



Taking to the streets for renewal and rejuvenation: *Lavagem do Bonfim 2006*

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"Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge" (Audre Lorde).

When I went to Salvador da Bahia, a beautiful coastal city that enshrines the African heart of Brazil, I did not have an intellectual experience – instead, I drank in my surroundings through my senses. Food that reminded me of home, beautiful bodies, swaying hips, tight muscles, sun, light breezes, smiling faces, and pulsating samba rhythms, all combined to make a sensual feast.

There is a lot to ponder in this part of Brazil, which garnered wealth through hardwood and sugar cultivation, but at a terrible cost. Over two centuries, over 1,3 million African slaves were shipped to this region – more than double the number brought to the entire United States ("A Short History", 2006). During the colonial period, more than 40% of the population in Salvador were enslaved, with the slave population predominantly African-born until around the mid-nineteenth century. With slavery abolished in Brazil only in 1888, the diasporic African communities here, drawn largely from West Africa, mixed with those indigenous peoples not displaced by famine and disease and Portuguese overlords and missionaries to create a unique and lively amalgam of cultures. Today, Salvador and Bahia are the centres of Afro-Brazilian culture, which is vividly expressed in music, dance (samba), popular foods, religion and life-style (*o estido da vida*).

Nevertheless, I found that my thinking was not done in my head – in this case, my whole body was engaged in my experiences. Whether I was exploring the Museum of Modern Art MMA-Bahia, sipping *caipirinha* on the beach, getting very sea-sick on a catamaran voyage to Morro de São Paulo, watching *capoeira* in Pelourinho or learning Afro-Brazilian dance steps, there was a mind-body connection that often eludes me.

This exploration of one aspect of Bahian culture will remain true to the essence of that experience and not attempt to refashion it into academic form or structure. I hope by telling it as it was, you, the reader, will share some of my childlike excitement and get a glimpse of a fascinating happening.

My personal reflections will be threaded with the thoughts of feminist scholars in an attempt to clarify how my experiences might relate to wider issues.

Time magazine has described Salvador da Bahia as the “New Orleans of Brazil” and it is well known for its festivals and annual carnival. *Lavagem do Bonfim* is the second largest street festival in Bahia after carnival. It takes place on the second Thursday in January and has done so every year for the last 150 years. It seems to be a spontaneous outpouring onto the streets of Salvador, not as hectic and physically demanding as Carnival, but regarded with a special reverence.

My Brazilian friends who invited me to take part in the festival said it was “religious”, but with a good “party vibe”, but could give little information concerning its significance. I decided to trust them, but was a bit worried as to how I would explain to my Portuguese language teachers that I was taking the day off to go partying in the streets of the city.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I did do some online research to find out a bit more about the history and significance of the festival. And what an interesting tale it is. It seems that African slaves were banned from practicing their indigenous religions and from participating in Catholic masses. In protest, they devised versions of Christian rituals and claimed their saints, often merging them with *orixas* (spirits or deities that reflect a particular energy or characteristic of the supreme being, *Olodumare*) and other deities. Over the years, the January festival has emerged, combining all these traditions. Cleansing and purification, as well as remnants of protest, remain central. The *Lavagem do Bonfim* festival fuses African religious expression with Catholicism in an intermingling so intricate that the individual parts are indistinguishable. The experience of African syncretism in Bahia, the combination of *Candomblé* (a religion based on African traditions) and Portuguese Christianity bears similarity to other diaspora experiences, reflecting the characteristics of symbolic reinterpretation and continued dynamism (Duncan, 2000). Protests against the banning of African ritual meet the father of all *Orixas*, and the site is a venerable Catholic church, the *Igreja do Bonfim*. Invitations to this religious festival are handed out by *blocos* (bands) to announce the start of the Carnival process.

I need not have worried about explaining my absence. Showing very good common sense, the language school declared that on *Bonfim* day, instruction would take the form of a practical workshop in the city centre. They also issued two pages of safety instructions that were clearly aimed at shielding their European charges from street crime and over-exuberant Brazilians. However,

I planned on having an adventure and insisted on hanging out with the locals. As a born and bred Trini (someone from Trinidad and Tobago), I was confident that I could deal with any street carnival atmosphere in the world. So off I went, camera in hand (this was strictly advised against), but remembering to “drink lots of coconut water”.

The form of the festival is as interesting as its content. It begins in the centre of the lower city, close to the largest former slave market, and takes a 12 km wander to the *Igreja do Bonfim* (Church of Bonfim) on the eastern side of Salvador. Hundreds of thousands of people throng onto the parade route, which is lined with spectators and well-wishers.

The parade itself is led by Brazilian women of African heritage. These leaders are generally dark-skinned, big-bodied women with breasts, hips, bellies and wrinkles. They comport themselves with self-awareness and dignity, and adorn themselves magnificently. They accessorise their ornate white embroidered gowns with gold bracelets, chains and bangles, and carry gourds containing perfumed lavender oil. Along the route they dispense this oil along with flowers. To my mind, this confirms Ann Cahill’s argument that rituals of feminine beautification can offer positive experiences rather than simply degrading and objectifying women (2003). The performance of the Bonfim women goes beyond the familiar feminist criticisms of beautification practices or a simplistic notion of celebrating female adornment. Theirs are beautification rituals that have strong communal, collective and shared characteristics, which not only add to enjoyment, but play other social roles, along the lines of what Cahill terms a “distinctly feminist (inter) subjectivity”.

