Janey Newsletter Submission

The Fire of Bahia: Cultural Expression as a Form of Social Resistance

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My interest in identifying and analyzing the historical, social, and psychological threads that are believed to connect Afro-Brazilian cultural practice to social resistance led me to Bahia, Brazil during the summer of 2004. During this period, I attempted to explore what I believed to be powerful examples of cultural agency and social empowerment manifest in the traditional dance and syncretic religious practices passed down by the forefathers and foremothers of modern Brazilians of African descent.

I intended to look at the role that African cultural expression, particularly religion and dance, played in the development of a collective social imaginary for slave communities in Northeastern Brazil, and how this development promoted notions of rebellion, resistance, and psycho-spiritual liberation. I was interested in looking at the conditions of slavery and resistance within Brazilian society, and wanted to see that socio-cultural resistance was, in fact, born out of an urgent need to create spaces of agency, control, and vitality. Additionally, I wanted to delve into the sources and uses of the unique African dance forms in New World slave societies, tracing the roots of such rituals to their spiritual and militaristic origins within original African societies and looking at the effects of the Diaspora, collective memory, cultural sustenance and transformation on such dance forms. I hoped to discover that these dance forms were not only aesthetic forms of leisure for the slaves, but were, in fact, powerful unifying forces among a people that were being 'broken' on a daily basis for generations.

Background

Noting the differences in the development of New World slave cultures, Herbert Klein[1] remarked that certain African cultural legacies, such as religious rituals and the worship of specific African deities, were more widespread and visibly significant in the slave societies of Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti than in other slave societies across the Americas (especially the Protestant societies). Regarding the strength of the African belief system in the face of proselytization and the suppression of traditional practice, Klein noted, "so powerful did (the African) religious systems become that they were able to survive under the guise of alternative forms of the folk Catholicism developed under slavery." Thus, the African religious rituals that persisted were apparently central to the spiritual and aesthetic survival of the transplanted peoples. Of course, the religions took on an added or transformative dimension on the plantation, as slave life and the fusion of Christian beliefs into the local customs would have notable impacts on the everyday Afro-Brazilian culture. In this process of acculturation and syncretization, Klein noted the following about the transformative roles assumed by the African deities in the New World, "the figures of Ogoun, the god of war, of Shango, the god of justice, and of Eshou, the god of vengeance, are not only given new importance in the American context, but stripped of their agricultural or more mystical features they take on more social and political aspects as gods of an oppressed class."

[1] Klein, Herbert, *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Noting the different milieus and conditions under which music and dance were allowed to flourish in the New World, scholar John Thornton[2] commented that slaves would often go off into the woods to sing and dance on Sundays, or during feast days or funerals. According to Thornton, the plantation authorities or masters often tried to keep this practice to a minimum out of fear of insurrection, or alternatively, out of distaste for the 'sexually transgressive' qualities of the dances. Thornton, quoting Sloane on the fears sparked by drums, noted that, 'slave owners restricted the use of drums and trumpets because they had military uses in Africa and might have contributed to the revolts.' Thus we see that the fear of rebellion in the hearts and minds of the slave owners was not borne out of a simple rejection of alien aesthetics, but of actual knowledge of the retaliatory powers of the drum.

The Case of Brazil: Samba and Candomblé as Resistance

Specifically regarding aesthetic or cultural resistance, it is helpful to refer to Barbara Browning's[3] anthropological survey of Afro-Brazilian dance, which traced the historical backdrop and socio-cultural legacy of samba and capoeira in the context of the Brazilian plantation system. Browning highlighted the unquestionable manifestations and aesthetic reproductions of struggle and resistance in dances like capoeira, and even in samba, noting that this tradition now lives on in the hearts of Afro-Brazilians as symbolic gestures of reverence to the struggles of a racial past, even if the dances have since become highly commercialized and commodified in the face of an assumption of these

[2] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[3] Browning, Barbara, *Samba: Resistance in Motion (* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

forms to ‘symbolize’ a national Brazilian cultural identity (note, for example, the role of samba in the highly popularized, economically profitable cultural tradition of *carneval*).

Browning asserted that samba effectively formed a racial narrative through synchronic means; a departure from the chronological or temporal parameters to which most historians or social scientists are accustomed. Explaining the etymology of the dance form, Browning traced ‘samba’ to the Ki-Kongo word ‘semba’, which meant ‘a blow struck with the belly button.’ Citing experts that note the ubiquitous presence of this gesture in all of the variations of samba across Brazil, Browning drew parallels to the same gesture, which was recorded by the early Portuguese traders/settlers in Angola. In addition, she noted the rhythmic and choreographic similarities between samba and traditional Angolan dances.

