

## *Fome Zero for Ethnic Marginalisation?: Reconceptualization of Empowerment in Contemporary Afro-Brazilian Popular Culture*

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*Unlike other erstwhile slaveholding countries, when Brazil abolished slavery on 13th May 1888, the problem of the ruling elites was not what to do with the millions of newly-emancipated Blacks but how to carry out their Eugenic agenda. In effect, long before slavery ended, Brazilian elites had begun to be ashamed of the reputation the country had acquired in developed countries of Europe where Brazil was looked down on as an extension of Africa in view of its overwhelming Black population. So, the solution was to eliminate the Blacks. When, barely a year after Abolition, Brazil changed from Monarchy to become a Federative Republic, different projects were conceived to remove, within a predicted period of 30 years, all traces of Blacks in Brazil, ranging from systematic genocide through the application of Eugenic theories to economic and social exclusion. At the same time, the Brazilian elites undertook a systematic whitening of the society by inviting impoverished European immigrants – Germans, Poles, and other Eastern European citizens – to whom the government gave land, seedlings and other forms of assistance to cultivate and colonize the fertile and expansive southern and south-eastern regions of Brazil. The only condition imposed was that they must not employ Black workers. The result was that the horde of Black Brazilians was denied access to jobs, housing and social stability, forcing them to live on the periphery of the emerging modern Brazilian society. This led to the formation of what is today the greatest headache of contemporary Brazilian society – the favelas – notorious as the abode of drug traffickers, prostitutes, kidnappers, and other social undesirables that are almost always the end results of institutionalized and wide-scale poverty and exclusion. However, the ideological and socio-racial reorientation introduced by the Government of ex-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) tried to tackle the problem of the so-called PPP – preto, pobre, periférico (black, poor and ghetto dwellers) by introducing various social programs like the Fome Zero aimed at eradicating poverty and socio-racial inequalities. The present paper intends to analyze and problematize the reception, interpretation and implementation of this and other social-racial programs in contemporary Brazil from the point of view of the target population of Afro-Brazilians, looking at how these reactions are reflected, projected and/or contested, through contemporary Afro-Brazilian popular culture expressions.*

**KEYWORDS:** ethnic empowerment, favelas, fome zero, afro-brazilian popular culture.

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*Não me convidaram, pra essa festa pobre, que os hom ens armaram pra me convencer... Não me nomearam chefe de nada, o meu cartão de crédito é uma navalha. Brasil, mostra tua cara, quero ver quem paga pra a gente ficar assim...*

(Cazuza, "Brasil")

*Brasil: País rico é país sem pobreza*

(Brasil: Governo Federal)

## Introduction

The origin of racial inequalities in Brazil is not entirely dissimilar with that of other societies on the American continent. For more than four hundred years, enslaved Africans were subjected to a life of misery and exploitation under a system of plantation, mine and urban service economy within which they constituted the principal currency. Various scholars and specialist on race relations in Brazil have tried to analyze the specificities that distinguished the racial realities of Brazil from what obtains in other societies, most especially, the United States of America. The overwhelming distinction between the racial divide operated in the latter and the color divide that appears to be the norm in Brazil and other Latin-American societies has been widely discussed. However, since the 1970s, a major paradigm shift started to emerge in the evaluation and analysis of the Brazilian brand of racial relations as presented in the pioneer writings of apologists of the Brazilian myth of racial democracy like sociologist Gilberto Freyre, Joaquim Nabuco and Jorge Amado among many others. Taking their cue from the movement of the Direitas Já! which ushered in a new political order to replace the military dictatorship that held a tight hold on the country between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, new generations of researchers, political, and social scientists as well as novelists and black activists have come to question, deconstruct and problematize the much propagated racial cordiality projected for the country. Concepts like Brazilian racial paternalism and the relationship between the erstwhile Casa Grande e Senzala have come under serious scrutiny to denounce the underlying intent of the Brazilian elites at minimizing the real extent of the devastating regime of human enslavement and exploitation that gave rise to the modern political, social and economic entity known as Brazil.

### From the Slave Origins to Affirmative Action – Emancipation, Modernity, Republicanism and Social Exclusion

Despite the fact that Brazil was the last slave-holding country in the Americas to completely abolish slavery, the slave-holding class doing everything possible for almost a

whole century to dribble and foil every attempt by both the British and other international bodies to put an end to the obnoxious trade, it is more than ironic that this same country was the first to take official measures aimed at a quick and definitive eradication of the presence of blacks from the post-slavery society. Indeed, after the proclamation of the Lei Áurea by Princess Isabel, the regent of Brazil on 13th May 1888, one of the very first steps taken by the elites was to roll out what they believed was a foolproof machinery that would rid the country of every trace of black presence within the shortest time possible. This was because, even before slavery ended, the elites were already growing increasingly uncomfortable with the insistent comparison of their country to Africa due to the overwhelming presence of blacks in the society. In essence, right from the time of Américo Vesúcio, through the period of the prolonged visit of European explorers, scientist, or mere curious adventurers in transit made possible by the opening of the Brazilian Ports to "friendly nations" by the Portuguese king, Dom João VI, all the European travelers, from Jean de Léry, Hans Staden, William Dampier, and James Cook, to Arthur Phillip, John Mawe, and Richard Burton, who visited Brazil between the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century always commented on the ubiquitous presence of people of African descent in the country. Also, notable European artists like Debret, Denis, Spix e Martius, and Rugendas always delighted in including everyday scenes of blacks carrying out various activities on the streets of Brazil in the paintings they took back to Europe after their tour of Brazil<sup>1</sup>. Without doubt, the famous British scientist, Charles Darwin was definitely influenced in his famous theory of the evolution of the species by his contact with Brazil. Historian, Jean Marcel Carvalho França succinctly summarized this in an interview he gave to the online journal História Viva:

