

# To the customer's taste: afro-brazilian manifestations in Rio de Janeiro Carnival in the early 20th century as a search for modernity<sup>I</sup>

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**Abstract:** The paper addresses reflections about the insertion of aspects of Afro-Brazilianness in the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro. The idea is to combine tradition and modernity in constructing an identity with the absorption of elements of Afro-Brazilian culture in the official festivity, under the wishes of the elite and the political class.

**Keywords:** *Carnaval. Modernity. Afro-brazilian. Miscegenation.*

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## Introduction:

From what we see today as a natural construction of crowds, Carnival is a somewhat naive act. In this text, we reflect upon and discuss certain transformations in the second quarter of the 20th century in the city of Rio de Janeiro and some essential concepts that permeate the construction of Afro-Brazilian identity and its implications. Based on this premise, the text focuses on the constant presence, assimilated by society at large, representing several Afro-Brazilian culture aspects as an export product of a miscegenated, pacified, multiple, and modern Brazilian image.

It is evident that when talking about modernity, it is crucial to think about the breadth of the term and all that this idea implies. In a recent debate about Brazilian modernity, professor and researcher Marize Malta (2021) brings some reflections to be used as a reference for the 'modern' that we are trying to illustrate with the questions raised in this paper. People perceived the 'modern' in Rio de Janeiro as a multiplicity of possibilities where controversial or complementary references could coexist. For example, as an "old and another new world," a land that is at the same time "agricultural and progressive," a city both "mestizo and worldly," "idyllic and fast," and other characteristics of various times and meanings.

Since the last decades of the nineteenth century, more than any other city, the country's capital felt in its daily life the winds of modernity, seeking a particular way to civilize itself, and at the same time, fall into the samba and carnival festivities. (MALTA, 2021)

According to Malta, the minority-majority made themselves seen and heard through Carnival and samba; iconic figures of the culture coming from the hills descended to the city streets and conquering the sign of modernity and contradictions. A country divided into well-defined classes full of various kinds of exclusions establishes the *malandro* and the *baiana* as a symbol of Brazilianness, miscegenation, and the construction of an official discourse based on the idea of Afro-Brazilian culture.

However, who is interested in this idea? The writing proposes a priori to understand the carnival elements of this popular celebration historically, at the same time bringing the socio-cultural scenario and the Carnival of the 1930s. The insertion of more elaborate and carnivalesque aspects in the parades, their organization, and then selected signs that confer an Afro-Brazilian identity to the festivity. From this point on, it is necessary to think about the Afro-Brazilian concept and its connection with seeking modernity for the nation. It was essential to advance socially, and the *Carnaval*

could serve as a great showcase displaying the country's advances and the exoticism of its miscegenation.

### **The *Carnaval* and the *carnavalesco*:**

The history of Carnival permeates a myriad of milestones and beginnings from the peoples of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, the Romans, and the Christian cultures. We will not delve into the detailed history of Carnival here because that would be another work, but we will go through some significant axes that will ease the approach to the theme. First, it is essential to think that Carnival, as a date and symbol of a pagan festival, starts when the Church instituted Lent during the Middle Ages. Lent is forty days in which the faithful abstain from meat, which can be interpreted literally or not. It can be the flesh on which we feed or, metaphorically, the sins of the flesh that involve, among other things, the pleasures of the body and the spirit. This fast, for the Church, would symbolize the forty days before Easter that precede the Passion of Christ: arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection.

There is also little doubt about the connection between the festive celebrations of ancient civilizations and the follies of contemporary revelry. Nevertheless, one cannot say that Carnival already existed in ancient Egypt or the Greco-Roman civilizations, [...] the festivals in honor of the Egyptian goddess Isis or the Roman god Bacchus, among many others, are not carnival celebrations or precursors only of Carnival, but of all kinds of popular public festivals that the world knew after them, [...]. (FERREIRA, 2004; p. 16)

In the quote above, the author is very didactic when explaining that popular festivals have always existed. Nevertheless, his text points us to a path where we can understand that popular culture and manifestations of joy and fun are inherent to the advent of Lent, but at the same time, may have suffered transformations from this novelty coming from the Church.

