Pompa: Black Consciousness, Politics, Youth, & Identity in Brazil

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Understanding Black Consciousness and Politics in Brazil

Literature on the Afro-Brazilian’s political participation within Brazil’s presidential elections and their political influence is becoming more prominent due to the nation’s changing racial demographics and by the fact that the marginalized sectors of Brazilian society are becoming more politically aware and are mobilizing to create social change.

This year, conversations regarding Afro-Brazilians and politics centered on Marina Silva and her hopes to win the 2014 presidential election and defeat the incumbent, Dilma Sousseff. Silva was one of the top three candidates for president, but she did not make it to the second round. Unlike the continuous connections drawn between Silva and black political consciousness, I aim to present a more diverse understanding of the political nature of Afro-Brazilians and how past sentiments and events within the Afro-Brazilian community can alter how one sees the political power of African-Brazilians.

I have created the following literature review in hopes of highlighting relevant aspects of the multilayered and complex relationship of politics and Afro-Brazilians in order to help guide readers understand the under researched and conflicting information on Black consciousness, politics, and identity in Brazil presented thusfar by academia.

Afro-Brazilian Religion, Politics, and Identity

Selka (2005) examines the relationship between the Afro-Brazilian identity and the different religions present in Bahia. The evangelical Christians have strongly opposed practices that suggest Candomblé’s status as a symbol of the black identity in Brazil. Yet for many Bahians, “the black consciousness movement, [and] activism goes hand in hand with affirming one’s ethnic identity through the practice or at least the valorization of Candomblé” (Selka 2005, page 72). Evangelical Christians, Catholics, and Candomblé organizations all have “radically different meanings to traditional Afro-Brazilian symbols and practices, and Bahian communities of African descent are divided along religious lines on questions of Afro-Brazilian identity” (Selka 2005, page 73). Today, Candomblé is seen as the natural connection between African-derived religion and blackness. Candomblé terreiros have ties to the black consciousness movement that emerged in Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s and “although there is no official link between black political organizations such as the Movimento Negro Unificado (United Black Movement-MNU) and any particular religion, many political activists concerned with antiracism are connected with the Candomblé community” (Selka 2005, page 74). Black activists and academics have argued from within and outside of the black consciousness movement that the focus on African-derived traditions as the basis for black solidarity can be seen as problematic since it alienates potential constituents of the movements since many Afro-Brazilians don’t identify with Candomblé. With Candomblé as an ethnic emblem, Black activists have sought to promote the cultural history and celebration of Candomblé. Yet many evangelicals see African descent rather than shared cultural traditions as the basis for black solidarity.

Selka (2005) goes on to explain how Baptists, Evangelicals, Protestants, and Catholics engage the political sphere of Bahia. No religious congregation is politically homogeneous, for example there are groups of Pentecostals engaged in progressive politics and proclaiming that Jesus was a leftist as well as Pentecostals that believe they should simply vote for who their pastor’s candidate. Selka (2009) also interviews evangelicals who self-identify as Afro-Brazilian, do not claim Candomblé as their religion, and explain that their shared experience of racism creates a common racial identity more than a specific cultural or religious tradition.

Selka (2009) examines the overlap of the religious and political realm within the city of Cachoeira, Bahia, Brazil with an historical analysis of the Afro-Catholic Sisterhood of Our Lady of Good Death (Boa Morte) within the city. Cachoeira is known for its deeply rooted Afro-Brazilian traditions and culture like its modern neighbor of 110 kilometers away, Salvador. The sisters of Boa Morte have created an answer to the difficulty for rural Afro-Brazilians to mobilize on the basis of gender or racial identity, “[…] organizations such as the Sisterhood of Boa Morte provide a model of ethnic pride and resistance expressed not in the militant language of the university-trained activist from the city but in the more familiar idioms of traditional rural life” (Selka 2009, Page 34). Boa Morte instead use their image of being a source of historic Afro-Brazilian tradition, religion, and culture to assert influence and dignity more than promote political or social change due to the politics of patronage, “[…] The arenas of Afro-Brazilian religion and public politics
and grassroots activists have drawn upon the image of Boa Morte, presumably to increase their popular appeal.

