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**“It is Necessary to Construct  
a New Type of Difference”:  
An Interview with Alberto da Costa e Silva\***

**PP:** Ambassador, what are your thoughts concerning the prohibition and repression of African cultures in colonial Brazil?

**Silva:** You cannot forbid it because Brazilian life was impregnated with African culture: our cooking habits, our daily habits. It was at the center of our homes. What occurred for a long time not only in Brazil, but also in Africa is that the religious Afro-Brazilian practices were forbidden. We are now speaking about the 1930s and 1940s until the legislation was changed, and the Afro-Brazilian practices became considered as a religion just as any other one in daily reality. But I have to make the point that in the period in which these cultures were forbidden and in which they suffered political repression, many prominent politicians in Brazil visited and frequented the houses where these cultures were practiced. That is to say that there was some hypocrisy between the public space and the hidden reality.

**PP:** How should we generally consider the influence of African cultures in Brazil?

**Silva:** Consciousness of the Afro-Brazilian presence is completely natural. People often are even not aware of it. It is part of our daily life and it is always changing because culture is always mobile. It changes with us; a static culture does not exist. A culture is always an exchange between different groups. This exchange is modified throughout time in the sense that, what was valid at the end of the twentieth century is not valid today or only in a relative sense. It is valid to the degree that our analysis considers the passage of time, the new influences that are produced, and the new dialogues that were established, because culture is always in movement, culture is a process. It is never

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\* Transcription Tiago de Oliveira Pinto.

finished. The same counts for culinary recipes: it is impossible to prepare the same dish today as that in the nineteenth century. The ingredients have changed and not only that, but the quality, the nature of the ingredients has changed. Therefore, everything is a process. People have the tendency to consider cultural facts as something that is crystallized, so-to-speak, and congealed in time. This is not true because culture undergoes permanent mutations.

**PP:** How do these concepts of being black or white function?

**Silva:** Let's not generalize; it is neither one nor the other. In the first place, this distinction between black and white does not exist as such. In Brazil you have gradations ranging from blond with blue eyes to African black. But the majority of the Brazilian population is considered white; if they've been in Brazil for more than three generations, they also generally have black origins. The same happens with the so-called blacks. In general the majority of them have some white influence. Therefore, you have a process that is quite complicated. Here and there people deny, of course, that they have this heredity, but Brazil is not an African or European country, nor an Amerindian country. Brazil is all this and something else. And this consciousness of being something else is gaining terrain in the country; but that has not always been the case. There was a time in which we thought that being black was a problem we had to resolve. And how would we be able to 'resolve' the black problem? Maybe through miscegenation, through mixing, through whitening up, through exclusion? How should we resolve the black problem? Thus, there was a moment in which it was stated that nobody was black in Brazil, that we were all Brazilians, and that we all had the same color. This is a historical and sociological fact. Well, there will be people who deny the black inheritance or others who deny the white inheritance. But this denial is useless because this being together does not happen intentionally. We behave at home, on the streets, and in our social contacts in, let's say, a mestizo way, in a way that accepts the behaviors of other people because it is impossible to live separated from each other. Of some specific cultural products it is impossible to say that this is white and this is black, this is African and this is Portuguese, this is German and this is Italian or Japanese. These distinctions are extremely difficult to make because everything is summed up and everything mingles. And it is very diffi-

cult to separate one thing from another. And besides, it is just as difficult as separating the life of all people, of all nations, of all human groups. All human groups are formed through contact with other groups of humans. Sometimes it seems that we are only one, unique reality but when we start verifying the history of these people, we witness a composition of numerous different inheritances. For example, look at Portugal. Since the twelfth century Portugal was already conceived as it is today, with the frontiers of today. That notwithstanding, when we look at its history we discover that many different and distinct people have formed Portugal, sometimes in conflictive situations. These situations have nevertheless produced the harmonization of a people that seems homogeneous, although its origin is heterogeneous.