Before the beginning of this period, many of these festivities had features that today we can consider "carnavalesque" aspects. Like big celebrations, music, dancing, many people, eating and drinking, and changing roles in society "between the king and a beggar" for example, as pointed out by the author cited above. However, it was not Carnival for all that. "One is at the root of the other, but it is not the same thing." (FERREIRA, 2004; p. 17).

To think about both Carnival and what would be Carnavalesque, we will seek reference in Bakhtin's thought as put by STOREY (1998). According to the author, Bakhtin argues that there is no division between artists and spectators during Carnival. Instead, everyone participates and performs

the Carnival. In this way, the social roles are diluted or even inverted. The participants, according to him, live a moment of carnival attitudes, out of their usual cycle; it is as if life turned inside out “the reverse side of the world, (*‘monde à l’envers’*)” (STOREY, 1998; p.251).

Furthermore, a very relevant issue to reflect on the structure that builds a behavior within a bourgeois Carnival in Brazil is the carnivalesque sense of the world. According to Storey, Bakhtin also deals with the unusual closeness between people and the momentary destructuring of a social hierarchy. There is a suspension of the order of life, laws, and social structures.

For Bakhtin, Carnival unifies, brings together, and combines the sacred and the profane, the significant and insignificant, and allows actions, manifestations, and social and cultural expressions that the dominant society generally would not allow. For the author, the idea of profanity, parody, caricature, and exaggeration, coined over thousands of years in celebrations and manifestations with these characteristics, is among the categories of a behavior or a festivity of Carnavalesque aspects, even if not being Carnival yet.

At this party, on the contrary, a sign is given that everyone is allowed to behave in the craziest and silliest way they want and that, except for punches and knife strokes, everything else is allowed. [...] Everyone approaches everyone, everyone grabs, with ease, what comes his way, and boldness and freedom alternate with each other, being balanced by a generally good mood. (GOETHE, 2017; p.525)

We note above Goethe’s text in his book “Journey to Italy,” where he devotes a significant chapter to describing the Roman Carnival. In the passage, the author emphasizes differentiated behavior, out of the social standard and maybe even foolish—the moment when the most different and unacceptable behavioral manifestations could be accepted and enjoyed. Everyone there, the people, the elite, and the Church are aware that it is only momentary; the festive extravagance is characteristic of this period of exaggeration that will end on Ash Wednesday when life returns to normality.

We can imagine that Carnival arrived in Brazil as a festivity that celebrates the beginning of Lent with the Portuguese colonizers as early as the 16th century. The imposed Catholic religiosity that came to colonial Brazil across the Atlantic resulted in new forms of the custom of revelry during the Carnival period.

By observing a really picturesque and perhaps allegorical scene of how carnival and mass festivities in the Colony were configured in Debret’s lithograph (1823), we come across an image of a Brazil that the elite would like to



Image 1  
Jean-Baptiste Debret,  
*Cena de Carnaval*, 1823,  
lithograph, n.d, Viagem  
Pitoresca ao Brasil,  
Jean-Batiste Debret.

leave in the past when entering the 20th century. In his visual account of Brazil, the artist illustrated and materialized in some of his works an idea of a free party, somewhat disorganized, dominated by blacks, and could bring risks to the ladies and gentlemen of the upper classes. Other entertainment forms began being practiced by the elite, but in their homes, privately, so as not to mix with the blacks and mestizos.

According to Felipe Ferreira's "*Livro de Ouro do Carnaval Brasileiro*"<sup>1</sup> (2004), the party initially took place in the beginning as "*molhadelas e enfarinhamentos*"<sup>2</sup> as we can see in the picture above, in the same model as the European "*Entrudos*," where the revelers threw powder of various shades on their "opponents." The party was divided into two groups:

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- 1 Title translated by the authors as *The Golden Book of Brazilian Carnival*.
  - 2 Translated by the authors as "water-bombs and flour-bombs."

one that took place inside the houses and among friends and that we will call 'family' and another that took over the streets, basically involving the poorer population and slaves, which we will call 'popular.' (FERREIRA, 2004; p. 81)

### **Rio de Janeiro and *Carnaval*:**

Many behavioral dialogues took place that led to various reformulations. The revelry of the Carnival period underwent many changes, and 300 years passed until a significant political transformation brought the Colony other aspects of cultural manifestations and social behavior. The arrival of the Royal Family in the 19th century also brought other traditions, and Carnival would be no different.