This author has presented a claim that there are ethnoreligious identities in Bahia, and I ask whether these identities heavily responsible for sociopolitical consciousness in Salvador. This author has also presented two works that describe the Afro-Brazilian religious sector of Bahia overlaps with the Afro-Brazilian political sector of Bahia. This project will see if religion is a self-defining factor among the participants.

**Afro-Brazilian and Party Identification**

Boas and Smith (2014) explore how demographic similarities between legislators and the public provides a stronger basis for the substantive representation policy preferences than party representation. "Brazilians routinely vote based on candidates' personal qualities rather than party or ideology, and in the open-list system they are given ample opportunity to choose a candidate of the same race, class, gender, or religion" (Boas & Smith 2014, page 1). Boas and Smith (2014) explain that for many Brazilians, choosing a candidate that looks like them may be the best way to elect someone who thinks similarly about major policy issues. In regards to the Afro-Brazilians, this would mean that Marina Silva would have had a large amount of voters identifying with her based on demographic similarities. Yet she did not make it to the 2nd round, and lost the elections despite having 22 million people vote for her, she consequently endorsed Aecio Neves for presidency.

Boas and Smith say that only 40% of Brazil identifies with a party and party discipline in Congress is low, which leaves political parties with a very small role in the process of gaining electoral votes for candidates. "A Black legislator who attributes her victory to the Black vote is more likely to hew to the preferences of Afro-Brazilians than one who considers race irrelevant to her electoral fortunes" (Boas and Smith, page 7-8). There is evidence that class generates stronger identity voting effects than gender or race, meaning many Brazilians are more likely to vote for a candidate of their same social class than of their same race or gender.

Yet race in Brazil is said to be a weak basis for political identity, due to the fluidity of race and complex nature of race within Brazil's historical context. Boas and Smith (2014) points out that Afro-Brazilian voters and legislators are unlikely to have similar opinions across a range of issues on the basis of race. This project presents a conflicting view where Afro-Brazilian participants see the need to vote for Afro-Brazilian legislators.

**Afro-Brazilian: Racial Identification and Brazilian Youth**

Lima (2009) explores how informal schooling, cultural centers, and formal schooling, the public school system, shape the Afro-Brazilian identity within Salvador's low-income youth. Salvador's cultural centers aim to affirm students' racial identity as a means of promoting success. While racial identity is fluid literature shows that there exists a common Afro-Brazilian identity despite the myth of Brazil's racial democracy renders all Afro-descendants invisible. Lima (2009) research showcases how students' identities are fluid and that the Black youth of Brazil are aware of or have experienced social marginalization and inequality, and have a distinctive perspective on higher education, the future job market, and what it means to be Black. Lima (2009) comes to the conclusion that there is no common Afro-Brazilian identity, because each student she interviewed had constructed a unique racial and cultural identity separate from the others. The study creates the space to question how Brazil's youth of African descent use their unique racial identities and perspectives to look at the Brazil's political process and this year's elections.

POMPA can be interpreted as a source of informal schooling through, what can be seen as the cultural center, of the Institute of Steve Biko. Each of the participants have a clear identity and self-identify as Afro-Brazilian. As Lima examined the cultural centers' effects on its participants, I intend to do the same with POMPA.

**History of Afro-Brazilian Political Liberalization and Black Consciousness**

Kennedy (1986) explains the historical nature of Afro-Brazilians, primarily in the coastal cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador, developed a black consciousness following the 'opening to democracy' after the military dictatorships during the 20th century. Afro-Brazilians went against the 'etiquette' of discussing race relations, which was to accept without question that Brazil was a racial democracy. The military governments suppressed discussions of race, viewing critics of the racial democracy ideology as threats to national security. Black youths were involved at the time in a black-soul movement, Afro-Brazilians' identification with African-descendants from the US's culture, style, dance, and hairstyles, and the blackitude-baina, Afro-Brazilians' identification with African-inspired attire, Jamaican reggae, and dreadlocks (Kennedy 1986, page 204-205). Both
contributed to the Black youths development of a racial identity but could not truly channel this racial consciousness to significant political action, which were instead mobilized through cultural organizations who would eventually publish papers, written by young Black students, with some of the main topics being police brutality, racism, and social inequalities.

