

## THE JADED HERITAGE: NIGERIA'S BRAZILIAN CONNECTION

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When, in 1977, a delegation from Brazil arrived in the Nigerian capital for the Second World and African Festival of Arts and Culture, it aroused in some people a feeling which distinguished it from other black groups of the Diaspora. While those from the United States, Haiti, the West Indies and other places with black populations settled to the joys of the great reunion, some members of the Brazilian contingent were eager to rediscover significant aspects of Yoruba influence on their culture. This issue is often overlooked perhaps in order not to recall a sad reminder of a rather inglorious connection. But, as Pierre Verger pointed out, the cultural traits of the former slaves managed to survive in the religious syncretism of contemporary Brazil<sup>1</sup>.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Brazilian elements in Lagos had become a major economic force as "commercial intermediaries between the European colonial firms and the native producers"<sup>2</sup>. They

1 "Na Bahia, encontram-se vestígios da cultura 'Nagô-loruba do Golfo de Benim, ainda nos dias presentes". VERGER, Pierre, *O fumo da Bahia e o tráfico dos escravos do Golfo de Benim*. Bahia, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Publicações do Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais, nº 6, 1966, p. 5. Verger's views on the Nagô (or Lucumi as they are called in Cuba) also explain the nature of Brazil's seemingly dual allegiance to orthodox Catholicism and Yoruba religious values. See also, by Pierre Verger, *Dieux d'Afrique: culte des Orishas et Vodouns à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves en Afrique et à Bahia*, Paris, Hartmann, 1954.

2 MARAFATTO, Massimo. *Nigerian Brazilian Houses*, Lagos, Instituto Italiano di Cultura, 1983. p. 26.

were an economic force with high hopes of playing an important role in politics in consonance with their position in the socio-economic reality of Lagos. This study seeks to examine how such a promising group as the Brazilians, freed slaves who were able to begin afresh so well, finished so poorly that today, their many achievements only feature in the nostalgic recollections of some families located in central Lagos. It is quite possible that things would have been different if, like the other Brazilians who settled on the west coast towns of Porto Novo and Ouidah among others, those in Lagos had chosen to be allies of the dominant colonial power. As it is, a lot happened which changed the pattern of events that were to relegate the once-flourishing Brazilians to their position in present-day Nigeria.

The arrival of Africans in Brazil from the second part of the sixteenth century marked the inception of the heavy traffic in Negro slaves. Whereas early contact with the Portuguese was very positive in view of the excellent relations existing between the oba of Benin and the King of Portugal<sup>3</sup>, the Atlantic Slave Trade was to change the situation with the attendant disastrous consequences. Stories abound of the slaves' living conditions on the plantations and the type of work imposed on them. Slavery accounts naturally bring to mind vivid descriptions of extreme forms of degradation, the many contradictions in the approaches to the question of slavery as well as the slaves' right to some decent existence. The harshness of the conditions naturally led to resistance in the form of slave revolts which, at a stage, threatened the very basis of the society and coincided with abolitionist efforts in the first part of the nineteenth century. After the successful uprising led by Toussaint Louverture which resulted in the republic of Haiti in 1804, the tendency to revolt became more manifest among the slave population in Brazil. The Malé War of 1835 was a rare example of two equally intransigent and exclusive religions – Islam and traditional African animism – to form an alliance against the oppression of the slave masters.

If the revolts never really succeeded, they were however the beginning of 'republics', colonies of runaway slaves whom the French called 'esclaves marrons'. Above all, these uprisings hastened the emancipation process for, according to Verger<sup>4</sup>, "there was emancipation

by manumission, self-purchase and the disquieting incidence of almost-white creole slaves". As this idea gained ground, there were manumission societies organized by the freed slaves. But after the purchase of freedom, the prospects were quite bleak because of the policy of removing blacks from the plantations in favour of white immigrants under the new system. Landless and totally dispossessed, the business of survival for most slaves became a most difficult task. In the circumstance, the idea of returning to Africa became a possibility to be accorded serious attention.