Many habits came upon the arrival of the Portuguese crown in 1808, a remarkable fact in the history of European expansion and colonization—a court settling in a Colony outside Europe. For various reasons, French customs predominated. France was in fashion. (FERREIRA, 2004). The French mission brought by D. João VI in 1816 introduced an idea of modernity, freedom, and civility. After the Independence of Brazil, this influence became even more explicit. An idea emerged, as in Europe, that everything that came from France was modern, unlike the customs that came from Portugal, which were considered outdated.

With the influence of French customs, the Carnival model based on the “Entrudo” jokes, according to Ferreira (2004), distanced itself more and more from the elite that wanted to get closer to the French high aristocracy by creating the masked balls. As a result, the “Entrudo” was not well seen, and its participants were persecuted, arrested, and forbidden to practice this popular tradition for some time.

From the 19th century on, the balls depicted luxury and exclusivity, while the people played on the streets and often ignored the prohibitions. Just as in the history of Carnival around the world, many facts and dialogues occurred and went on transforming this celebration; in Brazil, it was no different. We will not weave here details of the history of Carnival in Brazil. However, we will focus mainly on the need to insert ‘Africanness’ into Carnival so that the image of a diverse and exotic country would meet the tastes within the thinking of a new blooming elite and foreign tourists in the twentieth century.

The streets of downtown Rio de Janeiro were important actors in the organization of national revelry. They represented the preferred stage for the elite-style carnival



societies and established themselves as the space to enable and encourage the emergence of popular carnival groups. It is through the disputes and dialogues that occurred in these narrow ways that the Carnival of Rio would begin to structure the celebration that would set the pattern for the entire country. (FERREIRA, 2004; p.157)

Much has happened during the construction of the Carnival that we have today: from the elite's processions protected by men mounted on horses to get to the balls; from the criminalization of entrudos; from the processions with saints, images, and painted panels to the parades of the great societies and summits organized with costumes and decorated carriages; to the routes defined and delimited by the elite of society in the streets of downtown Rio de Janeiro in an attempt to control the festivity; to groups of mass people who organized themselves to go out on the streets playing and exhibiting, or rather, externalizing their fantasies.

In the previous image, we can observe a parade of the grand carnival societies, still keeping a privileged space for the elite. The photograph shows an ornamented car, with effects and symbols that entertain and

Image 2  
Augusto Malta. Parade  
of the Great Carnival  
Societies, 1919, pho-  
tography, s.d., Source:-  
Fotografia, s.d.. Fonte:  
[https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Desfile\\_das\\_grandes\\_sociedades\\_carnavalescas\\_Acervo\\_do\\_Instituto\\_Moreira\\_Salles.jpg](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Desfile_das_grandes_sociedades_carnavalescas_Acervo_do_Instituto_Moreira_Salles.jpg), Acervo Instituto  
Moreira Sales



amuse the people sprawling in the streets. The upper class produced such celebration to offer the people who watched the parade and enjoyed various performances.

This moment is transitory and before the emergence of a concept of Brazilianness that would come in the 1930s. According to Schwarcz and Starling (2015), the Brazilian is born where the miscegenation begins. It is from this miscegenation, however, that permanences and erasures are constituted at the same time.

