



**HAL**  
open science

# 1995, Brazil's Zumbi Year, Reflections on a Tricentennial Commemoration

Richard Marin

► **To cite this version:**

Richard Marin. 1995, Brazil's Zumbi Year, Reflections on a Tricentennial Commemoration. 2017.  
hal-01587357

**HAL Id: hal-01587357**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01587357v1>**

Preprint submitted on 10 Mar 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Richard Marin

## **1995, BRAZIL'S ZUMBI YEAR: REFLECTIONS ON A TRICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION**

In 1995, the Brazilian commemorations in honor of the tricentennial of the death of Zumbi, the legendary leader of the large maroon community of Palmares, took on every appearance of a genuine social phenomenon. The Black Movement and part of Brazilian civil society, but also the public authorities, each in different ways, were all committed to marking the event with exceptional grandeur.

This article advances a perspective on this commemorative year as an important step in promoting the "Black question" along with Afro-Brazilian identity. After describing the 1995 commemorations, we aim to show how they represented the culmination of already-existing movements that had been at work in the depths of Brazilian society. We will finish by considering the period following the events of 1995, during which "the Black question" becomes truly central to debates in Brazilians society.

### **The tricentennial celebrations**

It is not an accident that Zumbi, and the Palmares communities that he led until their destruction, have emerged as a symbol of the struggle of Brazil's slaves. In the context of maroon societies<sup>1</sup>—an integral, if mundane, part of Brazil's colonial history—the Palmares episode occupies a unique place. Indeed, while the *quilombos* or *mocambos* of Brazil can be counted in the thousands, these communities of runaway slaves established inland<sup>2</sup> were usually short-lived and of limited size.

However, in terms of both its longevity and its size, the *quilombo* of Palmares was exceptional. Indeed, in the rugged, palm-covered Serra da Barriga region in the interior of the Pernambuco captaincy, in the modern state of Alagoas, several thousand mocambeiros

– probably over 10,000 – spread out over a dozen sites, resisted Dutch and Portuguese expeditions for nearly a century (1604-1694).<sup>3</sup> Palmares, which was in all likelihood organized and governed following Bantu culture, with a King and his vassals at its head, is now believed to be the largest maroon community that has ever existed in the Americas. In 1678, a revolt broke out against the king Ganga-Zumba, who was killed by his nephew Zumbi (or Zambi) for negotiating a treaty with the Portuguese. Zumbi, who had been raised and educated by a priest outside of the *quilombo*, took over power and proved to be a remarkable strategist who mastered the art of guerrilla warfare. For a long time, he was able to withstand the onslaught of the colonial troops before being finally defeated by the formidable *bandeirante*<sup>4</sup> Domingos Jorge Velho on 7 February 1694. The *quilombo* was then completely destroyed and its population exterminated. Zumbi, however, managed to escape and remain free until the fateful day of 20 November 1695, when he was he was mortally wounded, likely after being betrayed by one of his lieutenants. He was decapitated and his head was displayed until it decayed in Carme Plaza, in Recife, reportedly in order to destroy the popular belief in his immortality.

In the dual commemoration—both official and civil society—highlighting "the year of Zumbi of Palmares" as enacted by law, the state was committed at the highest level. This was due to a need to respond to a strong social demand, a theme to which we will return later, but the personality of Brazil's President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, also played an important role.

Although he had only taken office at the beginning of the year, he had long been sensitive to "the Black question." An internationally renowned sociologist, he had been a student of two eminent specialists on the theme at the University of Sao Paulo: Florestan Fernandes and the French scholar Roger Bastide, who was part of the French University Mission to establish the University of São Paulo, in which Fernand Braudel and Claude

Lévi-Strauss took part at the end of the 1930s. In 1961, Fernando Henrique Cardoso devoted his doctoral thesis to “Capitalism and slavery in Southern Brazil.”<sup>5</sup> As President, he was particularly sensitive to issues of racial discrimination and to Afro-Brazilian grievances, which he saw increasing. In 1994, when he was still a presidential candidate, this child of the elite, a general's son, surprised the public by calling himself a "mulatto" with "one foot in the kitchen," deliberately using a common expression referring to domestic slavery to mean having Black ancestry. On later occasions as President, he would repeatedly refer to his Black origins, for example during the reception of South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki, in Florianópolis on 13 December 2000, when he said "all you have to do is look at me to understand that, in Brazil, white is a relative concept."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, he enjoyed mentioning that he was the first Brazilian president to have appointed a Black person as Minister, the soccer player Pelé.