**PP:** Are Afro-Brazilians discriminated against economically and socially in Brazil?

**Silva:** This point concerns class relations and the distribution of wealth in relationship with different social groups or, let's put it this way, “racial” groups. The situation of a person who looks black – because, certainly, what is important in Brazil is appearance – is not due to heredity. When you have a black grandfather but look white, then you are white; when you have three white grandfathers and a black one, but you look black, then you are black. Well, higher social levels are basically composed by white people, and to the degree that you descend the social ladder people become darker, right? This is something that everybody sees; you only have to walk down the street. And why is this the case? Because of slavery! The transition of the Afro-Brazilian toward the status of a free man has always been difficult. That is to say, the former slave starts his life as a free man with tremendous difficulties. The abolition of slavery in Brazil coincided with the arrival of huge groups of European immigrants. We should not forget that Brazil received within the time span of a hundred years six million immigrants from Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Switzerland, and Greece, in addition to the Arabs, who also came in great numbers from the Middle East. And what happened? At the same moment the slave left his work on the land, and the urban slave, who was the foremost producer of furniture, utensils, clothes, the artisans, and woodcarvers began to suffer the competition of the

immigrant. Immigrants bring new fashions, thus the slave who was a carpenter or cabinetmaker, now a free man with his own carpentry business accustomed to making furniture in the old Portuguese style, suddenly is confronted with a wealthy population that does not want furniture in the old Portuguese style; it wants the English style, it wants the French style. And who will make this furniture for them? The European immigrant, who thus displaces the free, the Afro-Brazilian, the mulatto, from the traditional crafts he had worked as a slave or a free man during the colonial period. It must not be forgotten that upon abolition, the majority of Brazil's black population was already free. She was already free, already had her crafts; now she is displaced from these crafts and marginalized.

**PP:** And what happens with the fusion of religious or cultural elements?

**Silva:** No, we don't make this difference, no! It is important not to confound – sometimes people confound things – a cultural aspect, which is the religion, with other cultural aspects. Evidently, you have an Afro-Brazilian religion or various Afro-Brazilian religions (there is more than one), which compete with the other religions that come from all over the world. Well, when you reflect on it, you have a very interesting phenomenon here. The religion of the *orixas*, for example, the religion of the Nagot, of the Yoruba; the religion of the cult of the *orixas*, this religion was that of a small parcel of the African population, of a determined geographic space in Africa, which is the Southwest of Nigeria and the Southwest of the Republic of Benin. Some eighteen million people are living there. They practiced a religion of this region, in which it was a national religion. In the same way as Judaism was the religion of a people, and Islam was that of an Arab group. This Yoruba religion continues being practiced in Africa; it is a religion that does not expand in Africa. It then comes to Brazil; it comes to Cuba; and it comes to Venezuela. And what happens there? It is transformed into a universal religion. So we have this phenomenon of a local religion transformed into a universal religion, which we've been witnessing permanently in Brazil in the last hundred years. And the last fifty or sixty years it became even more visible. That is to say, we are witnessing a process similar to the expansion of Christianity, to the expansion of Islam. A local religion, the religion of

a certain people, of an ethnic group is transformed into a universal religion. So this makes ... it is evident that the believers of this universal religion are distinct, are different and aim to affirm their personality and independence and singular face, for example, in comparison with the Catholics, the Evangelistic, the Muslims or whatever other religion. And as with every religion, it does not limit itself to rituals; it also affects all aspects of daily life, culinary habits, behavior, customs, of family education, and everything else.

**PP:** What measures are being taken to protect and maintain those cultures in the future?

**Silva:** I cannot foresee the future. I can only say what I wish for the future, which in my opinion, is that for which the majority of Brazilians strives. Yesterday we spoke about racial democracy. Racial democracy does not exist in Brazil, but an aspiration toward racial democracy in Brazil does. And the important thing is our aspirations. It means we aspire to have a country in which all groups are equal and relate to and support each other in a harmonious way. It means if you went to a popular quarter in Brazil, you would find that, on the level of the people, on the level of the masses, this would be a reality. The spirit of neighborhood would work and there would be a sense of togetherness that goes beyond color differences and religious differences or ideological differences. I am speaking of a Brazilian aspiration. I have the impression that there exists some confusion concerning this concept of racial democracy. It is not that we should think that we are a racial democracy but that we always wanted to be a racial democracy. That is to say that it is on the level of aspirations that things place themselves for us.

All societies are imperfect and will always be imperfect. Well, what you wish is that they would not be so conflictive. What you wish is that the differences would be accepted, that they pull themselves together, support each other, and construct new differences. It will never be possible to achieve unanimity. But it is necessary to construct a new type of difference, an apron that goes beyond difference.

**PP:** Ambassador, thank you very much for this interview.

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