

Paper presented at "Global Diasporas" conference __ UW_Madison, October 29, 1999 [a condensed version of an essay to be published in *Diaspora and Visual Culture*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff (Routledge, 1999)]

"Memory, Agency and the Arts: The African Diaspora in Brazil"

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A central problem for an adequate theory of cultural history is how peoples' ideas and aspirations are transformed into practices and products. This paper explores the arts histories of the African diaspora in Brazil, specifically Yoruba_ and Bantu_ speaking peoples and their descendants. I suggest that specific African theories of agency __ ase or "performative power" among the Yoruba and mooyo/nkisi "empowering perscriptions" among Bantu peoples __ help explain how Afro_Brazilians forged and continue to forge distinctive artistic worlds despite Euro_Brazilian attempts at cultural hegemony.

By agency, I mean the instrumentality of creating one's reality __ the process of turning aspirations into practices and products. Such agency never occurs in a vacuum or by accident, but rather emerges out of what already exists. It is a response to events and situations, some that open up possibilities, others that close them off. Thus, people shape culture and history, just as culture and history shape them in complex ways. My focus on agency and suppressed or hidden accounts in both the historical literature and in contemporary social practices is informed by recent discussions on the nature of evidence, knowledge, and representation in issues of cultural dominance and resistance. The history of African diaspora arts is the history of self and cultural assertions of identity, where identity concerns being in the world. The study and analysis of African diaspora arts __ the forms, images, practices, and ideas that persisted as well as those that disappeared or were largely transformed in specific situations __ can provide keys to understanding the internal cultural dynamics operating in histories of cultural encounters __ and the evidence of the arts in such histories.

When Africans were brought against their will to the Americas they may have come empty_handed, but they didn't come empty_headed. Even during the horrors of the Middle Passage, Africans in their shared misery began to form their own associations on board the ship, where they called each other in KiKongo __ malungo, friend, comrade. This initial effort at re_membering, that is __ restructuring society and the past __ created a new synthesis from diverse cultural elements, a process known as creolization or transculturation. Soon after arrival in Brazil, Africans adapted or established sacred and secular associations for mutual help, solidarity, and liberation.

One of these was the Catholic lay organization, or irmandade. Afro_Brazilians, whether they were Muslim, Christian, or followers of ancestral gods, managed to operate effectively within such Church groups, using them to their own advantage, and for their own purposes. Thus the women of Boa Morte carry their Christian icons in procession on Church festival days, as well as their beads of devotion to Africa's gods (orisa) for night ceremonies. In addition, they wear on their bodies, silver, copper, and gold waist pendants known as balangandans. Seen as "jewelry" by Euro_Brazilian society, such regalia actually served as commemorative objects and protective amulets. Cylindrical pendants, representing containers for documents of manumission, were symbols of freedom and assertive action or ase. Other symbols (keys, fish, birds, animal teeth) were associated with a variety of faiths, both African and non_African. Rather than thinking of this as a matter of religious "syncretism" which tends to convey a sort of "blending, homogenizing process," I would suggest we recognize the distinctiveness of each faith, the simultaneous interplay and juxtaposition of multiple beliefs and practices for persons whose histories demanded a refined, subtle, and effective facility for multiple consciousness. What was required was flexibility, a strategic pragmatism to multiple realities in order to be adepts at survival.

Background

From the fifteenth century, European expansion greatly accelerated and intensified the global encounters of cultures with radically different forms and concepts of art and artistic production. In Brazil, as in other parts of the Americas, such encounters involved Europeans, indigenous peoples, and Africans, especially Yoruba_ and Bantu_ speaking peoples. Yoruba_speakers were brought in the tens of thousands to Brazil between 1790 and 1850. Their large numbers, their late arrival during the Atlantic slave trade, as well as their clearly_articulated tenet of

action and agency based on the concept of ase, "performative power; the ability to accomplish something," may help to explain their religious and artistic achievements.

Bantu-speaking peoples, primarily from Central Africa, came earlier and over a longer period of time (16th-18th centuries). Their theory of agency is contained in the terms ntu (being/existence), mooyo (life force) and nkisi (empowering objects) which make actions possible. The ideas of mooyo/nkisi are manifested in the socio-political and economic organizations Bantu peoples established in 17th century Brazil — free, independent political entities called quilombos or mucambos.