O colono é a grande "mácula" que o visitante europeu detectou nesse Brasil exuberante e pródigo que descreveu nas suas narrativas de viagem... Aos olhos desses homens, os colonos eram preguiçosos, ignorantes, carolas, ciumentos,

<sup>1</sup> Jean Marcel Carvalho França, 2010, pg. 3. For more on the vision of European travelers on Brazilian life see also Gaspar, Lúcia. 2004.



desonestos e, sobretudo, excessivamente vaidosos e libidinosos. Isso quanto aos brancos, ou melhor, quanto àqueles que se passavam por brancos, pois havia ainda um toque a mais de barbárie no cotidiano da colônia e, posteriormente, do Império: o enorme contingente de negros escravos, vindos da “incivilizada África”, que perambulavam pelas ruas das cidades brasileiras.

(The (Portuguese) settler was the great “scourge” that the European visitor most detected in the exuberant and wonderful land that was the Brazil they described in their travel narratives. . . In the travelers’ accounts, the settlers are described as lazy, ignorant, sanctimonious, jealous, dishonest, and, above all, excessively conceited and libidinous. That is, referring to the white segment of the population, or rather, those who liked to think of themselves as white, because there was also that touch of savagery present in the quotidian existence of colonial Brazil that continued after its independence: the enormous contingent of black slaves brought in from “uncivilized Africa”, who roamed the streets of Brazilian cities)

This background scenario will certainly be incomplete without mentioning the role played by the protracted resistance and aversion of enslaved Africans and their Brazilian-born

creole descendants to the servile role that was their collective lot in slave-holding Brazil. If not for the fact that the benefits derived by the Brazilian slave-holders were considered of absolute values to the economic, social and domestic well-being of the slave-masters, the damage occasioned by the different forms of black resistance to slavery were enough to make the ruling elites advocate for the physical removal of all blacks from the society. Historians and specialists on race relations in Brazil like João José Reis and Pierre Verger have documented in their works diverse forms of black resistance to slavery, ranging from the so-called *banzo* and other forms of mild resistance and sabotage of the slave economy, to the more dastardly acts of poisoning members of the *casa grande*, and the elopement of slaves to form new quilombo communities or join already well established ones like the famous Quilombo dos Palmares where they could construct a black-ruled egalitarian society. Mention must also be made of the different episodes of armed resistance in the form of slave revolts like the 1835 *Revolta dos Malês* that constantly threatened to wrest power from the slave-holding white elite and transform Brazil into another Haiti. It is interesting to note that the option of deportation was readily adopted and

imposed by Brazilian elites to rid the society of the trouble-making blacks only when such individuals fall within the category of free or emancipated persons of color. This was the case with most of the blacks involved in the Nagô-muslim-led Malê revolt of 1835 in Bahia when the provincial government deported scores of blacks and forced many others to return to Africa where they eventually constituted what came to be known as the Aguda communities of the West-African coast.

On another level, I have argued elsewhere that the complete abandonment by the Brazilian ruling elite of Afro-Brazilian communities formed along the coastal regions of West Africa, such as the relatively small tabom community of Ghana and the more widely known and documented Aguda communities who settled along the coast from Aneho to Porto Novo, through Ouidah, Badagry and Lagos, where they quickly organized themselves into a Brazilian diaspora, preserving the customs, religion, festivals, language and other cultural heritage of Brazil, was an irrefutable proof of the intent of Brazilian ruling white elites to rid the country of any reference to its past dependence on African slaves in a desperate bid to obliterate all traces of black influence in the emerging modern Brazilian society which they wanted, at all costs, to model after Europe<sup>2</sup>.

This was the social and political background of race relations in Brazil up till the period of the Abolition of slavery in 1888. As rightly observed by Jean Marcel Carvalho França (2010, p.3.), majority of the white Brazilian creoles that would eventually constitute the political, economic, and intellectual elites of the emerging nation had their cultural formation in Europe, attending European universities and consuming European literatures. It was thus natural that they would be particularly embarrassed by the very low esteem in which their national culture as well as the behavioral mode of the so-called white Brazilians were held in the old continent. More importantly, since most Europeans who had the opportunity to visit Brazil after the opening of the Brazilian ports to friendly European nations occasioned by the 1808 arrival of the Portuguese crown in Rio de Janeiro always criticized in most vehement terms the cultural decadence of the Brazilian society, attributed to the ineptitude of the Portuguese colonizers and settlers to manage and develop the full potentials of such a land that was so greatly endowed by nature.

