Ilê Aiyê began as a carnival group in Salvador, Bahia in 1974. Today Ilê Aiyê operates a primary school, a percussion band for youth, and a vocational school for adults. They have developed into a social service organization. Ilê Aiyê is situated in the neighborhood of Liberdade on Curuzu Street. During the police strike in July 2001, much criminal activity was reported to have occurred in this district – robberies, theft, and looting. Liberdade is home to the largest Afro-Brazilian population in Bahia; of 450,000 people roughly 90% are Afro-Brazilians (Personal Interview 2002). Its name comes from the Portuguese term meaning “freedom.”

When I speak of Ilê Aiyê, I am referring to the entire cultural association or how they call themselves, Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê, (the Carnival Cultural Association Group Ilê Aiyê). The administration consists of Vovô, the president and cofounder, his mother, Mãe Hilda, Aliomar, the vice-president, and according to a staff listing some fifteen directors. The group was founded in 1974 by Antônio Carlos dos Santos, who is simply called Vovô (which literally means “grandpa”), and his late friend Apolônia de Jesus. Vovô said that the conditions for Afro-Brazilians during the 1970s were very difficult and Ilê Aiyê, the bloco, was created in order for Black people to have greater participation in the carnival of Bahia. A bloco is a group that parades in carnival. He said, Black people were then very timid, shy, and not respected. Ilê Aiyê has been exploring how culture through music can effectively open up
new spaces for Afro-Brazilians. They encountered a number of obstacles in the beginning during the years of Brazil’s military dictatorship. “We were called communists,” Vovô said. “We’ve been jumping barriers since the foundation of Ilê Aiyê.” In 1974, this bloco was thus formed to give positive expression to Black identity and culture throughout Brazil.

**HISTORY OF ILÊ AÏYÊ**

During the 1970s, Ilê Aiyê’s musical rhythms emanated from African traditions that were not being used by other carnival bands at the time. In essence, Ilê Aiyê popularized a new music movement in Bahian carnival. Today there are other Afro-Brazilian blocos or blocos afro that have this same style. In song, dance, and theme the image of Ilê Aiyê was that of Black Brazil, an affirmation of Black identity. They transmitted a perception of the African ancestral past together with significant contributions from Afro-Brazilians. Ilê Aiyê through its use of percussion instruments and rhythms, through its style of carnival dress, through its insistence on only Afro-Brazilians who call themselves “Black” (or rather acceptance of escuras, darker Brazilians), and even through its dance choreography reasserts an African heritage and what it means to be Afro-Brazilian.

On November 1, 1974, an influential idea took shape. It is not that Ilê Aiyê was the first Afro-Brazilian carnival group; it is when they came into existence. By looking at the period of their inception and the bloco afro itself, I have been able to understand their motivating philosophy and what has developed into an important association. Furthermore, as Ilê Aiyê has ties to Candomblé, the religion effected the formation of the bloco. The literature on Ilê Aiyê, the blocos afro, and movimento negro specifically within Salvador suggest culture to be a valuable source for political activity. By exploring Ilê Aiyê’s programs and policies, it can be
determined if the organization brings about fundamental change or mere symbolic protest. The central question is how does Ilê Aiyê serve as a conduit for Candomblé and articulate the message of the *movimento negro*? My secondary search examined the meanings conveyed to Ilê Aiyê’s students, both children and adult, to the specific community of Liberdade, and then to the public abroad. As Ilê Aiyê fights against inequality, it is part of the Black movement in Brazil. How does Ilê Aiyê express the objectives of this large fragmentary collective? The ideology of the Black movement although not unitary, has been the promotion of an Afro-Brazilian voice within the society – it is inclusion. Vovô reiterates that Ilê Aiyê does not want to occupy all public spaces; however, they do want an equal say, shared power (Conceição and Silva 2001).

