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# The History Of Afro-Brazilian People: A Theme Of The Burdening History Of Brazil

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## THE HISTORY OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN PEOPLE: A THEME OF THE BURDENING HISTORY OF BRAZIL

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### Abstract

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### Introduction

The predominance of the memory of the winners and the absence of conflicts have been constants in historical Brazilian culture. However, the country also has a history full of events that can be considered as 'burdening history'. According to the German historian von Borries (2016) the term 'burdening history' refers to those past experiences involving damage, injuries, guilt/shame, or all together. As an example of this past subjects in Brazil, we can mention the events related to the war against Paraguay, the genocide of indigenous populations, social conflicts, the struggle for land in a country of landowners, the tortures should be within the periods of Brazilian Dictatorships and, especially, the history of the Afro-Brazilian people.

The history of the Afro-Brazilian people is one of the main issues of historical Brazilian culture, due to the consequences that the enslavement of Africans, which lasted from 1530 to 1888, brought to our society. Considered as one of the major atrocities in the history of Brazil, this past subject still has issues that need to be discussed in history education. In this paper, the topic is addressed by asking the following question: regarding the enslavement of African peoples in Brazil in the context of historical culture (Rüsen, 2016) and burdening history (Von Borries, 2016), what is the relationship between the writings of Brazilian historians, the media and the historical education of children and youth? To answer the question, this paper took as reference the category of 'historical culture' described as "a phenomenon that has long characterized the role of historical memory in the public space (...) it includes academic research, school education,

the media, conservation of monuments and museums and other institutions” (Rüsen, 2016, p. 55), intending to analyze the place of this theme in the historiographic literature on the enslavement of the African in the Brazilian history, as well as its presence in the media and demonstrations of Brazilian popular culture. The category of ‘school culture’ is defined as “the set of cognitive and symbolic contents that selected, organized, standardized and routinized under the effect of the didatization imperatives, are usually the object of a deliberate transmission in the school context” (Forquin, 1993, p. 167); which differs from the concept of ‘culture from school’, in other words, the understanding of the processes and practices that produce learning (Forquin, 1993, p. 167). Those notions together guided the analysis of the results of researches already carried out by specialists in the history teaching, about the presence of the slavery theme in textbooks and within the opinions of the students. The selection and analysis of documentary sources was based on the methodology of triangulation, defined as the use of multiple methods and possibilities for the investigation of the same phenomenon. (Martins, 2004 & Duffy, 2007).

### **The issue of the history of the Afro-Brazilians and the historiographical debate**

The nineteenth century is considered a period of new discovery in Brazil and the creation of the History and Brazilian Institute – IHGB in 1839 was very important in this process. Created just after Brazil became independent from Portugal in 1822, the IHGB stimulated, mainly, the debate around two themes: the construction of the nation’s history, with features of exaltation and glorification of the fatherland and the debate on the race issue, which sought to meet and identify the ethnic composition of the Brazilian population. Regarding Brazilian historical writing, since the end of the nineteenth century, *what was intended was to create a historical narrative to justify a model of the Brazilian nation, understood as an extension of the history of Western Europe. The proposals understood nationality as a summary of the white, black and indigenous races, with a predominance of an ideology of white supremacy* (Sobanski, 2008, p. 35). One of the first person to reflect on the African influence in the Brazilian society was doctor Nina Rodrigues, who presented the issue of black people as a social problem. Influenced by the prospect of eugenics and social Darwinism, Rodrigues, in his book *Africans in Brazil (free translation)*, values the presence of African culture and the rituals of this culture. However, at the same time, he suggests that it is inferior to European civilization and culture. This book was written between 1890 and 1905 and was published in 1933. Despite the wealth of details with which he analyses the presence of the African elements in the Brazilian society, he expresses the theory that the poverty and misery in Brazil could be explained by the predominance of black African labor. This theory formed the basis on which successive Brazilian governments stimulated European migration to Brazil, contributing to the consolidation of prejudices and stereotypes in relation to the Brazilian population of African origin.

