

FILAS IN A MONASTERY IN BAHIA

When I first visited Brazil in 1994, I had a great wish: See filas working with cattle. During this first trip, I have seen kennels in São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and Pernambuco, but in them the filas spent the day in kennels and none of them could perform their task as “Boiadeiro”. In the State of Ceará, in north east Brazil, I have also visited a group of friends which were all members of CAFIB in a country home which belonged to the former President of Regional CAFIB, where for the first time I could see what a fila was able of doing once among the cattle.

Among the pure breed filas there was an eight months brindle female called Farpa do Araguaya, bred by Americo Cardoso. Obeying a command of the owner, the foreman (cowboy) took this female to a meadow, where a young bull was grazing, then released the bitch, which without any hesitation went after the bull, which by its turn, scared, started to run away from her. She posted herself before the bull and dominated it in a very traditional way: biting the bull in the ears and nose. A male called Aron do Labibo (Ibituruna blood line) came around and performed the same ritual as the female. I was impressed.



Farpa do Araguaya



Farpa do Araguaya



Aron do Labibo



Many times our lives take a route, which we cannot foresee. The man who was the owner of the country house, with his pure filas, his pure breed horses (Manga Larga Marchador), who owns the cattle, where for the first time I had a chance to see fila “boiadeiro”, had decided to join a Catholic Monastery. During many years my friends have given me information about his life as a monk and in the beginning of 2005 they told me that our friend “Irmão Bento” (Brother Bento) had moved to a convent in the State of Bahia, a convent, owner of a farm with filas.

I had no more information but a message such as this awakes several incognita. I started to dream of a site with pure filas, traditional cattle dogs working with cattle just as I had seen in Agua Fria Farm in the State of Para in 2003. By letter I asked permission to visit the convent and our “Brother Fileiro” and the main priest allowed me to come without any sort of problem.

In the beginning of 2005 I had a chance of spending a few days in the fascinating city of Salvador, Bahia State, visiting the mandatory sites such as Pelourinho (the area where the slaves lived), the house of Jorge Amado (writer) the wonderful churches and I bought souvenirs in the marvellous shops which are a tramp for tourists. Of course I also took a chance to meet the directors of CAFIB, Bahia Regional.



Colina II do Alto Quatis

With all my expectances I took a bus in the bus terminal of Salvador, which it is pretty modern. Luxury Buss, VIP waiting room, free drinks, unbelievable. On board, the first 100 kilometres the trip was smooth till a city called Feira de Santana, a major centre of cattle farms which I should like to visit on another trip searching for filas in farms. From this point onwards our problems started, beginning with a flat tire, which held us back for one hour.

From there we went to another small city called Ipará where in the local cafeteria where we stopped to have a drink I realised that in the country side of Bahia, the locals are not used to tourists. Once out of Ipará I understood that the bus was late due to the condition of the road, which forced the driver to drive at no more than 30km/h, trying to avoid the holes in the asphalt.

In that moment I did not feel very happy and had visions of the coast: palm trees, delightful beaches.... and a “caipivodka” with passion fruit (a cocktail variation of the classic “caipirinha”: Brazilian Spirit, lemon, sugar and ice) in my hand. But my reality was to carry on with the bus trip, shaking all over for hundreds of kilometres more gazing at the changing landscape of the northern green part of Chapada Diamantina and South of the famous “sertão”; the dry area and sometimes I could see a big cactus.

Luckily I had besides me a very nice lady who was a teacher in one of the country cities, and she gave important information about the convent and the inner part of Bahia. This kind of contact between passengers makes the trip more pleasant and helps the time to run faster.

My main concern was not to arrive at the convent in time once the monks go to sleep very early and due to a problem with their telephone, they had no idea about the day or time of my arrival.

I got off the bus in a small village, half way between the São Francisco River and the Atlantic Ocean on the foot of Serra do Tombador, meanwhile the teacher managed to find me a taxi for the last 20 km to the convent.

This “taxi” was a sort of vehicle, which would never pass the Spanish ITV (safety control), with no security belts, but the driver explained that they were not needed due to the lack of traffic.

He was right. During all the way, on an unpaved road we saw no other vehicle. The only thing, which called our attention, was a horrible scent coming through the open windows. With the lights of the car I suddenly saw a bunch of sorry looking dogs which were having a free meal: rotten meat of a cow, which had died on the side of the road from a snake bite, explained the driver. Some days later, on the way back, we could see that there was only left skin and bones, thanks to the work of dogs and vultures.



The dead cow and the vultures



At last the “taxi” diminished the speed once we had arrived at the convent, a huge building on the top of a hill, with a few lights on. Just at the moment of our arrival the abbot and a group of priests were coming out of the chapel. I received a warm welcome, meeting again, after many years my old fila friend, now dressed up as a monk.



The monastery was founded in the thirties of the last century. Missionary Monks arrived on donkeys, taking the Bible and economical prosperity to the country people, many of them descendents of Bahia slaves, others typical people from the arid land (Sertão).

The Monastery was part of another one, more powerful economically speaking, placed in middle Europe. Now they are almost independent and able to maintain themselves.

Apart from the religious work they have developed

projects on education and formation of the youngsters with carpentry, mechanic and agriculture training centres. The farm is from an inheritance, and borders on the convent area. It occupies 4000 hectares, and about 20% is Atlantic Forest. They also have nearly 1000 beef Nelore cows and some Guzera and other breeds for milk production. Many families depend on the convent and the farm and live in small houses with electricity and piped water. For their everyday work they have

horses, mules and donkeys. The cowboys use to work with little mongrel dogs, which have made themselves good cattle dogs. To avoid an explosion of the dog population the cowboys themselves neuter the males, something they are to doing frequently in horses and young bulls.



