

## Introduction

### Brazil's Black Rome and the Remaking of Bahian Regional Identity

Brazil's northeastern city of Salvador, capital of the state of Bahia, stands out as one of the most prominent points of reference within the African diaspora. The city, also often referred to as "Bahia," is known for hosting a vibrant, complex, and historically rich African-Bahian culture. Salvador's carnival draws more than two million people into the streets and showcases Afrocentric carnival clubs such as the *blocos afros* and *afoxés*, including the four-thousand-strong, all-male *afoxé* the Sons of Gandhi (Filhos de Gandhi), comprised almost exclusively of men of African descent. Salvador has nearly as much claim as Rio de Janeiro to samba, the music and dance quintessentially associated with both Brazil and African Brazilians. The heavily percussive fusion known as samba-reggae, a racially politicized offshoot of samba, has captured the imagination and diasporic sensibilities of Michael Jackson, Paul Simon, and Quincy Jones, all of whom traveled to Salvador in the 1990s. The most well known ensemble of samba-reggae, the street performing group Olodum, consists largely of African-Bahian teenagers. Capoeira, an African-Brazilian martial art, the practice of which is both competitive and playful, also evolved in Bahia.

The cultural-spiritual foundation of African-Bahian culture, including samba-reggae, capoeira, and many aspects of Salvador's distinctive carnival, is Candomblé, an African-Brazilian religion akin to Voodoo or Sante-ria. Candomblé's cosmology, iconography, and ritual draw heavily on West and west-central African traditions. The temples of Candomblé worship (*terreiros* or *casas* in Portuguese) have since the early nineteenth century provided institutional support to African slaves, free blacks, and generations of African Bahians, allowing them to reshape their cultural heritage and identity around cultural references to Africa. Links between Candomblé and other expressions commonly understood as *cultura negra* (black

culture), such as samba, capoeira, and the *batucadas* (all-male percussive carnival clubs) remained strong through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This African-Bahian heritage is particularly on show during Salvador's numerous popular religious festivals. Moreover, the food associated with Bahia's African-Bahian community and the women who cook it, known as *Baianas*, have come to characterize Bahia both within Brazil and internationally. Traditionally the *Baianas* (frequently women of some standing within the hierarchy of Candomblé) dressed distinctively in styles based on West African fashions and peddled food as their primary source of income. Nowadays a small number of these *Baianas* accept commissions from the Bahian state to work in the historical city center, posing for photographs with tourists for a fee. So close is Bahia's association with traditions typically described as African that Brazil's diplomatic corps and even former president Lula da Silva have employed this regional heritage in carefully scripted diplomatic efforts to woo African trading partners.<sup>1</sup> In very meaningful ways, Bahia has been associated with African-Bahian culture. Consequently, Bahia occupies a place of honor and privilege within the African diaspora. As Candomblé has been a vital institutional support at the center of this diasporic cultural richness, it fits that Salvador is known as Brazil's "Black Rome," as Candomblé priestess Mãe Eugênia Anna dos Santos (1869–1938) proclaimed in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

This contemporary association between Bahia and African-Bahian culture, however, boasts a more nuanced—and more fraught—nineteenth- and twentieth-century lineage than the city's tourist board would have one believe. With this book I return to the historical moment, roughly the years between 1930 and 1954, when a discourse of cultural inclusion was created and when the foundations for Salvador's subsequent configurations of cultural politics were established. Before 1930, Bahian elites cultivated a largely antagonistic position toward African-Bahian practices, and the press, politicians, and the police criticized, repressed, and persecuted public expressions of African-Bahian culture. However, a close analysis of Salvador's major popular festivals (from the Portuguese phrase for these events, *festas populares*), including carnival, reveals how a number of factors came together after 1930 to foster the incorporation of markedly African-Bahian practices into newer formulations of Bahian regional identity and "Bahianness" (in Portuguese, *baianidade*). Focusing on the festivals and the components of African-Bahian culture within them reveals the extent to which Salvador's African-Bahian working-class men and women (which includes those who worked in the informal economy) were involved in this

process of reformulation, largely through their insistence on the ownership and legitimacy of their cultural heritage through ritualized performances in public spaces. Bahians of African descent continued to organize and practice their festive traditions during this period, pressing their claims for acceptance and recognition within Salvador's social and cultural life.

