



**Witness** an online magazine

# Enchanted

Afro-Brazilian Subcultures

Photographs by Ricardo Teles

Text by Ricardo Teles & Richard Falco



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## Afro-Brazilian Subcultures

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Black slavery in the Americas is a shameful institution for which all developed societies must take responsibility. Taken by force from their social and natural environment, Africans were condemned to be dispersed, interbred, marketed, and sold.

Slavery endured for three hundred and fifty years in Brazil. It was the most perverse, long-lasting, and lucrative business in the New World. Today, approximately 50% of the total population has Afro-descendants. It is the second largest black nation in the world and it includes numerous African cultures within it. It is second only to Nigeria as the largest black nation in the world and it includes numerous African cultures within it.

From the first economic boom, with the introduction of sugarcane plantations in the colonial period beginning in the sixteenth century, slave labor underpinned the economic model that survived for over three centuries. There were few alternatives for resistance to this brutal reality. Among the best known are banzo, the name given to slow suicide as a result of inanition, and the quilombos, the uprisings and mass escapes to distant locations, hidden in the country's forests.

One of the most effective forms of resistance was the evolution of Afro-Brazilian cults and celebrations. Instead of self-destruction or war, they sought to face the harshest conditions with the disposition to endure. The artifice they used transformed the self-destructive impulses

Liberty Day commemorates the slaves emancipation in Brazil in 1889. It is celebrated on May 13th. In many black communities, these festivities re-enact the punishments the slaves endured. (left)





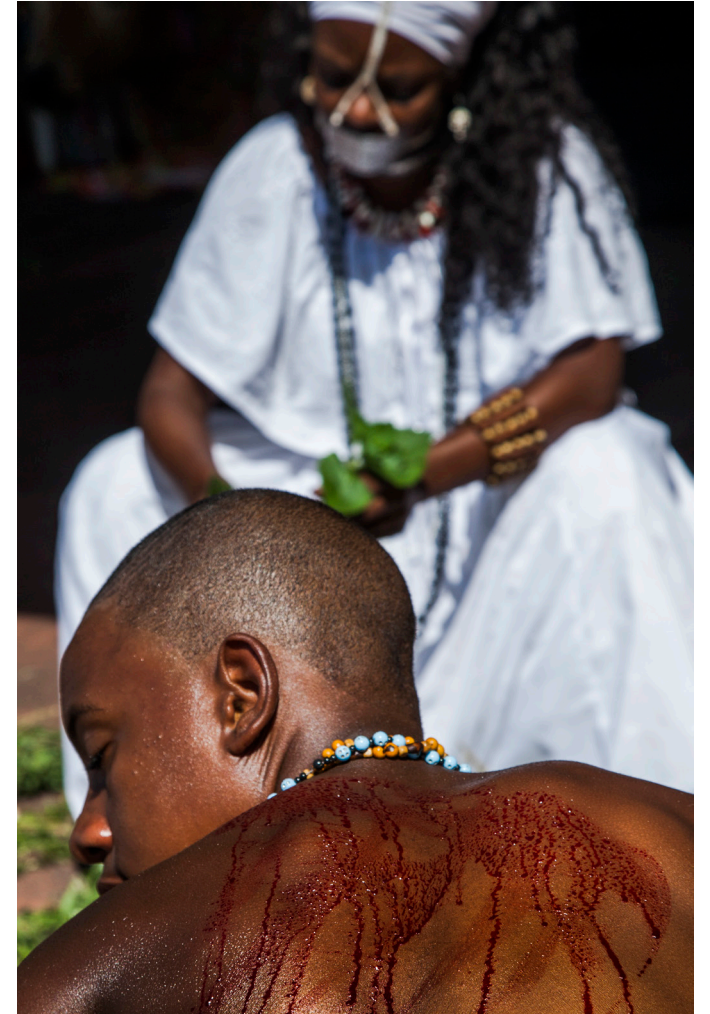


The procession of chains. The Liberty Day Festival in Contagem City, Brazil.





The black community of Arturos in Contagem City, Minas Gerais State, re-enacts slave punishments on Liberty Day.



into expressive ceremonies and artifacts, enabling them to overcome the threats of mute despair.

