

# THE JOY FUL DIC TA TOR SHIP

Intellectuals defend changes to save Bahia's most traditional celebration: Carnival

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As soon as shops close their doors in its central region, the Salvador of 2007 seems more like a city under curfew. Important thoroughfares like *avenida Sete de Setembro* and *rua Carlos Gomes* are quickly vacated, whereas bottlenecks form close to the areas where shopping centers are concentrated at the region of *avenida Paralela* giving rise to traffic as chaotic as the traffic jams in São Paulo. Everyone seems in a hurry to get home. While the city's subway development works have, at last, started once more, the city's inhabitants convey the impression of being uneasy, cornered and distressed.

Apparently, the leading motive is the day-to-day violence that confines dwellers of all ages and classes to their homes limiting their leisure to the shopping malls, which have sprung up like slot machines throughout the city. On the last Saturday of May, for example, while the city's beachfront was almost deserted at around 09:00 p.m., at Shopping Iguatemi, the city's biggest mall, it was almost impossible to obtain a ticket to watch a movie or to make it to an empty table at one of its countless snack bars or fast-food restaurants. There are those claiming that violence has become a public-calamity problem in the city, although the number of hold-ups cannot yet be considered on par with São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It was not by chance, that a survey on a local TV station included the question of how many times each interviewee had been held up.

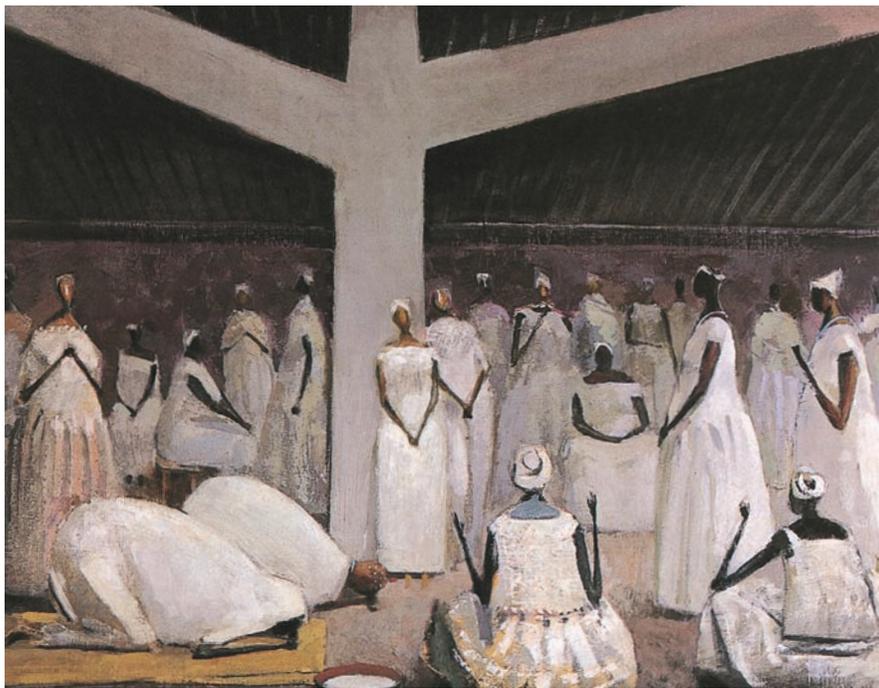
According to Professor Antonio Albino Rubim, from the Federal University of Bahia, the end of *carlismo*, brought on by the election of governor Jacques Wagner, has given rise to the expectation, at least, of the beginning of a break with what he call "the dictatorship of joy". The expression embodies several meanings. It is related, for example, to the supposedly innate flair typical of the Bahian citizen which has been intensely exploited by the tourism industry, by music and by Carnival for nearly 20 years. Or somewhere where television has the strength to impose the idea of a place of non-stop festivities and where it is possible to be happy forever. A condition symbolized by the lyrics of anthroposophical songs like "We are Carnival, we are reveling, we are the world of Carnival, we are Bahia".