On 20 November 1995, in an unprecedented and highly symbolic gesture, Fernando Henrique Cardoso made a visit to the community of União dos Palmares, neighboring the site of the Palmares *quilombo*, accompanied by Pelé, his Minister of Sports; Francisco Weffort, Minister of Culture, and Paulo Renato Souza, Minister of Education, as well as representatives of African countries (South African, Angola, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire). At the City Hall, he paid homage to Zumbi in these words on behalf of the nation:

Never mind the details. Never mind knowing whether the biography is based on documents, on traveler accounts or anything else. Zumbi is, for us, today, significant .... he is embedded in the cultural heritage, the historical heritage, the political heritage of Brazil. He is a hero in Brazil .... For someone like me who started his life studying Brazil's Blacks and wrote at least two books on the subject of prejudice and the Black people of Brazil, it was more than an obligation, it was an imperative duty, as I

have already said, an ethical obligation as President of the Republic to come here to União dos Palmares to say that Zumbi is ours, he belongs to the Brazilian people and he represents the best of our people: the desire for liberty. ... Zumbi has transcended his Afro-Brazilian nature.<sup>7</sup>

A postage stamp and a commemorative medal were issued in memory of the event, and on November 20 of the following year, a law added him to the "Livro dos Heróis da Pátria" (Book of National Heroes). The Chamber of deputies also participated in the tribute through a whole series of initiatives, including naming its cultural space "Zumbi dos Palmares."

This pantheonisation of the Black hero, which transformed him into an icon for the entire nation, thereby "unBlackening" him, did not meet with general support—far from it. We won't dwell on the Brazilian conservatives, nostalgic for the Portuguese empire and white power, who were repelled by these commemorations. But they also annoyed many Black activists who saw it as an attempt to capture, divert and dispossess them of Zumbi. Moreover, throughout the year, controversies flared up between the Palmares Cultural Foundation, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to arrange the official commemorations, and the Unified Black Movement (*Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial* - MNU) who broadly boycotted its initiatives, perceived as attempts at political hijacking.

The same day, a march took place in Brasília, the "March Against Racism and for Equality and Life"—remembered as the "Zumbi March"—organized by the Black Movement, with the decisive support of the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - PT) and the Unified Workers' Central (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores* - CUT). Significantly, Edson Cardoso, the march's creator was both an activist for the Black Movement and one of the

founders, in 1984, of the Black Commission (*Comissão do Negro*) within the Workers' Party (PT). This support from organized labor and political parties is even more notable when considering that in 1988, during the events related to the centenary of the abolition of slavery, Black activists complained about the lack of support from leftist organizations. This was a clear sign that much had changed in a decade.

On a route of around 2 kilometers, starting from the bus station at the Ministries Esplanade, several thousand demonstrators—the organizers gave a high estimate of 30,000—came from across the country to denounce racism and the lack of public policies for the Black population. Some of the most repeated slogans, as seen in the videos of the march, were: "Against racism, for citizens' rights and life"; "Respond to racial violence!"; "Blacks want power too!"; "Palmares! Zumbi!" "Long live Zumbi, no to racism!" "We want schools, we want work!"

At the end of the march, in the late afternoon, a delegation was received by the President, accompanied by a few Ministers. The activists handed the President a list of demands focused on implementing public policies of positive discrimination in order to open access to university and vocational education for Afro-descendants. Fernando Henrique Cardoso took the opportunity and signed a decree to create an interdepartmental government working group on "policies to empower the Black population". Together with nine representatives of ministerial departments, it also included eight representatives of Black associations.

These November 20 demonstrations were, in fact, the culmination of a series of commemorative events. In November, the Rio de Janeiro state government planned two weeks of artistic events; during the same period in Belo Horizonte, artists from fifteen countries participated in the first International Black Art Festival (*Festival de Arte Negra - FAN*). Organized annually since then by the municipal department of culture, it has

become one of the major events for Black art and culture in Latin America; 2016 was its 9th year. The CUT organized the "Zumbi March for Life" with a pilgrimage route of nearly 200 kilometers between the city of São Paulo and the Aparecida National Sanctuary, among other events.

### **1995 as a culmination**

Twenty years earlier, such commemorative fervor around a "Black hero" who symbolized slave resistance, would simply have been unthinkable. Without the profound changes that Brazilian opinion and society underwent in a short time, nothing like this would have been possible. We will focus on the most important of these changes.

