

## **The Cultural Space of African-Brazilians: A tribute on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in Brazil.**

by

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Undoubtedly the Brazilian proclamation of May 13th, 1888 ending official slavery in that country has had tremendous historical resonances that still reverberate within the present political context. Perhaps that act represented the first official political independence of black people anywhere in the world. That event of a hundred years ago was to be followed eighty years later, by the events of 1960, when practically half of the African countries gained their political independence from the yoke of European imperial domination. When a hundred years later today, we examine the importance of this proclamation, we have to seriously ask ourselves what political and cultural lessons can be drawn from it. In other words, can what happened to black Brazilians tell us as to what is happening to us Africans on the continent today. We only have to look at a particular institution in Brazil in order to see what a great tragedy has befallen our black brothers in that country. The West Berlin newspaper, Taz, of March 13th has reported that of approximately 596 members of the present Parliament in Brazil only 9 are African-Brazilians in a country that nearly half of its population consists of black Brazilians. This by any stretch of the imagination is an outrageous statistic, that definitely situates Brazil among the most racially minded countries in the world, however much Brazilian official pronouncements tell us the lie that Brazil is a racially harmonious society characterized by the absence of any kind of racial prejudice or racial discrimination.

Unfortunately this political dishonesty on the part of the Brazilian government has been supported by the intellectual evasiveness of certain Brazilian intellectuals and scholars, including the late great Brazilian scholar, Gilberto Freyre, who died in March 1987 at the age of 86. There can be no doubt that our understanding of Brazilian culture today and the particular patterns of its historical formation have been determined by the great scholarly works of Freyre, who was very reactionary politically. For instance, he never seriously opposed the military dictatorship that overthrew the democratically elected government of Goulart in 1964 and that misruled and misgoverned the country for approximately twenty years. It is impossible to evade the cultural, sociological and anthropological works of Gilberto Freyre, for they represent the most powerful and extraordinary attempt to forge a historical synthesis of Brazilian culture, giving profound importance of the African-Brazilian culture within it.

The political and colour configuration of Brazilian Parliament clearly indicates that the approximately 76 million African-Brazilians are being subjected to political and economic oppression so evident on the African continent today, namely, neo-colonialism. If in Africa neo-colonialism is largely imposed by external forces in the form of European late capitalist countries with the acquiescence of our bankrupt ruling classes, in the instance of Brazil, it is internally imposed with the assistance of American capitalism. Clearly then, the refusal of black Brazilians to celebrate today, this May 13th, 1988, the hundredth anniversary of the official proclamation, is clearly determined by their profound political and

cultural consciousness that the proclamation was the opening of the door to their neo-colonial subjection and oppression.

This political awareness has informed the historical consciousness and cultural imagination of African-Brazilians that the official Proclamation of 1888 was merely a shifting of their misery from plantation slavery to the destitution of the favelas. In other words, the economic exploitation of our black brothers and sisters in Brazil continues as before, although the political superstructure might have altered slightly, the determining economic substructure has not changed in any fundamental way at all. The historical lesson taught us Africans in Africa, in the African Diaspora, and also to the African-Europeans, by the refusal of the African-Brazilians to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of 1888, is that both the Proclamation Act of 1888 and the political independence of many African countries in 1960 were actually camouflaged proclamations of neo-colonialism. In America, the destruction of the Reconstruction achievements of the 1870s and 1880s, could be interpreted as having resulted in the internal neo-colonization of black Americans. It is partly because of the triangular structure of these acts of oppression that necessitates the historical unity of black struggles all over the world. These three events (the incomplete project of emancipating African-Brazilians in 1888, the roll back of the historical project of emancipating African-Americans in the Reconstruction era of the 1870s, and the neo-colonization of African people on the continent in the 1960s) were interconnected official histories imposed on African peoples in order to subjugate them even further; they were not historical acts determined by the will of the people.

Strangely enough and naturally so, it is the presence of a peoples' history among the black Brazilians which long predates the Proclamation of 1888, that made it possible for the African-Brazilians to expose the sham of the emancipation act. One fact about the Proclamation of 1888, among several others, is that its proclamation is long predated by the emancipation of the slaves through their collective actions and struggles. The action of 1888 in its consequences, did not profoundly affect the life and history of African-Brazilians, but had pronounced consequences on the economic history of Brazil, for it opened the official industrialization of the country. It is for this reason that the history of Brazil from 1888 to 1922 is known as the emergence of a New Brazil. The cultural importance of 1922 lies in the fact that it announces the arrival of Modernism in Brazilian cultural history, that was to have incontestable consequences on African-Brazilian history, as will be apparent in a moment.