Browning also examined the intricate web of micro and macro racial histories imbued in the Afro-Brazilian spiritual traditions of Brazil. For example, in Bahia, the candomblé religion of ‘African Brazil’ emerged from the ancient beliefs of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. Here, spirituality and divinity were physically manifest in ritual movements, complex rhythms, and fantastic gesticulations. Replete with meaning and transcendental power, the dances forging through these bursts of spiritual transcendence were called ‘possessional dances’.

However, the candomblé rituals and deities (termed ‘Orishas’) encompassed more that mere spirit possessions and religious epiphanies. In fact, political significance was assigned to the Indian *caboclo* spirit, an Orisha, who was the ‘free hunter, a true

prototype who would not allow himself to be enslaved.' This idealized image of an 'un-tamable' Indian is still the paragon of resistance and freedom for the candomblé - following black population in Brazil. Similar to the political history of the Native American in the United States, the indigenous population of Brazil was both annihilated and consecrated within the imaginary of the 'New World' for the European settlers. Now, the *caboclo*, or the Indian protector spirit, symbolizes freedom, protection of nature and self, and a breakdown of hierarchies in the eyes of black Brazilians. As was the case with many other Afro-Brazilian cultural and spiritual traditions, the practice of candomblé was strictly prohibited by the white ruling class throughout most of Brazil's history. It was only after its discovery as a culture and tourism-promoting exotic ritual that it was allowed (and even coveted by white middle-class Brazilians) into the national mythology. As part of my preliminary fieldwork this summer, I spent time in Bahia in order to understand the deeper historical and religious forces at play in the development and maintenance of the candomblé legacy and its spiritual and social significance for the descendents of the slaves. I will discuss this more detail in the paragraphs below.

'Socio-cultural spaces' are said to be created in moments of high-intensity musical or spiritual epiphanies, and can be seen on the Brazilian quilombos and plantations where slaves once resided. Katrina Hazzard-Gordon[4] aptly described these 'unregulated sociocultural spaces,' historically created by slaves in order to preserve African cultural practices and customs in the face of extremely cruel and dehumanizing slave conditions. My research supported her assertion that the endurance of these spaces and cultural milieus were predicated upon two necessary and prevailing dynamics: first, that the

[4] Hazzard-Gordon, Katrina, 'Dancing under the Lash,' in *African dance: an artistic, historical, and philosophical inquiry* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998).

slaves found the practice of African cultural preservation to be *functional* in their new realms of existence, and second, that the slaveocracy did not wipe out the continuation of these practices, as it perceived them to be relatively benign modes of psychosocial support for the slaves. Hazzard-Gordon suggested that the continuous volume of African slave imports would serve to re-vitalize the African traditions in the New World, allowing for a flourishing subculture and mode of socio-cultural awareness within the meaningful moves of the dances and rituals themselves. In the context of providing African slaves with a means to express their social, psychological, and political fears and desires, dance events could also provide slaves with a venue for surreptitiously camouflaging insurrectionary activity and the dissemination of resistance ideology. In addition, using dance as a vehicle for expressing criticism, ridicule, and frustration vis-à-vis the white authority, slaves were able to assume an element of agency and psychological control over their conditions. She concluded, 'This dance ritual of deconstruction allowed slaves to assert themselves and to keep the spirit of resistance alive on a personal level. Authority was made to look small and insignificant; and disregard for the power of the slaveocracy was openly displayed.'

Ethnographic Fieldwork

As I was investigating the sights and sounds of historic Salvador this summer, I met Dickson, tour guide and proud *Afro-Bahiano*, who gave me a tiny but profound glimpse into the world of candomblé. As I walked around the Pelhorino quarter of Salvador, Bahia; Iberian architecture, decrepit-yet-insistent streets, and warm, languorous smiles from the descendants of yesteryear's oppressed greeted me. Walking into and out of colonial buildings, I felt a sweet sadness as I looked at the faded, elegant beauty of a

