

EXTENDED READING

A Linha Curva: Historical & Social Context

1 Colonisation of Brazil: 300 years of slavery

When the choreographer Itzik Galili made *A Linha Curva*, he specifically drew inspiration from the music and movement of Brazilian Carnival, the annual celebration of national pride that combines the rituals of European Christian festivity with social dance styles, music and culture rooted in pre-colonial West Africa.

Carnival is a form of communal celebration that became widespread across Europe in the Middle Ages as a riotous indulgence before the spiritual rigours and dietary abstinence associated with Lent, the 40 days that run from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday.

The most famous carnival in Britain is Notting Hill Carnival, which began as a celebration of African-Caribbean culture and community in the 1960s, when the Windrush generation, the first wave of post-war migrants from the Caribbean, were facing systematic racism in housing, employment, education and policing.

Carnival can trace its roots back hundreds of years in the Caribbean. In Trinidad and Tobago, for example, the history of carnival combines two sets of rituals.

There were the elaborate masquerade balls in the period before Lent organised by white French settlers and free people of colour.

And there were the parallel celebrations organised by the enslaved people on the islands, which featured not only dancing and singing but also mockery of the people at the masked balls. This combination is common to many expressions of carnival around the world.

In Brazil, Carnival can also trace its roots back to colonisation and sugar plantation but it was the Portuguese who were the colonialists in this case, who began their occupation after the Portuguese aristocrat and explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral landed on the north-east coast in April 1500.

Early Portuguese capitalists established sugar plantations in the 1530s and 1540s, originally enslaving indigenous Indian people as their labour force. Indigenous slavery continued throughout the 16th and 17th centuries and was even widespread in the early 20th century rubber boom in the Amazon.

From the second half of the 16th century, the Portuguese were kidnapping and transporting people from West Africa to work on sugar and cotton plantations.

Brazilian historian Boris Fausto has used the records that have survived from Sergipo do Conde, a large plantation in Bahia, to track the increasing enslavement of Africans in the sugar industry.



In 1574, Africans comprised just 7 per cent of the plantation workforce. By 1591, they made up 37 per cent. Around 1638, Africans and Afro-Brazilians constituted 100 per cent of the workforce. (*A Concise History of Brazil*, second edition, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp36-37).

Between 1501 and 1875, Portugal alone trafficked 5.8 million African people to Brazil, almost the same number as Britain, Spain, France and the Netherlands did between them. (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>)

Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, who was abducted from what is now Benin and sold into slavery in Brazil, recalled the conditions on the slave ship that transported him from his home in the 1840s, in a memoir he wrote after he escaped to freedom in 1847.

An enslaved man's memory of being trafficked to Brazil

"We were thrust into the hold of the vessel in a state of nudity, the males being crammed on one side, and the females on the other; the hold was so low that we could not stand up, but were obliged to crouch upon the floor or sit down. Day and night were the same to us, sleep being denied us from the confined position of our bodies, and we became desperate through suffering and fatigue. Oh! the loathsomeness and filth of that horrible place will never be effaced from my memory; nay, as long as memory holds her seat in this distracted brain, will I remember that. My heart even at this day, sickens at the thought of it ... The only food we had during the voyage was corn soaked and boiled.

I cannot tell how long we were thus confined, but it seemed a very long while. We suffered very much for want of water, but was denied all we needed. A pint a day was all that was allowed, and no more; and a great many slaves died upon the passage ... When any one of us became refractory, his flesh was cut with a knife, and pepper or vinegar was rubbed in to make him peaceable.

I suffered, and so did the rest of us, very much from sea sickness at first, but that did not cause our brutal owners any trouble. Our sufferings were our own, we had no one to share our troubles, none to care for us, or even to speak a word of comfort to us. Some were thrown overboard before breath was out of their bodies; when it was thought any would not live, they were got rid of in that way."