In the first half of the 1970s, Brazilians fearfully tried to avoid being perceived as a threat to the authoritarian regime’s agenda. This was especially the case among Black activists who sought to address the dire social and economic condition of Afro-Brazilians. In 1964, a military coup began a repressive 21 years of authoritarian rule. The military’s rule consisted of media and artist censorship, rigid controls on labor, and attack on student and peasant movements. The regime’s repression included kidnappings, disappearances, and tortures. Some activists were forced into exile. They fled to neighboring countries like Chile where socialist president Salvador Allende was in power, or as far away as Europe. Throughout the dictatorship, policies were enacted that placed income in the hands of only a few, and the poor and working-class were excluded from full political representation. The cost of living increased while the purchasing power of real wages and the value of the minimum wage declined steadily. Likewise, social spending was reduced (Alvarez 1990). President Ernesto Geisel began the military regime’s political *distensão* (liberalization) in 1974, which provided some opportunities for protest. Still, militant leftist, student and labor groups continued to suffer persecution:
Brazil, in 1974, lived in a climate of extreme terror, and any cultural or political manifestations that were different and were against the established patterns of traditional order, were carefully watched and severely repressed. Therefore, we should understand that fear of the first militants as manifestations of the lack of individual and social guarantee reigned in this period and produced by security institutions that accused or dominated any political attitude of opposition as being a ‘communist thing’ (C. da Silva 1988: 278).

Vovô and Apôlonia wanted to create a bloco for Afro-Brazilians. In doing so, they also sought to make a political statement. Since opposition to the status quo would be labeled as subversive, they had to proceed with caution. Therefore, meeting for play, for carnival, would be safe and non-threatening. However, Ilê Aiyé’s debut was met with public criticism, particularly from the elite who refused to acknowledge that racial tension existed in Brazil. Many Afro-Brazilians shared this perspective. The “racial democracy” myth was widespread. Brazilians were led to believe that racial prejudice was not prevalent in Brazil. Discrimination was seen on an individual basis, related to merit and class, not race (Turner 1985). As a result, not only did Ilê Aiyé have to contend with verbal assaults from White Brazilians, the bloco also had to penetrate the minds of Afro-Brazilians who were unwilling to address (keeping in mind the dictatorship) a major source of their continued plight. There was also the propaganda, the public language, of a single homogenous Brazilian that further pushed discussions on race to nonexistent and insignificant. Ilê Aiyé’s statement was contrary to the longstanding denial of racial prejudice and discrimination. Reactions from some White Brazilians in society included insults that Ilê Aiyé’s “Mundo Negro,” “Negro Para Você,” and “Black Power” statements were imitations of the North American Civil Rights Movement – not truly Brazilian.
How was Ilê Aiyê to combat this? Their debut song, “Que Bloco É Esse” introduced a bloco that lauded Black features – hair texture, skin color. This was unheard of at the time. They were singing boldly about the value of blackness. The song was later recorded by popular artist Gilberto Gil and made available to wider audiences. Ilê Aiyê’s music attracted many followers. The style of percussion resonated particularly with younger Afro-Bahians. Through the use of heavy drums, atabaques, repiques, and surdos there was a great deal of excitement generated. Besides, there was also at the time a renewed interest in African roots led by the popularity of American soul music, and the reggae music of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Jimmy Cliff, all promoting racial consciousness. Reggae music exalted Mother Africa and criticized government corruption as well. Another catalyst to the formation of Ilê Aiyê were the African countries that gained their independence, some from Portuguese rule. Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Angola achieved independence in 1974 and 1975. In an interview with Antonio Risério in his book Carnaval Ijexá: Notas sobre a Reafricanização do Carnaval Baiano (1982), Vovô commented, “In that era [of the 1970s] there was that business of Black power and so we thought about making a bloco just for blacks, with African motives” (McGowan and Pessanha 1991: 125).

The subject of Ilê Aiyê is primarily brought forth in the literature on discussions of carnival. It is important to understand carnival and specifically, the Bahian carnival because this is when and where Ilê Aiyê makes its first public appearance. Bahian carnival includes the blocos afro, the afoxés, and the trios elétricos; it is the biggest street carnival in Brazil.