Gilberto Freyre is also considered to be an architect of the idea formation of Brazilian nationality. This sociologist, in one of his major works, *Casa Grande and Senzala* (2001), rejects the racist doctrines of whites in Brazil, arguing that racial determinism did not influence the development of the country. In his opinion, the African culture was as complex as the European white culture was. Although he considered European culture far superior to that of the indigenous peoples, in his opinion, a harmonic mixing of African and white cultures was possible.

This perspective gave rise to the so-called ‘myth of racial democracy’ in Brazil. At the same time, it allowed Brazilian slavery to be considered less bad than slavery in the United States. This difference is explained, per Freire, because the Portuguese colonist would have created a humanized slavery, influenced by the peculiarities of their cultural history. It was the prospect of ‘Brazilian racial democracy’ that influenced the ways in which Brazil started to be recognized and represented by other countries, since:

it is still the image of peaceful racial cohabitation, set by Freire, that appears drawn in the Zé Carioca from Disney and in the Carnival exported by the travel agencies, that increasingly distances the idea from the reality. This mixed country representation turns from negative into exotic, from scientific to entertainment. No wonder that on postcards, Brazil is still presented as a multicolor country. (Schwarcz, 1993, p. 249).

According to the Brazilian expert, Thomas Skidmore (1976), it is an optimistic view of miscegenation in Brazil that, countersigned in the superiority of the white element, considered that the inferiority of blacks would be slowed down as the traits of the population and culture of white people became predominant over others.

From the 1950s and in the context of the post Second World transformations, this image of Brazil caused the country to be considered a representative model of the possibility of a peaceful and harmonious coexistence between the different races and peoples by UNESCO. At the same time, Brazilian researchers pointed out that the problem of our society was not racial, but mainly social and the experience of 350 years of slavery had deleted the Afro-Brazilians from the labor market, with the consequent cultural exclusion (Fernandes, 2007). This perspective understood that the Afro-Brazilian was integrated into Brazilian society as victim of an exploitative system and was not yet seen and analysed as an agent of its own history. A new Brazilian historiography questioned the pathological construction of the slave and the free solely as a legacy of slavery. In the context of the celebrations of 100 years after the abolition of slavery in Brazil, in 1988, several works were published. New approaches became part of the historiographical debate (Benzaquem, 1994), particularly those who sought to research the experience of enslaved blacks, freemen and the new social contexts they created. This new Brazilian historiography has absorbed the contributions from authors such as Paul Giro (2001) and defended the idea that the historical Brazilian culture is not a universe without races, particularly regarding the presence of Africa in Brazilian society, considering the large number of Africans who came and whose descendants are a substantial and meaningful part of our society.

### **The history of Afro-Brazilians and history education in Brazil**

In Brazil, history education related to the history of Afro-Brazilian people is made mainly through the teaching of history in schools, through the media and through some expressions of the Brazilian culture, such as the Carnival. Regarding school history education, the teaching of the history of Afro-Brazilians is treated as one of the controversies in the history of Brazil. This fact was taken over by the Brazilian Ministry of Education, so that in 1980 a program called 'Controversies in the History of Brazil' was created. It was intended for high school students and aimed to discuss points considered to be conflicting in the country history. One of the main topics discussed was 'black slavery in Brazil', because "we selected some basic themes in the history of Brazil, which give rise to hasty judgments or are closely linked to prejudices". (Brazil/MEC 1980, p. 12).

One of the arguments that made the teaching of black slavery a controversial topic was the influence of historiography on history teaching. The perspectives of historians helped to build national identity, as well as the relationship of the Brazilian nation with other peoples. This construction was forged from the appreciation of the Eurocentric cultural tradition and the Afro-Brazilian population became part of the national identity, based on folkloric contributions, based on prejudicial views, which did not acknowledge or consider their rights or recognize their own identities.

### **School historical education: textbooks and history of Afro-Brazilians**

From the early 20th century until the late 1970's, textbooks of history were the major diffusers of traditional historiographical perspectives. After the installation of the Republic in Brazil in 1889, authors of textbooks spread ideas, such as that the black slaves would be a minor element in the formation of the Brazilian nation. This underling position was principally because of the perceived inferiority of the black race and African civilizations in relation to the European. The main authors of textbooks of the early 20th century, although condemning slavery, justified its existence as a bland and humanized slavery, which encompassed harmony between the races.

