

AFRO-BRAZILIAN AVATĀRAS: GANDHI'S SONS SAMBA IN SOUTH AMERICA

There is renewed interest in the scholarly world about the notion of Diaspora, culture thriving and changing as a result of its transmission from one place to another, from home to abroad. Diaspora is usually understood in terms of community of people who keep their original culture alive, both consciously and unconsciously, as a means of survival and cultural identity in a new place. But this notion can be extended beyond the idea of a people crossing oceans and inhabiting new landmasses. Diaspora can be conceptualised as ideas, images, and iconography being lifted and appropriated during the creation of a new Diaspora community—not a population of people, but a paradigm of ideas. Culture moves through continents, not only in the hands of its original possessors, but by the agency of others, curious and fascinated, who nonetheless creolize and transport belief, ritual, ideology, and iconography.

In the study of the Indian Diaspora, it is important to look not only at the parts of the world where immigrant Indians reside, but also at some places in the world where an idea, a stereotype of India exists and thrives. In one location, an idea of India has been displayed to millions of people from all over the world, every year for the past fifty-two years. This happens in Brazil, during carnival, in the parade of the group called *Filhos de Gandhi* ('Sons of Gandhi'). In order to expand the study of India in the imagination of the (new) world, we need a rich, detailed account of specific instances of this kind of Diaspora, in order to theorize and contextualize. Let us begin our journey.

The Sons of Gandhi

It is eleven o'clock on a hot morning in the city of Salvador, in the northeastern coastal state of Bahia, Brazil. From the heart of the historic centre, called Pelourinho—'the pillory,' the name serving as a reminder that this was the place where enslaved human beings were whipped during colonial times—comes the sound of drums, the piercing rhythmic sounds of double gongs struck, and the melody of Yoruba chanting. Africa is manifest in the pre-Lenten festival of *Bahia*, but there is something else going on here too: a large group of men have donned long white tunics, they have decorated

themselves with white terrycloth turbans, each with a large plastic sapphire-blue gem sewn on the front. They wear white leather sandals, sapphire-blue socks, and many strands of plastic beaded necklaces, worn crossing their torsos.

Among this gathering of hundreds of men is an old Black man carrying a staff and wrapped in a white toga-like sheet, wearing dark brown leather sandals. Behind him there is a crowd of yet more men dressed similarly, dancing and playing instruments, one man dancing while carrying a stuffed goat. The sash adorning their bodies reads *Filhos de Gandhi: Sons of Gandhi*. Gandhi, the slain pacifist who helped free India from the British Raj, but he was not Black, nor did he wear terrycloth turbans with plastic gems on them, nor did he parade on the streets playing percussion instruments during carnival time. How did a stuffed goat fit in Gandhi's program? The men start to spray the crowd with pungent *Alfazema eau de cologne* as a blessing often used in Candomblé, the syncretized religion of Afro-Brazil. The procession begins. What is going on here?

Carnival in Brazil

For outsiders as well as for Brazilians, the flavour of the country, the passion of what it means to be a true Brazilian, can be summed up by three words: samba, carnival and soccer. In a Catholic country with the largest African population in the Diaspora, the combination of an abundance of Amazonian tropical birds with wild plumage, the heat of summer in February, and the graceful moves of samba inevitably result in the flashy and flamboyant carnival processions associated with Brazil. The carnival of the mind is the carnival of Rio de Janeiro, a competitive display of style, dance and music, many of which, supported by illegal gambling and drug money, originate in the shantytown slums of Rio. In the past few years, however, the most popular carnival in Brazil, for both tourists and Brazilians alike, has become the carnival celebration of the first capital of Brazil, the African city of Salvador, in the state of Bahia. Whereas the Rio samba school floats and costumes are still watched by millions on television, an increasing number of young Brazilians choose to be in Salvador to participate directly in the street festivities, which happen almost continuously, around the clock, for seven days and seven nights.

The carnival of Salvador consists primarily of more than a hundred and fifty parading groups, called *blocos*. Most of them feature famous local popular music bands that play on top of trucks rigged with as many as one

hundred speakers, called *trio elétricos*. The *trio*, lumbering and loud, heralds the arrival of thousands of similarly dressed followers, dancing and jumping on the streets. To gain the right to dance behind a *trio*, one must purchase a costume for that particular *bloco*, the costume granting access to the three to four times the *bloco* will parade during one year's carnival. The most popular of the *blocos*—and the most expensive to the purchaser—are the *blocos* of *axé* music, the mainstream music made famous throughout the country by the carnival of Bahia. There are also other, albeit less popular categories of *blocos*: the *blocos Afro*, *blocos de Índio*, and *afoxés*. Each one has its core membership, its predominantly African-inspired musical style, its distinctive costumes representing that year's chosen theme.

