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**Social Environment Fostering Resistance: The Development of
Candomblé in Brazil**

Brazil is known for the impressive collection of religions practiced by its citizens. Despite being overwhelmingly Roman Catholic for centuries, large numbers of the population have recently been turning to Protestantism. This recent trend has been the focus of much research. A little bit more "behind the scenes" has been the tradition of Candomblé, a variety of religions that are African in nature yet were developed and tailored within Brazil during the early stages of the country's colonization to meet the needs of the slave populations. The number of Candomblé followers is also growing as Catholicism loses its supporters. Part of this crossing over is due to the nature of Candomblé as a religion resistant to the dominant culture. It grew out of the atmosphere of intense oppression and maltreatment of the Africans brought to Brazil to work as slaves. The immense number of slaves, the social life created for them, their grueling lifestyle, their status as mere animals, and their complete exclusion from the valued culture of the time encouraged them to resist. Candomblé was developed to

meet the slaves' need for a form of resistance that was sustainable in every day life.

The Brazilian city with the largest concentration of Candomblé followers is Salvador (also called Bahia). Salvador was the capital of Portuguese-ruled Brazil until 1763. Throughout its time as the capital, a lively trade in slaves there made plantation owners rich as they cultivated sugar for export. The operation was enormous; over eight million slaves were brought in to work in Brazil;¹ along the coast, 70% of the population was enslaved.² Currently, more than 80% of the population inhabiting Salvador is black.³ The number of Africans began to rival the number of Portuguese plantation owners rapidly and in order to regulate the slaves and suppress possible rebellions, the latter began to structure the cultural experience of the Africans they brought in.

Before ever having arrived on a plantation, a slave was segregated from whatever peoples he had been captured with in Africa. This intentional splitting up of slaves who spoke the same languages or came from the same area made plantation life very isolated; language and cultural barriers kept them from being able to interact in meaningful ways. Besides that, the

¹Roca, Jan, *Analysis: Brazil's 'racial democracy,'* BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/719134.stm>

²Brown, Jonathan. *Latin America: A Social History of the Colonial Period.* (California: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 241.

³Roca, BBC News.

majority of the slaves on the plantations were males. The majority of the women employed by the plantation owners would have worked inside the owner's house, effectively blocking the ability to develop families. Any families that managed to grow under such conditions were often intentionally separated, sometimes by selling one of the couple and often by selling any children born to them.

Existence for the slaves on these plantations was also physically punishing. The slaves were mostly seen as animals and incapable of religious redemption, and beyond that, the fact of life for the plantation owners was that it cost less to work slaves to death and buy a new one than it did to take good care of them. "Owners calculated that the work of each slave returned the investment within three or four years."⁴ Lasting beyond that time period was unnecessary—the owner would better benefit from a new set of hands. Because of that fact, a common day of work was long and harsh, with overseers constantly beating workers, sometimes for no reason—common knowledge of the time dictated that slaves would perform better if whipped often. Punishments were also severe. Beyond that, the daily diet provided was not enough to maintain health, and housing was often damp and unclean. All of these factors contributed to the rapid spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis, all of which led to

⁴ Brown, 240.

a high mortality rate. The death rate was so high that, "at any one time, those born in Africa constituted more than two-thirds of the slave population, while those born into Brazilian slavery made up less than one-third."⁵

Despite this death rate the number of Africans began to rival and overtake the number of Europeans in the area, but the separation and subjugation of the slaves perpetuated their inability to influence popular culture. It should not be forgotten that the native Indian population had decreased so drastically because of overwork, disease, and runaways that the number remaining was mostly inconsequential, but they too were mostly subjugated. As such, cultural norms remained dominated by the European principles of colonial and imperial politics. The Portuguese crown, like the Spanish crown within its territories, had sent entrepreneurs to Brazil to develop industries whose main purpose was to collect raw materials that would contribute to the growth of their respective nations. The sugar plantations, where so many slaves worked, were the location where a majority of the colony's profits were obtained, and so they were an active part of the commerce that supported European domination. The more money that the plantation owners obtained from the export of sugar, the more they were able to enhance

⁵ Ibid.

their nation's power. They took great pride in their culture of export for this reason.

Because so much of the development of Brazil's society and economy was based on the plantations of the rural backlands, owners of large sugar, tobacco, cotton, and coffee estates held great power and influence, both in their respective regions and as a group in colonial/imperial politics. The structures of dependency, patronage, and patriarchy they established in their dominions became the paradigms by which Brazilian society functioned throughout the colonial and imperial period..⁶

Within the colonies, that power gave the entrepreneurs their position of privilege in life and they demonstrated it in specific cultural forms. One common form was the "niceties" available to them that they eagerly collected. "Europeans intended to establish a separate, elite lifestyle out of reach of subordinated peoples. They wanted to live as in Spain or Portugal, with wine, food, clothes, furniture, and jewelry of European rather than indigenous styles."⁷ The African population, needless to say, found these cultural connections out of their reach.

The entire system of mercantilism was also deeply tied to the religion of the monarchy, Catholicism. Every action taken by the monarchy was considered under religious mores. The morals of Catholicism, then, were those of the colonizers, who were supported and encouraged by priests to spread the 'word of God.' Ironically, they were at the same time supported in their

⁶ Harding, Rachel, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3.

