

Afro-Brazilians: Time for Recognition

It is 4 p.m. on a warm winter's afternoon in the centre of São Paulo. In a classroom on the fourteenth floor at 365 Rua São Bento, Alex Ratts, an Afro-Brazilian architect and doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the University of São Paulo, is speaking about architecture to a group of 21 students, 12 girls and 9 boys. All of them are Afro-Brazilians who come from poor neighborhoods around São Paulo. Mr Ratts speaks, the students raise their hands to ask questions, and a dialogue ensues. But this is no ordinary class. It is one of the many supplementary activities of Generation XXI (Geração XXI), which aim to prepare Afro-American youth for the next millennium.

This innovative affirmative action programme, brings together the four pillars of civil society: the local community, the public sector, a non-governmental organization and the private sector. These are the very institutions which can make a difference in people's lives. Generation XXI relies on the participation of teachers, families and schools from the community, the wisdom of the social movement through the NGO Geledés, the support of the national government represented by the Fundação Palmares, and the expertise and financial backing of the private firm, BankBoston.

This partnership, which has won a number of social service awards, also represents hope for the future. Of all the population groups in Brazil, Afro-Brazilian children need the most support. They are the children who suffer the most discrimination in school and in public places. Many Afro-Brazilian teenagers drop out of school and work to help support their families. They have the lowest rates of literacy and are most likely to end up unemployed or in low-paid jobs despite their capacity and individual motivation.

'In a country such as Brazil, selecting only 21 students was difficult', says director of the project, Maria Aparecida da Silva, from Geledés, but 'it will hopefully serve as a pilot programme for the future'.

The participants, who are between 13 and 15 years old and come from low-income families, were selected from all of the city with the help of teachers, and through a series of interviews. All of them have excellent academic records and demonstrated a strong desire to participate.

Generation XXI takes a holistic approach to each student's education, providing families with financial assistance so that their children will be able to dedicate themselves to their studies full time. But the difference is not only financial.

Paula Braz da Silva and Richele Manoel, both 14 years old, have already seen changes in their lives. Paula, who comes from the neighborhood of Campo Limpo, recognizes that she is fortunate to have been chosen for the programme and knows that because of it her dream of becoming a lawyer will be achievable. Richele, from the neighborhood of Belem, is just as confident. Her participation in the programme has already motivated her mother to complete her degree in nursing.

In a country which has historically denigrated the black experience, to hear Afro-Brazilian children speak about their dreams and aspirations attests to the power of such programmes. BankBoston has pledged support for nine years. Hopefully, other companies will follow suit.

Profile

One of the central challenges of pluralistic societies, and a dominant theme in the development of the modern nation-state is the issue of minority representation. In the second half of this century, three societies have generated intense interest with regard to the position of their black people: the United States, South Africa and Brazil. Studies of these societies have enabled policy makers and human rights activists to compare how different nation-states represent the economic, political and cultural interests of their ethnic minorities. Since the end of the Second World War, significant changes have affected black people in all three countries. In the 1960s, civil rights activists in the United States helped break down segregation and paved the way for integration of Afro-Americans into US society. In the last decade of the twentieth century, South Africans have dismantled apartheid, and black people have gained considerable economic and political control in that country. Brazil has been affected by changes in both the United States and South Africa. Benefiting from global and national changes, in 1988 Brazil created an impressive Constitution which safeguards the civil and human rights of all its citizens, but still black Brazilians have gained little economic or political control in their communities. Only now, on the cusp of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Portuguese to Brazil, are there signs of change.

In examining the historic and current position of Afro-Brazilians in Brazilian society, it is important to bear in mind the central paradox, that Africans were able to influence and shape Brazilian culture so profoundly yet still remain politically and economically disenfranchised after 500 years. Thinking about four questions sheds light on this paradox: (1) who are the Afro-Brazilians and how have they contributed to the continued development of Brazilian society?; (2) how have they been marginalized (and continue to be marginalized) from mainstream Brazilian society?; (3) what have Afro-Brazilians and their allies done to combat their disenfranchisement?; and (4) what prospects do Afro-Brazilians have for the future? In considering these questions, we are able to place the Afro-Brazilian struggle within the context of Brazilian national economic and political developments since 1500.

Brazil, the largest country in Latin America, is an immense territory of approximately 8.5 square kilometres, divided into 26 distinct states and a federal district. Brazil's economy, from the arrival of the Portuguese, depended first on indigenous slave labour, then on enslaved Africans uprooted from the coast of west and southwest Africa. The intermingling of indigenous people, Europeans and Africans engendered a social hierarchy in which skin pigmentation became an important factor. Thus this report begins with a discussion of race in Brazil and defines who Afro-Brazilians are, while explaining the contributions that they have made to Brazilian society throughout history.