Significantly, the Brazilian elite that emerged as the ruling class after the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889 resolved to modernize the country, this time, not using the Portuguese blueprint that was considered inappropriate and backward, but working closely with models of modernity imported from eminent European societies, such as England, Italy, and, most

especially, France. Within this modernization project which was carried out on different levels, ranging from the intellectual to the physical re-organization of the society, the obsession of the white elites seemed to be how to get rid of everything that they considered responsible for the deplorable image of Brazil in Europe at the time. In the first place, blacks, who were now completely emancipated after the Lei Áurea of 1888 were considered to be a major source of embarrassment and accused of being the villains responsible for the backwardness of the country. The grandiose Brazilian modernization process thus had as its primary assignment their complete elimination from the national landscape within the shortest possible period, calculated by such racial pessimists like the Pernambucano parliamentarian Sílvio Romero (1851 – 1914)

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to within 30 years. The grand plan to achieve this was a multi-pronged but systematic social, economic and cultural strangulation as well as political castration of the horde of blacks inherited from the slavery era.

Thus, on the economic level, Brazilian blacks suddenly discovered that, the society that had depended on their free labor for over four hundred years now considered them as incapable of executing any decent work. Instead of employing them as salaried laborers, the new Brazilian elites ejected them from the lands they had worked for centuries, bringing in hordes of European migrants to colonize and work the lands. This was the beginning of the politics of *embranquecimento* aimed at whitening the Brazilian society.

Official Brazilian historiography would make us believe that European migration to Brazil was as a direct result of, and in response to the 1808 arrival of Dom João VI, when the Portuguese crown officially took up residence in Rio de Janeiro, fleeing from the Napoleonic invasions in Europe. However, between 1808 and 1824, that is, two years after Dom

2 See AyohÓMIDIRE, F. 2009



João's son, Dom Pedro declared Brazil's independence from Portugal, only two thousand Swiss and one thousand German nationals had arrived in Brazil<sup>3</sup> in spite of the open policy of granting free access to European nationals of "friendly nations" to settle in the country. It is highly instructive and revealing to note the official explanation of why this initial attempt at bringing in Europeans was not very successful:

Outras tentativas de assentar irlandeses e alemães, especialmente no Nordeste, fracassaram completamente. Apesar de autorizada a concessão de terras a estrangeiros, o latifúndio impedia a implantação da pequena propriedade rural e a escravidão obstaculizava o trabalho livre assalariado...

**“The project of completely eliminating blacks from the national demographic map was further strengthened with the policy of social exclusion meant to result in their physical removal from the urban landscape.”**

Após a abolição, em apenas dez anos (de 1890 a 1900) entraram no Brasil mais de 1,4 milhão de imigrantes, o dobro do número de entradas nos oitenta anos anteriores (1808-1888)

(... [During this period] other attempts to bring in Irish and German migrants, especially as settlers in the North-eastern region of the country completely failed. In spite of the assurance of land concession to such migrants, the grand scale plantation system did not allow small-scale rural agricultural enterprises to thrive, while the use of slaves was a great disincentive for waged labour by free persons...

After the Abolition of Slavery, in less than 10 years (from 1890 to 1900), Brazil received more than 1.4 million immigrants, that is, double the size of the immigrant population recorded in the preceding eighty years (1808-1888). (My italics)

One does not necessarily require the ability to read between the lines here before one understands that Brazil completely depended on the use of slave labor, that is, black labor for its national economy right up till the day of Abolition. However, as soon as the Lei Áurea completely put an end to white exploitation of black labor, Brazilian white elites decided it was time to invent a new economic blueprint for the nation, one that would bring the country at par with the modern nations of Europe and North America, thereby putting an end to what was

considered the bad reputation of Brazil as a backward country, which the intellectual elites in turn attributed to the mixed racial population. In essence, many of the leading Brazilian intellectuals strongly believed that the presence of blacks and the wide-scale inter-racial procreation encouraged by what was considered in Europe as the ultimate proof of the Portuguese moral laxity was at the root of the backwardness of Brazil. It thus became a convenient expediency to harness the project of modernizing the country to a systematic effort at ridding the country of its black population whose labor was no longer required because it was no longer free.

In order to ensure a quick disappearance of blacks from the national demographic map, the first step was to disenfranchise and castrate them economically, blocking every possibility of paid employment for people of color. The erstwhile enslaved population was thus branded as a lazy class, averse to any form of free labor and, on that score, the arriving European immigrants were encouraged to provide an alternative labor force for the nation. All necessary political will and machinery were deployed to attract migrants from various parts of Europe where the population was reeling under a serious economic recession and insalubrious social conditions. Thus, from diverse European ports, especially Amsterdam, Bremen and Hamburg, hordes of impoverished families migrated to Brazil where they were to have access to land and opportunities. On arrival, entire migrant families were received at the Casa do Imigrante specifically established by the Brazilian government for that purpose.

O primeiro grupo de colonos alemães aportou no Brasil em 1824. Foram recrutados pelo major Jorge Antonio Schaffer e encaminhados para o atual município de São Leopoldo, no Rio Grande do Sul. Os colonos tiveram que construir suas próprias casas, receberam sementes para a plantação e gado para o sustento. De início, São Leopoldo não se desenvolveu. Porém, com a chegada de novos imigrantes, a colônia cresceu. A partir de São Leopoldo, os alemães desbravaram a região, seguindo o caminho dos rios. Em alguns anos, toda a região do Vale do Rio dos Sinos estava sendo ocupada pelos colonos germânicos.