Those freed slaves who returned to Africa were in a position similar to that of the American slaves settled in Monrovia and the freed Brazil-bound slaves landed by the British in Freetown. One thing common to the freed slaves was the fact that most had nothing else apart from the will to survive. The slaves from Brazil, like their American counterparts had been able to acquire some artisan skills and, in some cases, a reasonable ability to read and write. They settled along the Slave Coast from Ouidah to Lagos and began to play a major role in the socio-cultural life of their new abode. But while those in Porto Novo, Ouidah and other parts of present-day Togo and Benin continue to flourish just like the freed slaves who ruled Liberia till 1980, the Brazilians in Lagos have lost a fair proportion of their wealth and importance in rather unfortunate circumstances which this study seeks to explain if not justify. This is because, unlike the flamboyant Brazilian life style at the turn of this century, what remains today is the faded Brazilian architecture as well as Portuguese words now part and parcel of the Yoruba spoken in Lagos<sup>5</sup>.

Many factors indicated Lagos as a major choice for the returnees. Lagos itself derived its name from the Portuguese term *lago* (plural *lagos*) meaning lake perhaps on account of the creeks around the island noticed by the first Portuguese to reach the area. Known as Onim to the slave-ship captains, Lagos however retained its native name, Eko. A small landing point which later graduated into a slaving port, Lagos was to play various roles until the British declaration of the protectorate in 1861. In spite of its chequered history, Lagos indeed bore traces of the impact of the Portuguese and, later on, the Brazilians.

3 "1550. Oba Benin gun si Eko nigbatl o nti Portugal bo". (The King of Benin landed in Lagos on his way back from Portugal). DELANO, Isaac, *Itan Eko*, London, Evans Brothers Limited, 1962, p. 14.

4 VERGER, Pierre, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia from the 17th to the 19th century*, Translated from French by Evelyn Ashford, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1976, p. 455.

5 A number of words in the Yoruba spoken in Nigeria today are of Portuguese origin as brought by the Brazilians. *Feijao* (beans) gave rise to *frejon*, the sweetened beans cooked at Easter. There is also *imoyo* from *molho* (soup). Also, the women in Bahia still sell *akaraje* just like the Yoruba women sell *akara*. There are, in addition to Lagos, towns on the former Slave Coast such as *Escravos* and *Forcados*.

Those who welcomed the first Portuguese to Lagos saw in it the logical extension of the friendship between the Oba of Benin, suzerain over Lagos and his Portuguese counterpart whom he visited around 1550<sup>6</sup>. Such was their influence that today, the Roman Catholic religion introduced by the Portuguese is referred to, in Yoruba, as *ijo aguda*, a transformation of the statement of intention of the first priests: *vamos ajudar*, or at least something to that effect. It is interesting to note that this able forerunner of the eventual commercial enterprise was able to blend with the local language. The later Christian denominations did not enjoy such assimilation with the result that the Anglican and Methodist churches as simply called *ijo Methodist* and *ijo Anglican*.

At the height of the triangular slave trade between Europe, Africa and the New World, the Brazilian dimension was soon to supercede whatever limits set by the Portuguese initiators. Although figures are far from being accurate, it is certain that whole villages and large sections of tribal groups were carted off to Brazil and other parts of America. Such displacements, if initially useful for the purpose of settling slaves in their new environment, also ensured homogeneity and a common tongue and religion, factors which later proved to be instrumental to organized uprisings. As said earlier, such revolts frightened the white population and hastened the process of manumission.

In the harsh conditions of the plantations, the concentration of tribal groupings in certain areas made it possible to maintain strong religious and cultural links with Africa. It was left however to the hardy slaves to arouse the spirit of revolt especially after the events of Haiti where the religious factor accounted for the extraordinary bravery of the insurgents. It is a wonder that the slaves in Brazil who, at the start of the nineteenth century, greatly outnumbered the white masters, never envisaged a 'Haitian solution'. One must remember though that plots often leaked through some frightened or devoted slave. In any case, the policy of 'branqueamento' as well as the unfavourable situation of the emancipated slaves finally convinced many of the need to 'return home'.

For most, homecoming was a unique experience in many respects. It meant an end to the life on the plantations and the endless affronts to their dignity. There was also the opportunity to regain some form of respect among people of their own colour. Thus, the fear of repeating the harrowing crossing did not deter many among whom were those born in captivity and the others called 'passengers', "Africans who had been

transported twice, the first time in ships which took them 'to receive an education in Brazil' and the second when they returned to the fatherland that had sold them"<sup>7</sup>.

