INTRODUCTION TO THE MULTICULTURAL HISTORY OF BRAZIL

Brazil is the world's 5th largest country, with the 6th largest economy. The official language, Portuguese, is the world's 6th-most-spoken language. With 190 million inhabitants, Brazil has the 5th highest population, and the 2nd largest black population in one country (after Nigeria!) in the world. So globally, Brazil matters. Furthermore, it provides an interesting example of a multicultural society.

Brazil is a richly diverse country with remarkable natural and cultural diversity (and also social diversity, in the sense of stratification). The population is composed of several ethnicities: we can find the biggest Japanese minority (1.5 million) outside of Japan, as well as towns built on German models. However, the national myth still claims the nation is born of the miscegenation of three races: the European (or Portuguese), the African and the Indigenous native American.

How, then, is this national story constituted; and what relation it has with historical knowledge and experienced reality? In his famous definition, Benedict Anderson has called nations ‘imagined communities’. Instead of face-to-face communion, the nation is constructed socially via imagination of its members. In the construction of brasilianity a crucial element has been the official politics of a “racial democracy”, where skin colour does not determine one's opportunities, as everybody in the country is of a more or less mixed descent. A growing criticism has proved the ideal too optimistic, but the myth prevails. Yet statistically, the poorest and less educated are by great majority black, whereas high positions in society, universities and the big properties are held by white people. During decades the ideology of a racial democracy has been a target of constant critique. Affirmative action with university quotas for unfavoured black population has now taken place for a decade, accompanied by severe debate. To enlighten the contemporary situation, we shall have a glimpse into the historical and cultural background of Africans in Brazil.

Africans in Brazil

The presence of Africa can not be emphasized too much, as Brazil has the biggest African-descendant community outside Africa. Yet the African cultural traits have evolved in an inventive manner on the Brazilian soil. The meaning and use of “Africa” has varied according to the sociopolitical needs and identifications of the time.

In the North-Eastern state of Bahia, commonly known as the blackest region in the Federative Republic, has flourished multiple Afro-descendant traditions. The famous Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé is a Brazilian variation of the spirit possession traditions in Western Africa, with multiple gods and spirit entities, reciprocal sacrificial gifts to the deities, and rich ritual tradition. On the streets of Bahia, Candomblé is very present in public festivals. Afoxé is a part of the carnaval tradition, a public procession court of music and chants in West-African ioruba language, the sacred language of Candomblé. Afoxé is also known as “candomblé of the street”. Afoxé gives us a genuine example of the cultural inclusion of different influences into the Afro-Brazilian traditions: the most famous of all the Afoxé groups is “Filhos de Gandhy”, a male organisation with some 10 000 members, whose theme is inspired by the nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi and a fantasized Indian style.
Filhos de Gandhy (photo Inkeri Aula)

In the picture below, varied Bantu origins of Brazilian capoeira game combine with Yoruban-descendant religion in the Brazilian orixás painted on the wall. (video)

Capoeira angola led by mestre Valmir in Salvador da Bahia. (photo Inkeri Aula)

A Brief History of Brazil: 1500-2014

Brazil was claimed for the Portuguese Empire on April 22, 1500, with the arrival of the Portuguese fleet commanded by Pedro Alvares Cabral, lost on their way to Asia. Portugal thrived for world power on their famous discovery travels (descobrimentos) motivated by Christian cruzadism and mercantilism. The land of the brasil wood was inhabited by indigenous peoples divided into several tribes, many of whom spoke languages of the Tupi-Guarani family. In the first two centuries of colonization, Indigenous and Europeans groups lived aside, yet in constant war, while European diseases extinguished the natives by the masses.
In half a century, sugar cane had become the core of Brazilian exports. For the sugar fields, more slave workforce was needed than could be taken out of the native peoples, so forced labourers were captured from sub-Saharan Africa, beginning the almost 400 years of brutal enslaving of the African peoples. The complete number of enslaved Africans is controversial due to lack of sources, yet most scholars agree on a number of at least 4 million, some claiming a number up to 15 million people.