(The first group of German settlers had arrived in Brazil in 1824. They were recruited by Major Jorge Antonio Schaffer and sent to the present São Leopold municipality in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The settlers had to build their own houses, they were given seedlings for their plantation, and cattle for their sustenance. This colony of São Leopold did not develop well at that period. However, it began to grow extensively during the second wave of immigrant arrivals. From São Leopoldo, the German settlers colonized the entire region, following the course of the principal rivers in the region. Within a few years, the entire region of the Vale do Rio

3 See Imigração no Brasil, <http://www.brasilecola.com/brasil/imigracao-no-brasil.html>. Accessed 22/02/2012.

dos Sinos was completely occupied by the Germanic settlers).

Apart from the Germanic peoples referred to above, Brazil also received within the same period considerable migrant populations of Italian, French, Polish and some Eastern-European nationals. As we have seen in the above quotation, what characterized and generally facilitated the arrival and integration of these European migrants into the Brazilian society was the official assistance given by the Brazilian government since those who came were actually not in any condition to offer immediate economic prosperity to their newly adopted country. In plain terms, most of the migrants who arrived could not have come to Brazil if the host government had not subsidized their arrival and initial installation in the country<sup>4</sup>. This is an important detail to note, for, when one compares this condition to the treatment meted out to the black population under the same system, it becomes obvious that the European migrants were being encouraged to come to Brazil not merely for economic reasons, but more significantly to help in the attempt at discoloring the population, that is, supplanting the erstwhile mestizo population pattern that had been dominant for the preceding four centuries, replacing it with a white population that would make Brazil resemble any modern European society.

## Modernization and the process of Favelization

Coupled with the economic emasculation of the black population made possible by the replacement of their erstwhile slave labor with the new economic model of land use by subsidized European settlers, the project of completely eliminating blacks from the national demographic map was further strengthened with the policy of social exclusion meant to result in their physical removal from the urban landscape. Having successfully removed them from the rural areas where they had been supplanted by white settlers, the official policy of modernization of the cities made it impossible for blacks to rent lodgings in the urban centers. Already, the repressive laws that were promulgated in the aftermaths of the successive slave revolts of the early 1800s such as the aforementioned Malê Revolt of 1835 in Bahia and the 1910 Revolta da Chibata in Rio de Janeiro among others had made it a criminal offense for blacks to own landed property. For example, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, which was the federal capital of Brazil at the period, the so-called urbanization reforms of the municipal government led by Perreira Passos did a thorough job of pushing

out the blacks from the centre of the city, leaving them with no options but to build their precarious shacks on the slippery hillsides of the various mounts that adorned the city. Not even the euphemistic description of the process made available on the site of the state government could successfully hide the real motives of the reform. A full quotation is well worth the while to underline this official intent in the appropriate manner it deserves:

A formação de favelas no Rio está ligada ao término do período escravocrata, no final do século XIX. Sem posse de terras e sem opções de trabalho no campo muitos dos escravos libertos deslocaram-se para o Rio de Janeiro, então capital federal. O grande contingente de famílias em busca de moradia e emprego provocou a ocupação informal em locais desvalorizados, de difícil acesso e sem infraestrutura urbana.

Com a Proclamação da República, em 1889, a elite e os administradores do Rio queriam apagar do seu passado os vestígios de uma cidade colonial. Cortiços sem condições sanitárias e povoados por ex-escravos foram demolidos na reforma de Pereira Passos. Sem ter outras opções de moradia os desabrigados foram obrigados a construir suas próprias casas. Começou então a ocupação dos morros<sup>5</sup> centrais da Providência e de Santo Antônio, em 1893, seguida pelo Morro dos Telégrafos e Mangueira, em 1900.

Com o passar dos anos, a modernização das zonas nobres da cidade continuou. As pequenas ruas e os casarões deram lugar a longas avenidas e construções arrojadas. Muitas casas foram demolidas, diminuindo a oferta de moradia e elevando o preço dos aluguéis. O fenômeno provocou o aumento da formação de favelas, para atender a população mais carente.

No entanto, desde o início do século XX as favelas foram vistas como um problema. Os morros provocavam medo e curiosidade, o que gerava desconhecimento sobre a situação. Em 1927, o arquiteto francês Alfred Agache apresentou um plano de urbanização e embelezamento para o Rio, em que

<sup>5</sup> In Brazilian black slang, the use of morro to describe the urban favelas stems from the afro-Brazilian population's use of sarcasm as a way of denouncing the racial and social inequalities and marginalization they suffer within the Brazilian polity. Morro is the Portuguese noun for the hill sides on which the socially marginalized blacks had to seek refuge but during slavery (when the morros housed the quilombos, and, after Abolition, when the morros offered the only lodging options available to them). On the other hand, morro is also the first person singular conjugation of the verb "to die". Thus, within the black discourse of the encounter of the afro-Brazilians with the white elitist authorities and their agents, such as the police, who delighted in persecuting every form of black expression and representation, forcefully breaking up their social and religious gatherings and arresting both the priests and adepts of Afro-Brazilian religions as well as capoeira dancers and samba musicians whom they collectively referred to as malandros (loafers and vagabonds), it is common to hear afro-Brazilians describing their survival tactics and reactions with the expression: *ou morro, ou mato*. This ambiguous expression can be translated in two ways: "either I die or I kill", or as, "I either take to the hills, i.e. seek the protection of the favela, or run to the woods". (*mato* is Portuguese for the forest or the woods but as the conjugated form of the verb *matar*, it means "I kill").