Blocos Afro plays an important role in Salvador. The city's population consists largely of Afro-Brazilians, many of them leaders in the political and nationalist Movimento Negro (Black Movement). Participation in the *blocos Afro* provides an opportunity for Afro-Brazilians to express pride in their shared African heritage, and to appear as a united front in the struggle for equality in opposition to the racial prejudice that is very much part of life in this nation, the last in the world to abolish slavery. Allegiance to African roots is expressed by yearly themes and costumes which evoke an image of pan-African iconography—half real and lifted from actual images of Africans; half imagined and realized in a vision of raffia, cowry shells, and an abundance of cloth, usually worn as bulbous head wraps or flowing tunics. Many of these *blocos* express the ethnic identity of their members as being, not Africans, but rather Afro-Brazilians, with their unique combination of experiences, memories, and struggles, their history of survival from Africa through the ordeal of the Middle Passage, and eventually, their arrival in the lush lands of Brazil. The identification with the unique experience of Afro-Brazil is reinforced by the strong presence of the syncretized religion of Candomblé in the carnival of Salvador. *Blocos Afro* evoke Candomblé *orixás*—Nigerian deified ancestors—in their names, in the iconography of floats and costumes. Many *blocos* start their yearly carnival parade with a Candomblé ritual, performed by priests and priestesses who are often integral members of the parading unit. Unlike the popular *axé* music *trios*, the *blocos Afro* see it as their mission to educate the public about Afro-Brazil, and to pay homage to the heroes of both African and Afro-Brazilian history, as well as to other great leaders who fought for racial justice, such as Mahatma Gandhi, celebrated every year for the last fifty-two years by *Filhos de Gandhi*.

Filhos de Gandhi

This all male group of over 5,000 participants was founded in 1949, two months after the assassination of Gandhi in India. Because the Mahatma fought peacefully for justice in Africa as well as India, he became a symbol for oppressed Afro-Brazilians in their quest to achieve equality by non-violent means. The *bloco Filhos de Gandhi* is defined by the heavy reliance on hand beaten drums and gongs, and the characteristic rhythms that have been used since colonial times and that, recently, have been associated solely with Candomblé rituals. In fact, association with Candomblé and Yoruba rituals is an integral part of the public face of *Filhos de Gandhi*. Many of the leaders of the group are priests ordained in the religion, and much of the iconography and the patterns of their practice in religious events reflects their deep connection to the Afro-Brazilian religion of Bahia.

Although the group's name evokes Gandhi, the *bloco* headquarters displays, along with a portrait of Gandhi himself, paintings of Yoruba *orixás* and an altar that blends Catholic and African forms. In other words, theirs is a *mélange* of religions that reflects the complexities of Candomblé. Among the *orixás* evoked, on the floats and in the costumes, are two: Oxalá, the elder *orixá* of peace and justice, symbolized by the pure colour white, and Ogun, the warrior *orixá*, who wears royal blue and is usually depicted holding a sword. These two are the two *orixás* predominantly associated with masculinity. The colours of the costumes and the characteristic beads of *Filhos de Gandhi*, blue and white, conspicuously render the two male *orixás* onto the bodies of the members of the *bloco*.

Jesus Christ is the patron saint of the city of Salvador—literally, 'the Saviour.' The annual ritual washing of the steps of the major church dedicated to Christ, Senhor do Bonfim, is very important for residents of Salvador. In the Afro-Brazilian religion Oxalá is identified with Christ. Because *Filhos de Gandhi* are so closely linked to Oxalá, their presence marks the beginning of the annual pre-carnival procession to the Church. The auspicious presence of the group, carrying connotations of Oxalá and bringing blessings directly from the city's patron saint, is part of the reason the *bloco* is so revered and seen as distinct from the other carnival groups who play minor roles in the non-carnival city celebrations. The Mahatma Gandhi, a white-clad older man, a symbol of peace and justice, becomes in the Brazilian imagination, an *avatāra* of Oxalá, syncretized with Jesus Christ himself, and therefore a creolized force for peace emerges on the streets of Salvador, clad in beads, smelling of perfume, and swaying softly to the ancient rhythms of Africa.

