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AFRICAN STUDIES IN BRAZIL: A BRIEF SURVEY

by

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I. MAJOR INSTITUTIONS

Brazil contains the largest population of African descent outside of the African continent; apart from Nigeria, it can be considered the world's most populous black nation. However, despite this numerical predominance of Afro-Brazilians and a binding historical link to Africa, Brazil has only three academic institutes devoted to the study of Africa, and of these three, only one that does not also divide its resources in attempting to study Asia along with Africa. While the formal institutional study of Africa began in Brazil in 1959(1), two decades of scholarly publications and research have yet to elicit the government support and resources which the subject obviously merits. As the Brazilian Government has publicly and repeatedly announced its desire to have an "approximation" towards the African continent, those concerned with the development and future of African studies in Brazil can only hope that this official attitude will foster a strengthening of Brazilian institutions and research concerning Africa.

In Salvador, Bahia, the northeastern Brazilian state with a population more than 70 per cent non-white, the first Brazilian Centre to study Africa and Asia is a part of the Federal Universidade de Bahia. The Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais is under the direction of Professor Guilherme de Sousa Castro. Its scholarly journal, Afro-Asia has been forced to suspend publication since 1975-1976 because of financial difficulties. Its major concentration has been to study the African cultural presence in Bahia, with particular emphasis on West Africa and Central Africa, particularly Angola, areas which provided the majority of the slave population sent to Bahia during the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The State Universidade de Sao Paulo houses the country's only centre devoted exclusively to the study of the African continent, the Centro de Estudos Africanos, under the leadership of Professor Fernando A. A. Mourao. Its journal, Africa, begun in 1978 has published as yet, only the first number. The Centro acts as an unofficial adviser to the Brazilian Foreign Ministry on its African policy, benefits from being associated with that country's premier University and is the only academic institution in Brazil which offers graduate level courses for those interested in studying Africa.

The private Conjunto Universitario Candido Mendes in Rio de Janeiro, contains the Centro de Estudos Afro-Asiaticos and its journal Cadernos Candido Mendes/ Afro-Asiaticos, begun in 1978, with two numbers published as of mid-1979. The Rio Centro specializes in the study of contemporary African affairs and politics, with a particular focus upon Luso-phone Africa and southern Africa. Institutional support has also been provided to Afro-Brazilians for research and study of Afro-Brazilian culture and history. The Rio Centro is under the direction of Professor Jose Maria Nunes Pereira.

There is no African studies major or concentration to be found in Brazilian universities, although at Sao Paulo, a student is allowed through a regular discipline such as history, anthropology or sociology, to "specialize" in Africa on both the undergraduate and graduate school level. Individual courses concerning Africa are usually to be found in departments of history, anthropology, or sociology and in rare instances might also include courses specifically designated as Afro-Brazilian in subject matter.

The Law Faculty at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianopolis, is attempting to start a programme in international African law with plans to affiliate with law schools in Lusophone Africa and elsewhere on the African continent. Santa Catarina has sought the support of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry for this project.

The Sao Paulo State University at Campinas, in its Anthropology Department, offers courses on Africa under the supervision of Professor Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, and is undertaking the systematic study of a "lost" African community still extant in the interior of Sao Paulo, Cafundo. This project is being directed by Professor Peter Fry.

The Sao Paulo State University at Sao Carlos is in the process of establishing what is called a Nucleo de Estudos Afro-brasileiros under the direction of Professor Eduardo de Oliveira e Oliveira. The idea is to create a multidisciplinary programme of Afro-Brazilian studies, the first in Brazil; this programme would evolve into a degree granting course on the graduate level, offering a Master's Degree.

Professor Lelia Gonzalez offers courses on Afro-Brazilian culture in Rio de Janeiro at the Pontifical Universidade Catolica, and the Universidade Federal de Rio de Janeiro. Also in Rio at the Universidade Federal Fluminense at Niteroi, there is a course listing on "Afro-Brazilian Culture" in that university's Anthropology Department. The Fluminense History Department has also expressed interest in providing a course on African history if resources could be provided and an Africanist invited to lecture at the university.

The Anthropology Department at the Fundacao Universidade de Brasilia also lists a course concerning Afro-Brazilian culture. African history had been offered for two years at Brasilia during my tenure there, Professor Corcino Medeiros dos Santos, who continues as a member of that History Department also has research interests connected with Africa. It is hoped that African history will again be offered as a part of the Brasilia course offerings.

In Salvador at the Universidade Federal da Bahia, Professor Yeda Pessoa de Sousa Castro offers courses on African linguistics and African cultural retentions in Brazil, with particular emphasis on Bantu transferences to Brazil. Listed but not offered presently at the Universidade are a number of courses on African Anthropology, History, and Afro-Brazilian Culture.