(*Biography of Mahommah G. Baquaqua*, Detroit, 1854, online at: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/baquaqua/baquaqua.html>)

While enslaved peoples were first put to work on sugar and cotton plantations, once the colonisers discovered gold and diamonds in the interior of the country at the end of the 17th century, they used trafficked more Africans into the new mining industries. And the vast expansion of coffee production in the 19th century was also achieved through enslavement.

Throughout the period of slavery that sustained the enormous profits of the early capitalists, the enslaved people resisted:

“They attempted to seize power in armed uprisings, broke equipment to sabotage their masters’ industry, and fled to the backlands. Runaways formed communities called quilombos, which had varying degrees of self-governance and self-sufficiency ... the largest and most famous quilombo, Palmares, lasted 100 years.”

(Brazil: Five Centuries of Change, James N. Green & Thomas E. Skidmore, Oxford University Press, third edition, 2021 – available online at

<https://library.brown.edu/create/fivecenturiesofchange/chapters/chapter-2/african-slavery/>

2 The evolution of samba after the abolition of slavery

Brazil finally abolished slavery in 1888, the last country in the Americas to do so. But the decree offered no form of compensation to the former enslaved people: not one of the 700,000 to be granted their freedom were offered land, job opportunities or education.

For the majority who moved to the cities, their only option for housing was to build what they thought would be temporary shelters in the settlements that sprang up organically to house internal migrants, itinerant labourers, and former soldiers – which is how Rio’s first hillside *favela* (or slum), Morro da Providência, was built over the port in 1897.

It was the musical traditions of the people of the *favelas* that came to dominate Carnival, especially through the evolution of the set of styles called samba. The word probably derives from the Angolan Kimbundu word ‘semba’, which means an invitation to dance.

In the latter part of the 19th century, when Brazil had gained independence from Portugal and was establishing itself as a republic, the upper classes looked down on samba precisely because of its African roots – although these attacks were often coded with reference to folk culture.

“During Brazil’s belle époque, the fashionable elite aspired to Europeanise Brazil and put an end to African aspects of Brazilian culture ... African musical traditions were marginalised at the expense of European musical styles. By the 1870s, Republican propagandists were attempting to prohibit samba on the pretext that folkloric dances shamed Brazil’s national image.” (‘The Politics of Samba’, Bruce Gilman, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2001), pp67-72)

Excluded from existing entertainment venues, the new arrivals in the *favelas* organised house parties where they could sing, play and dance together.

It was at one of these gatherings – in the home of Hilaria de Almeida (known as Tia, or aunt, Ciata) in Rio de Janeiro – that samba’s first big hit was created.

Four outstanding musicians were involved: José Barbosa da Silva (Sinhô), João Machado Guedes (João de Baiana), Ernesto dos Santos (Donga) and Alfredo da Rocha Viana Filho (Pixinguinha).



The piece they created together was called *Pelo Telefone* (On The Telephone), which combines a melody from the north-east of the country with the characteristic rhythms of *maxixe*, a blend of Afro-Brazilian and European forms that originated in Rio in the second half of the 19th century.

Donga registered the new song with the National Library in Rio with the intention of establishing samba as a unique genre.

When the singer Manuel Pedro dos Santos (known as Bahiano because he came from Santo Amaro in Bahia) cut a record of the song in 1917, it became a massive hit and over the course of the 1920s, samba became the dominant musical form of carnival.

However, it continued to face official opposition for another decade or so. Municipal authorities tried to restrict samba to the *favelas*, and the police not only prohibited samba groups from performing in central Rio but even banned the African-derived instruments associated with samba.

The samba pioneer Angenor de Oliveira, known as Cartola, Portuguese for ‘top hat’, who was born in 1908, later recalled the police harassment of his youth: “In my childhood, we played the samba in the backyards of the old ladies, whom we call ‘tias’, and the police stopped us often, because the samba, then, was considered a thing of bums and bandits.”

To protect and develop their music, the people of the *favelas* began setting up supportive artistic spaces for themselves called *escolas de samba* (samba schools) in the late 1920s.