The peoples' history of the African-Brazilians to which we are referring is that founded by the independent black Republics of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries in the forest areas of Brazil. They were established by former black slaves who had successfully revolted against their former masters. These independent black Republics established viable economic, political, cultural and social structures. They were known as the Republics of the Palmares. The Palmares were undoubtedly among the first freedom fighters in modern black history. Enormous scholarly research, on the historical and cultural plane, is presently being undertaken by African-Brazilian and African-American scholars to reconstruct and reconstitute the historical nature of these black Republics. Among the many fascinating questions confronting black scholars is the nature of the cultural patterns and political systems established by these Brazilian 'Black Jacobins', before the emergence of the Haitian Black Jacobins rediscovered by the brilliant historical work of C.L.R. James, the great black historian from Trinidad.

Were the political systems founded by Brazilian Palmares comparable or even a replication of the systems they had known in Africa! Were they a replication of the political forms present in the Songhay civilization or other African civilizations preceding them! What were their intellectual and cultural achievements! And the ultimate question, why did these black Republics eventually collapse under the pressure of colonial Brazil! Related to this, what historical lessons do they secretly hold, across archaeological ages, for our contemporary political struggles. These are some of the questions being unveiled by a collection of black scholars opening this domain of African history.

Unquestionably, it is the historical survival in the memories of present-day African-Brazilians of these black independent Republics of the Palmares that renews their cultural memory to proclaim today, May 13th, 1988 as the remembrance day of the last of the Palmares kings, Mumbi, rather than a celebration of the vacuous proclamation which did not immeasurably end the misery of black Brazilians. The cultural lesson for us black people in Europe, Africa, America and Australasia is that we should rediscover our heroes and heroines who characterize the essential moments of our peoples' history in order to place them against the hegemony of official historiography. This Brazilian lesson for my country, South Africa, is of inestimable importance. Whole wide sections of black South African historiography (of blacks, Indians, and the so-called Coloureds) have been falsified by official historiography.

Gilberto Freyre has given a historical synthesis of Brazilian culture, especially of black Brazilians, within the patterns of Brazilian official historiography. It is not accidental that Freyre's synthesis has recently been subjected to severe criticism over its historical accuracy and social logic, however much its fertile brilliance has been accepted. For our limited purposes Freyre is valuable in so far as indicating the complex structure of Brazilian culture. For Freyre, as is formulated in his magisterial work, *The Masters and the Slaves*, Brazilian culture has developed from a feudal structure of the sugar-plantation economy, symbolised by the interrelationship between the Big House of the white slave owners (Portuguese) and the Slave Quarters (Africans). It is the progression of this relationship, in different forms, mutations and modes, that has given rise to the synthetic structure of Brazilian culture. Under what Gilberto Freyre calls a 'synthetic principle', the form of Brazilian culture is a product of the 'miscegenation and the interpenetration' of three cultures, African culture, Amerindian culture and European culture. From this process of synthesis, Freyre argues that Brazilian culture has been undergoing a 'democratization' process, especially in relation to 'interhuman relationships, of interpersonal relationships, of relations between groups and between regions.'" (See the violently dissenting view on the interpretation of this historical and cultural process in Abdias do Nascimento's *Brazil Mixture or Massacre?: Essays in the Genocide of a Black People*). Freyre even argues that social opportunities have been opening to former black slaves, colored races and he mentions also heretics in the same context. This postulation formulated by Freyre is totally contradicted by the present day historical experience of African Brazilians, who are relegated to the lowest positions in the social structure of Brazil.