Dancing as Gandhi

Is the carnival group *Filhos de Gandhi*, homage to the Mahatma? Are *Filhos de Gandhi* a misappropriation, a failed theft of the notion of Gandhi and India? How did Gandhi shift from South Africa to India and end up in the heart of the African Diaspora in the sweltering heat of Salvador da Bahia? A close analysis of the group reveals that almost every aspect of their look and identity contradicts Gandhi—his morals, his persona, and his behaviour.

Visually, *Filhos de Gandhi* suggest Gandhi through the official group headquarters, the yearly parade float, and most importantly, the costume of the members. The headquarters, remember, can almost resemble a Candomblé temple, complete with altars, candles, and, on any given day, a scattering of ritual offerings, of kernels of white corn and yellow corn meal on the threshold separating the inside from the cobblestone street. The parade float, white with sapphire-blue painting, features what are considered to be symbols of India—a camel, an elephant, and a goat—yet these are relegated to secondary place in the iconography when compared with the implements of the *orixás*, mainly the sword of Ogun, the crown of Oxalá, and the bow and arrow of Oxóssi, the *orixá* of the hunt. The carnival procession and any other important presence of *Filhos de Gandhi* also features the Gandhi ‘look-alike,’ a slender older Black man with an uncanny resemblance to Gandhi himself. This Brazilian Gandhi sits atop a white elephant effigy. The white elephant symbolizes India, in the minds of the members of the group, but it also evokes visually the *orixá* Oxalá, whose emblem in most Nigerian and Diaspora art is the white elephant.

The most insistently visual, instantly recognizable representation of *Filhos de Gandhi* is, of course, their costume. The costumes of the other carnival groups change every year, and they are usually in very bright colours but the clothing of *Filhos de Gandhi* is always white, always includes many beads, and it is not complete without the obligatory turban. This costume, said to emulate that of the Mahatma, consists of a long tunic dress, in the Brazilian carnival tradition of the requisite African *abadá*. The turban, as used in caricatures conjures up images of majestic, ‘oriental,’ kings, surrounded by incense, rich foods and *harem* beauties, straight from a fantasy inspired by *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. In fact, the *Filhos de Gandhi* turban, with its huge plastic gem, does resemble some cartoonish illustration of a fairytale. The turban, along with the costume, is white, and most importantly, made of terrycloth, both extremely practical in keeping cool the heads and bodies of men who must parade for hours in the 105°F of the Brazilian summer.

The beads, made of plastic, yet worn in imitation of the Candomblé/African style, crossing the torso, provide another indication, along with the tunic, that the costume is really an adaptation, a secular version of the sacred African vision. The word for costume in Portuguese is ‘fantasia,’ literally ‘fantasy’ and that is exactly what the costume of *Filhos de Gandhi* is—a fantasy. It is not the dress of the simply clad, threadbare Mahatma, but rather the display of an African kingly man, in cool and flowing garments, adorned in the requisite turban that is worn because, as one informant told me, ‘everybody looks better in a turban. The turban not only frames the face, it adds a few inches to the height of the wearer, an important reason why many men opt to join this group; the choice reflecting, not political and musical affiliation, but pure vanity. Many men in Salvador choose to parade as a *Filhos de Gandhi* over the other options in order to seem more beautiful.

As mentioned earlier *Filhos de Gandhi* is the only all-male *bloco*, and it is also the largest one. It comprises the largest concentration of men in a single location—over 5000 men in one place for the days of carnival. This fact, inevitably, is appealing to young women interested in boyfriends for the duration of the carnival festivities. Gay men of Salvador, likewise, scope out the parading route of *Filhos de Gandhi* for precisely the same reason, to have a quick pick at the turbaned, majestic men of the carnival. Many men in Bahia, wishing to participate in the liberal, open dating season usually understood to be part of carnival, of course choose to become a *Filhos de Gandhi*, for the greater opportunity of meeting women or men, depending on their sexual orientation.