Despite the horrors and injustices of slavery, rich new social structures developed. The diversity of these cultural and religious manifestations, many with African origins, illustrates the persistence and vitality of numerous subcultures that thrive in Brazil today.

The terrible afflictions suffered during the Atlantic crossings did not deprive the Africans of the memory of their gods or their ability to recognize the gods of others.

Afro-Brazilian culture was able to produce a religious and cultural kaleidoscope originating in Mother Africa, which intrigues and fascinates us in its multiple manifestations. That culture is dynamic. Born from a hybrid





seed, it gave rise to the Afro-Brazilian cultural trunk that sprouted hundreds of the uniquely diverse branches.

From the earliest days of the slave trade, many Christian slave owners and church leaders believed it was important to convert the enslaved Africans, and the impact of what has become Afro-Catholic traditions is readily apparent to this day. Almost all Afro-Brazilian cults have been influenced by some aspect of the Catholic faith. This evolution fused a difficult combination of orixas, inkices, and voduns (divinities and spiritual guides from ethnic groups separated not only by language and customs but often by the deep animosity of war, conquest, and slavery) with Catholicism.

Even though the religions with African origins have a large number of followers, most have been continually persecuted and suffer enormous prejudice in Brazilian society. This is despite the fact that for a long time now they have not been exclusive to Afro-Brazilian descendants. The main source of condemnation came from the Catholic Church and a number of Pentecostal religions. It was not until these laws were changed in the 1970s that these religious freedoms were protected.







A woman wears a metal mouth plate. Devices such as these were used by slave owners to punish and silence an individual.





Today, there are three main branches of religions with African origin. They are: the Candomblé and Umbanda; the Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary); and the pagan festivals that go back to the days of slavery, such as Lambe Sujo and Negro Fugido.

Candomblé, the cult of the Orixas, represents the purest manifestation of African traditions in Brazil. In Africa, there is not one place where so many different rituals are practiced under one roof as occurs in the temples in Brazil.

The Candomblé is a mixture of traditional Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu beliefs. Over time, it has incorporated some aspects of the Catholic faith. The name Candomblé means “dance in honour of the gods.” Candomblé practitioners believe that every person has their own individual orixa which controls his or her destiny and acts as a protector. Music and dance are important parts of Candomblé ceremonies. There is no concept of good or bad in Candomblé. Each person is only required to fulfil his or her destiny to the fullest, regardless of what that is.<sup>1</sup>

Despite persecution throughout the centuries, it is impressive that Candomblé has lasted until today. The group has some two million followers.

<sup>1</sup> Candomblé, BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/candomble>



The Festa do Bonfim (Feast of Bonfim) is one of the most important popular Candomblé celebrations. It takes place in Salvador, Brazil.







Pilgrims gather in front of the Fanti Ashanti spiritual house, headed by Father Euclides, during the Divine Holy Spirit Feast in São Luís City.





Practitioners assemble for services in the Fanti Ashanti spiritual house.





Services conducted by the Tambor de Mina cult at the Turquia spiritual house in São Luis City, Brazil. The spiritual house was founded in 1889 by Mother Anastácia.







A Bumba Meu Boi dancer during the Saint John's festivities in São Luís City, Brazil.





Antônio José Ferreira da Silva, the Father João da Mata at his Virgem Maria Umbanda spiritual house, Codó City, Brazil.

In the early 1900s, another great Afro-Brazilian religion that originally derived out of Candomblé developed. It is known as Umbanda. Umbanda is a cauldron of religious elements, including the Spiritism of Allan Kardec, who is considered its founder. The religion also integrates Catholic saints with the influence of indigenous shamans. It is the fruit of a profound syncretism. Today there are thousands of followers in every corner of the country. It is estimated that there are approximately 500,000 followers of Umbanda.

There is no uniformity of belief among the followers of Umbanda. Most recognize a supreme deity called Olorum (or Zambi), who has various representations. Umbanda also gives reverence to a number of Catholic saints. Other followers seek interaction with the spirits of the deceased through psychics. Karma and reincarnation are central tenets of the religion.