The first samba school was *Deixa Falar*, launched in 1928, which today goes by the name *Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba* (Recreational Guild Samba School or GRES) *Estácio de Sá* (named after the Portuguese soldier generally regarded as the founder of the city of Rio de Janeiro).

The same year, Cartola himself co-founded the *Bloco Estação Primeira* (First Station street band) that later evolved into *Estação Primeira de Mangueira* (or *Mangueira*) – still one of the most important samba schools in Brazil today.

A year later, the very first samba competition was held at the Rio home of the journalist and sambista José Gomes da Costa (known as Zé Espinguela) between *Mangueira*, *Deixa Falar* and a third samba school, *Oswaldo Cruz*, forerunner of today’s *Portela* – with the latter crowned the winners.

The annual competition between the samba schools remains a central element of Carnival to this day, although the top samba schools in Rio can now build their elaborate floats in a specially designed warehouse complex *Cidade do Samba* (Samba City) and parade in the purpose-built *Sambadrome Marquês de Sapucaí* or *Sambódromo* (sambadrome), which was designed by the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, after his return to the country after the end of the 20-year-long military dictatorship in 1985.



The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) inscribed samba on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008.

3 The significance of Carnaval to Brazil

In his book *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes*, originally published in 1979 and translated into English in 1991, the Brazilian anthropologist Roberto DaMatta made an exhaustive study of the forms of Carnaval in Brazil and especially in Rio de Janeiro.

Carnaval, he says, represents a moment of almost complete freedom in an otherwise extremely hierarchical society. “I would say that the law of Carnaval is to have no law,” he says. Unlike any other mass gatherings (military parades, church parades, protests and demonstrations), Carnaval has no specific goal because it is not owned by any particular group. It is “a moment without a patron and a master: it belongs to all,” he says.

But although Carnaval belongs to no-one, it is primarily a festival of “the dominated and the destitute” who take over and transform public spaces in the city, including those they would normally be excluded from: “during Carnaval the nervous and hysterical centre of the city seems to turn into a medieval square, and it is taken over completely by the people.”

Everyone takes part: whole streets hold their own parades and Carnaval costume competitions and the boundary between participants and spectators becomes very blurred. “The ‘street’ becomes the stage of a theatre without a set text. Spontaneous dramatic improvisations by those in carnival costume take place there.”

In this participatory street theatre, gender identities become extremely fluid. “We see, side by side, carnivalesque personifications of the mother image ... as well as of womanhood ..., which in Brazil is paradoxically and simultaneously linked with the realms of sin ... and purity ... All these characters are staged by men (homosexuals or not) dressed up as women.”

During the 1977 Carnaval, DaMatta recalls witnessing a group of gay men playfully provoking other spectators “by calling attention to the enormous number of homosexuals in the world – however unsuspected, in a male-orientated culture”.

This was at a time when Brazil was living under a military dictatorship that was persecuting the LGBTQ+ community – underlining DaMatta’s point that Carnaval represents a moment of freedom from the laws that normally structure Brazilian life.

Indeed, LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion has been a feature of Carnaval celebrations in many of the biggest cities for many decades. In 1976, the trans woman Eloína helped lead the samba school Beija-Flor to victory in Rio de Janeiro, and went on to win the competition to be named Queen of the Drums three years in a row.

DaMatta also recalls witnessing how two young women taking part in Carnaval in 1977 were wearing revealing costumes without attracting any negative attention from the men around them.



“They were dressed as *femmes fatales*, wearing see-through dresses that revealed their naked bodies. In the midst of the Carnival crowd they were not, however, aggressively approached. On the contrary, they were the ones aggressively approaching the macho men of Brazil, who drop their masks during Carnival and reveal themselves to be surprisingly and incredibly timid in such sexual confrontations.”

In Rio, Carnival may be dominated by the parades of the samba schools, but there are parades by many other organisations as well, DaMatta points out.

There are the *blocos*, the groups who organise their own street parties with their own bands.

There are the *grandes sociedades*, the great societies that trace their roots back to the 19th century and organise their own parades.

