

Documentário Productions Presents

# Ebony Goddess

## Queen of Ilê Aiyê



Three young women search for identity and self-esteem as they compete for the title of Ebony Goddess in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, the largest black city outside of Africa.

### SYNOPSIS

*Ebony Goddess: Queen of Ilê Aiyê* follows three women competing to be the carnival queen of Ilê Aiyê, a prominent and controversial Afro-Brazilian group with an all-black membership. The selection is based on Afro-centric notions of beauty, in counterpoint to prevailing standards of beauty in Brazil, a country famous for slim supermodels and plastic surgery. Contestants for the title of Ebony Goddess dress in flowing African-style garments, gracefully performing traditional Afro-Brazilian dances to songs praising the beauty of black women.

For **AURELINA**, **JOSEANE** and **TALITA**, the competition for the title of Ebony Goddess is part of a profound and personal search for identity and self-esteem. The figure of the Ebony Goddess, representing a “black is beautiful” view of black women, resonates with women of African descent in Brazil, the United States and throughout the world of the African Diaspora.

For **AURELINA** the contest has become an obsession. She has competed in the past four years, but never won the contest, although once she placed third. Every year she feels an irresistible need to try again. She says she already feels like a queen, and just needs the title itself.

**TALITA** is taking dance classes, and wants to become a professional dancer. She earns a living by tutoring kids in the community, and offers free help to kids who cannot afford to pay.

**JOSEANE** has recently become involved in the African dance styles of Ilê Aiyê, and counts on the support of her family and friends as she prepares for the competition. Her father has participated in Ilê Aiyê since its early years, when the group was harassed by the police and accused by the media of being racist for having an all-black membership.



The event is hosted by Arany Santana, one of the directors of Ilê Aiyê, and Secretary of Social Development and Fight Against Poverty in Bahia. Antônio Carlos “Vovô”, one of the founders of Ilê Aiyê, also participates in the film.

Following the three candidates’ daily lives, dance rehearsals, and interactions with each other, *Ebony Goddess: Queen of Ilê Aiyê* shows the contest’s role in reshaping the idea of beauty in a society in which African descendants constitute the majority of the population but is pervaded by Euro-centric concepts of body esthetics. The concept of the Ebony Goddess creates an alternative view of the black female body as beautiful, desirable, and talented, promoting social change at its most basic level: the individual sense of self.

### OFFICIAL SELECTION—

Pan African Film Festival  
San Diego Black Film Festival  
San Diego Latino Film Festival  
Africa World Documentary Film Festival  
Hollywood Brazilian Film Festival  
Texas Black Film Festival  
Women’s International Film & Arts Festival  
Chicago Latino Film Festival  
San Francisco Women’s Film Festival  
Cine Las Americas Film Festival

## BACKGROUND

Salvador, Bahia, is the third largest city in Brazil, with a population of over 2.7 million, about the same as Chicago. Eighty percent of the city is of African descent, making Salvador the largest black city outside of Africa. Yet, despite this overwhelming majority, the pervasiveness of the Euro-centric values of the elite minority is striking.

In this social environment, for the past three decades the Afro-Brazilian group Ilê Aiyê has been an agent of black consciousness in Bahia, performing grassroots community work, raising collective pride and awareness of African culture, and speaking out against racial discrimination. The political nature of the concept of beauty has been one of its central concerns, and its carnival queen, the Deusa do Ébano (Ebony Goddess), is a key visual and symbolic element of its carnival procession.

Persecuted by the police and the media during its first years, and still controversial for only allowing blacks to parade with the group, Ilê Aiyê is now a renowned element of Bahia's pre-Lenten festivities. During carnival, the group popularly referred to as "o mais belo dos belos" (the loveliest of the lovely) brings to the streets hundreds of musicians, dozens of dancers, and thousands of members.

Although Ilê Aiyê's songs are not played on the radio except when they are recorded by white performers such as Daniela Mercury, and their limited number of CDs have very limited commercial distribution, the words to Ilê's songs have been etched into popular consciousness. As Ilê Aiyê's carnival procession passes, crowds numbering hundreds of thousands sing along to songs whose lyrics recount the importance of African and African-Brazilian culture and religion.



### DIRECTOR

#### Carolina Moraes-Liu

*Director, Editor, Cinematographer and Producer*

Carolina Moraes-Liu has been producing documentary films for the past twelve years. She sees documentary filmmaking as a means to educate and empower people, and she believes documentaries can be

used as an instrument for social change. Carolina was born in Bahia, Brazil, and holds a Master's degree in Radio and Television from San Francisco State University.

### DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I am from Bahia, but I have lived in the United States for most of my adult life. In 1999 I went back after being away for almost 7 years, and I noticed a shift in how Bahian women dressed and wore their hair. The presence of African-style braided hair on the streets was especially remarkable.

The next year I returned again to shoot a documentary about the local carnival, called Festive Land: Carnival in Bahia, and I had the opportunity to spend a couple of very special days with the group Ilê Aiyê.

Ilê Aiyê is more than a carnival group. They have year-round social projects that help thousands of people in the neighborhood, aiming to propagate black culture, raise self-esteem, and develop consciousness regarding racial discrimination issues. Ilê Aiyê's carnival parade features a young woman called the Ebony Goddess, selected for her beauty according to Afro-centric standards of beauty, her mastery of African-originated dances including religious Candomblé dances, and her ability to inspire others through her personal history.

I spent much of Saturday of carnival inside Ilê Aiyê's headquarters, which is also a Candomblé house of worship, and the home of Dona Hilda, a Candomblé priestess and mother of Vovô, one of the founders of Ilê Aiyê. That was the first time I saw up close the process of preparing the Ebony Goddess, selected just a couple of weeks earlier, to be presented to the local community. There was an incredible energy that came from the pride felt by each participant of the group. This was their defining moment, wearing clothing based on African garments, dancing Afro-Brazilian movements, and singing the songs of the group, showing to the rest of the world that they were proud of themselves and their culture.

Since then, every time I go back to Bahia I notice that more people are willing to openly talk about discrimination and fight for their rights. There is still a huge portion of the black population that follows Euro-centric standards of beauty, straightening and coloring their hair so they look as white as possible, but there is also an ever-increasing number of black women who proudly display their black identity. I hope the situation continues to improve, and that my film contributes to the evolution of how black women see themselves.

### CREDITS

#### Producer/Director/Cinematographer/Editor—

Carolina Moraes-Liu

#### Producer—

Chung Liu

#### Associate Producer—

Lisa Earl Castillo

#### Music By—

Ilê Aiyê

#### Featuring—

Joseane Charmitte, Talita Amorim, Aurelina Oliveira, Arany Santana and Antônio Carlos dos Santos "Vovô"