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## HISTORY OF BLACK PEOPLE IN BRAZIL AND THEIR ANCESTRAL IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** The construction of “ethnic-racial” identity as a social process is crossed by a wide range of factors that condition or permanently transform it. This article aims to carry out an analysis of the political and cultural factors that conditioned the construction of the identity of the black population in rural and urban areas after the emergence of the Constitution, but through a deconstructionist exercise of essentialist approaches to ethnicity. The article analyzes how the mechanisms have been of political inclusion from the top down, but with processes of social organization. On the other hand, it analyzes the way in which black identity has emerged in urban centers and areas and their areas of influence, where there is cultural syncretism and its traditions reinventing urban cultural dynamics. A relationship of black alterity, in which representations play between black and non-black individuals. The article also reflects criticism on the role of academic research on “ethnic-racial” social movements and the discourses that are built around this type of social mobilization.

**Keywords:** Blacks, Brazil and Ancestry.

## INTRODUCTION

When and how does black identity begin to exist? The essentialist point of view places identity as a first fact, independent in itself and the cause, in turn, of various social and cultural phenomena, which becomes the main argument of identity movements. In this perspective, implicitly or explicitly, a natural progression is assumed that radiates from culture to identity and from identity to politics. By trying to cross the path in the opposite direction (from politics to identity, and culture), we want to “deconstruct” this process analytically (Martins, Dos Santos, Colosso, 2013).

Therefore, the aim here is not to delegitimize the social movements that create and use it

within a process of struggle for social and political rights across cultural differences, but simply to explicitly show the intersections and complex mechanisms that underlie this affirmation of identity. At the heart of all this is the debate over cultural identity.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The political and cultural invisibility of black populations, which is one of the forms of their marginal inclusion from a social and economic point of view (Friedemann, 1993), lasted approximately until the end of the sixties. At these moments, together with some timid political movements against racial discrimination, the beginning – certainly preceded by some folklore studies – began with social science research on the Afro-Colombian population. Two major currents of interpretation have become dominant: on the one hand, the “adaptive strategies” developed by black populations within the New World; on the other, the “traces of Africanity” that would survive functionally and expressively among these populations.

These two interpretations reproduced the great theoretical models of anthropology of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s: the adaptive strategies and syncretisms born of the “encounter” of Africans with Europeans in the New World (Herskovits, 1941), and the one that supposes the idea of the “cut” between the African and American worlds, and the respective maintenance of “preserved cultures” in the New World. The discovery and recognition of African-American contributions to national culture were made in the 1950s on the basis of a certain positive assessment, inspired in turn by the success of African-American music and dance.

In turn, black inhabitants remained largely forgotten and marginalized, within a racial order in which regional differentiation became a hierarchical element when it came

to valuing or not valuing certain populations: they were located, in some ways, on one of the steps lower. This position would be related to their consideration as impoverished strongholds, excrescences of the broader society, and not as relatively autonomous spaces, with certain peculiarities and cultural and social differences. Thus, for example, the several centuries of repression, persecution and demonization of beliefs, rituals and ceremonial practices of African or Amerindian origin by representatives of the Catholic Church, first Spanish, and Republican, later, would have decomposed their cultural forms and would have favored their dissolution in the cults of Catholic saints (with different versions of Christ and Mary, Saint Anthony, etc.), as well as in the appearance of saints, virgins and figures and images from the jungle of Hispanic, indigenous or African origin and even in the rites derived from the festivals Catholics. (Agier, 2001).

Being a paradoxical inclusion that explains the inexpression – which Nina S. de Friedemann called “invisibility” – of the Afro-Brazilian identity: the beliefs and rituals, in a certain way mixed (Afro-indigenous-Brazilian), developed under the Catholic structural mold imposed by Spanish colonization in times of the Inquisition –but with republican continuity–, and created the conditions for mixed race to occur, both unequal and original (Costa, 2002).

This situation allowed the political formation of a new black movement that develops a discourse of an “ethnic territorial” nature; that is, to value the cultural, educational, labor and territorial particularities of black-Afro-Brazilian populations, explicitly losing strength in the strategy of anti-racist struggle and egalitarian integration in society. This way, bringing a close connection with legitimacy.

Self-identifications show the relative, relational and situational character of identity.