<sup>4</sup> Official records show that of the 4.5 million Europeans who migrated to Brazil between 1882 and 1934, more than 2.3 million came in through the State of São Paulo as 3rd Class passengers on board ships that berthed at the Porto of Santos. (<http://www.portalsaofrancisco.com.br/alfa/imigracao-no-brasil/imigracao-no-brasil.php>)



propunha a transferência dos moradores das favelas por motivos sociais, estéticos e hierárquicos. Somente alguns projetos de Agache foram levados adiante, mas a ideia de que as comunidades precisavam ser eliminadas permaneceu...

(The formation of the favelas in Rio can be traced to the extinction of slavery at the end the 19th Century. Without access to land and seeing themselves denied employment opportunities in the rural areas, many of the freed slaves moved to Rio de Janeiro, the then federal capital. Large family contingents in search of lodging and jobs created an informal occupation of the less privileged areas of the city, zones with difficult access and devoid of urban infrastructures.

With the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889, the elite and the administrators of Rio wanted to eliminate from the national memory all vestiges of its colonial past. Slum houses with no sanitary conditions and other insalubrious lodgings of ex-slaves were all demolished during the reforms of Perreira Passos. Left with no other option of accommodation, the homeless were forced to build their own make-shift lodgings. That was how the slums on the sides of the central hills of Providência and Santo Antonio came into existence in 1893, followed by the slum of Morro dos Telégrafos and Mangueira in 1900.

As time went on, the modernization of the noble areas of the city was further intensified. The narrow streets and the big colonial houses were replaced with long avenues and bold constructions. More houses were demolished, further reducing the number of lodgings available for rent and driving the rent itself beyond the reach of the poor. This phenomenon caused a further increase in the formation of favelas as the only option of accommodation available to the poor.

Meanwhile, right from the beginning of the 20th Century, the favelas were considered a problem by the authorities. The morros, as the favelas are popularly called, induced both fear and curiosity, and this created a lot of apprehension for the authorities. In 1927, the French architect Alfred Agache proposed an urbanization project to embellish the city of Rio de Janeiro in which he advocated for the removal of the favela dwellers for what he described as social, esthetic and hierarchical reasons. Although the project was only partially executed at the time, the idea of the need to eliminate the favelas continued to gain currency).

Today, by official reckoning, the city of Rio de Janeiro alone has more than a thousand favelas, while Salvador, the capital of Bahia is estimated to have more than 60,000 people

living in favelas<sup>6</sup>. Also, in virtually every major Brazilian city, favelas have automatically sprouted in their hundreds, from São Paulo to Brasília, from Salvador to Belo Horizonte, Porto Alegre, Curitiba and Florianópolis. This is because the white elites later realized that the favelas were a convenient source of cheap labor, providing them with house-helpers and other categories of underpaid workers within the informal sector.

Again, the glib official explanation was incapable of completely disguising the real reasons for the tolerance of the existence of favelas in the great urban centers:

Essa propagação das favelas nos bairros mais ricos parecia a única saída possível para a população pobre que precisava morar perto do local de trabalho. Num tempo em que apenas trens e bondes precários chegavam até as periferias da cidade, os nobres não queriam esperar por horas e horas seus empregados. Os morros eram uma solução cômoda também para a elite...<sup>7</sup>

[T]his proliferation of favelas in the vicinity of rich zones of the city appeared to be the only possible option open to the poor segment of the population who needed to live closer to their places of employment. At a time when only trains and trams with irregular schedules were the only available means of transportation between the city centre and the outskirts, the noble city dwellers did not wish to wait for hours on end for their maids to arrive. The morros were thus seen as a convenient solution by the elites...

Today, apart from serving as the source of cheap labor, servicing affluent Brazilian homes with housemaids, oddjobbers, errand boys, etc., Brazilian favelas have also acquired the unenviable reputation of serving as base and hideout to the booming drug trade in the country. However, not even this unsavory reputation is considered strong enough to make the authorities to wish for their total eradication. This is because, since the cultural renaissance of Afro-Brazilian communities initiated in Bahia and São Paulo between the mid 1970s and '80s through the creation of Afro-Brazilian socio-cultural groups such as Ilê Aiyê, Olodun, Muzenza, Ara Ketu and other blocos afros and afoxés in Salvador, and groups like Gueledé, mulheres negras, quilombhoje, etc. in São Paulo, with similar creations in Rio de Janeiro, leading to the formation of escolas de samba (samba schools), favelas and other black ghettos with their predominant population of the so-called PPP – preto, pobre, periférico (black, poor, ghetto dwellers) have become the haven of Brazilian cultural expressions, most especially with regards to music and carnival, two great Brazilian export products. Essentially, in Rio de Janeiro as in other Brazilian state capitals and urban centres, most of the samba,

pagoda, afro-funk, rappers and carnival groups originated and still operate from the various favelas and ghettos.

Afro-Brazilian Affirmative Action and the Conquest of Socio-Economic Space.