The present day vitality of black culture in Brazil is not due to any synthesis, which in actual fact never took place, but rather, it is due to its adamant refusal to be subordinated to the dominant hegemony of white European culture in Brazil. To go even further, there could not be any serious synthesis because the Amerindian cultures were, for all intents and purposes, in the process of being destroyed. The horrible suffering of the Brazilian Amerindians continues to the present day. Witness the refusal of the

Brazilian government and Brazilian Parliament to protect the land-rights of the Amerindians in the face of their land being confiscated by gold prospectors and the holders of vast land-Estates. Consequently, the so-called democratization and historical synthesis of Brazilian culture is a very questionable thesis. In many ways, it is governed by certain mythologies, which are not of immediate concern to us here. A real historical synthesis of Brazilian culture can only occur when and if the Amerindians and the African-Brazilians and other dispossessed members of the Brazilian society are totally and democratically integrated into the social structure of Brazilian society.

In a real sense, the vitality of African-Brazilian culture in our century is partly due to the inspiration it draws from the historical memory of the independent black Republics of the Palmares and from the synthetic systems of African philosophical processes and cultural networks.

Probably one of the most important figures in the cultural history of African-Brazilians is the nineteenth-century poet, Castro Alves. (The matter of the very great black poetic genius of the late nineteenth-century, Joao de Cruz e Sousa, is a complicated historical and cultural problem which is beyond the scope of this short presentation). Alves died at a very young age of twenty-four. He wrote poetry of extraordinary power against the enslavement of his black compatriots. The years 1860-71 in Brazilian cultural history are characterized by the activities of Alves. He is the one who was to establish the tradition, which was to continue in the twentieth-century, of interfusing poetic lyricism and social consciencism. Alves established a tradition that was to continue with Jorge de Lima. Alves other importance lies also in the fact that he established the tradition where in literary matters, African-Brazilians found themselves represented in the literary works of their compatriots rather than their representing themselves. This again indicates the absence of a serious attempt to integrate the black Brazilians into the collective historical imagination of the Brazilian people. It is one thing to be represented because one is marginalized, politically, culturally, socially and economically, and it is another matter if one is acceptable as the central component of that collective experience. Unfortunately, within the Brazilian context in relation to the black Brazilians, it is the former process which is in effect rather than the latter. The African-Brazilians are marginalized to the point of excelling well in music and sport, and problematically in literature and in the sciences. Despite this complicated historical problem, the African-Brazilians have found memorable representation in literature and in film. The Brazilian Cinema Novo of Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos and others has given us brilliant images of black Brazilians. From Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* to Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *A Tent of Miracles* (the latter an adaptation of Jorge Amado's novel of the same name), the portrayal of African-Brazilians in the cinema has been very impressive in its cultural richness and political complexity. But, this sketch will confine itself to literary matters.

The arrival of Modernism in Brazil in 1922 through the literary works of Mario de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade, Manuel Bainera, Carlos Drummond de Andrade and others, and the discovery of literary Regionalism in Recife in 1925 by Jorge Amado, Gilberto Freyre, Jose Lins do Rego and others, have effected a literary transformation in the portrayal of black Brazilians. The former movement was dominated by poets, whereas the latter literary school was given direction by novelists. Both movements sought to find and locate the central point of Brazilian culture. In their search, they encountered the prodigiousness of black Brazilian culture. Hence, their searing portrayal of it in some of their literary

works. Probably one of the most fascinating features about Modernism in Latin America, especially in Cuba and Brazil, was the attempt, which in many instances succeeded, by the white writers in these two countries to give black voicings and black symbolization a dominant place and position in their literary works. In other words, these Latin American white writers wrote some of their literary as if they had been written by African-Brazilians or African-Cubans representing themselves, rather than merely giving black representation to some of their characters.

Whether these writers in actual fact succeeded in doing this is one of the presently raging disputes in the critical debates about Latin American literary culture of the 1920s and the 1930s. The Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, wrote his first novel in 1933, *Ecue-Yamba-O*, in this literary mode. This novel is about a young black man, who after killing another man, moves to Havana to join a particular religious cult. This novel, in many ways, is a documentation of the horrible conditions under which the African-Cubans lived, particularly in the country side. But perhaps its singular aim was to present the African cultural customs present then in Cuba, the customs which determine the structure of the novel. The novel also consists of several photographs of the customs of the several African cults. Carpentier was to abandon this mode of writing, but not his deep concern for black people in Latin America, for later on in his life he wrote two great literary masterpieces in the realist mode, a novel and a novella about the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 against Napoleon's France: *An Explosion in the Cathedral* and *The Kingdom of this World*. With his first novel, Carpentier participated with Nicolas Guillen, today Cuba's National Poet, in Cuba's *Negroismo* movement of the 1930s.