It should be said that the idea of Salvador as the "Land of Happiness" – modernized to the "Land of Joy" – is not new. Back in the nineteen thirties, Ary Barroso availed himself of an expression to compose the classical *Na Baixa do Sapateiro*, whose lyrics glorified the beauties of the Bahian woman and that of the "Boa Terra" ("*The Good Land*") of Senhor do Bonfim (*Our Lord of Bonfim*). But what one is experiencing in 2007 is anchored on a more updated concept of "Bahianism", which the anthropologist Goli Guerreiro – author of the book *A trama dos tambores – A música afro-pop de Salvador (The Plot of the Drums – Salvador's Afro-Pop Music)* (Editora 34) – claims one may depict links between politicians, artists, members of religious orders, intellectuals, advertising executives and tourism managers which meets with acceptance among several social classes.

The dictatorship of frolicking, continues Rubim, might also be attributed to the close ties, which the carnivalesque and musical markets enjoy with the state and municipal powers by means of *Bahiatursa* and *Emtursa*, companies that promote tourism. A complicity, he claims, that would end up being connected with the figure of Antonio Carlos Magalhães, who, on reassuming the governorship of the state 1990, knew how to capitalize on the phenomenon of the Bahian music that was emerging at the time – and that would be pejoratively labeled as *axé-music* – in order to transform it into a product for tourists.

**Carnavalesque Blocks** - According to the researcher, at the same time that it provided artists, producers and block leaders with infrastructure and sponsorship the ACM (*Antonio Carlos Magalhães*) group gave them all ample freedom for managing the Carnival. As a result, he completes the concern of several groups with regard to the Workers' Party (PT) ascension to power. Wagner (*the current governor*) might kill two birds with one stone: weaken the grip of the *carlista* group on the city's cultural life and bring to an end the omission of public powers, which have permitted Carnival to be manipulated detrimentally to the tradition of the festivity.

Bahia, observes the anthropologist Antonio Risério, sells many myths that are not true. Author of *Uma história da cidade*



CARYBÉ, CANDOMBLÉ, 1983

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*da Bahia* (A history of the city of Bahia) (Versal), he cites several: one states that it is a sunny city, when in fact it rains torrentially throughout the year. “Caymmi fostered the idea that one does not work, however, the Bahian is very hardworking”, he observes. The vision of the joyous city, reckons Risério, contrasts with the names of ancient sites, such as *Largo dos Aflitos* (Park of the Distressed), *Praça da Piedade* (Park of Mercy) and *Ladeira do Desterro* (Slope of the Banished), among others. “One implanted a bizarre image, where nobody has the right to be sad, but you only have to talk to people, in order to encounter a lot of loneliness.”

The sociologist Paulo Miguez could not agree more. “In Salvador one is not allowed to be sad and if this never happens, the individual becomes deeply distressed, because sadness is a dimension of human life that should not be disregarded”, he observes. In his doctorate thesis “A organização da cultura na cidade da Bahia” (*The organization of culture in the city of Bahia*), Miguez presents revealing conclusions about Salvador’s musical and carnivalesque industry. “Depression, low spirits, all this, from time to time, enriches us. A population that is permanently happy becomes boring, given that it is not possible to construe happiness on a daily basis within a city of serious social inequalities.” According to his viewpoint, a “fan-

tasy island has been created, although, at times, such a circus comes to end, as on the occasion of the police-officer strike [in July 2001], when the population became hostage to the city’s criminals.”

To understand the complexities of Salvador and to defend a broad and urgent discussion with regard to the city’s way forward, has been an almost exclusive concern in Bahian academic circles in the past few years. Primarily at the Center of Multidisciplinary Studies in Culture/Cult, the Post Graduation Multidisciplinary Program in Culture and Post-Culture Society, at the UFBA. The seminar took place between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> May at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of Multidisciplinary Studies in Culture (Enecult), which brought together almost two hundred researchers from Brazil, Latin America and Europe.