The struggle for the implantation of Affirmative Action in Brazil started well before the end of the military dictatorship in 1985 or even the political amnesty of the early 1970s. Afro-Brazilian intellectuals and activists like Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011) who had created the teatro experimental do negro (Black Experimental Theater) in the 1940s to refute the claims by white supremacists that blacks were incapable of intellectual dramaturgy. In the early 1980s, on his return from self-imposed exile, Abdias also created the concept of Quilombismo which he developed from the historic anti-slavery resistance communities known as quilombo in Brazil. An ambitious and comprehensive project that sought to restore to Black Brazilian their racial, social and cultural dignity eroded by slavery, as well as what Abdias called racial and cultural genocide aimed at keeping afro-Brazilians in their place forever within the Brazilian polity, i.e. as a subservient and dependent population incapable of aspiring to equality with the white segment of the society.

Abdias' project and most of his concrete suggestions and proposals aimed at restoring the dignity of afro-Brazilians were actively taken up in the mid 1980s by the diverse segments of the larger MNU – Movimento Negro Unificado (Unified Black Movement) in the different states of Brazil. In Bahia, the landmark was the creation of afro-cultural and carnival groups known as bloco afro and afoxé which espoused the ideals of racial pride as a bold step towards complete racial emancipation. Groups like Ilê Aiyê, Olodun, Muzenza, Ara Ketu, Timbalada, etc. came up to challenge the negative projection of the black character in Brazilian socio-cultural spheres. Using the annual carnival as their platform, they projected a completely different image of Africa and afro-Brazilians aimed at making afro-Brazilians to begin to take real pride in their ancestry, abilities and potentials. The success of their activities was replicated over the years by similar groups in virtually every part of Brazil. Over the years, these groups have been able to engage the larger Brazilian society at different levels in a dialogue aimed at changing the general perceptions about blackness in Brazil, hitherto conceived by both blacks and whites as something undesirable.

As time went by, such groups gradually extended their activities to investing in the intellectual formation of the afro-Brazilian population who, due to poverty and economic disenfranchisement, themselves the result of centuries of slavery and racial oppression, could not afford good education. Much like their counterparts in the USA, black socio-cultural associations developed alternative educational networks to

6 IBGE censo de 2013.

7 <http://soulbrasileiro.com.br/main/rio-de-janeiro/favelas/origens-4/>



reinforce the intellectual formation of the afro-Brazilian population, starting in the 1980s and 90s with community schools such as the Escola Mãe Eugenia Ana dos Santos that developed out of the Oba-Biyi educational project designed by afro-Brazilian egungun priest Mestre Didi and his collaborators in the Candomblé (Orisa) Temple of Axé Opô Afonjá to offer alternative ethnic educational curriculum for children of the community. Today, this model of escola de terreiro (temple schools) has been so successfully replicated that virtually every religious temple and/or bloco afro runs not only a primary school for the children of the community, but also professional schools such as the Escola Criativa do Olodun, Banda Erê (Ilê Aiyê), Escola Candhyhal Pracatum (Percussion school) owned

**“This was what the concerted black renaissance of 1980s gradually rose up against, challenging the status quo and demanding for a greater participation in the public life of the nation through an array of affirmative action that would guarantee them educational, social, economic, and ultimately, political empowerment.”**

by musician Carlinhos Brown, etc., and even extra-mural colleges like the Steve Biko Extramural College in Salvador and many others in Rio, São Paulo, Porto Alegre, Belo Horizontes, etc. where young afro-Brazilian school leavers are given free additional coaching to assist them in their preparation for the almighty university entrance examinations.

A direct fall-out of this investment in the educational and intellectual capacities of afro-Brazilians can be seen today in the ability of afro-Brazilians to better engage the larger society and demand for their economic, social, cultural and political rights. This has led to the implantation and implementation of various Affirmative Action projects aimed at eliminating racial inequalities in the country. By far the boldest step has been the promulgation by former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on 9th January 2003 of the Brazilian Federal Law 10.639 which mandated the inclusion of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture in the school curriculum. This was followed by the creation of an extra-ordinary ministry for racial equality

known as the Secretaria Especial para a Promoção de Políticas de Igualdade Racial (SEPPIR) directly under the presidency to cater for the black segment of the population. Furthermore, since 2004, a great percentage of public universities in Brazil has adopted the sistema de cotas (Quota System) whereby 40% of admission placements into their various departments and faculties are reserved for afro-Brazilian students and those who graduated from public secondary schools.

“Brasil, mostra tua cara!” – The demand for Equality and not tolerant paternalism.

One of the first things virtually every writer and researcher finds out about the nature of racial relationship in Brazil is that racism is difficult to place in the country. This is because, right from the foundation of the Brazilian nation, the coming together of the three races – white, Amerindian and black –, emphasis has always been placed in official discourses on the existence of a certain cordiality as a marker of their encounter. Brazilian racial discourse is rife with myths of a racial paradise where the three races came together to live in harmony and work together for the *ordem e progresso* that came to be adopted as the national motto at the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889. I have demonstrated elsewhere how the legend of Caramuru was used as a foundation myth by the Portuguese colonizers to justify their right to harness the immense resources discovered in Brazil by the accidental landing of the armada led by Pedro Álvares Cabral in April of the year 1500<sup>8</sup>. In the same manner that pioneer literary texts emphasized the racial harmony occasioned and guaranteed by the marriage of the Portuguese deportee Pedro Álvares, alias Caramuru, with the native Indian princess Paraguaçu, chroniclers of the slave era in Brazil often tried to categorize the slavery experience of Brazil as a cordial arrangement based on mutual respect between the *senhoria* and the captive classes. This was the overriding impression created by the sociological treatise of Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) in his 1936 classic, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, aptly translated into English as *Slaves and Masters*. In this work, the general racial motif created was that of a cordial slavery where the enslaved population lived happily with their masters as members of the latter’s households, enjoying the latter’s protection within the peculiar arrangement of the system of *apadrinhamento* typical of the brand of Catholicism brought from the Iberia Peninsula whereby the slave masters would be the godparents of the children of their slaves, supposedly to protect such *afilhados* and cater for them as they would their own biological children. In most cases, such an *ingênuo* may actually be a *bastard filho natural*<sup>9</sup> fathered by