Firstly, identity is relative in that it depends closely on the context. Identification is also a relational phenomenon. It is built on a face-to-face relationship, on an interaction between two or more actors. This scenario is a situation of crossed gazes, where each person acts based on anticipations and assumptions about what the other’s gaze might be like, for example in the case of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee in quantitative studies. And finally, are we in the presence of optional or situational identities? There is a tendency towards imprecision, that is, a desire to neutralize racial characteristics, which is noticeable mainly in optional identification. This is where the idea of a certain freedom of choice and identities in a mixed-race country emerges (Marques, 2018).

In fact, the spread of racial stigma throughout society and among black populations suggests that there are a series of adjustments for each situation, rather than identity “choices” made a priori and/or forever. The dominant reality appears to be, ultimately, that of a diffuse and porous racism, as a non-homogeneous and not necessarily dichotomous discriminatory device, with nuances and variations that allow the representation in gradations of “skin colors”, depending on urban and social contexts. specific regions.

However, what changes have recent identity movements introduced through Afro-Brazilian rhetoric into the representations of the identity of black populations in Colombia and their social conditions? What has been its impact on racist stereotypes and on the responses of sectors of the Afro-Brazilian population to racial discrimination? These and other questions remain open to be studied in both Afro-Brazilian and non-Afro-Brazilian populations.

**Distribution by color or race in Brazil**  
 Pardos are the majority of the population in the country

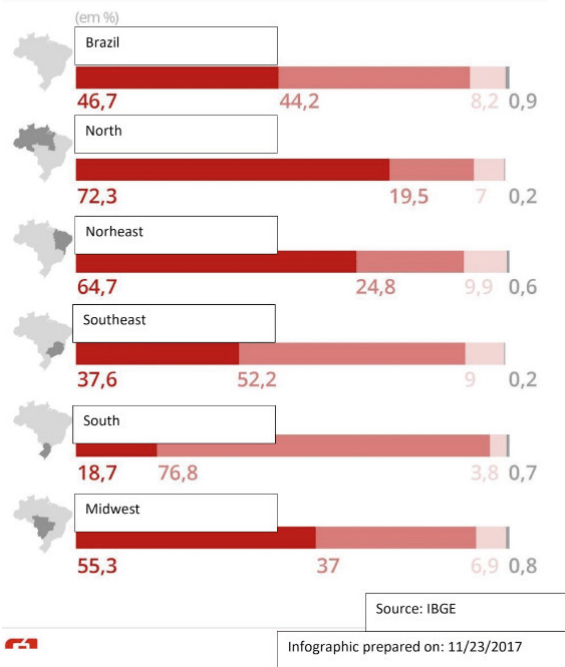


Image 1 – Graph with distribution by color or race in Brazil.

Available in: <https://g1.globo.com/economia/noticia/populacao-que-se-declara-preta-cresce-149-no-brasil-em-4-anos-aponta-ibge.ghml>

## CULTURE AND ANCESTRY

Today, cultural identity is configured as a multifaceted social construction. In short, we consider these facets to be as follows: an investment by capitalists and professionals who make culture a “commodity”. A whole series of jobs and activities, both in terms of production, distribution and consumption. Work that involves specializations, availability of time, mobility and spatial displacements, relationships, links and negotiations with financiers or “sponsors” (the local authority, the different departments of the State, NGOs, private agents). This way, culture appears as a “commodity” as an object transformed by capital and the work invested in it, instead of an object already made and finished and also

as a malleable “resource”, capable of multiple uses, be they political, economic or ideological (Gomes, 2003).

The work of memory. Identity mobilizations of an ethnic nature gave the memory of places and the past a central role within the discourse of legitimization and, simultaneously, differentiation of black populations, on an individual, local and urban-rural scale. The work done in memory, which - as is the case with culture - can also be pragmatically political, economic or ideological, sets in motion, updating them, the interethnic relations that existed until then between blacks, whites, mestizos and indigenous people. The investigations, censorship, selections made, as well as the inversion of the relationship between the elderly and young people in the control of collective knowledge, progressively constitute what could be defined as the recreation of memory in a localized context full of tensions and even conflicts (Hoffmann, 2000; Quintín, 2000).

The symbolic work that takes place in cultural innovations. The relationship between identity strategies and artistic and ritual performances, that is, the ritualization of identities, puts symbolic figures on stage that allow the creation of moments of collective recognition, more or less ephemeral, within the contexts of ceremonies, parties, carnivals, etc... Within these unusual situations, the reunion between individuals and a common history or destiny is symbolized by some recognizable figures or entities, of local origin or hybrids. These symbolic forms allow you to create a feeling of identity, and multiply from the moment your imagination is unleashed. They are, then, part of a panoply of ethnic-regional identity symbols in which their mechanism and articulation are sometimes still pending to be realized (Agier, 2001).