In what follows, I will suggest the ways in which Afro-Brazilians have used expressive culture, both forms and performances, to construct identities. I will also show how these forms of artistic expression have been and continue to be socially mobilized to confront, divert, and resist hegemonic forces in racist Brazilian society today.

One nineteenth century example can be seen in the Church of Lapina, Liberdade_Salvador which was designed and built sometime around 1860s-70s by Manoel Friandes, (b. December 25, 1823 — d. August 4, 1904). Friandes was African, possibly Yoruba, but more particularly he identified himself as an African-Muslim or imale, the Yoruba word for Muslim. We know that he was a well-known and successful architect and builder who was commissioned to do a large number of commercial and ecclesiastical buildings throughout the city of Salvador, Bahia.

The Lapina Church stands as a monument to 19th century Afro-Brazilian religious and cultural resistance in architectural form, of self-expression in the face of hegemonic forces. The exterior of the church is very staid and unelaborated compared to many Brazilian Baroque churches. Commissioned by the Church which must have known he was Muslim, Friandes created a subdued, quiet, Christian exterior. But within, he designed a forcefully exuberant Islamic space — Moorish arches, decorative tiles, and most striking of all, Arabic script etched into the walls over the arches surrounding the nave and containing excerpts from Old Testament accounts of The Creation. How and why did Friandes obtain the patronage to design and construct this church, especially since the church was built not long after a series of armed revolts led by African-Muslims throughout the first half of the 19th century, the last and most violent taking place in 1835? How did he negotiate the obviously Muslim interior design and combine it with the equally obvious Christian imagery? What did Friandes think and say about what he was doing, and how did it fit in with his other architectural projects? Is this an example of subversive expression — an assertion of self-identity as a Muslim, as an African, as a cultured, sophisticated professional man? Or all, or some (or none?), of the above? What were the responses of the Church hierarchy and parishioners? The Church of Lapina certainly stands as a monument to the enormously complex, seemingly incongruous, and fascinating juxtapositions of contested religious ideologies, racial and class hierarchies, political possibilities, and economic forces which Afro-Brazilians had to negotiate. This monument is part of a hidden history, like so many others about Afro-Brazilians, waiting to be researched and told.

Congadas and Quilombos

Congadas (from the African word Kongo) are dramatizations of the coronations of African kings and queens, diplomatic missions and battles. In the state of Bahia they date to the beginning of the 17th century. They seem to have been permitted by Portuguese officials to encourage inter-ethnic rivalries, to divide and thus more easily rule Africans. Yet Africans used them as a model and mechanism for self-government which helped shape socio-political institutions, processes, and ideals. For example, some of the late 17th century congadas commemorated Queen Njinga Nbandi of Angola who died in 1663 after fighting valiantly to maintain the independence of her realm against the Portuguese. In the 1820s-30s, the French artist Jean Baptiste Debret documented a Kongo king and queen in a church and an African funeral pageant not unlike the congada tradition. Note especially the fellow in the foreground doing a handstand/cartwheel which may relate to a Bantu African performance tradition (capoeira) I discuss later. The memory of such powerful African rulers helped Afro-Brazilians to re-member their past, that is, bring it into existence in tangible ways — this was performed identity in which bodily praxis was combined with material re-invention. Thus these African elements — coronations of rulers, assertions of ethnicity, and military prowess — probably had a significant impact among Afro-Brazilians, especially in the northeastern state of Alagoas, where many Bantu-speaking Africans fled slavery and fought to create numerous independent communities called quilombos. The most famous was Palmares which

survived most of the 17th century (1630_1695). [10] Its leader Zumbi continues to be the primary symbol for the Black Consciousness movement in Brazil today.