First of all, there was a necessary weakening of the ideology of "racial democracy" established under *l'Estado Novo* of Getulio Vargas (1937-1945) and largely supported by the sociologist Gilberto Freyre's famous book *The masters and the slaves* (1933); this long-accepted ideology had met increasingly vocal challenges.

Indeed, while Brazil is not Apartheid-era South Africa, it is far from the idealized image of a fraternal multiracial nation, immune to racism. Incidentally, how could it be otherwise in a territory that was both the largest of the slave colonies and the last to abolish slavery? Partly hidden by the lack of legal segregation and the customary warmth of social relations, this "cordial racism," as it is sometimes called, is barely perceptible to an untrained observer. This state of affairs was so ingrained that the long-standing national taboo was to forcefully deny its existence.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth recalling that it wasn't until 1986, in a country that has traditionally celebrated the sensuality and beauty of *mulatas*, that a Black woman was chosen as Miss Brazil, in a tumultuous and controversial election. As soon as she was named, she declared that she wanted to use her "throne as a banner in the fight against racial prejudice."<sup>9</sup> This

was also the era when, if a job offer asked for a "person of good appearance," it was obvious to everyone that it meant "no non-white applicants"; where the São Paulo National Employment System (Sistema nacional de Emprego, SINE) included a confidential code "M4" which meant "only white candidates accepted."<sup>10</sup>

Even at the beginning of the 1990s, "the heredity of the captive"—the posthumous persistence of three and a half centuries of slavery—still weighed to the point that their subaltern social position often led Blacks to internalize the idea of their inferiority. Unlike the United States, where many Black people held elective office, in the early 1980s there were no high-level Black politicians at all in Brazil. Similarly, the census numbers and survey results from those years crudely reveal the extent of racial discrimination and inequality. A 1988 survey of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* - IBGE) reported, for eleven selected professions, an average Black-White pay gap of 50 percent in the *Nordeste* region and 96 percent in São Paulo. Further, within the same profession, the wage gap increased with the level of qualification. The statistics from Recife and São Paulo clearly showed the existence of a dual labor market. Compared to their white counterparts, Black doctors earned less by 22 percent on average, engineers by 19 percent, metallurgy workers by 12 percent and masons by 11 percent.<sup>11</sup> In 1992, official figures for male daily wages showed 6.3 dollars for white men, 2.9 for mulatto and other mixed-race men and just 2.6 for Black men.<sup>12</sup>

In the mid 1990s, the infant mortality rate for whites was 3.73 percent, compared to 6.23 percent for Blacks, mulatto and other mixed-race groups. Compared to 13 percent of the white population who could hope to pursue university studies at that time, only 6 percent of multiracial people and 4 percent of Black people had the same chance.<sup>13</sup> And we could go on much longer with examples like this.



Logically, one might think that, between the racial prejudice and social discrimination they faced and their strength in numbers—Blacks together with mulatto and other mixed-race groups were estimated at 44.2 percent of the population in the mid 1990s<sup>14</sup>—general awareness would increase and a powerful Black protest movement would arise. Yet, for a long time, nothing like this developed, and there was very little progress in that direction. The history of Black protest organizations—most which had limited reach and a brief existence—was for a long time only a history of their failures.

Certainly, there were a few movements and an active Black milieu starting in the interwar period, especially in São Paulo. However, Brazil's Black activism of this period did not approach the extraordinary vitality of the Harlem Renaissance and organizations such as the NAACP, co-founded by W. E. B. Du Bois who led large demonstrations against racial discrimination during the same era. The pillars of Black organizations of the period were recruited from the minority who managed to extricate themselves by joining the ranks of the small bourgeoisie. All shared a fervently nationalistic attitude and a focus on integration. They advocated much more strongly for the right to a full and complete *Brazilianness* than for a Black identity; indeed, race was most often seen as a handicap to overcome in order to escape marginality. Of the large number of associations that emerged in the period following WWI—whether cultural, charitable, or, more rarely, protest organizations that denounced discrimination—most were short-lived.

