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Memories of slavery and the slave trade in the region of Salvador da Bahia (Brazil)

Research Report Brazil 2023

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Introduction

Between December 2022 and April 2023, we conducted fieldwork in different parts of Brazil with a focus on the intergenerational transmission of individual and collective memories of slavery and the trade in enslaved people. In this report, we will focus on findings from fieldwork conducted with our colleagues Artur Bogner and Gabriele Rosenthal between January and April 2023 in Salvador da Bahia, the region of Recôncavo Baiano (São Félix/Cachoeira and surrounding areas), and on the Dendê Coast. We will discuss our findings which are based mainly on participant observation and interviews with members of different groupings in these regions of the state of Bahia. Furthermore, we carried out historical analyses, and interpreted other kinds of data material, such as website presentations of memorial sites, art exhibitions, and fictional literature. We will begin with some reflections on specific figurations in memory disputes in Brazil, and the role of generational differences and family or community dialogue. This is followed by an explanation of the interrelationship between practices and places of remembrance (like memorial sites as more formal places of remembrance or other places which can be characterized as less public and more informal). The relative absence of formal places of remembrance of slavery (in the sense of memorials dedicated explicitly to this purpose) is a central finding of our research to date. Closely related to this discussion are further findings that primarily concern the tourist marketing of places and practices, as well as the importance of religious practices.

The significance of figurations in memory disputes

In contrast to Ghana, which is not characterized by a *white* elite like Brazil, but by Indigenous elites or ethnic groupings, memory disputes in Brazil take place in a context of structural racism. Here, there are conflictual figurations and power inequalities between Black (Afro-diasporic) and *white* Brazilians (often with a European

family history), but also more complex relations. For instance, many of our interviewees had ancestors not only from the African continent, but also from diverse Indigenous groupings that lived in what is present-day Brazil before the arrival of Europeans, and/or from Europe. Figurations involving descendants of enslaved people, enslavers and other groupings in Brazilian society are very different from those in Ghana. Power inequalities between Black and *white* people play a much greater role in Brazil, and, as we also observed in Ghana, the existence of enslaved ancestors can still be experienced as a stigma to this day. These figurations explain the tendency in memory disputes to focus on empowerment, 'Blackness'[5] (*Negritude*) and proud Black history, instead of the traumas of the violent history of enslavement, and the experiences of racialized prejudice and violence that most of our interviewees with African and Indigenous family histories have had.

Generational differences and family or community dialogue

Many of our Afro-Brazilian interviewees directly linked their own life stories (characterized by exclusion and poverty) and current life situation with the history of enslavement and exploitation. Here, we could observe parallels and differences between different generations. Not least due to the affirmative action policies of President Lula's first governments (2002–2010), younger generations of Black Bahians now have more access to higher education, and position themselves politically in relation to their collective past and their current situation (and the interplay between them). But people living in precarious circumstances – who often belong to the older generations of the parents and grandparents – with lower chances of access to formal education are less likely to position themselves in such a politicized way. Nevertheless, they often emphasize the continuities between their own marginalized situation in Brazilian society and that of their ancestors. This points to an important empirical finding that we intend to investigate during our next field visits: To what extent do life under precarious circumstances and lower chances of access to formal education interrelate with thematization of the experiences of enslavement and servitude of previous genealogical generations? And which social constellations lead to this past being transmitted, or not transmitted, in families and (local) communities?

The significance of practices and places of (non-)remembrance

A key finding of our research in the coastal region of Bahia is that everyday practices, including everyday religious practices, are more important for remembering the history of slavery than formal places of remembrance such as memorials and museums. This very general statement will be differentiated somewhat by looking at some practices and places in more detail. We will rely on interviews we conducted during participant observation in these places.

[5] Blackness is a literal translation from Portuguese but does not convey the same meaning as the intellectual and political Négritude movement, which was strongly influenced by Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor, among others.

While we encountered little memorialization of enslavement in the form of monuments and museums in Bahia, this was overwhelmingly the case in the celebration of African heritage in various forms, such as during Carnival or various traditional Afro-Brazilian celebrations we attended in Salvador da Bahia (e.g. the Iemanjá festival and the washing of Itapuã). Visits to religious sites and houses (*terreiros*) in Salvador and in the São Félix/Cachoeira region, as well as several interviews with practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, showed us how important religious knowledge and everyday religious practices are for understanding the enslavement past of one's own family, we-group or local community. We will discuss this in more detail below.