This ulterior motive for parading during carnival—to pick up sexual/love partners—adds pressure to the members of *Filhos de Gandhi* to look good, as they are at all times in competition with other equally handsome, similarly dressed men. Therefore they embellish their already exotic, and therefore erotic, costume with many ornaments, including an enormous amount of beads, baby pacifiers around the neck, ribbons, cowry shell armbands, beads affixed to braids or dreadlocks, and cool sunglasses, often worn at night, in the absence of any glaring sunlight. Many *Filhos de Gandhi* have started wearing green contact lenses, which have recently become cheap and accessible, to achieve the attractive look referred to as ‘Cape Verde,’ that is green eyes on light skinned Black men. (This reference evokes the creolized beautiful people of the former Portuguese colony, the Cape Verde islands off the coast of Senegal in Africa.) And lastly, to entice all the senses of prospective partners, *Filhos de Gandhi*, instead of spraying others with the cleansing *eau de toilette Alfazema*, are often to be seen spraying themselves!

Just as the perfume should be shared with others, in an act of good faith and symbolic blessing from Oxalá, members of *Filhos de Gandhi* have customarily carried a small stash of beaded necklaces to give out on the streets. Although many members of the *bloco* still give out beads, an increasing number of young men use the beads and a dab of perfume as barter, for a can of cold beer or a kiss from a pretty woman. As in the American Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans, Louisiana, where beads are given out for sexual favours, the blessings of Oxalá are not tokens of peace (and therefore consistent with the notion of Gandhi), but rather a wish for self-aggrandisement and a bid for pleasure. During the quest by many members of *Filhos de Gandhi* to look attractive in order to appeal to the young men and women of Salvador, the connection with the Mahatma's humble appearance and years of celibacy becomes ironic. Another strong incongruity between the Mahatma and the carnival revellers who impersonate him has to do, again ironically, with what Gandhi is most associated with peace. The *bloco Filhos de Gandhi* attracts many young men who exhibit violent behaviour, and in fact, see membership to the group as an opportunity to enable aggressive tendencies while hiding behind the guise of a peaceful group of paraders. A basic contradiction with Gandhi becomes explicit in the simple, violent act of eating the flesh of animals that were killed for the gastronomic pleasure of humans, and hence viciously cancelling Gandhi's Hindu philosophy of vegetarianism.

Members of the group often engage in more direct acts of violence, such as fistfights in the streets. The area surrounding the *trio elétrico*, or the float of a parading group, is roped off to yield special privilege to those who have purchased a costume, and with it, access to the group. Members of *Filhos de Gandhi* are the only ones in Salvador to gain (unofficial) access to all groups, therefore any fighting these men choose to perpetrate can occur within the other groups' restricted space. This privilege is granted to *Filhos de Gandhi* out of a combination of the fear and respect that others have for them. The *bloco* is respected because it is the oldest parading group, because it embraces a pacifist philosophy, and because it has overt ties with Candomblé, Oxalá and Jesus Christ, and Mahatma Gandhi, who is respected all over the world.

The carnival *bloco* also evokes fear. Most people would not have the courage to bar entry to members of *Filhos de Gandhi* in the cordoned-off areas of other groups. Residents of Salvador are fearful of *Filhos de Gandhi* because of the group's continual strong alliance with the mayor of the city, with important politicians, and with the military police, many of whom exchange their helmets for terrycloth turbans during the carnival period.

Their association with the military police makes it possible for them to fight on the streets because innocent bystanders and the unlucky targets of aggression are well aware of the improbability of any intervention by the military police who patrol the carnival parades in riot gear. The official rules of *Filhos de Gandhi* are that there are no women, no drugs or alcohol, and no fighting allowed inside the restricted area of the group.

Fifty-two years after the death of the 'Great Soul,' thousands of men impersonate, distort and trivialise him in the fantasy of Brazilian carnival. The Mahatma was simple; his 'sons' are extremely vain, bejewelled, perfumed, and beautiful. The Mahatma was celibate; his 'sons' swap beads for kisses and hope for more. The Mahatma was a vegetarian; his 'sons' eat the flesh of animals cooked and sold on the streets. The Mahatma was a pacifist; his 'sons' are aggressive and unduly violent. A closer look at the *bloco Filhos de Gandhi* reveals not only that the reality of Gandhi is imagined, but also that the reference to the *orixás* Oxalá and Ogun are idealized. Members of *Filhos de Gandhi* see themselves as ultra-masculine, what with their exclusion of women, their large core of military police members, and their association with male *orixás*, namely the warrior Ogun. But armed with perfume, not swords, adorned with beads, and dancing softly on the streets of Salvador, rather than emulating the strong males, the fighter Ogun or the wise and peaceful Oxalá, the men seem to personify instead the female *orixá* of love and seduction, the mistress of the sweet waters, Oxum.

What is going on here?