Between 1945 and 1948, following the collapse of *l'Estado Novo*, there was a renaissance of Black community organizations in São Paulo, including the promising *Associação dos Negros Brasileiros* and the theater company *Teatro Experimental do Negro*, inspired by the francophone Négritude movement. These movements, more culturally oriented and limited in reach, did not succeed in raising racial consciousness in the Black world. Intense racial mixing, at work for centuries in Brazil, was a powerful

obstacle.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in contrast to the United States where the rigidity of legal definitions of race (especially after 1930) left no place for the undefined or the in-between, Brazilian society has always escaped Black/White dualism. Rather, there has always been an extreme sensitivity to the subtlest nuances on the color spectrum, as well as the position of individuals on the social scale. In response to a 1976 questionnaire asking Brazilians to define their phenotype, the result was a diverse palette of 136 different color descriptions!<sup>16</sup> It is in this context that mixed-race Brazilians could hold out the hope, not unfounded—if not for them, then for their children—of one day being accepted into the white world and thus escape the stigma of Blackness. Social success, moreover, was the surest guarantee of whitening.

Unlike the United States, where inescapable imprisonment within the Black condition resulted in the formation of a community of interest and struggle, nothing like this occurred in Brazil. This inability to organize around a common struggle was related to a Black Brazilian world that was historically without a significant group identity. This is a society in which class position has always been a more decisive factor for integration than uncertain racial identities.

In spite of this background, everything began to change at the end of the 1970s, in the context of the "liberalization" of the military regime, with the emergence of the Black Movement Unified Against Discrimination (*Movimento Negro Unificado Contra a Discriminação Racial* - MUCDR), quickly renamed Unified Black Movement (*Movimento Negro Unificado* - MNU). Its official birth in São Paulo, on 18 June 1978, followed a public action on June 7 on the steps of the municipal theater, protesting the beating death of a Black worker in a city police station and the expulsion of four Black children from the pool at the Tietê Yacht club in São Paulo. In their "open letter to the population," they stated:

We are out in the streets today for a protest campaign. A campaign against racial discrimination, against police oppression, against unemployment, underemployment and marginalization. We are out in the streets to protest the very poor living conditions for Black people. Today is a historic day. A new day is beginning for Blacks. We have come out of the meeting room, the conference room and we're going out into the street. A new step has been taken in the fight against racism.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, the MNU did not emerge spontaneously. It was the result of a network of Black organizations from the first half of the 1970s, and a number of its leaders also belonged to far-left political organizations like the Trotskyist group Socialist Convergence (*Convergência Socialista*) and the Brazilian Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Brasileiro - PCB*). In the following years, most joined the new Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT*). Without becoming a mass movement, the MNU quickly established its presence in the intellectual debate that was then relayed by a number of cultural associations. Defining itself as an "instrument of combat for the Black community," it became an effective voice for the fight against racial discrimination, condemned "the Holocaust of slavery" and combated "the national myth of racial democracy." Extremely critical of an official history written by the white victors, the group was determined to balance it with a Black intellectual counter-history. To this end, they demanded that the study of Africa and Afro-Brazilians be introduced into the curricula of school and universities; as a balance to May 13, the anniversary of the abolition of slavery, they promoted November 20, the commemorative date of Zumbi's execution. At their first meeting, the MNU decided to observe it annually as "Black Consciousness Day."

Since the beginning of the 1980s, racial issues occupied an increasingly important place in public debate. While pressure from Black activism was not unknown, there are other reasons to be considered. There is no doubt, for example, that a certain "zeitgeist" has influenced social and political figures. UNESCO's World Decade for Cultural

Development (1988-1997), along with challenges from the "conquered world" arising around the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America in 1992, helped bring multiculturalism into political agendas. All the more so given that after the dictatorial regime ended (1984), Brazilian society became more open and receptive to long-suppressed voices and ethnic groups. Things had begun to change at the end of the 1970s, in the context of democratization, when new social movements appeared and joined the continent-wide assertion of a counter-history of conquered peoples under colonialism. They severely questioned the ideology of the nation-state as inherited from independence, exposed the existence of ethnic discrimination, and campaigned for the recognition and promotion of ethno-cultural diversity. Through this process, they helped to sketch a new image of Brazil, one which is far from being completed and not without ambiguity, tension and resistance.

In São Paulo, starting in 1984, the State Governor, Franco Montoro, established a *Black Community Council*, whose mission was to deal with issues of racial discrimination. In Rio de Janeiro, the populist governor Leonel Brizola (1983-1987; 1991-1994) appointed many Afro-descendants to positions of responsibility in the state government as well as in the political party he led, the Democratic Labor Party (*Partido Democrático Trabalhista*, PDT). It is also under this banner that Abdias do Nascimento, one of the leading figures of the Black Movement in Brazil, was elected as a Federal Deputy, then Federal Senator.