Though the crossing was made in a different psychological condition, the ships were very much the same former slave ships now converted through British efforts to 'legitimate trade'. Some of the returnees had learnt a manual trade in Brazil and were, in particular, masons and carpenters. They soon conquered a sizeable portion of this 'specialized' sector of the island. Notable among the masons was Lazaro Borges da Silva who was responsible for the masonry of the first Holy Cross Cathedral in 1879. Apart from these skills, those returnees who could read and write became letter-writers and some even joined the colonial administration as civil-servants<sup>8</sup>. Success on the part of the returnees hinged mainly on their ability to begin from virtually nothing and still build an enviable situation in little time. In spite of their situation of latecomers to Lagos, they soon settled on virgin land away from the shoreline. The result is that today, an area in central Lagos spreading from Campos Square is appropriately called the Brazilian quarters.

As great artisans, the Brazilians totally revolutionized the concept of building in Lagos and eventually in the hinterland. The use of stone led to such impressive realizations as the cathedral already mentioned, the old Lagos Central Mosque and, in particular, João Esan da Rocha's house, the Casa da Agua, a fine piece of art now classified as a national monument. Above all, the Brazilians' great fortunes made their names synonymous with wealth, as was the case with da Rocha till as late as the 1950s. At the turn of the century, the Brazilians were already a socio-economic force which arbitrated the rules of the society at the time.

It is however most intriguing to know how things suddenly took a turn for the worse among such a resourceful group. The Brazilians had been able to attain a certain measure of sophistication equal if not superior to that of the local British residents. This they went on to demonstrate through ostentatious spending as the ir parties dazzled the local people and aroused the envy and suspicion of the British who deeply resented such shows by those they considered inferior to them. Apart from

6 DELANO, Isaac, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

7 VERGER, Pierre, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia*, p. 535.

8 "Muito cumulavam um officio artesanal e comercial com uma função publica", DA CUNHA, Manuela, 'Brasileiros nagôs em Lagos nel seculo XIX, *Cultura Brasileira*, Ano 6, 23, out/dez 1976, p. 32.

establishing a coloured bourgeoisie which rivalled the colonial society<sup>9</sup>, the Brazilians remained very faithful to the Brazilian life-style of flamboyant spending. It is said that when paper money was first introduced to the colony, some profligates proceeded to light them as cigars! Indeed, such was their economic power that the Brazilians came to regard themselves as a caste which needed to close ranks in order to preserve their pedigree. Having found a rallying point in the Roman Catholic religion<sup>10</sup>, they insisted on practicing endogamy, requesting that prospective spouses of their children be converts to the Catholic faith. All this tallied with their faithfulness to the Luso-Brazilian traditions, a situation which ultimately alienated them from the British rulers of Lagos.

In the face of such arrogant opposition from a group of people who, in spite of everything, remained black and thus subject to the same laws as were applied to 'natives', the British authorities could not possibly see eye to eye with the Brazilians. There arose a suspicion of these new Africans who, unlike the Saro (Sierra Leone) group, showed little inclination to be part of the British venture. They were therefore removed from the list of possible successors. In addition, the Brazilians' sustained links with the Portuguese language and the Roman Catholic faith directed from the French colonies coupled with the reluctance to adopt English as their lingua franca showed that they cared little for the British efforts. Instead, there was nostalgia for Bahia 'de todos os santos' as a new form of snobbishness which made them feel superior to the indigenes. Consequently, the British administration kept an unfavourable prejudice towards Brazil and the Brazilians and began to consider other groups in the colony. Decline was thus inevitable and actually hastened the demise of this important group of freed slaves who settled on the west coast of Africa.

This state of things would have been quite unnecessary since, as descendants of Africans, particularly of the Yoruba group or Nago as they were called, resettlement was easy enough as was proved by their initial successes. Some even traced their relations and the majority could easily

have chosen to forget the initial crime of selling their forebears into slavery. There were other advantages too: for example, the ability to read and write could have made it easier for them to learn English and Yoruba to their advantage as the Asians have shown in recent times.

But all these ideas never came to be because of the generally negative attitude of the returnees towards the natives who in turn despised those who, forgot they had been sold in the first place! In spite of their evident Negro origins, the Brazilians insisted on remaining apart and maintaining the language and tradition imposed on them in bondage. So attached were the returnees to the Portuguese language that, in 1882, the British decided on the Education Ordinance as a means of imposing the English language as the language of the colony. To this was the added fact of their active endogamy which ruled out contacts with non-Catholic and consequently non-Brazilian groups. The result was the loss of the vitality for survival, the type only achieved through what Léopold Senghor calls "métissage culturel".