Africans adapted themselves to Portuguese colonial society, but many also resisted, and

that resistance continues to be a source of inspiration to modern activists who challenge official policies and the widespread belief that there are no racial problems in Brazil. Looking at the status of civil rights in six distinct historical epochs - (1) slavery (1822-88); (2) post-abolition (1888-1930); (3) Second Republic: the Vargas years (1930-44); (4) transitional democracy (1944-64); (5) military dictatorship (1964-79); (6) political opening (1979-85) - helps us to understand the social, political and cultural dynamics which shape civil and racial discourses today. These six epochs forged distinct visions of the Brazilian reality and a distinct national discourse within which the rhetoric of civil rights and racial consciousness emerged.

In the absence of a democratic civil society (because of the monarchy, the Vargas dictatorship and the military dictatorship), official channels of discourse were often closed to Afro-Brazilians as well as to other sectors of civil society. Furthermore, precarious economic conditions have prevented access and continue to prevent access of more than three-quarters of the population to economic and cultural opportunities, and consequently the law. A series of factors, including ignorance of civil rights, lack of education, misinformation about the law and general disenfranchisement inherited from the patriarchal and racist colonial tradition, render politics and activities in the public domain off limits to most Brazilians, but particularly to Afro-Brazilians and the indigenous peoples.

The political opening of the early 1980s has allowed activists and researchers to intensify their work. The majority of Afro-Brazilians are still economically marginalized and politically disenfranchised, however, and can be found at the bottom in relation to all social and economic indicators.

In the 1990 census report the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics (IBGE) used five basic categories for colour or race: White, Black, Yellow, Indigenous and Parda. Parda translates literally as 'brown', but is, by and large, synonymous with afro-mestiço, although it may contain a percentage of indio-mestiços with no African roots. The racial breakdown of a total population of 146,815,796 inhabitants was as follows: 75,704,927 White; 7,335,136 Black; 62,316,064 Parda; 630,656 Yellow; 294,135 Indigenous; and 534,878 Not Declared. According to these statistics, Afro-Brazilians represent a total of 47 per cent of the population, although this group is not monolithic.

Pioneering researchers such as Florestan Fernandes and Octávio Ianni were instrumental in exposing Brazilian racial problems, and important works such as Anani Dzidzienyo's MRG report on Afro-Brazilians in 1979, provided much-needed information for Brazilians in the 1960s and 1970s respectively. Recent scholarship continues to keep a critical focus on Brazilian race relations. Nonetheless, the myth of racial democracy and the idea of 'whitening' remain strong, despite empirical data indicating that Afro-Brazilians are discriminated against in almost every sector of Brazilian society. Many visitors to Brazil do not perceive these inequalities since in public spaces, people of different social classes and races intermingle with ease. Still, colonial stereotypes of black people continue to exist, and Brazilian society tends to dismiss many Afro-Brazilian success stories as exceptions. Stereotypes, in the long run, are used to encourage individuals to live down to pre-imposed static images of groups.

One of the few forums where African themes were treated nationally was Brazil's cinema. Cinema novo, a politically orientated cinema of the 1960s, provided some of the first images of Afro-Brazilian customs. Many of the images were stereotypical and/or one-dimensional, however. Afro-Brazilian women, for example, are often stereotyped as promiscuous or erotic, thus relegating many of them to certain professions, such as the mulatas of carnival and nightclubs the world over. Inter-racial sexual relations, which Brazilians often refer to as a measure of the country's social tolerance, often mask the power relations which keep Afro-Brazilians in inferior political, economic and social positions.

The percentage of Afro-Brazilians in the federal, state and local branches of government has been small traditionally, although this may be beginning to change. In 1987, Benedita da Silva from the state of Rio de Janeiro, became the first black woman ever to be elected to Congress, but she remains an anomaly. The municipal elections of the city of Salvador in the state of Bahia, long considered the centre of African culture in Brazil, provide several important insights into the role of race on the municipal level. Afro-Brazilian political candidates have made gains, but there is still a long way to go.

Statistics on literacy, education and employment do not give grounds for optimism. In 1988, the IBGE reported that, as a general rule black people earn less, live in poorer conditions and die earlier than white people. That remains true today. Afro-Brazilians have a 30 per cent higher infant mortality rate and are 50 per cent more likely to leave school without learning how to read. In the Northeast, the infant mortality for Afro-Brazilians is as high as 96.3 per 1,000 births, compared to 68 for white people.