Filhos de Gandhi manifests the unique flavour of Afro-Brazil on the bodies of its members. Instead of the group paying an exalted homage to the African motherland, or even a respectful tribute to India, it actually reflects quite accurately the morals, motivations, style and beauty of the carnival of Salvador, Brazil. The apparently strange occurrence of a Brazilian parading group honouring Gandhi does not in any way distort the existing structure of the carnival, but rather mirrors it perfectly. The representation of Gandhi in Bahia is not a form of misappropriation, of a failed attempt to emulate, but rather a clever and conscious appropriation, of taking an existing idea and manipulating it to meet self-serving goals.

In *Filhos de Gandhi*, African elements filter down through the long history of slavery and mingle with Amerindian and European influences in a blended reflection of the reality of creolization in contemporary Brazil. The images of India, however, are not drawn from the local Indian population, which is insignificant. Indian elements are representations of representations of India made by outsiders:

the movie *Gandhi* starring Ben Kingsley, the exoticized Indians in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and most recently, the international fascination with Indian (women's) body arts, namely *henna*, 'temporary tattoos' and *bindi*, the forehead decorations. In Bahia, as in many parts of the world, images and caricatures of India created by the mass media become associated with symbols of deep spirituality and emotionality. Since *Filhos de Gandhi*, composed of many Black members, was founded and accepted as a carnival group before all others, we are led to wonder whether the Indian affiliation, combined with the references to Oxalá, acted as a buffer and led to an acceptance and tolerance of the group by the politically dominant, minority White population of the city of Salvador.

Appropriation of India and Africa serves *Filhos de Gandhi* on three levels. On a national level, *Filhos de Gandhi* is an outlet for an expression of the African heritage of its members. *Filhos de Gandhi's* honouring of the *orixás* fits with the paradigm of others *blocos Afro* in their collective expression of pride in Africa and the political Black Movement. *Blocos Afro* in Salvador exhibit, elaborate, self-conscious themes honouring the heroes of the African Diaspora, such as Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, Marcus Garvey, and Martin Luther King. The Mahatma can be seen as one among these illustrious men. Secondly, on a group level, the *bloco Filhos de Gandhi* is visually distinct from every other parading group, creating what is called a 'sea of white' with their white clothing. They are unique, not only in the size of the group, but also in the distinctive turbans, characteristic ornaments, and their desirable gifts of plastic beads and squirts of purifying perfume. The costume, seemingly inspired by India, functions to distinguish these men visually from the rest of the revelers, whose costumes are either simple shorts and t-shirts, or some version of African, not Indian, inspired regalia.

Lastly, and most importantly, the group can be seen to function for the members on a very intimate individual level. By donning the outfit and persona of a *Filhos de Gandhi*, these Brazilian men look good, feel attractive, have greater access to women, and have free rein during the carnival processions. These individuals, many of whom are not particularly interested in honouring the Mahatma, use the erotic and exotic elements of the costume for their own benefit, serving them in what they think carnival is really about: getting women, getting beer, getting to fight, and getting away with it.

In the carnival of Salvador, African mythology, music, perfume, sex, beads, beer—and the Mahatma Gandhi—all come together in what must be the ultimate *samba*. As the example of the Sons of Gandhi shows, this phenomenon, ostensibly about India, is in fact about Brazil;

Afro-Brazilians use and orientalise India to achieve their own personal and political goals. Syncretism can happen at long distances, and not only as a result of direct contact between people of different cultures. A self-conscious image of India, portrayed originally by an Indian, Mohandas K. Gandhi himself, gets lifted and dramatised in the movie *Gandhi* by British movie makers, which in turn inspires Brazilians to further embellish their costumes, their behaviour, and the exoticism of India, through the venue of the carnival parading group *Filhos de Gandhi*.

The relationship between the cultures of India and Africa has been analysed in the context of the Indian Diaspora in the former African colonies, but not in the African Diaspora, such as the one in Brazil. Notions of India, filtered through the funnels of orientalism, creolization, appropriation, and globalisation, are in turn influencing the way the rest of the world perceives India. These foreign adaptations may easily work their way back into India, through members of the Indian Diaspora as well as foreigners. That is why it is imperative to be aware, not only of the diasporic spread of people, but also of ideas and stereotypes. The Diaspora of India, real and imagined, flourishes in densely populated London and New York, and it also throbs to the beat of the *samba* in the hot and sensuous streets of Brazil.

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