The Catholic Church, at the time the spearhead of liberation theology in Latin America, also joined the movement. On 22 November 1981, in Recife, the diocese of Bishop Helder Câmara, celebrated an open-air *Mass of the Quilombos*, causing a commotion and provoking the wrath of the Vatican. Bishop José Maria Pires, the Black archbishop of João Pessoa, was dressed in African attire; in his sermon, he recognized the overwhelming role of the Church in Black slavery, paid tribute to African culture, and solemnized the

martyrdom of Zumbi. In 1983, the organization of Black pastoral workers was created and, in 1998, this pastoral was included the official organizational chart of the Episcopal Conference.

During the same period, Afro-descendants gained more access to positions of responsibility within the major trade union centers—General Confederation of Workers of Brazil (*Central Geral dos Trabalhadores do Brasil - CGTB*), CUT, *Força Sindical*—and issues of race gained importance. The progression follows the same pattern in the political parties: by the mid-1990s, most had their own Black organizations.

In 1988, the centennial of the abolition of slavery was a high point in public reflection on the Black issue and, more widely, national identity. By its wide reach and the debate it generated, it foreshadowed 1995. During this period of national soul-searching, Brazilians learned to look at themselves with greater lucidity, and the ideology of the racial democracy came out worse for the wear. Thus, in Rio de Janeiro, in protest against the commemoration of May 13, Black associations organized a March against the Farce of Abolition—which was severely repressed—on May 11th along avenue Presidente Vargas, facing the Pantheon of the Duke of Caxias, patron of the Brazilian army.

At the same time, the tide of publications and events increased awareness about the legacy of slavery and also highlighted Africa's substantial contribution to Brazilian civilization. In São Paulo and Brasília, some two hundred works in the exhibition on "The Afro-Brazilian hand" (*A mão afrobrasileira*), revealing to everyone the extent of the Black contribution to Brazil's artistic production since the Baroque Period. The National Library in Rio reconstructed "Black history in Brazil" and television stations increased their output of popular programs dealing with slavery, including the series *Absolition* on the *Rede Globo* (Globe Network) where the Black activist Joel Rufino dos Santos worked.

The new constitution, adopted the same year, echoed these changes in progress. Not only did it incorporate a transitional provision allowing the State to assign property rights "to the heirs of the former *quilombos*," but it recognized the multicultural character of the Brazilian nation. It declared that "the State will protect cultural expressions of indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, and other groups" as well as their cultural heritage transmitted through memory. 1988 also saw the creation of the Palmares Cultural Foundation, attached to the Ministry of Culture in order to "promote and preserve the cultural, social and economic values originating from the Black influence in the formation of Brazilian society."

In such a context, the character of Zumbi, long confined to the Black Movement and intellectual and political circles, became known to a much wider segment of Brazilian society.

As early as the period immediately following the establishment of the dictatorship (1964), there was a first significant mobilization around Zumbi and the Quilombo of Palmares, both transformed into a suggestive weapons against the regime. In 1965, when Gianfranco Guarnieri and Augusto Boal wrote and staged "Arena tells Zumbi" in São Paulo, the play spoke much more to viewers about their present than the heroic past of rebel slaves. Each episode in Palmares on the stage in fact referred to current events of the time: by restoring life to the saga of the *quilombo*, the authors wanted first to explain how the defeat of the slaves of the XVII<sup>e</sup> century could help in understanding the defeats of the Left of their time. So, when the white characters of colonial Brazil worry in the play about the "Black menace," it is of course the "Red menace" of the 1960s that is evoked.<sup>18</sup>

In this increasing visibility of the Black hero, the book by Décio Freitas, *A Guerra dos Escravos. Palmares*, published in 1973, also plays a decisive role. His work, one of the most comprehensive to date on the subject, remains an important reference for the Black cause. Its origin is particularly revealing of the uses of the past. The author, a lawyer by

training who had gone into exile in 1964, discovered the history of Palmares while drafting an opposition manifesto exalting the history of popular struggles. "It was then," he explained in a 1995 interview, "while doing research to write this manifesto, that I read, for the first time, in Francisco Adolfo Varnhagen, a Brazilian historian, a few lines about Palmares."<sup>19</sup> From that moment on, rereading the history of the *quilombo* from the perspective of the dictatorship in its darkest period, he constructed it as a phenomenon of exemplary political resistance, generally relevant and broadly applicable. In this same spirit of the power of evocation, the guerrilla group which counted among its ranks future President Dilma Rousseff chose the name VAR-Palmares (*Vanguarda Armada Revolucionária Palmares*) starting in 1969.