In Recife, Pernambuco the traditionalist assimilationist theoretical study of African cultural transferences to Brazil remains under the direction of Professor Gilberto Freyre. His theory of "luso-tropicality" or the Portuguese allegedly harmonious creation of multiracial societies is the dominating theory behind the Joaquim Nabuco Institute.

Professor Decio Freitas a member of the History Department at the Universidade Federal de Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre has specialized in studying the Afro-Brazilian slave experience, reflected in course offerings provided by that History Department.

It would also be useful and instructive to analyse departmental offerings at the federal universities in the Brazilian States of Minas Gerais (particularly Belo Horizonte), Goias, Maranhao, Pernambuco, Mato Grosso and Bahia. Journals and scholarly publications connected with these above-named institutions have often contained articles concerning Afro-Brazilian culture and history or African cultural transferences to Brazil. Researchers connected with these institutes have been the authors and have later incorporated this research into their course offerings, thereby creating a net increase in African studies, Afro-Brazilian studies course offerings in Brazil.

II. POPULAR INSTITUTIONS AND AFRICAN/AFRO-BRAZILIAN STUDIES

In Rio de Janeiro Quilombo is a samba school created by Afro-Brazilians to protest the commercialization of the traditional samba schools and the altering of the traditional annual Carnival into an event strictly for foreign tourists and wealthy spectators. Quilombo (the name taken from the historical runaway slave communities) seeks to research authentic African cultural traditions and their historic transfer to Brazil, relating themes of Afro-Brazilian history in the yearly Carnival pageant and providing inexpensive costuming and theatrical clothing for the majority of the working class members of the samba school. Authenticity, in relating to Africa and Afro-Brazilian culture, is the goal of the Quilombo group.

Also in Rio is the Brazilian Negro Cultural Institute, popularly known as the ICBN. The Institute attempts to study African culture and Afro-Brazilian history and culture with occasional seminars, conferences and writings and meetings. Particular emphasis is given to the situation of the Rio Afro-Brazilian community.

The Leopold Sedar Senghor Foundation has a Brazilian affiliation based in Rio. The Casa Senghor has as its mission the critical study and analysis of African cultures as they relate to Brazil. Small fellowships have been given to Brazilian researchers studying African topics.

The Andre Reboucas Study Group, at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niteroi, Rio de Janeiro is an Afro-Brazilian student group at that University. For six years consecutively the students have sponsored a week of lectures and conferences on African culture and the transference of African cultures to Brazil. Researchers from all over the country are invited to present papers and discuss contemporary issues of concern to Afro-Brazilians. The group has been a major force in bringing African studies and Afro-Brazilian studies courses to that institution. They have reproduced papers from past conferences to serve as reference material for the researcher interested in African/Afro-Brazilian studies in Brazil.

In Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais there is also a Black Cultural Institute which sponsors yearly meetings and conferences on Africa and Afro-Brazilian studies and publishes occasional journalistic material relating to the Afro-Brazilian community in that state capital.

In Sao Paulo the Afro-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, under the direction of Federal Congressman Adalberto Camargo seeks to foster political, economic and cultural relations between Brazil and Africans and specifically between Afro-Brazilians and the African continent.

Africa House in Sao Paulo seeks to popularize African culture within the city, serve as a centre for art exhibitions and other cultural manifestations of African and Afro-Brazilian cultures and to develop a hostel service to welcome visiting African delegations as an alternative from official government sponsored tours.

In Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, a small but very active and diverse Afro-Brazilian community has created the Institute Leopold Sedar Senghor for the study of African culture and Negritude as it relates to the Afro-Brazilian, particularly with reference to that group's numerical minority status within southern Brazil, (an area of heavy European immigrant population). The Senghor Institute publishes an occasional newspaper, called 'Tiao, which is presently under federal indictment for discussing the existence of racism within Brazil being directed against Afro-Brazilians. The issue of Afro-Brazilians in southern Brazil is an important and neglected area of study within the broader topic of Afro-Brazilian studies; interest among southern Afro-Brazilians concerning Africa, the Diaspora and Brazil's complex official relationship to the African continent, remains strong and the southern community would like to receive more visits by African delegations and official groups, more visits by representatives of black countries in the Americas, to lend support to them and their movement in Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. It is their feeling that northern Brazil and particularly Bahia because of the larger numerical Afro-Brazilian population receives major attention by Africans and international organizations, but that the concerns of the southern Afro-Brazilian are equally as important and meriting of attention. The federal indictment of their newspaper under the censorship law would and should gain them more international support and national support. They are strongly influenced by the Diaspora, and are attempting to express their continuing links to Africa in spite of official obstacles and pressures.