The mixture was no longer a handicap to become a compliment, and several regional practices associated with the popular - in cooking, dancing, music, religion - would be properly de-Africanized. Transformed into a reason for national pride, they were acclaimed, and are to this day considered, a mark of the country's cultural originality. (SCHWARCZ; STARLING, 2015; p. 378)

As complex as this trajectory is, with many negotiations, disputes, transformations, adaptations of customs, class struggles, and conquests of territory, the Carnival in the Brazilian capital, Rio de Janeiro, gradually transforms itself until it reaches the present day. Two ideas, however, should be highlighted to permeate the rest of our text. The first one is the presence of Africanness and blackness in the Carnival as a flag of originality, modernity, and Brazilianness at a particular moment in this history. The second is the inversion of roles and behavior personified by the costumes and frivolities during the festivities, already mentioned by Goethe and Bakhtin, that allowed the revelers to be during these days of celebration of what they were not or could not be during the rest of the year.

### **Afro-Brazilian representation as a symbol of modernity:**

To get into the heart of this issue, this aspect or concept that we call Afro-Brazilian should be regarded. Roberto Conduru (2007) brings *Arte Afro-Brasileira* an approach that seems pertinent to the theme treated here. Defining an aesthetic or even art as Afro-Brazilian becomes a very complex action because it does not require a previous definition of what is either African or Brazilian. The definition of an Afro-Brazilian aesthetic should not be a reductionist task given that Africa is a continent where many nations, diverse cultures, and multiple characteristics coexist, and Brazil is a country with a continental dimension that has received and re-signified several influences. In this way, we will use here the idea of an encounter with the crossroads that Afro-Brazilianness leads us to, just as the author reveals in his study:



In this sense, the expression Afro-Brazilian art indicates not a style or an artistic movement produced only by, or representative of, Brazilian Afro-descendants, but a plural field, composed of very diverse objects and practices, linked in different ways to Afro-Brazilian culture, from which artistic, cultural and social tensions can be problematized aesthetically and artistically. (CONDURU, 2007; p.11)

However, the Afro-Brazilian aesthetics or the interest of the Rio de Janeiro elite to absorb such elements refer to the influence of enslaved black African people recently freed from slavery but still attached to their origin. They will bring Brazil their knowledge and transform their manifestations into new territory with several other elements. Thus, to understand Afro-Brazilianness, a constant dialog is needed in the different fields of knowledge, from the geopolitical, cultural, and historical dimensions to the diasporic feeling of struggle, negotiation, and survival.

Some relevant factors of the culture of the enslaved blacks in Brazil that also infiltrated the customs of the bourgeois elite are of importance. Past the abolition of slavery in 1888, 80% of the population of Rio de Janeiro was composed of blacks. Taken from their nations and brought by force to Brazil for many years, hundreds of thousands of men and women carried nothing but their culture and memories in their luggage. Forced to forget their faith, their family, their habits, and often their language, Africans and their descendants in the Colony clung to a few breaches in the *modus vivendi* here in order not to succumb. Together with their feelings of survival and struggle, relying on the memory and practices of spirituality, they allowed for cultural diversity to flourish, which we can find woven into several manifestations in Brazil: in religion, in cooking, in behavior, in music, in dance, among others.

The religions of African origin were forbidden to be practiced throughout most of history, including their festivals and customs. These religions were polytheistic, unified the black people, gave strength and faith to the enslaved, and went against the dogmas and laws of the Catholic Church. The blacks were forcibly baptized even before they entered the slave ships, and here, already on Brazilian soil, they had to pray under the same rule. With much struggle, resistance, and transformations, religious and cultural syncretism happened in Brazil. The blacks could shape religious cults and celebrations that combined signs of both Catholicism and their religions of origin. The best-known examples of these syncretic manifestations are the *Igrejas das Ordens* ('Order Churches') that appeared to receive the black and mixed-race population and the popular religious festivities that mixed dances, music, and the most diverse symbolic representations. Like Nossa

Senhora da Conceição, São Jorge, Nossa Senhora Aparecida; and also the Candomblé and Umbanda temples. The latter have always suffered countless prohibitions and retaliations, as they still do today, even though these cults are allowed in Brazil today.