The fazenda that belongs to the Monastery

My dream of a nucleus of authentic filas was broken when I checked that the three filas that they owned had arrived at the farm at random. It was my friend, who visiting the farm recognized them. The Monks themselves knew nothing about the presence of filas once they spend most of their time executing their 17 religious daily obligations, which are praying, meditation, and masses, leaving the farm work to the cowboys.

My friend was awarded permission to show me the farm and surroundings, and the nice abbot, almost a saint, lent us a pick up of the convent to drive around.

The first “Fileiro” whom we visited was he owner of a precious female (my friend’s remark) mother of the two females that live in the house of some cowboys. Once we found the owner of the beautiful lady, he gave us the news that she had died. Talking to him I realised his lack of knowledge about the health of dogs. The poor girl – according to him, had a tumour around her anal part, and for this reason he had sacrificed her. Asking for details I found out the female had vaginal prolaps and

probably her death was totally unnecessary. Well what is done is done. The owner had no information about the origin of his female; she was given to him by someone from the village. Of course he had no pictures and he informed that the male with which she had had a litter, was very pretty, brindle with lots of white and it lived around the village and had also died. He had also tried to breed the bitch to a pit bull, very much in fashion in Brazil, but fortunately without success.

We went to visit the daughters of this beautiful dead bitch in another part of the farm. We approached, on foot the house of a cowboy, and were received by a brindle bitch barking at us, sowing “Ojeriza” but keeping herself at some distance at first and then going away, for us it was clear that for her there wasn’t any trouble if we went into the house. The wife and daughter of the cowboy received us with lots of tender, joy and a delicious cup of coffee and when they heard the reason of our visit they started laughing; a monk and a foreign lady interested in dogs, “Holy Mother, it must be a joke!



Even though I knew I was not going to see pure fila, I was very disappointed when I saw that female, with fila blood, but with a very light head, nothing like a “cabecudo”. For sure it was a mongrel fila, but not man made like the mixbreeders have done in the 70’s and 80’s of the last century, but a mongrel for lack of interest of the owners and by the laws of nature, mixing with whatever was present in the moment of the heat.

The proportions of the bitch were correct even though at first sight she did not look so due to her light body, lack of mass and too much “air

under her inferior line”. She moved correctly, camel walk typical of the breed. Some months ago, when she was only a year old, she had had a litter with 9 puppies. She delivered them alone without any trouble and had enough milk to feed them all.



The mixbreed bitch and the mongrel

The father of the litter was also in the garden of the cowboy’s house, a simple beige mongrel, and full of fleas. This brings about “my present” to the farm files: pills of Drontal plus wormer, spread around by Brother Bento. Six puppies of the litter had already found their new homes but three remained. The ladies of the house were not able to give us an idea about the types and colours of the ones that had already gone. It was a pity once the ones, which stayed in the house, were very interesting. First my attention was caught by a brindle male, like the mother, with lots of white. It had white in the chest and neck, the fore legs had symmetrical white “boots” and the rear ones had white socks.



We knew that its grandfather had this kind of coat. The other puppy had a rare kind of brindle, called “Mineiro brindle” which is a sort of golden, with tiny light discontinued stripes. The two males above mentioned had a very light head, like their mother, but both of them showed good proportions and camel step.

The third puppy was a true son of his father in type and colour and did not have the camel walk... Nevertheless we had found mongrels I must say I enjoyed the visit for I could witness the strong appearance of typical and old features of the fila breed in these puppies.



The mother and her pups, the one in the middle looks like the father.

Talking about it with Americo Cardoso, specialist in the breed, I was told that this was the way it all began in a remote past, breeding with dogs in the fields, in farms with no selection

In another house within the farm we went to visit a sister of the mother bitch. Type and colour just like her sister; she was a guard bitch, which after some barking, was hiding herself behind the house to show up again and again repeating the same performance.



Another interesting excursion we did was a visit to Atlantic Forest. We went by car, opening and closing fifteen fences, which separated pastures for the cattle, till the board of the forest. My friend was well prepared for the trip; he took a machete (two-edged sabre) because we had no clue of what we were going to meet. Normally the jungle isn't a zoo without cages. Many times no animals are observed. All we can hear is

the singing of a bird and the roaring of frogs. But we knew the presence of a Jaguar and several Pumas even though I fear more to step on a snake. Our walk in the forest made us forget the dangers, it was beautiful and amazing!

Another day we went to the village searching for a fila breeder. In a small shop we found this breeder with an “araça” brindle male which started to bark strongly at us after being provoked. It had no pedigree. Insisting much looking for some information about its bloodline the conclusion we reached was the following: A breeder in Feira de Santana, had given a dog to someone in another inner village and the story repeated itself for other filas in the village around the convent. The brindle male had other sons, which we also visited: a sand colour male, neglected, and another darker brindle with a remarkable under bite. The sons had none of the qualities of the father. About the mother we only found out that she had died. We, in the end, were fed up with the ignorance about dogs of the country people.



Male without pedigree in the village

I called our friend Olegario in Belo Horizonte and he offered help, promising to send a male from a litter to be born. The abbot was happy with the offer but did not give permission to my friend to get the puppy at the airport in Salvador. There is a solution for everything. I organised a meeting by telephone between Brother Bento and the directors of CAFIB – BAHIA, in Salvador. The latter were willing to collect the puppy in Salvador and to take it by car to the convent. The project of returning filas to farms made us all very happy.

Nonetheless in a few months I received another “cold shower” which was the moving of Brother Bento to another place to continue his formation as a priest. Without the guidance of a Fileiro with experience and without the real passion for the breed, it would not make any sense to risk the life of a puppy of this quality among non-interested monks and ignorant cowboys.

A lost opportunity for the breed!!!

Text and pictures: Ines van Damme
