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## Entry Nr. 023 Rosa Egipcíaca

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Aaron Spencer Fogleman and Robert Hanserd (eds.), *Five Hundred African Voices: A Catalog of Published Accounts by Africans Enslaved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1586-1936* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2022).

*Catalog number:* 23  
*Name(s) of African providing account:* **Rosa Egipcíaca = Rosa Maria Egipcíaca da Vera Cruz**  
*Date account recorded:* 1763-65  
*Date account first published:* 1987  
*Date of entry creation or last update:* 17 September 2021

*Source:* Extensive quotations from Egipcíaca’s autobiographical manuscripts printed in Luiz Mott, *Rosa Egipcíaca. Uma Santa Africana no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand, 1993.

and

Quotations from Egipcíaca’s autobiographical manuscripts printed on p. 175-177 in Robert Krueger, “Brazilian Slaves Represented in Their Own Words,” *Slavery & Abolition*, 23:2: 169-186.

*Comments:*

From Robert Krueger –

At age fourteen, Rosa was sold as a sex slave to an aristocrat in Minas Gerais, where she became ill, probably from a venereal disease. At age thirty she sold her possessions and became a pious church woman and street vendor. Eventually, she began having mystical religious experiences while in trances and heard voices. She began preaching and with her following forced irreverent people from churches. For this she was declared a fraud and publicly whipped, which forced her to flee to Rio de Janeiro. She was one of few literate women of color and became known as the *Flor do Rio de Janeiro* (Flower of Rio de Janeiro), a living saint. She financed and directed the building of a convent, but so outraged authorities that they had her imprisoned and brought before the Inquisition in Lisbon. She was a prolific writer, but her confessor burned most of her work after her imprisonment.

*Note:* In order to provide readers with continuity and context, direct quotations by Egipcíaca are presented within Krueger’s running commentary, highlighted in yellow. Readers are encouraged to consult the original Portuguese versions in Luiz Mott’s work to get a fuller understanding of this African voice.

*Text of Account:*

Original Portuguese –

For the original published text see Luiz Mott's work (above.)

English translation –

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“Rosa, hearing voices and routinely possessed by demons in trances, mastered the ritual of exorcism under the tutelage of a famous exorcist, her new owner. Thus, she converted the painful symptoms of her venereal condition into a possession by ‘seven demons ... feeling as if a cauldron of boiling water had spilled onto her body, and thus fell unconscious to the ground, splitting her head on the stone under St. Benedito's altar’. Rosa began a religious career that would take her to the highest levels and contradictions of the Luso-Brazilian empire.

Rosa's religious experience graduated from voices to possessions and visions. At times, during her many trances, she would break out in *sermões edificantes* (edifying sermons). She was positively dogmatic; not only did

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she have the audacity to preach in the religion of the slave masters, but also presumed that ‘everyone maintained perfect composure in the churches’. She designated herself the custodian of those marvellous Baroque temples, her liberated zone. She used physical force to remove the irreverent from the church, even slave-owners. Tropical Baroque religious iconography, with its polychromatic paintings and sculptures, provided inspiration and passion for Rosa's literacy and multimedia visions.

At the beginning of her career as *beata*, the severe dichotomy of slavery, the struggle of opposites, enslavement and freedom, marked her already famous ecstasies, one moment possessed by Satan and in the next ‘celestial visions ... of St Mary and hearing choruses of angels’. Finally, one day in the cathedral, when she had stolen the show from a distinguished preacher, the bishop ordered her publicly whipped, leaving her permanently partially paralysed on her right side. Afterwards, she was declared a fraud and a *fechiceira* (witch) and suffered severe persecution by churchmen and laymen alike.

Rosa fled with her exorcist mentor to Rio de Janeiro in 1751. The fact of her *alfabetização* (literate education) is of historical importance; she incorporates her need for this elite power in her visions. One day in a rapture, she receives a Trinitarian injunction:

Sweeping St John the Baptist church, she saw a white dove in the centre of the cross, a beautiful one, with red feet, claws and beak so shiny that they looked like hot iron, and the dove told her the

following words: “You will learn to read and to write, because I want to build a nest in your breast.”

Her identity with St Anne, the mother who teaches her daughter St Mary to read, the Mother of God the Son, would remain central to her character her entire life. She studied assiduously, the first known African Brazilian slave woman to learn to read and to write, and for the rest of her life vive *escrevendo* (she lives writing). Rosa was one of 28 literate women in Rio de Janeiro at the time. She became known as a *Flor do Rio de Janeiro* (the Flower of Rio de Janeiro), a living saint. She financed and directed the building of her convent, the *Recolhimento* de Nossa Senhora do Parto. With some dozens of ‘young girls and former women of the night ... negresses ... *mulatas*’, she became the pious ‘Madre Rosa’ with a multitude of devotees, including ex-owners. In her visionary world she is the *ama-de-leite* (wet nurse) to the Christ Child who combs her hair after each repast.

At one point, Rosa’s unorthodoxy moved the church authorities to expel her from her beloved *Recolhimento*. She was imprisoned by the bishop,

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investigated and sent to Lisbon, Portugal, to face the Holy Office of the Inquisition, accused of idolatry and heresy in 1763. In the last session, Rosa relates to the Holy Officers one of her most paradisiacal visions in which a voice tells her: ‘You will be the queen bee reigning in the hive of love. You will fabricate the sweet royal jelly to set upon the table of the celestial banquets, for the sustenance and nourishment of your invited friends.’ Fearing Inquisitional implications, her hitherto faithful Franciscan confessor and benefactor in Rio de Janeiro burned one thousand sheets of her writings and sayings, thus, depriving posterity of the full record of Rosa’s thoughts and feelings.”

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