By the end of the 17th century, sugar cane exports began to decline, and the discovery of gold would become the new backbone of the colony's economy. The gold rush attracted thousands of new settlers from Portugal and all Portuguese colonies. Slaves continued to work mainly on plantations and mines, but generally all kind of work used forced labour of the black slaves and their offspring (often resulting from sexual abuse of the female slaves by white masters).

Pierre Verger: Cycles of slave imports to Bahia
- The Guinea cycle during the second half of the 16th century
- The Angola cycle in the 17th century
- The Mina Coast cycle during the first three quarters of the 18th century
- The Bight of Benin cycle between 1770 and 1851
Slave resistance: the quilombos

During the many centuries of transatlantic slavery, enslaved Africans resisted oppression in creative ways. Everywhere in the "New World" escape was common, and communities of runaway slaves where founded in remote areas of difficult passage or protected hideouts near the colonial plantations. These communities, known in Brazil as quilombos and mocambos, have been well researched especially in Surinam and Jamaica, where many of them have managed to maintain a relative autonomy and oral knowledge of their history to this day. The historical quilombos of runaway slaves and to a lesser extent, their contemporary remainders, are seen by popular movements to represent free and egalitarian communities achieved by escaped Africans in Brazil; a counterpoint to colonial society based on slavery.

The archetype for quilombo can be found in the legendary Quilombo dos Palmares, that reigned in Northeastern Brazil for the 17th century as an "African Republic" composed of 10-12 economically specialized small cities ruled on Angolan-rooted principles, in a more or less constant war with Portuguese troops.

Today the remainders of quilombos in Brazil are mostly rural, largely self-subsistent Afro-Brazilian communities struggling for land rights and ethnic recognition. Due to pressure from the social movements, in the post-dictatorship constitution (1988) were included land rights of the remainder communities of quilombos. The realization of these rights has hardly begun, employing many Brazilian anthropologists in exploration of the cultural-historical continuities of the quilombo communities (to produce official documentation, laudos antropológicos) often resulting in the communities' legal demands for collective land entitlement against other real estate interests. This documentation has resulted in an ongoing scholarly discussion on the nature of quilombo culture, raising demands to broaden the concept to include Afro-Brazilian communities in a wider sense.

Quilombo Country http://www.quilombofilm.com/ Ethnographic document from Maranhão

The Brazilian Republic

In 1807, the Napoleonic invasion caused the Prince regent João, in the name of the crazy Queen Maria I, to flee the royal court from Lisbon to Brazil with British help. Compared to the Middle Passage of the enslaved, the circumstances were luxurious, yet nothing comfortable – the travellers did suffer many diseases and discomfort on the crossing. Some of the fleets arrived with all the ladies wearing a head scarf, due to having shaved all their hair because of lice, which created a scarf fashion in the colony amongst the feminine admirors of "anything European". The Portuguese court established some of Brazil's first financial institutions and ended the monopoly of the colony trade with Portugal, opening it to other nations.

1822, Prince Pedro was declared the first Emperor of Brazil and crowned Dom Pedro I
1889, the monarchy was overthrown by a military coup
1888, Abolition of slavery

After the Abolition of slavery in 1888, began a process of wiping out any traces of Africanity from Brazil – a hopeless endeavour. Any meetings involving drumming, called “batuque” by the authorities, were banned by law. Candomblé, capoeira and a number of other cultural manifestations were not only harassed by local police and guards but turned officially illegal and suffered severe repression. Immigrant workforce was invited from Europe to replace the slave labour: tickets from Europe were paid by the Brazilian Government. The European (and especially the subsequent
Japanese) labourers encountered harsh and unjust working conditions, but the freed slaves were usually much worse off: social mobility and access to land were extremely limited. The first favelas and other black areas were formed.

This ideology of “Whitening” the Brazilian society continued for decades. A swift occurred in 1930, when Getúlio Vargas, supported by most of the military, led a successful revolt. Vargas was supposed to assume power temporarily, but instead he closed the Congress, extinguished the Constitution, ruled with emergency powers and replaced the states' governors with his own supporters. The authoritarian populist regime of Vargas limited immigration and favoured the ‘national’ labour force in its modernisation project. The ideals of a harmonious nation born out of different “races” had the time to break through. The “whitening” became more subtle: a genuine Brazilian race of mixed richness was celebrated, yet the African traits were supposedly acculturated into the general Brazilian culture. Another coup d'état in 1937 made the Vargas regime a full dictatorship, noted for its brutality and censorship of the press, possessing immense power in cultural production and the forming of national ideology.