The 1980s witnessed a sign that Palmares and Zumbi continued to grow in the collective memory as the November 20 commemorations organized by the Black Movement took place in many more state capitals. Government authorities also took notable measures: in 1986, the Institute of Historic and Artistic National Heritage (*Instituto Patrimônio Histórico Artístico Nacional* - IPHAN) classified the site of the Serra da Barriga as a historic monument; it has since become a pilgrimage destination visited by activists every year. Two years later, it was made a national monument by decree.

In Rio de Janeiro, at the behest of the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, the state's Secretary of Culture, an imposing 3-meter-high bust called "Zumbi" was inaugurated in 1986. A large scale reproduction of a Benin bronze kept at the British Museum in London, it was installed near the *Praça Onze*, an emblematic location for Afro-descendant culture in Rio and birthplace of samba. Statues dedicated to Zumbi have also been erected in Duque de Caxias in the State of Rio, in 1989, and at the port of Santos and Volta Redonda in 1990. It was the beginning of a true "Zumbi fever" that would take over the country in the 2000s.

### **Post-1995: Towards a new Brazilianness?**

Building on the commemoration of 1995, the Black cause continued to gain ground. Two decades later, its achievements can be evaluated in terms of two main directions. On the one hand, they have encouraged a deep reworking of the discourse on national identity, which now fully includes the Afro-Brazilian matrix, long suppressed in favor of the discourse on the "multiracial nation"; on the other hand, they have contributed to a real, but still limited, promotion of Afro-descendant populations and a decline in racial discrimination.

Such results have been achieved through pressure from the Black Movement and its many supporters in civil society, but also through the actions of public institutions that have adopted a number of their demands.

The excitement and the recognition of Afro-Brazilianness were expressed in different ways. One was from the early 2000s, to honor the resistance of slaves by multiplying the statues of Zumbi, now present in the urban landscape of many cities, large and small, and to name streets, avenues, and buildings after him. A few examples: statues of the hero have been inaugurated in Porto Alegre (1997), Recife (2006), Salvador (2008), Aracaju (2012). The name Zumbi dos Palmares has been given to a university in Sao Paulo (2004), the airport of Maceió (2005), and even a tanker inaugurated by President Dilma Rousseff in 2013!

We also witness all kinds of places linked to the history of slavery being integrated into national heritage and transformed into places of remembrance. It thus follows that some 2000 communities of descendants of former *quilombos* preserve "African traditions"



largely reinvented by anthropologists. To date, the majority of them are still awaiting the official property title which brings access to a range of government aid.

In this same spirit of heritage creation, the site of Palmares was converted into a "Memorial Park" in 2006; in 2012, as part of UNESCO's *Slave Route Project*, 100 sites connected with the memory of slavery were selected for Brazil: ports, houses, places of worship, churches, brotherhoods, sites of revolts and *quilombos*, intangible heritage, work and everyday life.

In order to structure a Black consciousness and identity that had been singularly lacking in the Brazil, the Black Movement took on the project of creating, albeit with some difficulty, "the fiction of a subject identity" and an "imaginary community" as described by Michel Agier.<sup>20</sup> To do this, census data proved to be an important tool. The statistics helped to construct a broad category of "Blacks" by combining the census categories of *pretos* (6.2 percent), i.e. those explicitly identifying themselves as "Black," and *pardos* (39.1 percent) i.e. all mixed-race Brazilians, regardless of the type of *mixing*. However, the majority of these *pardos* did not see themselves as Black! Thus, one of the main rhetorical figures in the activist discourse consists in making "Blacks" an ethnic subject defined by African ancestry, to which they are also assigned.

The State, too, has continued its official contribution to promoting Afro-Brazilianness, with the 2003 law requiring primary and secondary schools to teach Afro-Brazilian history and culture, including the history of Africa; with the 2011 formalization of Black Consciousness Day, now celebrated in schools across the country and decreed a holiday by more than 1,000 municipalities.

Beyond these measures which may be seen as symbolic and perception-oriented, the second component of these advances was the policy implementation of affirmative

action, which has achieved real success in the fight against discrimination and the social advancement of Afro-descendants.