In Salvador, Bahia the Afro-Brazilian ethnologue and candomble babalorixa or chief priest, Didi dos Santos and his wife Juanita Elbein are attempting to create a school/quasi-commune based on the principles of Afro-Brazilian religion and culture. This is a conscious attempt to recreate an African cultural experience in Brazil and has received national attention. Recently the commune has also come under federal scrutiny and potential censorship activity.

Working through the Bahia Geographical and Historical Institute and with personal funds accrued from many teaching positions, Professor Edson Nunes e Silva has for more than thirty years researched and published articles and books analysing Yoruba religion and its transformation into Bahian candomble. Professor Edson who first visited Nigeria in the 1940's and did graduate work in philosophy in Great Britain in the 1950's is a pioneer in the field of Diaspora Studies in Brazil, one of the first Afro-Brazilians to critically analyse the process of cultural transference from Africa to the Americas.

In all major Brazilian cities it is possible to encounter several groups devoted to the study of African and Afro-Brazilian dance forms. In Salvador the Federal Universidade and the Secretary of Culture sponsor such groups. Similar quasi-official affiliations exist in other Brazilian municipalities, particularly Rio de Janeiro. It becomes necessary to question the degree of professional autonomy and freedom to express authentic African/Afro-Brazilian themes, as often the purpose of such groups is to attract tourists.

One example of an autonomous folkloric group seriously attempting to study its history and culture is the Bumba-Meu-Boi Society of Sobradinho, DF, a satellite city adjacent to the national capital of Brasilia. Formed by migrant workers from the Brazilian Northeast, the Society attempts to present monthly programmes of performances and lectures analysing Afro-Brazilian culture as it has developed in the areas of Pernambuco, Bahia and Alagoas. While researchers are utilized from the Universidade de Brasilia to present lectures and conferences, it is the working class members of the Society who choose topics for discussion and performance.

III. CONCLUSIONS

More co-ordination of research and exchange of information concerning study projects on Africa and Afro-Brazilian studies is necessary within Brazil. This co-ordination particularly in the form of national seminars and conferences has not been encouraged by the federal government and the Ministry of Education and Culture, the ministry which should be providing the major institutional support and resources. It has been erroneously believed by Brasilia that such national encounters would be used as forums of criticism for the racial policies of Brazil -- and as public arenas to challenge the often publicly stated theory of Brazilian racial democracy.

The planned International Conference of the African Diaspora, which had been scheduled for July-August 1978 suffered from such an official interpretation as it was feared that North American blacks would "disrupt" Brazilian race relations and upset Afro-Brazilians. While the 1978 Diaspora Conference was not cancelled official Brazilian government support was withdrawn immediately before the meetings and Afro-Brazilians were discouraged by their government from participating. Similar problems were encountered by Afro-Brazilians who were official delegates to the Conference in Calle, Colombia in August 1977. Restrictions were placed upon them by the Brazilian Government making their attendance at the Conference impossible.

International organizational support then becomes crucial in aiding all Brazilians who wish to seriously study Africa, the history and consequences of the Diaspora; and its direct relationship to Brazil, Afro-Brazilian studies. Clearly the Afro-Brazilian experience bears much in common with the experiences of the Afro-Latin communities in South and Central America, the socio-cultural dynamics a far greater binding tie than the Portuguese language which separates them from others in the region. Co-operative research to include the countries of the southern Cone; Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay would be a systematic analysis of the migrations of fugitive slaves and freed blacks out of Brazil and into these neighbouring countries during the period of Brazilian slavery. This is necessary research as there is little published information concerning the formation and nature of the Afro-Argentine, Afro-Uruguayan and Afro-Paraguayan communities, numerically small parts of their countries' national populations, but not without influence and historical significance. Culture and history also link the northern Brazilian region of Amapa with neighbouring Guyana, while the experience of Afro-Peruvians offers contrasts and similarities to that of the Afro-Brazilian.

The political or official attitude towards research on the Diaspora must change within Brazil for any meaningful comparative work to be accomplished. The Brazilian Government must understand that in studying its ethnic complexity, it is manifesting national richness and strength; that its African antecedents and position within the African Diaspora should be a source of international pride and a partial key to national harmony and justice.

NOTES

1. Turner, J. Michael "Brazilian and African Sources for the Study of Cultural Transferences from Brazil to Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Latin American Studies Association, African Studies Association, 1977 International Conference, Houston, Texas).

AMERICAS

Extensión de la cultura restaurana y centros de cultura neofrancana