The transgenerational and collective transmission of knowledge[6] is visible not only in non-everyday practices (such as the celebrations mentioned above), but also in everyday practices, including everyday religious practices, cooking recipes, the use of various medicinal herbs, songs, dances, body painting, and clothing. At the same time, these practices are also subject to the logic of economic utility when they are advertised as part of the city of Salvador's African identity. As in Ghana, this always led us to ask: Which groupings benefit from these initiatives? Which memorialization serves which interests? And what role does the commercialization of memories play?

During our fieldwork in Bahia (January–April 2023), we visited several *Quilombo* communities, most of which can be traced back to communities that escaped enslavement and colonial control. These play a central role in the transmission of knowledge about the enslavement past of their own collective and its reconstruction. We conceptualize them as places of remembrance where memories can have a specific Gestalt. During an interview at a *Quilombo* on the Dendê Coast, we first asked specific questions about the history of the place, to which the interviewee replied that she knew nothing about it. However, when we asked her to tell us her life story and family history, she was able to trace the foundation of the *Quilombo* where she currently lives to two ancestors, a woman and a man, who settled there and initiated the family and the community. On a manifest level, she claimed to know nothing about slavery. However, she did in fact have the concrete knowledge that her ancestors escaped from enslavement and established a community that remains in existence even today. Here we can see how collective memories of enslavement overlap with processes of remembering one's own history and the history of one's family or local community for members of certain groupings.

In the following sections of this report, we will focus on the more museum-like forms of remembrance and commemoration. African and Afro-Brazilian culture played a major role in the sites we visited. What they have in common is that their focus is on African culture – sometimes somewhat homogenizing, without clear differentiation between different ethnic groupings or historical phases – rather than on social history, in the sense of presenting specific dates, processes and actors. Consequently, they tend to not explicitly thematize the histories of enslavement.

[6] We use the term "knowledge" in a broad sense which includes not only cognition but also know-how in the sense of habitualized practices.

In Salvador, we visited the Afro-Brazilian Museum (Museu Afro Brasileiro, MAFRO), the House of Carnival (*Casa do Carnaval*), the Baianas Memorial (*Memorial das Baianas*), and institutions that relate to specific African countries, such as the Benin House (*Casa do Benin*). The Museum of Afro-Brazilian Culture (Museu Nacional de Cultura Afro-Brasileira, MUNCAB) only reopened in November 2023, after our departure, after more than three years of closure due to the pandemic and underfunding by the Bolsonaro government. Addressing the history of enslavement is part of the self-description of the museum: "Here you will find works that [...] deal with the issue of trade in enslaved people, black resistance, quilombos and revolts"[7] (translated from Portuguese by the authors). And the digital collection, which is accessible via the website, contains chains and instruments of torture, as well as portraits of so-called wage slaves (*escravos de ganho*), and historical documents from the slave-owning associations (passports, tax assessments, etc.). We plan to visit MUNCAB during our next field visit, which is planned for October 2024.[8]

While the MAFRO exhibitions we saw contained mainly the collections of French photographer and anthropologist Pierre Verger, the Casa do Benin and other "African Houses", such as the Houses of Ghana (since 2023), Angola, and Nigeria, were created in cooperation with the respective embassies, or on the initiative of the respective African state governments.[9] Regions situated in present-day Benin, Angola, Nigeria and Ghana were among the regions of origin of the people who were brought to Bahia in the context of slavery.[10] It is important to stress that most of the employees at these institutions whom we were able to observe and interview had ancestors they traced back to the African continent.

We were able to visit the Baianas Memorial, a museum in the historic center of Salvador dedicated to the Baianas. These enslaved women were characterized by the fact that they organized themselves in Catholic syncretic sisterhoods, and by the typical activity of selling *acarajé* – bean balls fried in palm oil. These women worked on the streets and had to give part of their wages to their enslavers (*escravas de ganho*). A tour guide told us during one of our visits that these women had greater freedom – as they worked on the streets – and in some cases the opportunity to buy their freedom with their savings. Although this museum is centrally concerned with a

[7] https://museuafrobrasileiro.com.br/ [all websites in this report: accessed July 3rd, 2024]

[8] Both authors had the opportunity to visit the current exhibition displayed at MUNCAB, *Um Defeito de Cor* (A Color Defect), at the Museum of Art of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2023. African ancestry, the origins of African Brazilians, their current circumstances in Brazil, and their history of resistance to different forms of violence are commemorated through diverse art media. The book on which the exhibition is based (with the same title) is a classic of Afro-Brazilian literature and tells the story of a woman who was enslaved in Benin and brought to Brazil, but returned to Benin toward the end of her life. We include these literary memory practices in our analyses.