A practitioner descends a stairway at the Rainha Iemanjá spiritual house. Services here are devoted to the Afro-Brazilian cults of Umbanda and Terecô.

Leaders of Umbanda temples are often referred to as priests or priestesses. Their ceremonies include chanting, offering food and other items to spirits, and dancing, as well as eating and drinking.

Codó, in Brazil's northeastern state of Maranhão, is the cradle of a particular Afro-Indian-Portuguese religious cult called Terecô da Mata Codoense. This sect was born when runaway slaves met local native Indians in the babaçu palm forests of the region. Terecô, at that time practiced by peasants, reached the towns in the 1930s and joined forces with Umbanda. Codó soon became a place famous for its witch doctors, whose spiritual services are much in demand throughout Brazil. Some started calling Codó a town of Black Magic, of powerful sorcerers able to do any kind of spiritual work.





A procession of practitioners marches to the Rainha Iemanjá spiritual house. These festivals celebrate the saints and orishas associated with the cults of Umbanda and Terecô.





Terecô celebration, during the St. Anthony's Feast, at a black community named Santo Antônio dos Pretos (The Black's Saint Anthony), in Codó City, Brazil. (top left & bottom left)



A practitioner receives the Spirit of Cipriano during a Terecô celebration.





Ceremonial blessings at the Rainha Iemanjá spiritual house, headed by Father Bita do Barão in Codó City, Brazil.





Women pray during the festival of saints and orishas at Rainha Iemanjá spiritual house. The spirit house is devoted to the Afro-Brazilian cults of Umbanda and Terecô.





Pedro César Santos Souza receives the spirit of Chica Baiana at an Umbanda spiritual house in Codó City. (above) A devotee sits inside an Umbanda Cult spiritual house. (below)



The spiritual house master Emiliano José Maria da Conceição. (above) Terecô celebration, during the Saint Anthony's Feast in Codó City. (below)







Disciples of Umbanda celebrate the goddess Iemanjá.





Saint Benedict's Feast celebrations in Catalão City. (above)

The group most influenced by the Catholic traditions is the Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário (Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary). As an order of the Catholic Church, it was founded in the mid-1600s. The church encouraged the constitution of brotherhoods as a means of spreading the gospel among the free population as well as the black and mulatto Christianized slaves. These lay associations brought together people according to color and ethnic and status criteria. Brotherhoods served the purpose of self-affirmation for slaves and freed persons, but they were also used by elites as a tool of social control.<sup>2</sup>

The Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário e São Benedito dos Homens Pretos (The Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Benedict of the Black Man) was the social service organization of the Church that gave shelter and material resources to the Africans and Blacks of Rio de Janeiro.

Throughout the year, the brotherhoods also pay homage to and celebrate their origins through ceremonies of the coronation of black kings from Congo to Mozambique. These feasts of the Kings of Congo spread throughout the whole of Brazil in the past, but today they are restricted to the center-south, specifically the state of Minas Gerais.

<sup>2</sup> Matthias Rohrig, From Slave to Popular Culture: The Formation of Afro-Brazilian Art Forms in Nineteenth-Century Bahia and Rio de Janeiro'. Iberoamericana. América Latina - España - Portugal (2003)



Two girls carry a sculpture of the Virgin and Child during the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary Feast in Uberlândia City . (top) The celebration of São Benedito Day, named after the black saint of Brazil, begins with a parade in the city of Aparecida. (above)





Enthusiasm reigns throughout the day at the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary celebrations in Uberlândia City.





On April 19, throughout Brazil, many black cultural groups celebrate the feast of São Benedito (Saint Benedictus), who is the black saint of Brazil.







A young man puts down his drum to pray during the Liberty Day festivities.



A woman receives a blessing during the Liberty Day festivities.



Participants enter a spiritual house in Contagem City during the Liberty Day festivities.





As the day's festivities end, a group of Liberty Day participants make their way home.





The Lambe Sujo Festival in Laranjeiras City, State of Sergipe, Brazil. This festival mixes dance, music, and theater across the streets of the city and exposes the history of a quilombo, a place of runaway slaves during the colonial period in Brazil.