moment in the history of Brazil; one of the most culturally rich, yet socio-economically inequitable, countries in our western hemisphere. Yet the Pelhorino was unique. The old slave trade square; where slaves were publicly tortured and humiliated, cast a heavy cloak of guilt upon the streets. Here, tourists and street salesmen alike were chattering and idling the morning away. And I felt the shadow of the past. It was in this context that I met Dickson, an expert and devoted follower of the candomblé tradition. He gave me his own history, a folk history of candomblé. He told me that many Bahian members of the candomblé houses believed that the purpose of the triangle trade, or New World slavery, was to spread these rituals and legacies of the Orishas to the New World so that the message and power of these spiritual deities could be disseminated beyond the ocean's breadth, allowing many more of the earth's children to be enlightened and brought into a true state of metaphysical awareness. For in Africa, long ago, the spirits of earth, water, fire, and air were understood naturally and primordially deep within the people of this land. These spirits, when invoked properly, could keep us all in balance and protected from the dangerous, volatile, lower spirits that constantly gnaw at our skin; ready to pull us down into the depths of impure behavior (hedonistic, primal, self-destructive impulses). Dickson described the Orishas as follows: Ogun was the god of war; Shango, the god of truth and justice; Exu, the devil god that tempts man; Oxum, the female god and god of fertility; and Olorum, the supreme god, guiding and surveying the other gods from atop his perch. According to Dickson, we are born with our own specific Orisha, but one must study and develop a deep awareness of these spirits in order to invoke them as protective shields from the lower spirits.

Putting Dickson's words into the context of social resistance, it really became clear to me how, in the face of brutal oppression and marginalization, the powers of the human spirit could emerge to turn injustice into hope, exploitation into a meaningful truth. And this truth is passed down through oral histories, becoming ripe in the social imagination. I was deeply impressed by Dickson's articulation of the purpose of New World slavery in the context of candomblé, and in terms of psycho-social resistance, I was convinced of the powers of this truth to provide at least some of the faith needed to endure the harsh reality of the Brazilian slaveocracy.

Candomble Ceremony

I was picked up at the youth hostel by an unassuming-looking vehicle, and carted along with a newly-made Australian travel companion about 15 minutes outside of central Salvador. Of course, attached to this innocuous little ride was a hefty tourist fee, which we paid grudgingly before shuffling into the spectacular moment of life that awaited us. Told beforehand to wear only white for customary purposes, we were given barely-perceptible nods of approval as the members of the candombé house ushered us to our seats among the other women of the house; all of whom glanced us over with tired eyes, soft and weary from years of looking at similar women of foreign descent trying to capture, in a voyeuristic few hours, the mysterious world of the Orisha.

This was Casa Branca, and its Orisha was named 'Shango'. Shango, the god of justice and power, was to be called forth in a dance of spirits performed by a group of female members of the Casa. These women, many of whom appeared as if they were well into the winter of their lives, were walking around the ceremony hall with expressions of

relaxed nonchalance; they were completely unperturbed by the growing, nervously anticipatory mass of tourists and spectators around them. These women would each be individually possessed over the course of the evening by Shango. Shango would come down and possess them, communicate with them, bless them, and protect their souls before moving swiftly and silently back into the heavens. Shango, the fourth ruling king of ancient Oyo, was represented by thunder and lightning iconography. His power was not one-dimensional: it transcended the boundaries of royal morality and was a combination of authoritative, destructive, healing, magical and creative in nature.

We waited for hours for the dance to start. And as I watched these women move forward, in sequence, around and around the shrine of Shango, I noticed the expressions on their faces. Controlled, knowing, aware, confident, empowered, receptive, mature, serene; these women seemed to be calm, cool valleys of vacant space waiting to be filled with the fire and energy of the spirits to come. They waited and looked around, conversing casually as the agitated, crowded roomful of spectators looked on. They seemed to chuckle silently as they teased and mocked the crowd around them; they knew that that the outsiders, most of whom were far removed from the richness of candomblé, were a desperate assemblage of worldly bodies in search of a glimpse of spirit, of connection, of a sign from above.

And how could I see the resistance inherent in the moments of spirit possession? The energy was ample. As the energy in the room became so thick and insistent that I could cut it with a knife, and as the wind fluttered through the room amidst onlookers convinced that Shango was dancing valiantly among us with abandon, the women started

to drop to their knees, eyes rolled back in their heads, shaking and shuddering under the weight of the evening. Subsequently, members of the audience at large; men, women, and children, would show dramatic signs of possession. They would shudder violently, their heads would cock to the side and their pupils would disappear into the crevices of their skulls as they started to pulse, pulse, pulse to the sound of percussion in crescendo. The room was aflame. Participating in these moments, I was convinced that resistance was in the air. Truth, power, and justice flooded the room as Shango wielded his staff, and the strength and enduring spirit of generations of the members of Casa Branca sent a brazen blow to the 'belly' of the ghost of their ruling oppressors.