**Carnival** - The researchers claimed that any planning for sustainable growth in Salvador must include the elaboration of a project for the re-evaluation of the role of the state and the municipality at Carnival, to save Bahia’s most important popular festivity. This implies, taking it out of the hands of small group of entrepreneurs, who for more than two decades have dictated the rules and granted privileges on behalf of what they call the “professionalization” of the “world’s most democratic” Carnival. In practice, however, this apparatus has privatized public spaces and strangled the traditional popular events or those associated with the afro culture.

Although one claims that Bahians are friendly, the fact is that the fear of violence has scared both tourists and inhabitants away from the festivities. Carnival 2007 reflected, according to Rubim, the crisis in the Carnival model and served as one more warning: the hotels were below maximum occupancy and it was possible to purchase fancy dresses (*abadás*) without difficulty and during the festivities. “One has to create ways forward, a market logic that is not submissive, predatory, in search of immediate gains, in order to give margin to innovation”, he recommends.

A respected communications theorist, Muniz Sodré, one of the lecturers at Enecult, point out that both the Bahian carnival and music must be rethought. “Popular culture has been carried out by Salvador’s media, primarily due to the strength of TV. However, it continues to have, on the part of the population, various appro-

priations and in different places.” For this reason, he believes that the concept of place is imperative to define diversity, “because it is not the place of the media, but that of small communities, from the hinterland, with their own form of expression”.

Bahia, observes Sodré, has already been the place where, all of a sudden, these differentiated symbolic expressions made it to the top, but soon became commercial. If, on the one hand, the music market gave rise to a certain identity that previously had been repressed, on the other hand it was immediately taken over by the entertainment industry and by the state as a tourism attraction. “I believe that, at the outset, this had a very important political role and the problem is to verify whether this radiation has already ended. Personally, I believe that this influence is on the wane, given that it has not concerned itself with continuity to a great extent.”

If it gave rise to the emergence of some groups, Carnival, he states, has great economic limitation and does not touch upon the issue of inequality. “The carnivalesque blocks, which had a sense of free-

dom, are today cordoned off.” In this manner, the concept one witnesses on the streets during the festivities, favors the idea of a Dionysian, free Carnival. The old ideology of patrimony predominates among entrepreneurs, artists, the state and the municipality in his opinion. “It is the ideology of illicitness, of favoritism. The country continues to be like this, and irrespective of how leftist the culture might be, one cannot infringe this logic, which establishes territories. It is stronger than any leftist or rightist ideology.”

**Injustice** - For the journalist and reveler Bob Fernandes, Carnival is just one more of the grave phenomena that has marked Bahia’s `evident` social injustice over five centuries of history. “A street carnival goer”, as he defines himself, he claims that it is not demagogy that proposes to discuss the festivity, but those that defend its continuity from the comfort provided by the boxes and official grandstands. “I hang out in the middle of the people and am aware that to meddle in the scheme is not going to solve Bahia’s apartheid problem, but

it may signal the opinion of the public authority in this regard. If not, at least expand the number of `owners` of this business.”

The first step, he suggests, is to do away with the cordons. “The cordon is the bludgeon, it is the sale of public space and the imposition of prejudice and segregation.” Fernandes believes that the future of the festival is going to depend on the capacity of the new administration to impose, to discuss and to carry out some kind of a project for the city. “Salvador is the jewel in the crown and it is not possible to refrain from an in-depth debate before the forthcoming year’s Carnival. Given its nature as a great popular festivity, a more enduring and fair policy should be established.”

The most serious issue in his opinion, resides in the power that the blocks have established over the organization of the festivity. “It is a Carnival of persecution, with an objective limited strictly to half a dozen men, boys and girls. Persons that do well in a scheme invented as a gigantic lie created to sell the event: that of Salvador welcoming a million tourists in five



CARYBÉ. THE BALLERINAS. 1961

days.” How can this be possible, he asks, if the city has only 27 thousand hotel beds? “There are no houses or apartments for rent to accommodate such an amount of people.” According to his estimates, if 30 blocks should parade at the same time with approximately 90 thousand dancers, the number of people on the street could not be more than 500 thousand.