In Brazil the same pattern repeats itself, for Mario de Andrade, the literary pope of Brazilian Modernism, wrote in 1928 a novel called, *Macunaima*, which attempted to give black voicings within its literary structures. The novel is a satire on a humorous black King who rules in the Amazon jungle. It is a very funny literary work. A film of the same name, adopted from the novel in 1969 by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade is being shown here in West Berlin this week, at the Xenon cinema house in Charlottenburg, as part of the so-called one hundredth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Brazil. For sure, the film is being shown this week with the intent of showing how funny African-Brazilians are and how contented they are with their political situation, rather than as a distanced social critique of the horrible situation in which black Brazilians have been pushed.

Also within the context of Brazilian literary Regionalism, novels have been written in which black voicings or their blues have found literary representation. The instance of Jorge Amado is well known all over the world for it to need a rehearsing in this short sketch. But it needs emphasizing that Amado was not an isolated example; there were other Brazilian writers who wrote within the historical experience of this cultural logic. One prominent example, which should suffice for our purposes here, is Jose Lins de Rego. His novel of 1935, *O Moleque Ricardo*, is about a young black Brazilian man from a plantation who is caught up in the urban whirlstorm of the strike movement. The very structural movement of the novel indicates very clearly that Lins de Rego attempted a fusion or synthesis of proletarian culture and African-Brazilian culture. Many other Brazilian writers participated in these two literary movements of Regionalism and Modernism: both were an attempt to forge, at differential historical and cultural levels, a synthesis between cosmopolitanism and nationalism or universalism and particularism. Before closing this presentation, I would like just to mention the name of Jorge de Lima,

the Brazilian poet, who died some years ago and who has written vast tracts of poetry on black Brazilians or themes related to their way of life. One day it will be necessary to do a serious appraisal of this fascinating man, for after writing for decades on blacks Jorge de Lima shifted his literary imagination completely to mystical themes. In other words, his imagination shifted from social preoccupations to magical fascinations. It should not be thought from what has been said that the African-Brazilians have not been capable of representing themselves, but rather, this presentation has sought to make a critique of the social conditions and situations which have prevented black Brazilians from giving full representation of themselves in their literary works. Without question the African-Brazilians possess an extraordinary creative imagination. It has been prevented by social oppression from expressing itself in literary form. But in music, the brilliance of the African-Brazilian creative imagination has been unstoppable: witness the impressive black composers and musicians from Brazil who have fascinated our century. In fact, Milton Nascimento will be performing at the Tempelrom on June 6th; and later on June 25th, Jorge Ben, Djavan and Beth Carvalho will be performing together at the Sommergarten. But also we should not forget Brazilian painting; last Sunday afternoon I visited the Brazilian art exhibition currently on display at Berlin's Kunsthalle on Budapesterstrasse. The African-Brazilian imagination belongs to us also in Africa. In fact, the hoped for spiritual unity of Brazil and Africa is not far off from our historical imagination, as can be indicated by the fact that this May of 1988, is not only an occasion for the remembrance of the hundredth commemoration of the transference of African-Brazilians from the sugar plantations to the urban favelas, it is also the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity. I would like to end my presentation by reading this poem, "A Lesser Life", by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, arguably one of Brazil's greatest poets in the twentieth century: The flight from reality, farther still the flight from the marvelous, farthest of all: the flight from yourself, the flight from flight, the exile without water and word, the voluntary loss of love and memory, the echo no longer answering the call, and this fusion, the hand becoming enormous and vanishing, disfigured, all gestures finally impossible, if not useless, the needlessness of song, the purity of color, not an arm in motion or a nail growing. And yet, not death. But life: caught in its most simplified form, already stripped of ornament and musical commentary, life that we long for like peace in weariness (not death), life at a minimum, essential; a beginning; a sleep; less than dirt, without heat; without science or irony; what I could want from the least cruel: life in which the air, uninhaled, still envelops me; no wear and tear of tissues; absence of them; confusion between morning and evening, already painless, because time no longer splits into sections; time elided, vanquished. Neither the dead nor the eternal nor the divine, only the living, the tiny, silent, indifferent and solitary living. That's what I seek

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