8 See Ayoh’OMIDIRE, 2010.

9 During the slave era in Brazil, children born by slave women were referred to as *ingênuo* while a *filho natural* was a child born to a white slave master whose paternity he had no intention of recognizing.

either the slave master himself or one of his male inheritors. Such was the “cordiality” of the Brazilian type of slavery that, during the campaign for slave Emancipation, many intellectuals of the slave-owners class who were avowed opponents of the Abolition of slavery often argued that the country would be doing injustice to the enslaved population by setting them free. Dias Carneiro, a Deputy in the Brazilian Federal Parliament had this to say during the parliamentary debates over the Sexagenarian law in 1885:

Que gênero de felicidade proporciona-se a um sexagenário, que passou toda a vida no cativo, onde formou hábitos, adquiriu necessidades, atou relações, oferecendo-lhe a liberdade quando mais precisa da proteção dos seus senhores, que em geral não lha negam? (cited in Mendonça, 2010, 31)

(What kind of happiness would we be offering a sixty-year-old man, who had spent all his life in slavery, where he had developed habits, acquired needs, made relations and developed family ties, if we suddenly set him free, when what he actually needs is the protection of his master, who, as a rule, will never deny him such a protection?)

This paternalistic discourse was to be brilliantly developed in the early years of the 20th Century, giving rise to the myth of racial democracy within which it was widely acclaimed as the striking characteristic difference between racial relations in Brazil and what obtained in other societies such as the southern part of the United States with its Jim Crow laws and, the Apartheid system in pre-1994 South Africa.

Sociologist, Anthropologists and other categories of experts in race relations who have always been attracted to Brazil are usually struck by this seeming absence of racial prejudice among the markedly miscegenated population. From the 1960s onwards, findings of successive social-scientists like Florestan Fernandez, Peter fry and a host of others however point in the opposite direction, indicating that myths like racial democracy, cordiality and harmony were nothing but a subterfuge by the ruling white elite in Brazil to keep the blacks in their ordained places and protect the status quo of race relations in Brazil, i.e. the white occupying the prominence in public life with a distinctive economic, social, and political advantage over the non-white segments of the population. In other words, the racial harmony apparent in Brazil was only possible for as long as the blacks, who, by the official reckonings of IBGE<sup>10</sup>, made up more than 49% of the population, accepted to remain invisible in public life, conceding to the

white elites the right to occupy the posto de commando in virtually all spheres of the national life – the presidency, judiciary, legislature, industry and technology, as well as the universities, the armed forces, etc., contenting themselves with the front row only in the areas of sports, carnival and, probably, music.

This was what the concerted black renaissance of the 1980s gradually rose up against, challenging the status quo and demanding for a greater participation in the public life of the nation through an array of affirmative action that would guarantee them educational, social, economic, and ultimately, political empowerment. The year 2000 celebration of the Quincentennial of the Discovery of Brazil was a turning point in the discourse of race relations in Brazil. By a concerted representation of their aspirations, afro-Brazilians began to communicate in a more urgent tone their need for racial equality instead of racial cordiality or tolerance. By questioning the hitherto harmonious fluid of the national life based on the praxis of *cada macaco no seu galho* (every monkey on his designated tree branch), afro-Brazilians inaugurated an irreversible process that would look beyond the rhetorics of racial democracy and harmony, beyond social reparation programs like the Fome Zero introduced by the government to calm the hunger of millions of black households by giving them a monthly stipend and providing them with gas cylinders and urban-transport tickets for their school-age children<sup>11</sup>.

Nowhere is this discontent with the status quo and the quest for a fundamental change of attitude in the national polity more eloquently expressed than in the lyrics of what came to be known as MPB – *música popular brasileira*, i.e. Brazilian popular music. A good example is the song “Brasil” partly quoted in the epigraph of this paper. Made popular by Cazuza in the 1980s, this song is nothing but an open questioning of the invisibility of afro-Brazilians by the socio-racial status quo. The song could well have been the *desabafo* (outburst) of a typical afro-Brazilian individual lamenting his exclusion from all the pumps and pageantry of Brazilian public life, especially in moments of national celebration like the aforementioned 5th Centenary of the Discovery of Brazil:

11 The program Fome Zero is seen in official Brazilian quarters as one of the greatest legacies of democracy in contemporary Brazil, aimed at eradicating not only social but economic inequalities in the country. It's success has been lauded by different world leaders, including the United Nations. This success was the basis of the change of the Brazilian national motto by the current government of Dilma Roussef from the “Brasil: um país de todos” (Brazil: a country for everyone) of her predecessor to the new motto – “Brasil: país rico é país sem pobreza” (Brazil: a rich country is a hunger-free country).