The history of quilombos may be linked with the African martial art form of capoeira — a tradition of action and resistance through subversion. The basic move or jinga has as its goal to respond to and move with a force, redirecting and transforming it — a moving metaphor of how Afro_Brazilians engaged hegemonic forces and subverted them. Capoeira, forged in an oppressive context, stressed the interplay of constraint vs freedom, the tactics of improvisation, and above all, the use of cunning, wit, and deception (called malicia) to defeat one's opponent. My final examples of Afro_Brazilian assertive actions using the arts come from the 1993 Carnival in Brazil. The Black Consciousness movement in Brazil continues to struggle to spread its message to wider audiences as revealed in a battle to control representation: The public controversy about the 1993 carnival decorations in the streets of Salvador, Bahia. It began when city officials announced their decision to "celebrate" Salvador as the "city of the orisas" (African deities honored in candomble). What they did not do was consult those most concerned — orisa devotees — the candomble community as officially represented by the Bahian Federation of Afro_Brazilian Cults (Federacao Baiano do Culto Afro_Brasileiro _ FBCAB). This created a heated debate and protest, and a series of articles and editorials in the local newspapers and on TV. Eventually the city negotiated a compromise. It agreed to reduce the number of decorations and to avoid direct reference to specific orisa icons and symbols, replacing them with generalized "folkloric" images. It also eliminated a plan by the artist (a white Bahian) to create elaborate decorations in pemba (sacred chalk)," that had been billed as the "symbol of Salvador." This was a hard battle to win, and yet at least a partial victory was achieved despite the odds. For one, the generally independent, decentralized, politically and economically powerless Afro_Brazilian religious organizations were confronting powerful political and economic forces aligned with the government, the tourist industry, corporate businesses, and the Catholic Church. The Federation (FBCAB) was resisting the long_term Brazilian tradition of "folklorizing" or marginalizing African culture and religion, here being used for explicitly profit_making purposes of attracting tourist dollars to the most "authentic," that is, "exotic" carnival in Brazil.

The Creation of the World (and Brazil) according to Yoruba Myth?

Our final example comes from the 1993 Samba School competition in Rio de Janeiro. In the midst of all the images of barely_clad bodies of the 1993 Rio Carnival broadcast on Brazilian Globo TV, came images and a popular Samba song created by the Samba School Villa Isabel that celebrated an African Genesis — the creation of the world according to Yoruba legend. Not only did key figures in the Yoruba myth appear, such as the supreme creator Olorun and divine sculptor of life Oxala, but also several key Yoruba philosophical concepts. One, that served as the keynote for the entire extravagant display and song, was GBALA, the Christianized Yoruba word for save, rescue, redeem, translated as resgatar, salvar. The myth and theme were used to proclaim an environmentalist theme. One float presented images of living forms emerging from clay (the medium from which Oxala shaped life) and surrounding a "tree of life", the tree also being a primary site of many Afro_Brazilian altars and offerings. As the Samba School passed in review, the lyrics flashed on the TV screen for viewers to read, learn, and sing.

It was a fantastic spectacle of life animated by axe, but how are we to understand its significance? What were the intentions of its creators, and how and by whom were they formulated? What was its reception — its impact upon those who witnessed it live in Rio, or the millions of Brazilians who watched it on TV? Was this the same kind of appropriation by dominant society that the Bahian Federation of Afro_Brazilian Cults opposed? Or by incorporating elements of Yoruba culture and language (Olorun, Oxala, gbalá, and orixás) into the monied spectacle of Rio's Samba Schools, was Brazilian carnival giving space, legitimacy, and importance to African elements in the formation of Brazilian identity, or was it primarily a co_optation of an exotic, marginal mythology with no real connection to Brazilian realities? How are we to judge the nature of this artistic expression and its impact in formulating consciousness, its role in mobilizing social movements in Brazilian society? A systematic survey of the factions and "players" involved in this contest might suggest how specific interests were (or were not) turned into practices and why. These are some of the important questions surrounding issues of hegemony and resistance, agency and effect, and how we are to understand African diaspora arts and their impact in shaping society, culture, and identity.

In closing — According to my colleague Olabiyi Yai, Yoruba-speaking peoples have always thought of themselves

as a diaspora and their artists as are, "itinerant persons," forever strangers on the move engaged in "constant departures" of creative invention. A Yoruba saying expresses it well: "Outside the walls of your home you have the right to choose the name that pleases you" (oruko to wu ni laa je lehin odi). For centuries in Africa, during the horrors of the Middle Passage, and more than four hundred years of slavery and oppression in the Americas, Africans and their descendants have defined themselves using a multiplicity of means: re_membering the past, interpreting their situations pragmatically; adopting a variety of strategies and tactics in visual and performed artistic expressions to either subvert or confront the dominant society; and then taking action using the concepts of axe, or mooyo/nkisi or capoeira's tactic of wit and cunning, malicia, in order to survive, and even more, to thrive.