[9] https://g1.globo.com/ba/bahia/novembronegro/noticia/2023/11/20/salvador-ganha-casa-de-gana-conheca-outros-espacos-dedicados-a-paises-africanos-na-capital-baiana.ghtml

[10] See the map from Slave Voyages, for example. Available at: https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#maps

legacy of enslavement, this is not discussed much in the text panels.[11] The most prominent text on the walls of this memorial is by the mayor of the city of Salvador:

> "The baianas memorial represents an important recognition of the history of one of the main symbols of Salvador's culture and identity, which projects our city in Brazil and around the world – the *baiana de acarajé*" (translated from Portuguese by the authors).

This sentence sums up an impression we often had during our stay in Salvador: there is a politicization of African heritage in connection with the promotion of tourism and political and economic interests. In our view, this does not do justice to the violence experienced by the women represented in this memorial in the context of enslavement. This is reflected, for example, in the focus on the cultural characteristics of these women. There is a presentation of the embroidered trimmings on their skirts, their turbans, lucky charms and talismans (*balangandãs*), and palm oil (*dendê*) as an important ingredient of the *acarajé*. All of this is presented as "African tradition". It is a strikingly ahistorical and depoliticized presentation that dethematizes historical suffering and the – potentially ongoing – traumatic experiences of the descendants. It is visited by many tourists without really getting to the heart of the matter, which is that this is a tradition that originated with African enslaved women who had to ensure their survival.

With regard to carnival and its Afro-Brazilian traditions, the House of Carnival of Bahia (*Casa do Carnaval da Bahia*) is an important place of remembrance. During our visit, we learned that the carnival has a European-colonial-elitist tradition, but the focus of the museum is a different one. Gringo Cardia, the curator, explicitly emphasizes African resistance on a display at the entrance to the House:

> "Enslaved people brought from Africa fought hard to be able to celebrate with dances and percussion on the streets: afoxé groups, blocos and batucadas" (original in English).

The first carnival block (*bloco*) exclusively for Black people, *Ilê Aiyê*, was founded only fifty years ago.[12] This is presented at the museum as the start of a '(re)Africanization' of Bahia's carnival. The *Blocos Afro*, of which there are now many, refer proudly and positively to the African heritage of Afro-Brazilians and their campaign for equal rights. The parades and shows of these *Blocos* often include a proud reference to African countries and cultures. This became clear, for example, when the *Bloco Afro Olodum* (famous due to its performance with Michael Jackson in the song "They don't care about us") defined its theme for the 2014 carnival: "The Ashanti people – The Golden Throne – Queen Mother Yaa Asentewaa".[13] As far as

[11] It should be mentioned that the museums and memorials have predominantly Portuguese text panels and are therefore not necessarily comprehensible for some tourists, e.g. for roots tourists from the USA.

[12] https://g1.globo.com/ba/bahia/novembronegro/noticia/2023/11/04/se-nao-fosse-o-ile-aiye-bloco-afro-mais-antigo-do-pais-se-prepara-para-celebrar-50-anos-veja-curiosidades-sobre-a-historia-de-resistencia.ghtml

[13] https://www.bahianoticias.com.br/holofote/noticia/28609-olodum-define-tema-para-o-carnaval-de-2014

we could reconstruct, this did not address the involvement of the Ashanti in the trafficking of enslaved people. In 2017, Olodum also received the King of the Ashanti (*Asantehene*), Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II, in Salvador.[14]

There are places of more implicit remembrance in Salvador, such as the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia (MAM), which is located in a former sugar cane mill, in other words in a historical location which, on the one hand, was shaped by the exploitation of enslaved workers, but which, on the other hand, was also the center of life for many African people (and their descendants). However, this history is hardly discussed at the site, or mentioned on the historical information boards on the grounds. A historical site of slavery has thus been turned into a museum, but this aspect is obscured. During our visit there, we observed that the quarters in which enslaved people used to live (*senzala*) are nowadays a café and snack bar, with no reminder of those who were forced to use these quarters as their home in the past. In an ethnographic interview with a museum employee, it was apparent either that she did not know that she was in the former *senzala*, or that she did not want to talk about this topic, which we raised very specifically.