At the end of the 19th century, there was an effort by a large part of the Brazilian elite to put into practice an idea of whitening the population as a way to build a national identity, showing purity and superiority. Therefore, it was essential to erase the massive presence of black people and create various stimuli for a new wave of migration of Europeans to Brazil. Already in the early twentieth century, after World War I, other concepts, coming from other origins, permeated the search for a Brazilian nationality that would include a more diverse identity with the multiple identities that already existed in this country. Ferreira (2014) also cites the Art Week of 1922 and the book “Casa Grande e Senzala” by Gilberto Freyre as a critical ratifying moment for constructing this new look at the new emerging Brazilianness.

Again many dialogues and negotiations ensued, and the Carioca Carnival became the symbol of Carnival in Brazil until other places could, throughout the century, seek their own identities.

“Carnaval came to represent the synthesis of Brazil. It was no longer a celebration with a specific format but a meeting of diverse festivals and popular rhythms. The carnival revelry would provide, thus, an epiphany, a moment of intense contact with the national “truth.” (FERREIRA, 2004; p. 255)

To continue this thought and return to our theme, the cathartic idea of Carnival is essential, that carnival spirit in which what is forbidden is allowed, to which Bakhtin called our attention. Furthermore, one should reflect on what would be this national truth cited by the author as perceived by the Brazilian elite.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Rio de Janeiro Carnival became a grand national celebration. Many transformations occurred throughout the years that preceded this movement in Brazil - such as the emergence of *ranchos*, *blocos*, and *cordões*, the organization of the parades - until it reached the samba schools, the competitions, and the tremendous universal celebration. Hence the article resumes the idea of thinking about Afro-Brazilian representation in Rio’s Carnival as an element to confer modernity and, at the same time, to be a space of resistance, a mixture of different ways of experiencing culture, negotiation, and insubordination beyond the permission of the conservative Christian elite. The party is configured as a

constant space of articulation and belonging of the “carioca urban space,” as defined by Ferreira (2004).

After the end of the 19th century, when the rule was to whiten the population, the Brazilian intellectuals went through reinventing the symbol of the Republic by seeking a Brazilianness along with an idea of modernity. This action in the early twentieth century includes, among other things, moving away from the characteristics that would bring the country closer to Portugal and imbuing itself with habits and tastes that would bring this “new” nation closer to French practices. With modern art and the modernist ideals coming from France, especially with Picasso’s cubism, the interest of Europeans in African art increased the interest of Brazil’s upper class and intellectuals. However, as Carl Einstein would say (1915, apud O’NEILL and CONDURU, 2015, p.29), “... the judgment hitherto attributed to the Negro and his art characterized much more the person who issued this judgment than its object<sup>3</sup>”. Thus, there was a search and a constant need for Europe to contact and collect African art. These cultural manifestations of African origin that took shape in Brazil caused the Brazilian intellectual elite to desire, admit, or even pay attention to the banquet of black culture presented here. In the 1920s, the movement to construct an idea of nationhood became more robust. Several writers, musicians, and visual artists began to rescue the characters that would unite the nation.

The idea was to unite Brazil’s cultural diversity into a homogeneous idea. This project of building a unified national identity would cause, for example, many artists with an academic background to incorporate popular elements in their work, as did Maestro Villa-Lobos, who added typical congada instruments to his orchestra’s presentation during the Week of Modern Art of 1922. (FERREIRA, 2004; p. 250)

Although this action of aesthetic and cultural miscegenation was not a consensus, these negotiations happened. Within the perspective of the idea of Carnival as the people’s festivity, it was reformulating itself and absorbing various characteristics. Recalling Goethe and Bakhtin, if the celebration idea were to be what one usually could not be -role-playing and hierarchy challenging- there would be no harm in absorbing in the days of revelry new elements of culture coming from Africa. These elements relate to modern and exotic ways of building this new idea of nation and approaching French

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3 Translated by the authors. Original citation: “... o juízo até então atribuído ao negro e a sua arte caracterizou muito mais quem emitia tal juízo do que seu objeto”

modernism. According to Ferreira (2004), the carnival revelry became a distraction escape from the daily struggle. A kind of “anthropophagic” cauldron where everything is capable of being transformed.