Distrusted by the British who were least inclined to have as partners a group so attached to the civilization of their rivals, the Brazilians were also, like most educated or at least culturally advantaged black men, most scornful of the people they met on arrival. By refusing to embrace the more relevant aspects of the British system which was to operate in Nigeria, they created a gap in their artistic and economic fortunes with the attendant political consequences. Meanwhile, the rest of the Protectorate, especially the Egba of Abeokuta, went on to take notable firsts in choice English professions such as law and medicine, a prelude to their entrenchment in the Nigerian pre-independence public service.

Today, the old "bairro brasileiro" in Lagos is a collection of augustly derelict houses, a sad reminder of a once-flourishing group. The notable exception is the Casa da Agua with its classic lines and bold features. But of its original owner's colossal fortune and many others like it, there is little to recall the glory of the group which bested the British and other inhabitants of Lagos in elegance and class. However, the names are still as Brazilian as ever: Soares, Pinheiro, da Costa, da Rocha, Vera Cruz.... just as in present-day Togo and Benin where there are noteworthy families like da Silva, Medeiros, d'Almeida and, of course, Olympio, the family of the assassinated Togolese president.

It is perhaps pertinent to explain the reverse fortunes of the other Brazilians who chose places like Ouidah, Porto Novo and a few other towns along the west coast. Unlike the Lagos Brazilians, they had the initial advantage of the Roman Catholic background common to both the French and the Portuguese-speaking Brazilians. There was also the common

9 "The pattern of their social life was an amalgam of Brazilian and Yoruba customs although the latter predominated. Consul Campbell in the 1850s states that they were far more culturally assimilable to the indigenes than the Sierra Leonians...". COLE, Patrick, 'Lagos Society in the Nineteenth Century', in A. Adenibigbe (Ed.), *Lagos: The Development of an African City*, London, Longman, 1975, p. 46. There was also a Brazilian Dramatic Society founded in 1882 and a Lagos Cricket Club.

10 "Os Brasileiros de Lagos encontram no Catholicismo um aglutinador eficiente". DA CUNHA, Manuela, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

linguistic aspect of their Latin background coupled with the history of close contacts between France, Portugal and consequently Brazil. This made things less arduous for the French to welcome them and actually place them in some sort of middle-class situation<sup>11</sup>. The Brazilians in these areas remained contented with this situation and never sought to outdo or even contest the hegemony of the colonial masters. From positive allies, they then moved into positions of auxiliaries who naturally took over the major role in the public service after the official departure of the colonizers.

Recent attempts to revive Nigeria's Brazilian heritage have been faced with problems caused by the hiatus in relations with Brazil. One must not forget that those who chose to depart never really hoped to return to Bahia or indeed any other part of Brazil. Unwanted and disillusioned with the freedom obtained, they certainly found it more expedient, at least when leaving, to forget the country rather than face the emergent forms of racial discrimination and depravation. Of the number that refused to leave, few ever bothered to find out what happened to the returnees. Moreover, as the Brazilian descendants are now Nigerians in every sense of the term through marriage with the rest of the population, the idea of some journey to the roots destined to find lost cousins seems an exercise in futility. There still remains however the Brazilian Descendants Union which seeks to effect some form of linkage through cultural shows and other festivals which recall the Brazilian reality.

It is no longer relevant to imagine what may have been the fortunes of the Lagos Brazilians had they succeeded in fostering better relations with the British rulers and the larger native society. Although it is on record that some returnees were able to trace their people on arrival and actually went to settle in the interior, the majority remained in Lagos to dominate the artisan skills. If many were not inclined to mix, their stance will be understandable as this reflected the usual distinctions even on the plantations among the slaves. The *escravos da casa* naturally felt superior to the field slaves who did the heavier and dirtier work. In the struggle for freedom, the latter were the first to strike since they had nothing to lose but their lives. But when emancipation came with the invitation to leave, the field slaves could hardly afford to return. The more willing candidates consisted of those who had acquired some skill or the other.

Of the fabled Brazilian opulence in the earlier part of the century, what is left today only fuels folkloric nostalgia as the present generation has learnt to live with the Nigerian reality of which it is an integral part. The loss of a great opportunity to have a decisive role to play in the emergent nation leaves the major lesson for all of the need to interact with the larger community as a means of safeguarding the future. This stops the process of sclerosis which the absence of social intercourse is bound to provoke. Above all, the story of the Brazilians is just one of the many facets of Nigerian history which need to be told in full.

11 VERGER, Pierre quotes, in *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia*, p. 543, the *Journal Officiel* which said: "The mention *Monsieur* is to put before the names of Frenchmen, *le sieur* before that of Brazilians and *le nommé* before that of natives".