The festivals also drew the attention of journalists, intellectuals, and politicians who came to embrace African-Bahian culture, including both public and private ceremonies linked to Candomblé, samba, and capoeira, and contributed in central ways to reshaping the dominant discourse on African-Bahian cultural traditions.<sup>3</sup> By 1954, shapers of ideological opinion within the dominant class regularly honored African-Bahian popular culture as constitutive of and even central to Bahian regional identity, celebrating Candomblé ritual and performance within Salvador's public festivals in print media, via the radio, and occasionally in government discourse. Samba and related African-Bahian practices became a defining feature of the city's carnival, while the Baiana, too, became a venerable symbol of Bahia, appearing in song lyrics, photographs, and artwork.

Nevertheless, studying the festivals and the discourses surrounding them also reveals the extent to which this cultural inclusion provoked conservative reactions against the positive recoding of African-Bahian cultural practices. Even as the celebration of African-Bahian culture became widely accepted as central to commonsense constructions of Bahian regional identity, the inclusion of African-Bahian culture came up against both practical and discursive limits. In a very meaningful way, then, the popular festivals were important sites of "contestation and negotiation" over the meanings of African-Bahian culture.<sup>4</sup>

## **Bahian Cultural Politics**

Since the early colonial period, a central question of social organization in Salvador from the point of view of the elite has been how to control, exploit, and live alongside the city's majority population of slaves, former slaves, and free blacks. Salvador's nonwhite population, in turn, has a complex history of individual and collective attempts to accommodate, contest, negotiate, resist, or flee altogether the impositions of the dominant class of the colony (1500–1822) and empire (1822–89). Culture has been fundamentally important within the relations of power between the dominant and subordinate classes in the city.<sup>5</sup>

During Brazil's First Republic (1889–1930), Bahian elites feared that their largely African-descended population prevented or at least decreased the possibility that Salvador could achieve the level of progress Europe or the United States had attained. They felt they had to make a choice, and they chose the European model of “civilization” over African culture. According to one typical newspaper article, Europe was at least “3,000 years ahead of Africa.”<sup>6</sup> Scientific racism informed the discourse of Bahian elites on African Bahians, variants of which were promulgated locally by academics associated with the Bahian Faculty of Medicine, where social Darwinism combined with medical theory to establish a diverse range of causative, although not necessarily irreversible, connections between race, criminality, and degeneration.<sup>7</sup> African-Bahian culture in particular was considered to be antithetical to reigning notions of civilization and came under attack in public forums. Candomblé and capoeira were routinely savaged in the press: Candomblé was understood to be a haven for black magic, barbarism, and unhygienic conditions. Its medicinal traditions were judged to be unsafe and even life threatening. Capoeira was portrayed as the brutal practice of a shiftless and lazy yet menacing underclass, a practice that threatened to disturb not just the peace but also the existing social order. Both Candomblé and capoeira suffered episodic but concerted campaigns of police repression and persecution, a persecution that was institutionalized in the rewriting of the republic's penal code in 1890. The harassment was especially intense in the 1920s, when the infamous police chief Pedro de Azevedo Gordilho spearheaded a campaign of violent raids and intimidation that terrorized Salvador's working class.<sup>8</sup> Public hygiene campaigns targeted the open-air markets and informal dining in public spaces. As the popular periodical *Crispim da Bóia* lamented in 1906, Salvador was “a land of trash and blacks.”<sup>9</sup>

“Race science” imbued jurisprudence and elite thought with notions of black inferiority. Labels such as *mulata* and *crioula* were used to indicate sexual licentiousness and compare nonwhite women unfavorably with the city's chaste and honorable *moças da nossa sociedade* (society girls). The African-Bahian woman street vendor—the Baiana—was dismissed throughout the First Republic as the *mulher de saião* (woman of the big skirt), a pejorative expression for the poor black working woman, who was portrayed as coarse and unclean, sullied by her continual presence in the street. It was even argued that the Baiana tarnished the image of Bahia beyond the capital.<sup>10</sup> African-themed carnival clubs were banned in 1905.<sup>11</sup> Even the forward-thinking, modernist editors of *Samba*, a short-lived 1928 local