### Final considerations:

The great societies paraded with their richly decorated floats through the streets in the so-called Grand Carnival in the late 19th century and the wake of the 20th century. It was a celebration offered to the people in ornate cars and with diverse themes. Nevertheless, on the other hand, a “carnavalesque confusion” (TURANO and FERREIRA, 2013) composed of popular groups was formed in the city’s streets. Gradually, the differences increased, and Rio de Janeiro had well-defined three clear styles of popular manifestations in Carnival: *cordões*, *blocos*, and *ranchos*.

The “Entrudo” game, intended for blacks, had been criminalized and persecuted, although it continued in various formats and spaces. The *cordões*, *ranchos*, and *blocos* were shunned and elevated to a smaller carnival called *Pequeno Carnaval*. The *Sociedades Carnavalescas*, *Bailes*, and parades of the elite formed a more prestigious carnival called *Grande Carnaval*. Over time, the *ranchos* became softer, and the *cordões* were considered more aggressive. The *blocos* stood between these characteristics and marched through the streets with rhythms, dances, and costumes. Over time the *ranchos* become more sophisticated and gradually lose some of their originality. They will parade in the noble profession of Carnival, yet they will move away from the roots of the streets.

Society gradually resolved this dilemma through conviviality, experience, and governmental and popular strength. Although, on the one hand, the *ranchos* became more sophisticated and distanced themselves, on the other hand, the *cordões* still inspired the idea of disorder. At this moment, the intellectuals began to look at the morros and favelas. They identified a manifestation that could gather the necessary characteristics to confer rhythm, joy, and Afro-Brazilian identity to the revelry, coming closer to the idea of essence, tradition, and modernity: the samba schools. These groups stood out and differentiated themselves from all the others by their organization and the instruments and the new rhythm that echoed a batucada samba. According to (TURANO and FERREIRA, 2013), “a carnival expression capable of representing the Brazilian people in its ‘essence,’ ‘traditionality’ and ‘innocence.’”

The 20th century progresses and, still based on this same idea of seeking a Brazilian nationality for the celebration, there is paradoxically a movement of

importing French customs that increasingly admired the black culture after the success of Josephine Baker and the Jazz musicians. The Brazilian intellectuals see in Carnival the excellent opportunity to show their advance towards modernity. Carnival absorbed the culture and the rhythm of the blacks in Brazilian popular art to insert itself in the image of a nation that advances towards a modern world without losing its traditions. Notwithstanding, Carnival also approaches the French elite and causes the insertion of the favelas and the slums in the making and showing of Carnival to attract foreign tourists who search for the other, exotic and unusual. At the same time, Europeans and North Americans demonstrate an awakening and a taste for the ethnic aspect of this cultural mixture, which attracts foreigners to Brazil who comes in search of the national signs already known and identified abroad.

Although this new format or genre still needed to be officially recognized by society and the party organizers, it was a big hit among the intellectuals. Moreover, it would not be so difficult for the elite to admit this black protagonism since Carnival was the time and place to live unexperienced fantasies during the rest of the year. It was the place of dreams and fantasy. Thus, two racial-pacification-oriented figures emerged to represent miscegenation in Brazil: the *malandro* (trickster) and the *baiana* (woman from Bahia) from the hills and streets of Rio de Janeiro.

From this moment on, these characteristics became more and more evident and absorbed by society. Carmen Miranda sold abroad the image of a Bahian, just as Zé Carioca.<sup>4</sup> sold the image of a good-hearted rascal. Visual artists, writers, and musicians helped spread this image, reinforcing and re-signifying stereotypes coined by Jean-Baptiste Debret, Johann Moritz Rugendas, and other traveling artists. They had always projected an image of an African, indigenous, miscegenated Brazil now in the 20th century, taking advantage of this “myth of origin” to leave behind and advance in the modern world.

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4 The Brazilian character from Walt Disney Studios, trademark registered, is an anthropomorphic green parrot with a witty, crafty, trickster, yet sympathetic, warm-hearted, and easygoing personality.



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