Few Afro-Brazilians own land in the countryside. Agrarian reform remains a chronic problem today, but particularly in the North, the Northeast and the South of Brazil. Afro-Brazilians make up a substantial percentage of landless peasants, struggling for lands, although this is not always framed within racial terms. A constitutional law brings some hope for some Afro-Brazilians, however. Residents of historic *quilombos*, the colonial escaped-slave communities, have begun to obtain titles to land which they have occupied for decades. The Fundação Palmares, the organ responsible for certifying the modern-day *quilombos*, facilitates the acquisition of titles, but its work is a long way from being completed.

In the cities, Afro-Brazilians encounter many challenges as well. In addition to low employment rates, relations with the police authorities continue to be problematic. A 1997 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) report recommended widespread reforms of the state police forces. Police officers were responsible for an average of 20 deaths a month in 1996 alone, and in poor Afro-Brazilian communities, police are reportedly responsible for one-third of the deaths. The police's tough rhetoric against crime, which is often supported by the elite and middle classes, means that suspects, innocent or guilty, often have no rights and are abused by officers. Because of stereotypes of Afro-Brazilians in general, and black men in particular, black men are more likely to be arrested as suspects for violent and non-violent crimes than any other population group. In the past seven years, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, has indicted more than 500 police officers for a number of

abuses.

On the positive side, compared to many other nations, Brazil has an excellent record on agreeing to instruments that guarantee human rights within its territory, having signed most of the conventions and treaties in the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS), the two major international organizations of which it is a part. A vigilant and ever growing black movement is responsible for many of these changes. Civil rights activism has expanded and can be divided into three major areas; government entities and lobbies, national grassroots organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and independent social, political and cultural entities.

Outside government there are relatively few national organizations that are able to overcome the tremendous obstacles inhibiting grassroots resistance across state lines, although some, like the Conselho Nacional de Entidades Negras (National Council of Black Entities/Societies, or CONEN) have succeeded in bringing together groups from all over the country to discuss ways to pursue mutual support and to advance the black movement's agenda on a national scale. The group '500 Anos de Resistência Negra, Indígena e Popular' is an important national response to the national celebrations planned to commemorate the arrival of Cabral in Brazil 500 years ago, bringing together black, indigenous, popular and social justice groups. Musical groups such as Ilê Ayê and Olodum from the state of Bahia also constitute important entities which have politicized Brazilian popular culture on a scale often greater than local or state-based organizations, since their music reaches a wider audience. Thus the report also examines the role of music as a vehicle for consciousness and education.

Special attention is given to young people and education. Poverty, poor education and lack of role models all contribute to the many problems facing Afro-Brazilian children and adolescents. Over the past decade, various human rights organizations have protested against the torture, abuse and murder of children, particularly in urban areas. According to the Public Ministry, for example, between 1988 and 1991, 5,644 youngsters between the ages of 5 and 17 were victims of violent deaths. Of all the homicides of minors from 1988 to 1990, 82 per cent were black boys. New national curriculum programmes which teach tolerance and appreciation of diversity and new laws that protect human rights have already been established, but they need to be implemented with rigour.

Education of Brazilian youth is important for the construction of a better future, but education alone is not enough. A series of structural reforms are needed, this could give a role for activists and aid agencies both in and outside of Brazil.

Recommendations

1. The Brazilian government should address structural inequalities by prioritizing special measures to facilitate the full participation of minority and indigenous groups in all aspects of political, economic social and cultural life.
2. The Brazilian government should urgently enforce the provisions of the 1988 Constitution and the extensive complementary legislation for the protection of human

rights.

3. The Brazilian government should address the fundamental human rights of its many hundreds of thousands of street children, the majority of whom are Afro-Brazilian.

4. The Brazilian government should ensure equality of access and greater equality of outcome in the education system through special provision in the form of scholarships and special education programmes.

5. The Brazilian government and media should prioritize the elimination of inaccurate and stereotypical coverage of Afro-Brazilians and their culture.

6. The Brazilian government should immediately implement the recommendations of the National Programme for Human Rights for the promotion of affirmative action initiatives.

7. Transnational corporations investing in Brazil should ensure that their activities promote wider opportunity and greater equality of outcomes; intergovernmental bodies such as the UN and the OAS should hold corporations accountable for the impact of their actions and international financial institutions should support projects based on genuine consultation and impacting favourably on Afro-Brazilians and other marginalized communities.

8. International NGOs should support Brazilian NGOs in consolidating strategies to raise and address issues of racism in international forums.

This Profile is a summary of the MRG Report AFRO-BRAZILIANS: TIME FOR RECOGNITION which is available to order on the Publications page