

AFRICAN INFLUENCES ON BRAZILIAN DEVELOPMENT

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Brazil is a country with countless African influences on its culture and customs. With 70 million people of African descent living in Brazil it is the “second largest black population on earth” (Larkin Nascimento). Due to the fact that Afro-Brazilians are a large part of the population, they have a profound influence on Brazilian culture and development.

While traveling in Brazil one could notice people of all shapes, sizes and colors. The great racial diversity of Brazil is closely linked to the country’s slave trade. “African culture endured in Brazil, researchers say, because the country received more slaves over a longer period of time than any other country in the Americas...there has been a far greater presence and influence of native Africans for a longer time” (Prada). This constant influx of Africans kept their culture and traditions from becoming diluted or warped by popular culture, as happened in many other nations with African populations. Many of the languages, oral traditions, myths and legends, have been passed down through the generations influencing Brazilian culture and development almost subconsciously. So how is it that such an influential part of the population has been excluded politically and economically?

For much of the twentieth century Brazil was looked at as a racial oasis. A place where inter racial marriages, couples and friendships were prevalent. It appeared as if a sort of racial harmony existed in Brazil that does not exist in other nations with mixed populations. But the socioeconomic statistics of Brazilian society tell a different story. They portray the large gap between rich and poor, directly relating to the darkness of one’s skin color. While traveling through out Brazil it is easy to see how one could come to believe that Brazil is indeed a racial democracy. People of all colors would be seen hanging out together. But with a better understanding of Brazilian mentality and economical issues, the true identity of the situation is quickly revealed.

Racism does indeed exist in Brazil, as it does in other parts of the world, despite the pureness and abundant presences of African culture and the strikingly high proportion of the population that call themselves of Afro-Brazilian. But Brazil’s racial issues are not as easy as ‘Black or White.’ “Unlike the United States and South Africa, Brazil established a system of white supremacy without the obvious signs like segregation or apartheid” (Lehman). But nevertheless, Brazil *is* a racist society even though there have been no outright laws or violent struggles to gain rights. This becomes obvious when looking at the facts. While Afro-Brazilians account for about 45% of the 180 million citizens in Brazil, they account for 63% of the poorest population. Afro-Brazilians suffer from high infant mortality, landlessness, poor access to education, discrimination in employment and are victims of police violence. Statistics also show Afro-Brazilians to

have the lowest paying jobs many of which are in the informal and service sectors. And despite the fact that they form almost half the population, one is hard pressed to find Afro-Brazilians in government bureaucracy, military hierarchy or as directors of corporations. When the issue of racism and discrimination was brought up amongst higher class Brazilians, the majority said they would rather have improvements made in the inequality of the class systems, rather than implementing programs such as affirmative action.

Despite these negative facts, Brazil *has* been making headway in the advancement for Afro-Brazilians. During the 1970's, there was growing awareness of the racial tension and inequality in treatment of Afro-Brazilians. This led the formation of an Afro-Brazilian Black Pride Movement. Black interest groups began springing up to give Afro-Brazilians a voice and an outlet to discuss Brazilian life and inequality. These Black awareness movements have worked to establish such things as "Affirmative Action quotas in the universities, the workplace and political offices..." (Lehman). Supporters of the black movement feel it is important for "African and Afro-Brazilian history [to] be taught in the country's schools" as it is an important part of Brazilian history and culture (Lehman). While the Black Pride Movement has done a lot to raise awareness and start developmental advancements in this field, there is still a lot more talk than action on the part of the government. Racial equality is an important concept that needs to be put into reality if Brazil is to develop successfully.

If Brazil wants to truly advance and become a developed nation it needs to face up to its reality and address the issues of race and equality. With about half of the population identifying themselves as black or mulatto, Brazil is going to have to deal with its racist mentality and improve the quality of life for its African members.

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