And there are even the costumed sea swimmers (*banho de mar a fantasia*), a tradition that dates back before the Second World War, when street bands wearing costumes of crepe paper would dive into the ocean after marching through the city’s beaches.

For DaMatta, Carnival is a popular participatory art that is significant to the entire culture of Brazil: “It was not Brazil that invented Carnival; on the contrary, it was Carnival that invented Brazil.” (‘Carnaval, Informality, and Magic’, Roberto Da Matta, in *Text, Play, and Story*, edited by Edward M Bruner, American Ethnological Society, 1984, p245).

4 Looking at Brazil through the Western gaze: *Black Orpheus*

Galili is not the first artist from outside Brazil to make work rooted in cultural practices that are inscribed inside a complex network of meanings in Brazil itself.

The 1959 French film *Black Orpheus* sets the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the slums of Rio during Carnival. The film is based on a play by the Brazilian writer Vinicius de Moraes, *Orfeu da Conceição* (Orpheus of the Conception).

The cast are almost all Brazilian (although one of the leads is a bi-racial actor from Pittsburgh in the USA). And the soundtrack features music by two of the pioneers of bossa nova, Antônio Carlos Jobim and Luiz Bonfá.

However, the film cannot be said to be an example of Brazilian cinema: it was internationally financed and it was directed by the white French director Marcel Camus and the white French producer Sacha Gordine.

Nevertheless, it achieved enormous critical and commercial success outside Brazil on its release. It won the Palme d’Or, the most prestigious prize, at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, as well as an Oscar and a Golden Globe for best foreign film in 1960.

Yet inside Brazil, it was a very different story. The original playwright Vinicius de Moraes disowned the adaptation and the disenchantment with the film inside Brazil persists to this day. Reflecting on the film at the turn of the 21st century, the Brazilian



singer, composer and activist Caetano Veloso criticised its “outrageously fanciful colours (so different from Rio's real ones) and the general ‘voodoo for tourists’ ambience” in an article for *The New York Times*.

“The contrast between the fascination that *Black Orpheus* generated abroad and the contempt with which it was treated by Brazilians, who saw themselves depicted as exotics, invites thoughts on the loneliness of Brazil.” (‘Orpheus, Rising From Caricature’, *The New York Times*, 20 August 2000.)

Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira reflects on *Black Orpheus*

“My disappointment was as great as my anticipation. I believe it was the same for all Brazilians. The film works outside Brazil, for foreigners that do not know Brazil or who only know it superficially. There is in it a parti pris of exoticism that, along with very marked French elements, make it very insipid to us, despite the intention of the director, and regardless the authentic presence of so many Black Brazilian folks.”

(Quoted in ‘Variations on the Brazilian Orpheus Theme’, Marília Scaff Rocha Ribeiro, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, Volume 11 (2009) Issue 3, p6)

Even the soundtrack by Jobim and Bonfá is problematic, since bossa nova was a style quite separate musically and socially from samba. “The musicians and fans of bossa nova, unlike many samba singers, were part of the Carioca middle class that frequented jazz clubs and had been exposed to North American music and movies,” comment Green & Skidmore in *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change*.

The recent reflections of film critic Cathy Brennan on *Black Orpheus* are worth remembering when studying *A Linha Curva*, another work viewing Brazilian culture through an outsider’s gaze.

“When watching *Black Orpheus*, it is impossible to divorce the film from its European perspective. This film exoticises its black cast through a European gaze. When Eurydice first arrives in Rio by boat, Camus films the city from the viewpoint of a tourist. A montage of vendors selling their exotic wares seems to say, ‘look at how different this is!’ Again, a touristic gaze is not essentially bad; what it shows is how *Black Orpheus* is a film by Europeans for Europeans, rather than black Brazilians telling their own story.” (‘The Western Gaze in *Black Orpheus*’, One Room with a View website, 5 January 2017, <https://oneroomwithaview.com/2017/01/05/western-gaze-black-orpheus/>)