Janell Hobson (2003) critiques discourses that position black female bodies as sexually grotesque simply because they deviate from dominant categories of (white) beauty. In this regard, the Bahian women leading the *Bonfim* parade successfully overturn white and Western stereotypes and standards of beauty. Other scholars have suggested that positive role-models such as these are important for creating healthy identities for women and challenging the notion that white attributes are the normative standard for beauty. Banks (2000) provides a cogent argument for how through rituals and celebration black women can change historical perceptions of their own beauty. Myself and others present experienced the African-ness of the Baianas leading the *Bonfim* parade as a source of strength and power. Their association with ancient civilisations was not air-brushed over, but rather drawn upon as a source of symbolic and mythical value.

The Baianas leading the procession are not simply beautiful; they are recognised spiritual leaders who hold power in their communities. Their public display and performance is different from that typically associated with carnivals in the Caribbean, where feminist scholars argue that women express power through vigorous displays of sexuality, demonstrating freedom of choice and independence from men and traditional gender roles (Dikobe, 2004; Barnes, 2000). Neither is theirs the “behind-the-scenes” organisational power associated with women’s role in formal religions (Baer, 1993). This was a very visible, expressive and vocal display of power and leadership by women of African heritage in a multi-racial society.

On *Bonfim* day, crowds surge towards these Baianas, reaching out, pleading to be touched, to be held and to receive blessings. On the steps of the church, it is these Afro-Brazilian women who play the lead role in the symbolic washing. As a black woman visitor, I did not expect that Afro-Brazilian women would be considered in a negative light. I don’t have a personal association with the “mammy” stereotypes discussed by many feminist scholars, or instinctively regard black women as representations of “servility, acquiescence and undesirability” (Duncan, 2001: 99–100). I do not experience automatic revulsion associated with large body size or have an expectation of passivity. However, I was struck by the degree of reverence accorded to the Baianas, and the sense of urgency with which men and women in the crowd sought their attention and favours. It is clear that the *Bonfim* festival creates a space in which traditional icons of African femininity are accorded respect.

This experience confirmed for me that elements within the diaspora provide wider definitions of female beauty, eschewing the vilification of beautification rituals present in some feminist theorising. The *Lavagem do Bonfim* festival I attended suggests that adornment, beautification, and particularly the communal and collective aspects of the ritual provide pleasure and positive reinforcement in spiritual, bodily and aesthetic senses.

This should not be read as suggesting that the image of womanhood presented here consistently confronted stereotypes of Western “beauty”. There is as much adoration of the lithe, tanned, waxed bodies that lounge around on Salvador’s beaches outside of the festival as there is for the Baianas!

To return to the festival itself, *Lavagem do Bonfim* is a psychedelic aesthetic experience. Brown and black bodies, blue skies and multi-coloured ribbons intermingle with the white clothing, worn to represent purity and cleansing (Devereaux, 2003). The religious intertwines with the political. Politicians, trade

unionists and community leaders all take part because the people expect it. As 2006 was election year in Brazil, none of the state and municipal leaders missed the opportunity to meet and greet the masses.

Arriving at the *Igreja do Bonfim* was in no way an anticlimax. I felt part of the mass ritual and performance, and shared the sense of culmination, even though I did not understand much of the speeches. On the church steps, the formal aspects of the ritual are enacted, including the ritual washing. The Baianas and their helpers hand out yet more multi-coloured ribbons, with whispered calls to make three wishes and receive blessings for the year to come. The expectation is that the touch and presence of the Baianas will assure that these New Year wishes are granted.

The faint-hearted do not make it all the way to the end of the procession, but are content to have a good time and drink plenty of beer nonetheless. The ceremonial formalities don't last too long, because this is Brazil, and there was serious partying to come.

The streets leading up to the church are turned into roadside discos and bars, alcohol and food is abundant, and the music is turned up. Women dance the erotic samba dressed in mini-skirts and tight skimpy tops, again underscoring the point that different notions of feminine beauty and sexuality are presented almost simultaneously as part of the performance of the festival. We know about embracing both the sacred and the profane in the Caribbean, but even I was surprised at the speed of the code-switching, from religion to party-time. I can understand why some traditionalists, and even young cultural adherents, complain that many who participate in *Bonfim* do so simply as an excuse to enjoy an early carnival in January. I also heard discussions about middle-class folk being too afraid to be with the people in the street, preferring to remain on their balconies and verandahs.

My own experience was one of pleasure. I enjoyed being part of a mass celebration. It didn't matter that many conversations around me were not in my mother tongue. I had an experience that went beyond words; there was a connection to Brazil, to the Caribbean and to Africa. The sharing, the knowing and the commonalities were intuitive. It began by simply allowing myself to feel – and then Bahia took over.

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