Thus, a key finding is that slavery is often addressed only implicitly (through its non-thematization), or, for example, in the context of temporary exhibitions.[15] We will only be able to assess whether this has fundamentally changed with the reopening of the MUNCAB after our next field visit. At this point, we wish to emphasize that our observation in the region we investigated, that (often religiously influenced) everyday practices play a more significant role than memorial sites in the transmission of knowledge about African heritage and violent pasts, should not be understood as normative. Memorialization in museums and monuments is a static form of remembrance that is very European in character (and that has been criticized, for example with regard to the ritualized remembering of the victims of the Shoah[16]). According to our findings thus far, in Bahia it is primarily everyday practices, especially everyday religious practices, and the celebration of African or Afro-Brazilian culture, that can be reconstructed as practices of remembrance and commemoration. This is strikingly different from southern Ghana, with its memorials that place the transatlantic trade with enslaved people at the thematic center of their narrative. However, in other regions of Brazil, such as Rio de Janeiro, a stronger 'Western'-style memorialization and formalization of commemoration of the history of slavery can be observed. In Rio de Janeiro, there is a stronger focus on historical sites and places of remembrance. One example is the MUHCAB (Museu da História e da Cultura Afro-Brasileira), which we visited during our stay in Brazil in 2023. The Museum is presented in the exhibition as a

[14] https://www.bahianoticias.com.br/cultura/noticia/29522-olodum-vai-receber-otumfuo-nana-osei-tutu-ii-rei-dos-ashanti

[15] For example, the already mentioned exhibition *Um Defeito de Cor* (A Color Defect) at MUNCAB, which is based on the novel of the same name by the author Ana Maria Gonçalves (11/23–03/24) and had previously been on display in Rio de Janeiro.

[16] See, for example, Bodemann, Y. M. (1996) Gedächtnistheater: die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung. Hamburg: Rotbuch.

'Museum of the Territory', consisting of 15 historical sites.[17] Central to this is the Valongo Wharf, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 2017.[18]

Tourism: marketing African heritage and selective remembering

In a city characterized by tourism, such as Salvador da Bahia, the following questions arise in relation to our research interests: Which places of remembrance and everyday practices are marketed and how? What is the orientation of memorials and places of remembrance and who are they aimed at? Which groupings profit more than others from certain forms of commemoration?

The historic old town of Salvador da Bahia was declared a World Heritage Site in 1985, and the brief UNESCO description states:

> "As the first capital of Brazil, from 1549 to 1763, Salvador de Bahia witnessed the blending of European, African and Amerindian cultures. It was also, from 1558, the first slave market in the New World, with slaves arriving to work on the sugar plantations" (UNESCO, 1985).[19]

Here, the city's 'multicultural' heritage and its past as a central slave market are cited as reasons for this special status, which promises tourist attention and access to economic and symbolic resources. In its campaigns and offers, the tourism industry focuses on the colors, sounds and tastes of Bahia without making it explicit that these are closely linked to the violent displacement – and the subsequent suffering in the enslavement society of Brazil – of the ancestors of many city dwellers.[20] On the contrary, stereotypical representations of Black people are part of the marketing strategy to appeal to tourists. As this has not contributed to improving the living conditions of Black people in Brazil, a branch of Afro-tourism has developed in recent years that aims to establish Salvador as an 'Afro-capital'. As we observed during in a *Guia Negro* ("Black Guide") tour of the city, this places value on visiting and using Black-owned businesses, and also targets Afro-diasporic tourists in order to convey Black history to them.[21] Salvador has become an international point of reference for Afro-tourism, as well as for Afro-futurism. For example, 10 Afro-centered city tours and 30 points of interest are now offered to visitors, which are intended to show the capital from a Black perspective.[22] During the tour that we participated in, there was an important focus on the city's historical connections with slavery and colonialism, as

[17] https://www.rio.rj.gov.br/web/muhcab/lugares-de-memoria

[18] "It is in the former harbour area of Rio de Janeiro in which the old stone wharf was built for the landing of enslaved Africans reaching the South American continent from 1811 onwards. An estimated 900,000 Africans arrived in South America via Valongo" (https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1548).

[19] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/309

[20] https://www.tourism-watch.de/en/article/focus/brasil-postcolonial-bahia/

[21] https://www.salvadordabahia.com/capitalafro/

[22] https://g1.globo.com/ba/bahia/novembronegro/noticia/2023/11/07/conheca-roteiros-que-apresentam-pontos-turisticos-de-salvador-sob-a-otica-da-negritude-role-afro-vai-de-caminhos-de-fe-a-rota-de-lutas.ghtml

well as on how the living conditions of Black Brazilians in the city could be improved in the future.