The first fruits of this policy appeared at the beginning of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's first term as President,<sup>21</sup> bringing into Brazilian society the terms of a debate that had previously been completely foreign. In 1996, the National Human Rights Program devoted a specific chapter to them, listing a wide range of possible actions: mandatory inclusion of "skin color" on official documents, representation of Brazilian ethnic diversity in government advertisements, implementation of affirmative action policies in universities and high-tech sectors, support for private companies who subscribed to such policies, and many others. Something close to these proposals would serve as platform to the Brazilian delegation to the World Conference against Racism in Durban, under the auspices of the United Nations, 2-9 September 2001. The work of preparing for this conference, as well as the contact with other experiences in Durban, including that of South Africa, were critical steps in the Brazilian Black Movement ultimately subscribing to affirmative action. On May 13, 2002, for the anniversary of the abolition of slavery, Fernando Henrique Cardoso signed a decree aimed at establishing an Affirmative Action program in the Federal public Administration in order to "eliminate the inequalities of gender, race and those related to physical disabilities."<sup>22</sup>

These developments accelerated further in January 2003, with the inauguration of President Luis Inacio da Silva, known as Lula, who had signaled his strong interest in these issues during the election campaign. During his first months in office, he created the Ministry for the Promotion of Racial Equality (SEPPIR<sup>23</sup>), the department which would administer the quota policy.

Starting in 2004, federal public universities became the primary field of application. After a long period of improvisation, the Law of Social Quotas, passed in 2012 by Dilma

Rousseff, finally required all public universities to reserve half of its spaces for incoming students for applicants eligible for quotas; one part of this number is determined by racial criteria (depending on the ethnic composition of the population of the State), another by socioeconomic criteria.<sup>24</sup>

This policy has deeply divided opinion, to say the least, and has sparked a broad national debate and intense clashes that transcend the left-right divide. For the defenders of quotas, their most explicit justification centers on "reparations" to be made by establishing truly equal opportunities that equal rights have failed to do for Afro-descendants. As for opponents, some denounce what they perceive as a racialization of social issues, while others cite a lack of respect for the rule of "merit" as the sole criterion for university access; they see the change as heralding a decline in general skill levels which, incidentally, has never been confirmed. These university quotas, coupled with the scholarship systems, have proven to be so effective that, between 1997 and 2011, the number of Afro-descendant students quadrupled.

## **Conclusion**

Compared to 1995, it cannot be denied that Brazil has come a long way, even though there is still much left to change for millions of Afro-descendants who live as second class citizens. Social integration has accelerated and having African roots has become a point of pride, despite it being stigmatized still quite recently. The phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the 2010 census, in which 50.7 percent of Brazilians said they were Black or multiracial compared with 44.7 percent in 2000.

The number of Afro-descendants in positions of power has also significantly increased, especially in politics. In 1988, among the 559 members of the Constituent Assembly, only 7 were Black. But their numbers increased to 25 in 2007 and 43 in 2011.

Despite the increase, even the latter figure remains modest, considering that it represents barely 8.5 percent seats for more than half of the population. Over the past few years, some Afro-descendants have even gained access to high-level political responsibilities, something that was unimaginable only a short time ago. In 2003, the first Lula administration included five Black Ministers, among them the singer Gilberto Gil as Minister of Culture and Benedita da Silva, an established Black icon in the PT, as Minister of Social Assistance. In 2012, a Black man with very humble origins, Joaquim Barbosa, joined the prestigious chairmanship of the Supreme Court.

Finally, Afro-descendant populations have benefited, like others, and probably more than others, from the cycle of prosperity of the second Lula administration (2006-2010); by the end of his term, they made up half of Class C—the famous Brazilian "middle class"—while in 2001 they were less than one-third of the same class.

However, very recent events have somewhat tempered the optimism that prevailed in the early 2000s. The economic recession that Brazil has been struggling with for three years brought an end to social advancement, and the government of Milton Temer, who became president after Dilma Rousseff was impeached by the senate on 31 August 2016, does not include a single Afro-descendant. Is this a simple bump in the road for an irreversible historical process for which 1995 was one of the founding events?