Bob Fernandes identifies serious problems of a cultural and political nature that might turn the Bahian capital into a place unfit for living, in the medium term. The symptoms are already present in the chaotic traffic in the city’s main thoroughfares, as a result of the concessions granted to shopping malls and deluxe-condominium construction companies. “Currently and at any cost, they are intent on increasing the beachfront buildings to turn it into a modern-day Copacabana, damaging the environment and the quality-of-life which will affect the whole city.” In addition, he emphasizes his concern with regard to a certain “moral cowardice” on the part of the population that witnesses the taking over of public property without reacting.

“The Bahian adores to enter the fray on his own, but has shown himself incapable of reacting collectively against the actions of these small groups that do as they please in the city”, he provokes.

**Challenges** - The secretary of culture Márcio Meirelles, five months in office, is aware of the challenges and of the reforms he must carry out. One of the renovators of the Bahian theater during the past two decades, he speaks out cautiously with regard to the challenges facing him. Among his priorities is the decentralization of culture towards the hinterland, in order to preserve or revive rich traditions threatened by the steamroller which the city’s music and carnival have become.

Meirelles laughs prior to speaking about the hornet’s nest, into which he intends to put his hand: the exchange of favors among Bahiatursa and Carnival entrepreneurs and artists. “When there is no longer a relationship with a political leader or colonel, things have to change.” According to him, “there are many people stamping their feet because they are los-

ing their privileges. It is that old story: he, who feels threatened, reacts. And this is what we are beginning to witness: the attack of the privileged”.

Another aspect of the Bahian culture that has awakened interest in the academy is the importance of Afro-Brazilian music, which left the ghetto to become successful on radio and on TV and to animate carnival during the eighties. Furthermore, it brought on deep transformations, such as the break up of the barriers of prejudice and re-locating the blacks to their own space in a city where 70% of the population is of African origin. This is the positive side of a predatory industry, punctuated by equivocity, as Rubim explains.

Miguez emphasizes that the cutthroat competition for Carnival-goers had a positive aspect: it led to the noncompliance with racial and beauty parameters. “Currently, I am convinced, the screening of carnival-goers gives priority to the economic issue.” Even the plan for setting up an agenda for off-season carnivals throughout the year – the *micaretas* –, which fill up the timetables of carniva-