Sociohistorical power inequalities are particularly evident at major public events that attract tourists from all over the world, such as carnival and the Iemanjá festival. We were able to observe a spatial separation between tourists who are mostly *whites* in VIP areas (*camarotes*), and local street vendors who are mostly Black Brazilians. The latter, with whom we conducted numerous biographical interviews, endure precarious working conditions, exposed to the weather and the dangers of the street, although their informal economic activities are licensed by the city administration. These sociohistorical power inequalities are also clear to the city dwellers. A young male Afro-Brazilian museum employee in Salvador, when asked whether he thought Salvador should have a museum on the history of slavery. replied: "We don't need a museum, that would only be for the tourists. Our slavery museum is the crack addicts here on our doorstep" (translated from Portuguese by the authors).

International actors in Salvador play a different role from those in Ghana. While the country-specific cultural centers (the "African Houses" mentioned above) were created on the initiative of the governments of Nigeria, Benin, Ghana and Angola, Salvador is gaining importance for the (predominantly US) diaspora. It is increasingly becoming a destination for roots tourism, which is interested in the well-preserved African traditions of Bahia. The pop singer Beyoncé made a surprise appearance in Salvador in 2023, which was interpreted in newspapers in the capital as a tribute to the city's Afro-Brazilian heritage, and as an opportunity for local Black entrepreneurs.[23] This international attention has so far clearly focused on urban Salvador and not on its rural surroundings, which have historically been heavily influenced by the sugar plantation economy – and thus massive exploitation of enslaved labor – and are still characterized by the marginalized communities of their descendants.

The role of Afro-Brazilian religions in the transmission of knowledge about enslavement pasts and African heritage

As we were able to observe, Afro-Brazilian religions play an important role in the passing on of traditions within families and local communities, in the reconstruction of diffuse knowledge of displaced ancestors and their origins, or in the 'invention' of family traditions, because, with their deities, practices and languages, they can be assigned to particular regions or peoples of origin in Africa (such as Angola, Benin, Ewe, Fon). Here, lines of conflict along religious belonging can be recognized over attitudes toward the past. Both in the city of Salvador and at remote *Quilombos*, we repeatedly encountered references to the role of evangelical churches, which stigmatize and sometimes openly fight Afro-Brazilian religions, and in principle demand a turn toward the future – and thus, at least implicitly, a turn away from past injustice and suffering. One interviewee, who is very active in a group that memorializes slavery in his *Quilombo* community, told us:

[23] https://www.correio24horas.com.br/minha-bahia/como-a-visita-de-artistas-internacionais-impacta-nos-negocios-e-turismo-negros-em-salvador-1223

> "It's funny because people deny it, many people in the group deny it, but then if people join the Church, they automatically leave the group. […] People say 'no! no!', but when they become evangelical, the first thing they do is leave the group" (translated from Portuguese by the authors).

The influence of different ethnic groupings, not only from the African continent but also from Brazil and Europe, is particularly evident in religious practices and places. Explicit reference to enslaved or Indigenous ancestors of certain ethnic groupings (e.g. *Tupinambá*) is made at Afro-Brazilian religious sites (*terreiros*). The syncretism of local Indigenous everyday religious practices and those from Africa has affected not only the intergenerational transmission of knowledge within different groupings, but also how they have intermingled and deeply influenced each other.

Commercialization and economization, especially in connection with tourism, is also evident here. We observed in several instances that religious practices from Afro-Brazilian religions were offered as paid services. For example, we were offered the opportunity to contact a divine being, an *Orixá* – via an intermediary – or the 'shell oracle' known as Ifá, in which the client's situation is 'read' in a set of cowrie shells. The strong commercialization of Afro-Brazilian religious objects, which can be found in all souvenir stores, is also striking.

During our next field visit, which is planned for the period September to November 2024, we will review our findings to date, pursue further research paths, and focus more closely on the questions raised in this report. This includes the conditions in which family dialogue and dialogue in the local community is possible on the topic of enslavement, as well as commercial and political interests in remembrance and memorialization. Indispensable for this research project are a historical perspective and contextualization to understand current and historical figurations. In view of our findings, the general question arises as to whether a progression from family memories and memories of local groupings to public memorials, and from localized processes to transatlantic discourses and negotiations, can be reconstructed, and what this means for the "future of memory" in Bahia.

Institutionalization and transmission of knowledge about slavery in classrooms and schoolbooks in Ghana and Brazil

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As part of our research project, we made a contrastive comparison of presentations of the past in respect of slavery and the slave trade in Ghana and Brazil, based on the analysis of schoolbooks currently used in schools, group discussions with teachers (n=4), and individual interviews with teachers and students (n total=5). The group discussions in Ghana took place in Elmina (southern Ghana) and Navrongo