There are also a number of pagan festivals with the strong presence of the memory of slavery. These rituals are conducted all over the country. Lambe Sujo, which takes place in the small town of Laranjeiras in Sergipe State, and Negro Fugido, which takes place throughout Bahia State, are just two. These festivals commemorate in the streets for an entire day the escape and later imprisonment of a group of slaves. It is a great example of open-air theater, with parades meandering through the streets of the town with a wealth of music and dancing. These festivals take place under other names throughout Northeast Brazil. Despite the vast geographical distances that separate them, the rituals have many elements in common.

Nego Fugido (the runaway black) and Caretas (masks) Festival in the Acupe District, Santo Amaro da Purificação City, Bahia State, Brazil.







The Lambe Sujo festival in Laranjeiras City, State of Sergipe, Brazil. The festival mixes dance, music and theater to expose the history of quilombo, a place of runaway slaves during the colonial period in Brazil. (above & bottom right)

Participants begin the ceremonies by painting their bodies. This is followed by loud chanting and a procession of chained individuals, symbolizing their enslavement. Often there is a re-enactment of the punishments, beatings, and murders that many had to endure.



Participants prepare and gather for the beginning of festivities for Nego Fugido in the Acupe District, Santo Amaro da Purificação City, Bahia State, Brazil. (top right)







A young boy with a painted face participates in Nego Fugido (the runaway black) feast in Santo Amaro da Purificação City.





These festivities are a testament in which one witnesses the recapitulation of the whole of a collective life. The black person from the plantations and the mines, and the domestic worker in the cities and in the slums set out to show their direct connection to the history of their people. The festival symbolizes a synthesis of conscious ancestry, folklore, and historical facts.



A Negro Fugido ceremony re-enacts the hunting and murder of runaway slaves.







The Lambe Sujo festival in Laranjeiras City, State of Sergipe, Brazil. The festival is a mixture of dance, music, and theater.





The drama and activities of the Lambe Sujo and Negro Fugido festivals expose the oppressive mistreatment of slavery and the horrific conditions in which many slaves lived. They reveal the hard-fought battle for emancipation that cost many their lives. The festivals are a celebration of that precious freedom.





Afro-Brazilian subcultures constitute a great deal of the social fabric that is distinctive to Brazil. More African slaves were brought to Brazil than any other country in the world. The sheer numbers changed the demographic structure from which the society evolved. The most expressive forms of these cultures have their roots in the founding of the New World. As colonization continued to expand and diversify, it implanted cultural and religious manifestations that are being renewed and intensified in the present day. The consequences of the African diaspora, have shaped the cultural legacy of Brazil, making it different from any other society. The rituals performed by each group, with their colorful preparations, unite people of white, brown, and black skin. The ceremonies infuse the Brazilian society with a captivating identity. Enriched by combining cultural roots that go back to Africa with native elements, Brazil is vibrant, unique, and a perennially fascinating illustration of the dynamism of diversity.



A member of a Maracatu dance troupe in Aliança City during the carnival celebration. (above)  
Fireworks set off during a celebration of the Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Benedict of the Black Man Festival. (right)





The Festa de Iemanjá. Disciples of the Umbanda and Candomble cults pay tribute in a sign of devotion to Iemanjá, the goddess of the seas. Praia Grande City, State of Sao Paulo, Brazil.



This project is a production of

## **VISION PROJECT Inc.**

### **Ricardo Teles**

Ricardo Teles is a freelance photographer, living and working in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Since 1994, his focus has been photojournalism. He has been involved with several major national and international publications, ranging from periodicals to corporate and government editorials. He was an independent photographer for the Estado group (Estado agency and “*O Estado de Sao Paulo*” and “*Jornal da Tarde*” newspapers) between 1994 and 2000.

The winner of numerous awards, he has collaborated with a number of important Brazilian publications such as *Terra*, *Epoca* and *Caras Magazines*. He is also a contributor to the photographic agency, FOCUS, in Hamburg, Germany, and is one of the: founders of Arcapress Association of Documentary Brazilian Photographers.

Most recently he has been involved with corporate work, with focus on the Brazilian manufactory industry as well as environmental and social projects.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

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