The production of “images” of culture, conceived both by its own residents, by

strangers (black and non-black) and also, sometimes, by academia itself, representations and illustrations of culture tend to reproduce a holistic image of places of (idealized) origin that are opposed to another, individualized and, therefore, less friendly image of urbanized places. Social (and identity) ties would be diluted, tending towards “nothing”, or towards the utopian dream and the apocalyptic end. The use of photographs to reconstruct the family past, genealogical affiliation, although exclusively imaginary (given that there are fewer or more ephemeral returns to places of origin), participate in a certain “fictionalization” of representations of black identity (Quintin, 2000).

But throughout this process, other images are rediscovered and mix with the first: the resulting “miscegenation” begins, where they are quite noticeable.

presence and ideological influences of “global” actors (Plano Padrinhos, the Catholic Church, the State itself - through its educational, health, judicial, repressive or administrative system, and even external agents linked to international capital - agro-industrial companies, drug trafficking ), as well as information and images from the mass media (radio, press, television): national and international politics, the heroes of Disneyland, the stars of popular music, films, television and sports, orixás, among many others, constitute the images that are transmitted through these channels and that are added to previous beliefs, knowledge and images, themselves resulting from other, older mixtures (Nogueira, 2007).

These multiple influences are found, for example, in carnival. The funk and rap compositions incorporate and transform the stories and legends that circulate around the neighborhood and that come, in part, from an older record brought from the regions of origin (this is the case with the visions that

persist to this day in rural areas); but the truth is that this culture made in the city also receives and interprets the styles and emblems of black youth culture of American origin disseminated worldwide through channels of mass cultural consumption - although also through circuits at a personal and family level.

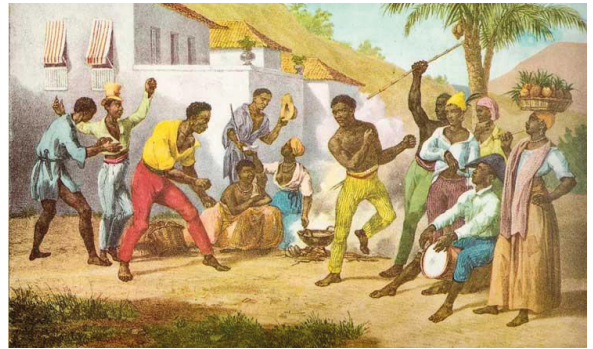


Image 2 - Painting by Johann Moritz Rugendas from the 19th century shows the game of capoeira already being practiced in Brazil.

Available in: <http://memorialdademocracia.com.br/card/historia-e-cultura-afrobrasileiras-escolas>

## CONCLUSION

But, in turn, it is clear that this theoretical debate is constantly “disturbed” by local tensions. Thus, affirming “territorial identity” against “racial identity” ends up giving arguments to those agents who preach the titling of the land for all who live and are on it: whether with the argument of ancestry, or with the argument of the rights of first to arrive (the “natives”), either through forgetfulness and/or ignorance of the historical processes -not always peaceful- of expulsion and plundering of land, etc. At the end of the reflection, we cannot fail to be aware of the role that these different arguments play within the political, economic and social positions that, among others, are woven within and on the peaceful zone and from which we cannot be oblivious.

if we, therefore, give arguments (even if false) to those whose political position and struggle seem more legitimate? Certainly, today

black peasants “grouped in communities”, together with indigenous groups, are the most vulnerable and the most fragile in the region (Agier, 2001). Without a doubt, we need to go beyond deconstruction, too, and we need to build relationships more systematically culture, identity and situation (rather than space). We are in the midst of a development situation (which needs to be characterized in more detail, but whose main element is the introduction of financial “manna” and external forms of access to resources) that condition identity conflicts and micro and macro-regional cultural changes.

Is it still possible to dialogue with exclusively objective, “scientific” arguments (without excessive misunderstandings)? with

agents intimately involved in this situation and directly affected by it? What might be the terms of this dialogue? These are questions whose answers are not easy and cannot be given in the summary. In a more pragmatic way, the training, throughout the investigation, of “local” and “community” interviewers and researchers is one of the most evident facts and achievements of the project, to the extent that they have become not only a basic means of investigation, but even very active co-participants in it. Perhaps this is one of the most pertinent results, as it has allowed the constant reintroduction of complexity in the most simplifying and dualistic visions that clashed on the ground.

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