming slowed. She looked around her. The dancers shimmered, vanishing and appearing as if she watched them through a pool. People spoke to her. Their mouths moved but she couldn't make out the words. Heat rippled through her body. She ran her hands over her breasts, past her stomach, to the cleft between her legs and back again. Her nipples pushed against her bra. She kicked off her shoes and began to dance. She danced and danced, her feet skimming the ground, her hips swaying in an ancient invitation. She drew the others to her, the men especially, their eyes fixed on her body, on the promise they read in her movements. If they danced well or if she liked their faces she kissed them but not deeply for Xango, her husband, was in the room. She knew herself as Oshun. She was the goddess of love

and magic. The immortal seductress. Someone handed her a face mirror and she watched herself laughing. Xango came up behind her. She recognized him without turning by his smell, sharp, powerful, lightning and earth, smoke and rain. His arms slipped around her waist. He turned her around and they danced together as they had for centuries, groin to groin, moving in tandem. Around them, the people clapped and stamped. Their energy feeding the divine couple, their dance fueling the people's devotion. They kissed. Her mouth opened under his as his hands caressed her behind.

The rhythm of the drums changed. Xango's hands ground her against him. His erection was a rock-hard interruption between their bodies. She moved on it seeking her own release. His breathing quickened. Her pants grew damp. She felt the orgasm coming, liquid heat moving like a wave beneath her skin. She jumped up, wrapping her legs around her husband's hips, taking her pleasure as best she could. She buried her nose in his neck, breathing him in like oxygen. His hands cupped her ass, his fingers met over her cleft, pressing against her clit. She came then, crying out as everyone watched.

'Uhn, uhn,' the god groaned deep in his chest as he spilled his divine seed. 'Beloved,' he whispered. 'I would fuck you all day.'

'You would.' She drew back to look at him, smiling. 'If I let you.'

'Let me.'

There was nothing she'd have liked more but they were there for a reason.

'They wait for us.'

'It is their duty to wait.'

'Heart's delight, we have eternity. Our children do not.'

'You speak true, beloved.' Regret veiled his face.

They kissed again, deeply and with longing, as she slid down, regaining her feet. The people danced around them. She could feel their anxiety. They wanted, needed, to speak to their gods. She and Xango broke apart, dancing, still dancing. The drums slowed again and they moved among the people, their people,

calming their fears, answering their questions, recommending herbs for their healing.

The taxi driver came in the door and she made her way to him. His face registered shock when he caught sight of her. She kissed him, allowing her hands to wander to his crotch as a sign of her favor. He was one of hers. She looked into his eyes and saw all the women he'd loved. At her touch, he hardened almost immediately and she laughed, whirling away from him though his hands grabbed at her. Her name was Oshun. No man could hold her but they loved her just the same. She danced on and on, the beat of the bata drums like water in her head but it could not last. The rhythm changed, the drums slowed. With the abruptness of a handclap she was Noelene again. She sank to the floor, weak but happy.

People helped me to her feet, someone put a glass of water in her hand.

'The orixas are,' she said to the taxi driver when he came up to her.

'Now you know,' he said, smiling. 'Oshun took you like you were hers from birth.'

She nodded. The memory of it was like a hot kernel of pleasure nestled in the pit of her belly. Suddenly, she wanted to experience everything the country had to offer.

'Does your invitation to the parade still stand?'

'Everything stands.' He rubbed himself and she glanced at his crotch. He still had an erection. Oshun's laughter bubbled into the air from her. The goddess was a half-remembered song beneath Noelene's skin. A devotee who has been ridden by an orixa is never the same again. Oshun would never let her go. Noelene didn't want her to. Already she was looking forward to meeting the goddess in Cuba, in New York, wherever her research took her. Across the room, the pai caught her eye and smiled. Noelene nodded. The seashells hadn't lied.

Noelene passed the flat of her hands over the bulge in the taxi driver's pants.

‘Let’s go,’ she murmured, her mouth against his ear. ‘I want to dance till the morning. And then I want you to ride me like a god until the night comes again.’

Deep inside her, Oshun, hot, triumphant, exultant, sang to herself.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Tula Neal writes hot sensual fiction in all time periods and in all genres. Her short story, The Gladiator's Woman, will be released by Phaze.com on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2008.



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