⁷ Brown, 123.

enslavement of Africans. One Franciscan Juan de Torquemada wrote that "blacks descended from Ham, the son of Noah, who had incurred a divine curse. It was therefore permissible to keep Africans in bondage and to teach them to work 'for their own good.'"⁸ Even the famous Bartolomé de las Casas, who fought for years for the rights of indigenous peoples, petitioned to have more slaves sent to the Americas from Africa. So, within the economic and religious culture of Brazil, the African population was simply a tool of the wealthy in order to maintain their privileged, Catholic lifestyle. Just as they were left out of the mercantilist culture, so too were they left out of the religious movement.

Although the slaves did not partake in the dominant culture, they were still present within it. Because of their presence, some cultural perceptions highly influenced by skin color were developed and promoted. Generally, the black population was seen as a different creature all together. The closer your skin color was to black, the less European, and therefore the less of an intelligent, human being you were. The fact that Africans were made to do grueling work on a daily basis, even after they were able to gain freedom from slavery, meant that "...skin color also determined one's chances in life. White skin marked one as a person of command and leisure, and

⁸ Brown, 230.

dark skin meant that one was destined for a life of brutish work."⁹ These perceptions only became stronger, becoming subconscious knowledge as the African, indigenous, and Portuguese populations mixed.

Under such circumstances of separation, abuse, oppression, and isolation from dominant culture, one would expect there to be a great deal of rebellion from the slave population. There were, in fact, many cases of rebellion as a form of resistance, such as the famous Revolta de Malês in January 1835. In this case, Yoruba and Hausa Muslims organized an uprising to protest the treatment of slaves as well as freedmen, the latter of which had been guaranteed rights which never came. "Speaking of the *libertos*, Chief of Police Martins declared: 'none of them has the rights of a citizen, nor the privileges of a foreigner.'"¹⁰ Africans, or people with ancestral ties to Africa, were made to register themselves in the district they chose to live in, obey a curfew, pay a head tax, and suffer through numerous other restrictions. The rebellions did not affect change for a long time. Since outright rebellion was dangerous and did not alter their circumstances in any substantial manner, the black population chose a more subtle form of resistance.

⁹ Ibid, 240.

¹⁰ Harding, 4.

This form of resistance came from practicing Candomblé. Although the Yoruba people of Nigeria were the greatest influence on the structure of Candomblé in Brazil, the religion spoke to Africans from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds. Within Brazil, Candomblé actually refers generally to African-derived religions. They were gathered and labeled under the same name because of their common tie to Africa and similarities between their practices. An example of these similarities, as pointed out by Rachel E. Harding, is the central tendency of African religions to have an "overwhelming concern with human beings, their proper relation to each other and to the world, and their earthly, physical, present-life well-being."¹¹ Another example of shared belief is that of the cosmic or universal force, also discussed by Harding. This force, labeled by different names, is found in religion after religion within Africa. It is *Muntu*, it is *Ngolo*, it is *Karamo*, and it is *Àse*.¹² Such similarities were all the more pronounced in the Brazilian atmosphere, where they were compared to European religious institutions. Within Candomblé, the African population within Brazil and their descendents had a cultural expression that they were denied in every other part of Brazilian society at the time.

¹¹ Harding, 20.

¹² Ibid.

Candomblé, then, was a force that united the African community in common beliefs. Harding summarizes the meaning of Candomblé to the black community best by saying that "...the complex of practices constituting Candomblé shared an orientation directed toward experiences of communion/community, refuge/resistance, and healing/redress."¹³ It did this by taking the spiritual similarities of the African cultures and creating one encompassing religious practice that was more a daily lifestyle than a religion. Mikelle Omari-Tunkara describes the meaning of Candomblé as a lifestyle: "As it is used in contemporary Bahia, *candomblé* signifies the total aggregate of each group's ideology and 'culture,' including such factors as visual art forms, dance, music, myths, epistemologies, worldviews, mental constructs, values, rituals, appropriate deportment, and ethics."¹⁴ This separate culture that developed gave to the slaves a lifestyle which was, in and of itself, a resistance to popular culture simply because it allowed the African population to express themselves as they chose to. It was a sustainable, daily resistance.

The atmosphere surrounding slaves in newly colonized Brazil was in many ways extremely oppressive. Despite their

¹³ Ibid, 40.

¹⁴ Omari-Tunkara, Mikelle, *Manipulating the Sacred: Yorùbá Art, Ritual, and Resistance in Brazilian Candomblé*, (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2005) 3.

considerable numbers, and arguably because of them, the slaves were focused on as a problem, which led to the creation of laws that subjugated them. Because the slaves were not considered human, they were abused. The dominant culture of the time excluded them completely, to the point that they were considered the opposite of what it was to be cultured. Outright rebellion against these circumstances failed to provide them with a satisfying solution and so they were influenced to develop an enduring form of resistance that took the shape of Candomblé. This religion and lifestyle served as the slave population's resistance to European exploitation and cultural pervasiveness. This history continues to influence Brazilians today as they choose if they want to become followers of Candomblé or one of the various other religions in the country.

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