Translated from the French by Corinna Anderson

- 
- <sup>1</sup> The term *maroon* (from Spanish *cimarron*, savage) refers to slaves who escaped plantations and fled into difficult-to-access regions to live in freedom.
- <sup>2</sup> The 1930 Brazilian directory contains more than 175 addresses with names derived from *quilombo* or *mocambo*. Still, this is a small number compared to those that probably existed. See Stuart B. Schwartz, "Brésil : le royaume noir des 'Mocambos'," *L'Histoire*, n° 41, p. 38-48.
- <sup>3</sup> The Dutch occupied the *Nordeste* between 1630 and 1654 with their colonial base in Recife, which was extended under the administration of Maurice of Nassau.
- <sup>4</sup> Those known as *bandeirantes* carried out armed expeditions (*bandeiras*), which played a fundamental role in the discovery of the interior (*sertão*). Operating from the captaincies of São Vicente and São Paulo, most hunted Native Americans for slavery and searched for mines.
- <sup>5</sup> Fernando Henrique Cardoso, *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional*, Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1977.
- <sup>6</sup> Daniela Nahass, "FHC se define novamente como mestiço," *Folha de São Paulo*, 14 de dezembro de 2000,
- <sup>7</sup> Cited by Jean-François Véran, "Brésil : les découvertes du *quilombo*. La construction hétérogène d'une question nationale," *Problèmes d'Amérique latine*, January-March 1999, p. 55.
- <sup>8</sup> A 1988 survey conducted by the anthropologist Lilia Moritz Schwarcz provides detailed data measuring this denial. Although 97 percent of those surveyed claimed to have no racial prejudice, 98 percent confessed associating with racist people, including among their relatives, friends, or romantic partners. This led the anthropologist to conclude with humor: "Every Brazilian perceives himself as an island of racial democracy surrounded by racists."
- <sup>8</sup> Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, "Questão racial no Brasil," p. 155, in Lilia Moritz Schwarcz and L. Vidor de Sousa Reis (org.), *Negras imagens*, São Paulo, EDUSP, 1996.
- <sup>9</sup> "Discurso enfático," *Veja*, 28 May 1986, p. 36-37.
- <sup>10</sup> "Na segunda classe," *Veja*, 11 May 1988, p. 30.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> "Uma pirâmide feita de desigualdade," *Veja*, 31-03-1993, p. 78-81.
- <sup>13</sup> *Brasil : Pesquisa Nacional sobre Demografia e Saúde*, IBGE, 1996.
- <sup>14</sup> In 1996, the official distribution was the following: 55.2 percent white, 6 percent Black, 38.2 percent mixed-race, 0.4 percent "Yellow" (East Asian heritage) and 0.2 percent Indigenous. *Brasil : Pesquisa Nacional sobre Demografia e Saúde*, IBGE, 1996.
- <sup>15</sup> Racial mixing operates according to very specific rules and most often follows a logic of phenotype similarity. In Brazil, the rules of racial mixing are centered on minimizing distance: for example, it is common to hear a pejorative reference to "a fly in the milk" in comments on a couple with very distant phenotypes.
- <sup>16</sup> Table of color descriptions found in Lilia Moritz Schwarcz "Nem preto, nem branco, muito pelo contrário," *História da vida privada no Brasil, IV*, 1998, São Paulo, Companhia das letras, p. 227.

---

<sup>17</sup> Milton Barbosa “Movimento Negro Unificado: uma crônica inacabada do combate ao racismo,”

<http://tamboresfalantes.blogspot.fr/2016/07/movimento-negro-unificado-uma-cronica.html> ; retrieved 5 October 2016.

<sup>18</sup> “Arena tells Zumbi” is analyzed in Gérard Police, *La fête noire au Brésil*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1996, p. 170-172.

<sup>19</sup> Marilene Felinto, “Líder Zumbi pécou pelo radicalismo,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 11 November 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Agier, “Du Brésil des mélanges au Brésil des quotas,” in *Le nouveau Brésil de Lula*, Daniel van Eeuwen (ed.), Editions de l’Aube, 2006, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Fernando Henrique Cardoso served two presidential terms: 1995-1998 and 1999-2002.

<sup>22</sup> Presidência da República, Casa Civil, Subchefia para Assuntos Jurídicos: “Institui, no âmbito da Administração Pública Federal, o Programa Nacional de Ações Afirmativas e dá outras providências,” [[https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/decreto/2002/d4228.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto/2002/d4228.htm)], retrieved 15 September 2016.

<sup>23</sup> SEPPIR: Secretaria da Promoção da Igualdade Racial.

<sup>24</sup> According to the 2012 Law, all 59 federal universities and 38 federal institutions of education are required to implement a policy of quotas for new entrants. The policy combines social and racial criteria using the following method: 50 percent of the spaces are reserved for students from modest backgrounds from public institutions. Among these, a racial quota for Afro-descendants and indigenous people also applies based on their percentage in the population of the State.