

Quilombos and their influence on Afro-Brazilian cultural interpenetration

An anthropological approach
María Laura Bergel – April 2006

Summary

For centuries, African black people were brought to the Americas as slaves, in order to perform the most inhuman tasks without enjoying any kind of rights. These groups, once they arrived in Brazil, were scattered throughout the 22 Brazilian states.

Quilombos were a hiding and shelter place for black runaway slaves in rural areas, where they first started to develop very isolated community forms, which later experienced important gradual exchanges. They represented a major issue from the early African pockets of resistance to colonial slavery, re-emerging in times of the Brazilian Republic with the Brazilian Negro Front (1930/1940) and returning to the political scene at the end of the 1970s, during the country's redemocratization process.

Although quilombos have not been the only forms of collective resistance to the slave system, their revolt and settlement were undoubtedly the most important ones.

In spite of the fact that many quilombos were made up of a few runaways – either individuals or groups - many others resulted from collective escapes following the revolts. This seems to be the case of Palmares, in Pernambuco, which had significant dimensions.

Thus, for many centuries, quilombos have represented the struggle against the oppression of settlers in Brazil, in the attempt to replace slave labor with free and paid labor, and also to enable members to exercise the right and freedom to enjoy their culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

This issue, which is scarcely disseminated out of Brazilian borders, provides a good example to examine the topic of Black influence in the Americas since it implies a paradigmatic relationship between cultures that are being mutually interpenetrated and influenced.

It is of additional interest, since it shows how Anthropology can be used as a political-institutional tool at the present time. With regards to this, the reform of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution granted “the remaining quilombos” ownership of the lands. This unleashed debate of broad semantic and conceptual dimensions as well as specific and practical implications - what was implied by “quilombo” and by “remaining”? – in which Anthropology (and the corresponding departments of the different universities) played a major political-scientific role in the regulation and implementation of constitutional provisions.

Another topic of interest has to do with the unavoidable invitation offered by this work to think about the use of the term “quilombo” in South American countries, mainly in Argentina. In this country, the term “quilombo” is very commonly used - above all by young people - as a synonym for “disorder”, “chaos”, “disturbance”, “lack of organization”, etc. Even if we go back some decades in time, in the tango jargon, “quilombo” was used as a synonym for “brothel”. However, it seems that within Brazil, the term “quilombo” has been and still is simply a group of black people that got together. This is something to think about!¹.

¹ Author's note.