From the decade of 1980, the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1984) provided, among other things, a renewal of Brazilian historiography and, consequently, greater renewal of textbooks. Marxist historiography began to make its presence in the approaches of these books. Slavery was no longer explained by reasons of traditional historiography but was the result of exploitative relations between the metropolis and the country, based on the link between export monopoly, monoculture, landowning farmers and the exploitation of slave labor. This new approach, however, kept the Afro-Brazilians as a passive and subordinate members of Brazilian society who were treated as merchandise.

According to Costa (2005) some textbooks still reveal this perspective, as can be seen in the title of the book chapters about the topic: *Slavery, pain that produces wealth* (free translation) (Ferreira, 1991) and *From Africa to plantations: a one-way street* (free translation) (Carmo & Couto, 1997). The subtitles of these chapters also reinforce this vision: *cloth, bread and stick and slave Life* (free translation) (Carmo & Couto, 1997) and *Slaves: hands and feet of the Brazilian society* (free translation) (Ferreira, 1991). To the same author, the Afro-Brazilian was transformed into a being devoid of any possibility of intervention and action in the society, without the possibility of establishing interactions based on solidarity and affection. One of the issues about the life of the Afro-Brazilian population spread by textbooks, currently already deconstructed by historiography, is on the lack of family relationships among the Afro-descendants.

Furthermore, most of the images presented in the textbooks of history were produced by European travellers who were in Brazil in the 19th century. Due to the ease of access and copyright release, these pictures have become canonical, even in more recent books. They are evidence of the reality of the everyday life of slavery in Brazil. So these images became confused with reality by children and young students in schools. In his research, Costa (2005) analysed images present in the more frequently used history textbooks in Brazilian schools and, according to the frequency that they appeared in the texts, also found that they were mostly from two 19th century European travellers: The German painter Johann Moritz Rugendas, who was in Brazil (1822–1825) with the scientific expedition of Baron Von Langsdorff and the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Debret, who came to Brazil in 1816, with the French Artistic Mission, and remained until 1831. The purpose of this mission was to set up the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's capital and headquarters of the Empire.

From the end of the 20th century, in the process of democratization that followed the end of the military dictatorship, the role of the black movement became a constant variable in Brazilian society, generating several affirmative actions on the part of successive governments, such as the establishment of quotas for black people in public universities. The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 proposed the protection and promotion of the indigenous and Afro-Brazilian culture. After the World Conference to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance, promoted by the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the UN, which took place in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, there were increased protests and complaints in

Brazil, particularly on the part of black movements and intellectuals committed to this cause. These movements started to have the support of the Brazilian State with the creation of the State Department for the Promotion of Racial Equality and also of international philanthropic organizations.

As a signatory to the Durban Declaration, the Brazilian Government had the challenge of facing and proposing measures that could result in more inclusive ways of integrating the Afro-descendant population as citizens with full rights. One of the results of the action of the State occurred during President Lula's Government, when the law 10.639, from January 9, 2003, was sanctioned, establishing the obligatory inclusion in the curriculum of schools in Brazil, of issues related to the history of Africa and the Afro-Brazilian culture, recognizing the contribution of these people to the formation of the Brazilian national identity.

In 2008, with support from UNESCO, the Brazilian Ministry of Education proposed the document, Contributions to the Implementation of the law 10.639/03. According to this document,

Law 10.639/2003 can be considered a point of arrival of an historical struggle of the black population to be portrayed with the same value of other peoples that came here, and a starting point for social change. On educational policy, the implementation of law 10.639/2003 means deep rupture with a type of pedagogical position that does not recognize the differences resulting from the way our nation was formed. In addition to the positive impact on the black population, this law must be seen as fundamental challenge of the set of policies aimed at improving the quality of Brazilian education for everybody. (UNESCO/MEC. Contributions to the implementation of the law 10.639/2003, p. 10).