Today, there is still a marked preference for books published by foreign authors. With a new generation of Black youth and Black students who have already gained a socio-political consciousness, there is a new need to disseminate more current information about the inequalities and racism within Brazil. Transmitting information through small newspapers, such as the Sociedade de Inter-cambio Brasil-Africa (SINB), Federaqao das Entidades Afro-Brasileiras do Estado de Sao Paulo (FEABESP), or the Movimento Unificado (MNU) used to, but is no longer the most efficient way. This project will look to see if the participants are able to link the Afro-Brazilian identity to a political consciousness related to their identity and channel this consciousness into action.

Public Opinion and Nonwhite Underrepresentation
Bailey (2009) explains how the public of Brazil engages nonwhite underrepresentation in Brazilian politics. In most of the evaluations of this underrepresentation up to Bailey’s study, the public opinion of the Brazilian public were largely ignored. Although the opinion of the masses does not provide a definitive answer to the question of why underrepresentation occurs, it does contribute to the understanding of the intersection of race and politics. The study uses data collected from a 2000 probability survey of racial attitudes in the state of Rio de Janeiro showing that the difficulty of electing a nonwhite person boils down to 2 reasons: 1) the difficulty of a nonwhite person has becoming a viable candidate due to lack of financial support, negative stereotyping, lack of political experience, and lack of educated individuals to recruit for candidacy, and 2) the inability of the Afro-Brazilian movement and Afro-Brazilian politicians to mobilize a constituency around “blackness” due to a denial of the existence of racial discrimination, class differences, and a weak racial consciousness. But the black ethnicity is becoming a more prominent factor in Brazilian politics. I will see if the participants agree with the factors that inhibit a Black candidate from getting elected that Bailey outlined.

Affirmative Action and State Policy Regarding Race
Htun (2004) analyzes the emergence of affirmative action in 2001 after decades of state defending the myth of racial democracy. “The government admitted that Brazil is racist and endorsed an extreme form of affirmative action—quotas—to address racial inequality” (Htun 2004, page 61). These quotas challenged how the country’s understanding and por-
abandoned its racial democracy ideology not because of material incentives, threats, or vote seeking. Instead “policymakers became convinced that combating inequalities was the right thing to do” (Htun 2004, page 75). The World Conference on Racism held in Durban in September, 2001 opened the door for many to discuss racial discrimination in Brazil and commit to change. Affirmative action has been considered a form of public policy that has had a large impact of the Black population of Brazil, this project will see how participants view this type of policy.

**Racial Representation and Brazilian Politics**

Johnson (1999) presents the “first scholarly attempt to investigate the racial composition of the Brazilian Congress, to analyze black underrepresentation, and to examine the behavior of black members” (Johnson 1999, page 98). Johnson finds that despite the incredibly low amount of Black politicians in Congress, they have advocated for white politicians and the general public to address racism and racial inequality. Many at the time believed that Brazilians do not have a strong racial consciousness and do not behave racially in politically relevant ways: voting along racial lines or organizing influential racial organizations and movements.

Johnson writes at the time there were only a mere 3 black senators in the Federal State, with Marina Silva and Benedita da Silva being the two black women. At the time blacks were underrepresented according to the difference between the percentage of blacks in the general population and the percentage of blacks in Congress. Rio de Janeiro had sent more black politicians to Congress than any other state. Johnson explains that there isn’t a lack of black candidates for Congress, there are underfinanced and infective campaigns by black candidates. Active black leaders are members of the PT and PDT, which are small leftist political parties that have difficulty gaining majority support for their proposals. The motion to create a black caucus has been stalled due to ideological and partisan diversity along with the hesitation of some black representatives to accept their blackness.

The Black members of Congress so far proposed legislation to outlaw and severely penalize acts of racism and racial discrimination, introduce African and African Brazilian history into the public schools, to institute affirmative action programs, and to give reparations to descendants of slaves, among other race-specific projects (Johnson 1998, page 112).

**References**


Kennedy, James T. “Political Liberalization, Black Consciousness, and Recent Afro-Brazilian Literature.” Phylon 47.3 (1986): 199-209.