10 IBGE stands for Instituto brasileiro de geografia e estatística, a government agency responsible for populational census.

## Brasil - Cazuza

Não me convidaram	They did not invite me
Pra esta festa pop	to this glamorous party
Que os homens armaram	that has been organized
Pra me convencer	to convince me
A pagar sem ver	to pay blindly
Toda essa droga	for all this shit
Que já vem malhada	that has been there
Antes de eu nascer...	ong before I was born
Não me ofereceram	They did not offer me
Nem um cigarro	not even a cigarette
Fiquei na porta	I had to stand at the gate
Estacionando os carros	helping them to park their cars
Não me elegeram	They did make me
Chefe de nada	head of anything
O meu cartão de crédito	my only credit card
É uma navalha...	is a pocket knife
Brasil!	Brazil
Mostra tua cara	Show your true face
Quero ver quem paga	I want to know who's paying)
Pra gente ficar assim	for us to live like this)
Brasil!	Brazil
Qual é o teu negócio?	what are you up to?
O nome do teu sócio?	who's your business partner?
Confia em mim...	please let me in on your secret)
Grande pátria	Great fatherland
Desimportante	Irrelevant nation
Em nenhum instante	At no point
Eu vou te trair	would I betray you
Não, não vou te trair...	no, I will not betray you...
Brasil!	Brazil
Mostra tua cara	Show your true face
Quero ver quem paga	I want to know who's paying
Pra gente ficar assim	for us to live like this
Brasil!	Brazil
Qual é o teu negócio?	what are you up to?
O nome do teu sócio?	who's your business partner?
Confia em mim...	please let me in on your secret

## Conclusion

In essence, within the larger discourse of the official projects aimed at eradicating poverty in Brazil today, despite the extensive activities of diverse afro-Brazilian groups and organizations, from the Teatro Experimental do Negro founded by Abdias do Nascimento in the 1960s, to the more concerted activities of the Movimento Negro Unificado –MNU (Unified Black Movement) which led to the adoption of various form of Affirmative Action such as the Fome Zero, the creation of SEPPPIR, the Sistema de Cotas, etc, adopted by the Brazilian government since the time of former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, some segments of the Brazilian society still try to explain away the problems of inequalities in Brazil as more of a social problem rather than as a racial problem. Such apologists would claim that even the so-called favelas and ghettos are not inhabited solely by blacks, but reflect to a certain extent the color demography of the country, serving as home not only to blacks, but also to the poor pardos (browns), mulattoes, morenos and even some odd whites. However, Afro-Brazilian activists and defenders of Affirmative Action always insist on such occasions that the statistics alone are sufficient to give the lie to such arguments. Comparative statistics of the demographic composition of the ghettos and favelas show an absolute majority of blacks, same for economic statistics, with Brazilian blacks occupying the lowest rungs of the economic ladders, participating more in the informal sector of the economy, due mostly to their low educational level. Ditto for the political level, where, even in states with predominantly afro-Brazilian populations like Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, or Alagoas, the political power is still in the hands of the white minority.

The situation thus confirms the conclusion of afro-Brazilian activists when discussing the equation between poverty and racial inequalities in the country. They claim that in Brazil, poverty has a color: black. Thus it does not matter from whatever angle one looks at it, the equation remains as constant as the northern star: in Brazil, one is either pobre porque preto (poor because (s/he is) black) or preto porque pobre (black because poor).

I would like to close this discussion at this point by quoting part of the 2009 official message of Zulu Araújo, president of the Fundação Cultural Palmares, Brazil's highest institution for the defense of the rights and cultural expression of afro-Brazilians, to mark the 121st Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in Brazil. His pronouncement tries to summarize the present stage of the struggle of afro-Brazilians for equality of opportunities for blacks and whites alike in the national public life as a sine qua non condition for the full realization of the much celebrated Abolition of Slavery, correcting 121 years of Abolition without recognition. Lamenting the “indignant reaction of some sectors of the Brazilian society to the different public policies of the Brazilian government

aimed at promoting racial equality through Affirmative Action, Zulu Araújo urged all Brazilians to join hands in redefining Abolition so as to put an end to discriminatory racial practices:

Abolição para sensibilizar e conscientizar os homens e mulheres que dirigem o país, em especial aqueles que nos representam na Justiça e no Parlamento, de que a promoção da igualdade racial não pode ser apenas o recheio mágico de discursos vazios sobre a beleza da mestiçagem, o encanto das mulatas etc. Ainda mais quando estudos e pesquisas apontam para a iniquidade das relações raciais no Brasil, a exemplo do uso do critério da “boa aparência”, que leva à exclusão milhões de brasileiros e dificulta a eles o acesso a determinados nichos do mercado de trabalho, como a publicidade, a moda e a televisão...<sup>12</sup>

(Abolition to sensitize and awaken the conscience of men and women who rule this country, especially those who represent us in the Judiciary and the Legislative arms of government, that the promotion of racial equality cannot be imprisoned within the magical echoes of empty rhetorics centered on the beauty of racial mixture, the charm of mulatto women, etc. More so, when various studies and research findings denounce the extent of the iniquities of race relations in Brazil, as exemplified in the use of the criteria of “good appearance” at job interviews, which have led to the exclusion of millions of Brazilians, making it virtually impossible for them to gain access to specific niches of the Brazilian job market, such as the areas of publicity, fashion and television). ●

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