This document refers to the importance of the development of actions which aimed at evaluating Brazilian textbooks, based on this policy, through the National Textbooks Program (PNLD). This program carries out, systematically and periodically, the evaluation of publications that are produced by different publishers in Brazil and, if they are approved, they are distributed free of charge by the government, to the children and youth in Brazilian public schools. Among the criteria for approval of the textbooks, there are principles such as:

promote a positive image of Afro-descendants and descendants of the indigenous ethnic groups of Brazil, considering their participation in different jobs, professions and places of power; – promote positively the Afro-Brazilian culture and indigenous Brazilian peoples, giving visibility to their values, traditions, organizations and social-scientific knowledge, considering their rights and their participation in different historical processes that have marked the construction of Brazil, appreciating cultural differences in our multicultural society and to address the theme of racial-ethnic relations, prejudice, racial discrimination and related violence, aimed at building an anti-racist, solidary, fair and equal society. (Brasil /MEC//FNDE/ PNLD, 2014)

Regarding the inclusion of African history as a curricular component and with mandatory content in textbooks, there are still serious problems, due to the predominance of the great historical narrative based on the Eurocentric division of history: ancient history, medieval history, modern history and contemporary history.

In the curriculum of history teacher formation and in schools, as well as in the content of textbooks, the history of Brazil is 'integrated' in this linear division of periods and in Eurocentric history. The concepts of Africa, African culture and Afro-descents are still tied to a narrative based on traditional periodization of history. This is a way to insert the African continent in the history of

Brazil only beginning from when the Portuguese introduced the black population through modern slavery, which caused the migration of hundreds of thousands of Africans to Brazil.

### **The history of Afro-Brazilians in the Brazilian historical culture: examples from the media and the Carnival**

Although textbooks are important instruments in the formation of the historical consciousness of the young people and children, they are not the only ones. Other means of circulation and dissemination of historical knowledge, such as television, need to be considered in that process. For the researcher Selva Fonseca (2003) in Brazil, it is mainly the television, which is very influential in that country, that has reinforced traditional and stereotypical conceptions of the history of Afro-Brazilians. For this author, it is particularly the television soap operas, one of the key elements in the development of Brazilian television, with large audiences and great success, that have reinforced perceptions of slavery which are rooted in the Brazilian society. From 1970, numerous Brazilian soap operas introduced the presence of Africans, but usually in subordinate and enslavement situations.

One of the soap operas that covered this topic had two versions, called *A Escrava Isaura* (1977 – Rede Globo channel and 2005 – Rede Record channel). It was a great success and was also shown in other countries such as Portugal, Mexico and Argentina. It is the reproduction for television of a literary work, written by Bernardo Guimarães in the late 19th century, during the context of the fight for the abolition of slavery in Brazil. The play expresses the condemnation of slavery, but the main character, Isaura, is represented as a white girl, despite being the daughter of a black mother and white father. The representation of the character as a mulatto woman, at the time when the play was written, would sound bad for a society in which this female figure was associated with the black race. (Grijó & Souza, 2012).

Regarding the theme of black people and slavery, the Carnival, one of the largest popular festivals in Brazil, has also been very influential. In 2006, two carnival groups ('samba schools') from São Paulo chose plots related to the issue of the African in Brazil: *Rosas de Ouro*, which focused on the theme of the *African diaspora – a crime against mankind*, and *Nenê de Vila Matilde* that addressed the theme of racism. In 2007, Africa was the subject of three samba schools in a special Rio de Janeiro group. The champion, *Beija-Flor*, presented the plot *Africanas: from the real cradle to the Brazilian court*; *Salgueiro* took to the Avenue *Candances: fights, freedom and consecration*; and *Porto da Pedra* modeled *Black and white in color*. (Bispo, 2009).

### **The theme of the history of Afro-Brazilians and the learning of children and young people: what the researchers say**

In research conducted with children aged 9 and 10 years, from the fourth grade of elementary school in a public school, the teacher, Soraia Freitas Dutra, aimed to address the topic of black people in the history of Brazil, trying to deconstruct, through questioning procedures, representations that children had. (*Apud* Siman, 2005). Firstly, before working on the topic in the classroom, she sought to identify, through a diagnostic activity, students' representations of the 'way of life of the black people in Brazil'. She asked the children to make a representation of black people and their ways of life, and then to write explanatory phrases of their drawings. The percentage of 56% of the 36 children drew slave labor, 33% focused on punishment, and approximately 17% drew black people working and being beaten at the same time.