With the allied victory in 1945 and the end of the Nazi-fascist regimes in Europe, Vargas's position became unsustainable and he was swiftly overthrown in another military coup, with Democracy being "reinstated" by the same army that had discontinued it 15 years before. The ideology of a Brazilian racial mixture and racial democracy had been implanted to stay.

Brazil was ruled by military dictatorship in the years 1964-81. Since the infamous Fifth Institutional Act in 1968, state repression was not limited only to those who resorted to guerrilla tactics to fight the regime, but also reached any kind of institutional opponents, artists, journalists and other members of civil society. The Constitution of 1981 can be reckoned as the start of a democratic era in Brazil.

**An illustrative case: histories of the popular art of Capoeira**

Afro-Brazilian culture can be approached from the viewpoint of two opposing trends: search of purity, originality and things genuinely African; and emphasis on resistance, adaptation to different times and hybridism or syncretization. (See also Sansone 1999: 18-20), the former being emphazised in Bahia.

In capoeira culture, the capoeira angola movement can be seen as the “Africanist” trend, whereas contemporary capoeira regional presents either Brazilianist or hybridist views. It is widely accepted by researchers and practitioners in the field, that capoeira was developed on the basis of different African martial, ritual and musical traditions by the enslaved Africans in Brazil. How much are emphasized the circumstances in Brazil or the African origins, is a complex question often revealing something about the speakers' political standpoints in relation to questions of affirmative action politics, history and racial democracy.

More on the subject see for ex. Assunção 2005

**Example of a casual event of contemporary capoeira:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHafOphQyrQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHafOphQyrQ)

**Example of contemporary capoeira regional as a show-fight-sport:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRup8RDsCzk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRup8RDsCzk)

**Example of capoeira angola:** [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nW19Tak2P0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nW19Tak2P0)
Quilombos as a counter-story of the Brazilian National Narrative

The contemporary movement of black pride (movimento negro) tends to emphasize the opposition of black and white. One of the main figures, Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011) promoted the view of quilombo communities as utopist egalitarian societies built on African models. In his manifestation of “Quilombism”, he, nevertheless, reckoned the quilombos as highly inclusive for different ethnic characters and socio-cultural influences. Thus he proclaimed that Quilombismo should be taken as a model for all Brazil to create a uniquely Brazilian, highly egalitarian and still effective society.

Quilombos, especially the mythical land of Palmares, used to be discussed as an African kingdom, African Republic or African city-state in Brazil, inasmuch as suited the perspective of the writer. However, besides contemporary ethnography, new archeological and historical research has questioned the old stereotype of quilombos as closed and remote rural communities living in an ethnographic “African” past. Palmares has also been brought into new light (esp. by the research of Paulo Funari), bringing up the ethnic diversity and connectedness also of historical quilombos. Actually, Palmares has never been fixed in the ethnographic preesens of cultural isolation once assumed. All quilombos have historically been part of global processes, especially the transatlantic trade, including movements of not only African runaway slaves, but also of liberated Africans and Afro-Brazilians, Amerindians, outlaws of European origin, Jews, Portugueses, Dutch etc., forming unique combinations with the African-derived cultural forms, syncretisms and creolizations of the quilombos in Brazilian territory.

Concluding remarks

Altogether, the assimilation hypotheses of the “whitening” of Brazil were proved erroneous a long ago; the approach to African cultural traits as historical “survivals” was shown to be an oversimplication of cultural history, and the Racial Democracy a reality, where fair-skinned often are “more equal” than their darker companions. The cultural mixture in Brazil is thus not a story of blending and hybridity as such, but of diversity. It is important to note how the interpretations about this diversity and its meaning change according to the social and political interest of the times.

Some literature:


GILROY, Paul. The Black Atlantic

