

9 The New Politics of Black Culture in Bahia, Brazil

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Race relations in Bahia, Brazil, confront ethnic studies with a paradox. On the one hand, there is a very large non-white population, amounting to almost 80 per cent of the total population in the metropolitan area. Moreover, as a result of a history of overt and subtle racial discrimination, in particular in the labour market, poverty is concentrated among black and dark Bahians. On the other hand, historically, Afro-Brazilians hardly act like a political group at all. That is, black identity crystallizes only episodically (mainly during leisure and religious activities) and does not play a major role in party politics and voting habits. Yet this is just part of the paradox: the counterpole of such political weakness is the prestige and vivacity of Afro-Bahian culture. This is a culture that at times enjoys plenty of official recognition – mostly as regards the religious dimension (the Afro-Catholic *candomblé* religious system), cuisine and music – and which has a major role in the public image of Brazil and Brazilianness at home and abroad, but participation in it cannot be associated with strong identification with blackness. The context of this paradox is characterized, furthermore, by a high degree of inter-marriage, a trans-racial cordiality during leisure among the lower classes, and the existence of official and popular discourses about race relations that stress Brazil as a country where class, not colour, matters – the land of ‘racial democracy’.

However, over the last decade, Bahia has experienced a growth in black identity and a new political use of blackness, even if in different ways from what we are used to in a

polarized race relations system like the United States, and without yet greatly affecting the realm of party politics. It is mainly young blacks, and, among them, those with better jobs or higher education, that are more actively using blackness to boost their status and to dribble (as in football) the subtleties of Brazilian racism.

By focussing on the metropolitan area of Salvador, the capital of Bahia, the Brazilian state with the highest percentage of blacks, this article highlights the complex relationship between the new discovery of blackness among lower-class young people and the deep labour crisis that has been affecting Brazil for the last decade. Furthermore, the paper shows the effects of global and local tendencies in the reformulation of black ethnicity among young people. It describes changes in colour terminology, the development of a new black Bahian culture and the way in which new international black symbols are merged with the Afro-Bahian tradition. The focus is on young people in the 15–25 age bracket, who are compared with the older generation, often their parents.

Fieldwork and quantitative data were collected in a lower middle-class neighbourhood in Salvador and in two lower-class neighbourhoods of Camaçari, an industrial town within the metropolitan area of Salvador, between 1992 and 1994. In each of the two areas we interviewed just over 500 people using a survey questionnaire, and collected about 50 in-depth interviews. To this was added participant observation. The neighbourhood in Salvador is more socially mixed than the two neighbourhoods of Camaçari, where the average income is only one and half times the minimum wage.² In Salvador, the neighbourhood consisted of a *favela* (shanty town), a row of working-class terrace houses and a housing project for the lower middle class. From now on we shall refer to the two areas we studied simply as Salvador and Camaçari. Unless otherwise stated, the figures presented only concern the two research areas.

In the following, black culture and ethnicity in Bahia will be placed in the context of important socioeconomic changes over the last decades. We then show the developments in racial terminology and the new relationship of black culture with youth culture. First, however, we need to