In the drawings, the clear majority of children related black people to slavery and slavery to physical violence. The instruments of torture were highlighted, especially chains and the whip and

showed the facial expressions of the black people marked by suffering, with bruises or crying. The research showed that, among the students surveyed, only one made any kind of reference to forms of resistance to enslavement. The child drew a slave who tried to destroy the chains locking him up, expressing the intention to possibly escape.

A second survey was carried out by Ramos (2009) in a central public school in a big Brazilian city, with a teacher with innovative ideas. Four classes of the 1st year of high school were randomly chosen. Each class had an average of 40 students. However, only 37 students, representing the four classes, could effectively participate as subjects of the research, and the clear majority were in the range between 15 and 17 years old. The students belonged to different ethnic and racial groups. The objective was to verify if, after contact with new approaches on the topic, students were able to build more complex historical narratives. For this, 38 images of black slavery in Brazil were delivered and the students were prompted to identify the elements: characters, relationships between them, their costumes, actions they developed, objects present in the scenes and scenarios. The students were asked to choose 10 that, in their opinion, represented best slavery in Brazil and, after choosing, to write a narrative on the subject. Common elements were identified which made it possible to group the narratives around the idea related to violence and suffering as fundamental marks of black slavery in Brazil. Those were the basis on which this system was developed, according to the students, who emphasized the depiction of violence, both on the images they selected, and in the stories they told. According to Ramos (2009) in 61 narratives analyzed, 26 were grouped in this category.

All students selected the image *Execution of the Punishment of the Whip*, from Debret, and only one did not select *Plantation overseers disciplining blacks*, also from Debret. These are very common images in textbooks, including in the book used by the students. Among 26 stories, only 6 established some sort of relationship between the past and the present in the text, to condemn and emphasize the violence or show the permanence of certain adverse conditions on black life. One of them, at the end of his story, wrote

*'slavery doesn't end here, enslaved black people suffered discrimination and were marginalized, forming what today we know as slum, i.e., slavery was one of the worst inventions of man'.*

Another ends his story by telling that black people were in search of 'a freedom that, to date, has not been fully achieved.' (Ramos, 2009, p. 105). Still, according to Ramos, in other narratives – 20% – the issue of cultural manifestation of the slave appeared harder, aesthetically valuing the Afro-Brazilian culture, its beauty and specific way of life. A small group, (10%) assigned to the slave a much more active role and could contemplate, at least in parts, the complexity of slave life in Brazil.

### **Some conclusions**

Taking as reference the Jörn Rüsen's category 'Historical Culture', some considerations can be made. Firstly, learning the topic African Slavery can be considered as part of the 'burdening History' of Brazil, both a product and a producer of the historical culture of our society and is controversially characterized by four elements constituting this historical culture (Rusen, 2016):

the aesthetic dimension, present in the media, in the images that illustrate the textbooks and in the celebrations of the Brazilian culture, as the Carnival,

the political dimension, exemplified in the need for the presence of the state to manage the tensions created historically by the way in which the Afro-Brazilian population was regarded



in our society (prejudice, racial discrimination, stereotypes), and the proposition of laws and principles for evaluation of history teaching material,

the cognitive dimension, present in the way the academic production of historical knowledge has addressed the theme and its implementation in the form of school historical knowledge.

the ethical dimension, represented by the isolated actions of teachers and educators committed to changes in social relations in Brazil.

Highlighted tensions in the dynamics of the relationships between the elements of the historical culture in the Brazilian society are evident in the difficulty that children and young people in our schools have in assimilating new perspectives of learning in order to build more complex and less prejudiced and stereotyped arguments on this burdening history theme of Brazil. Such considerations suggest the need for research in the area of history education that could indicate theoretical and methodological possibilities and potentials to work, in a more complex way on the relations between the historical culture and the school culture, therefore, dialogue cannot exclude the conflict, under penalty of being a naive one. (Paulo Freire, 1979, p. 13).

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