CARYBÉ. CHARREL FISHING, 1976

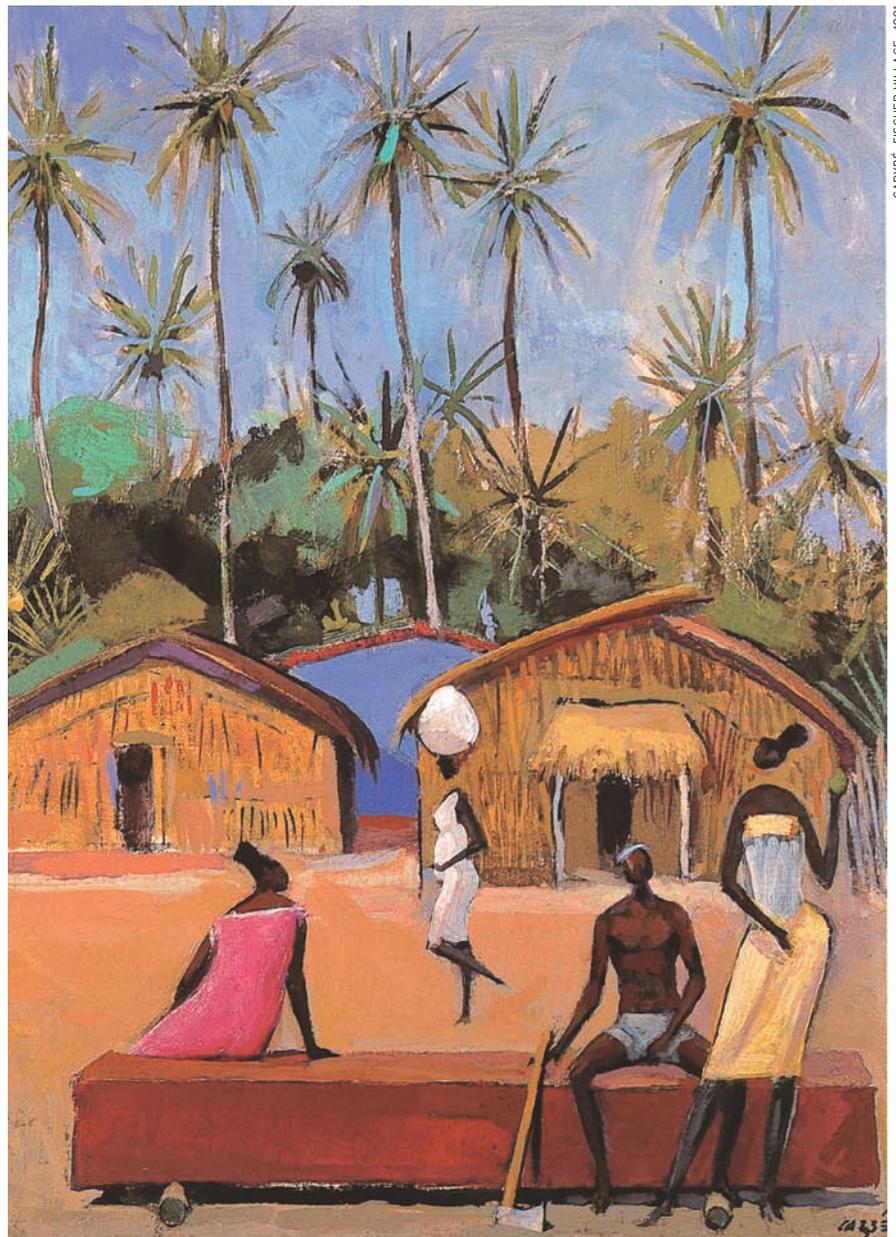
lesque blocks and artists, seems vulnerable in its lack of innovation.

Rubim points to the university proper as responsible, to a certain extent, for the onset of the afro culture valuation, such as the creation of the Center for Afro-Oriental Studies (Ceao) in the 1960 decade. Another relevant aspect, he emphasizes was the industrialization of the *Recôncavo* with the creation of the Camaçari petrochemical complex and the Aratu Industrial Complex in the seventies, which led to the appearance of black groups more conscious of their rights and of the importance of their culture, with new needs and in tune with the American Black Power movement and with black music, primarily reggae. This awakening brought forth the *Ilê Aiê* afro block, conscientiously recalling the value of the black in Bahia.

**Caetano Veloso** - The third element was the engagement of a group of composers coming from the middle class in the 1970 decade and led by Antonio Risério, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. The latter only discovered the strength of black culture after his experience as an exile and with his engagement in the Sons of Gandhi block. They would sow the seed of what was to become axé-music.

Risério agrees with Rubim and takes over his role in the story. He recounts that there was a clear political investment for what happened in Bahia to “a great black turnaround, with the population being treated respectfully, “given that what was interesting in the local culture was of black origin”. This effort became apparent, for example, in the recording of *Beleza Pura*, by Caetano; and in the *afoxé* beat, that Moraes Moreira managed to extract from his guitar. “We played a few notes and helped transform black culture into a hegemonic ideology.” The anthropologist recalled that with Caetano he would attend various events linked to black music promoted by blocks, such as Badauê, Ilê Aiê e Zamzimbá, among others.

To curious observers, the expectation remains of how the ritual of praising the politicians by a number of important singers will take place. ■



CARYBÉ, FISCHER VILLAGE - 1981

*The images illustrating this article are reproductions of the book O capeta Carybé, published by Berlendis & Vertecchia Editores Ltda.*