



Each year, an old movement of faith and mysticism is reenacted on the streets of small cities and villages throughout Northeast Brazil, as if it were an act of a greater play.

Main Characteristics of the Movement

Lay participants – In the great majority of the groups, there is no influence whatsoever of the Catholic Church. They present their own rituals and chants. In many places, the Church condemns the practice of these public acts (which differ from theirs). There are reports of prohibitions of the penitence by the police at various times and places.

Altruism – In general, penitents don't pray for themselves. They request favors for those souls in purgatory. Beyond this help, which they believe they are giving to the suffering souls on the spiritual level, the penitents help console grieving families during a mourning period, families who desperately need to feel that their beloved ones are remembered properly through rituals and chants, carried out often in the house where they lived. In many other places, these penitents are also called the "soul feeders", as they are believed to feed those spirits in need.

Use of the body – They used to engage in long and exhaustive walks during the night (usually three times a week during Lent, increasing this frequency during the holy week), many times carrying heavy objects such as crosses and chandeliers, and always singing and praying. They wear special vests, which identifies them, and hides their identities. There are extreme cases of groups, which practice the auto-afflict, who beat themselves for hours using a whip.

Secret rituals – Through their vests and special times (always late at night), the penitents try to hide their acts from the majority of the local population. It is good to remember that there were many persecutions from the police and the priests. In two of the cities, there was a special police unit protecting the penitents from the curious ones. (During interviews there were reports that in previous years, locals taunted them, and tried to hurt them by throwing rocks and other objects).