The blocos afro through their focus on a less than always accurate perception of Africa instill ideas of Black pride among Afro-Brazilians (Dunn 1992). They are part of what is called the “reafricanization” of carnival. The first phase occurred during the late nineteenth century
when the afoxés emerged with their use of the ijexá rhythm brought forth from the Candomblé houses. Afoxés² were composed of men associated with the Candomblé religion who also formed carnival groups. By the twentieth century, the afoxés were controlled and suppressed by police for fear that the Bahian carnival was becoming Africanized (13). In 1949, the now popular afoxé Filhos de Gandhi (Sons of Gandhi) appeared. The original members were stevedores, or dockworkers, who honored the image of Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi. They have continued to promote the flag of peace and wear all white in reverence to orixá Oxala. Filhos de Gandhi did not join forces with the young militant blocos afro, choosing to instead remain outside of the Black movement. Filhos de Gandhi utilized atabaques (drums), xiquerés (gourd shakers) and agogós (bells), and many of their songs are taken from traditional liturgy of Candomblé (13). The afoxés were predecessors to the blocos afro who dispensed with the shakers and bells and rely heavily on drums. The blocos afro are far-reaching. Infusing the traditional ijexá rhythm of Candomblé, some groups mix samba, others Jamaican reggae and still others Caribbean merengue. What is common amongst the various blocos afro is the Pan-Africanist perspective of an increasing consciousness of Africa and negritude. By drawing on global African Diaspora identity, the term negritude and its historical movement sought to erase the stigmatism associated with Black heritage and culture by means of racial affirmation.

Carnival is an important element to look at in this regard because it also highlights race relations in Bahia. Roberto DaMatta reinforces that carnival is a ritual of inversion of roles in which the hegemonic social order is turned upside down (1986). However, Dunn criticizes DaMatta’s analysis of Brazilian carnival and his false premise that a single definition of carnival exists for all Brazilians. Dunn aptly notes that carnival is experienced differently for people depending on race, gender, and sexual orientation (Dunn 11). The “ritual inversion of social
roles” is not the case in Bahia as it played out in Rio. In Bahia, young Afro-Brazilians do not parade in costumes of the European aristocracy. Instead, there is the celebration of African countries and heritage with the dress of African style clothing and heavy use of African-derived percussion instruments. Furthermore, Rio looks to Bahia for African influences. DaMatta speaks of the role reversal where the carnival stage, the street, and the center of town, turn upside down. The poor parade in fantasia (costumes) of the rich, and Black Brazilians from the outskirts of town dress in baroque fantasia emulating royalty.

At Ilê Aiyê’s beginning, the Bahian carnival had been heavily dominated by the enormously popular trios elétricos. With a style of fast tempo frenetic music adapted by the frevo genre, trios elétricos rolled huge sound trucks through the streets creating a spontaneous open and equal dance celebration. Since the 1950s, musicians have performed on top of these moving stages using electric guitars, portable amps, and loads of speakers (McGowan and Pessanha 1991). The trios eléctricos were electric bands, whereas Ilê Aiyê came along and employed strictly percussion. The former were exclusively White. Ilê Aiyê’s policy of exclusion was related to the trios elétricos continued denial of Afro-Brazilians inside the cordoned-off sections following their massive sound trucks. Before Ilê Aiyê formed, Afro-Brazilians were relegated only to the position of holding the ropes as security during the carnival parade of bands. Thus, Ilê Aiyê restricted entrance to brancos as a racial policy against the status quo. It was a direct affront to the social climate in the country that viewed Afro-Brazilians as second-class citizens.

I suspect that Ilê Aiyê was able to sustain their racial policy and homage to an African past during carnival through those years of the dictatorship because their social protest was shrouded in the festivities that allow for a period of inverted gaiety. In other words, Ilê Aiyê was
protected by the *loucura* (madness) of carnival. The hit song they debuted in their first carnival appearance of 1975, “Que Bloco É Esse,” claimed a sense of mad courage and boldness (Dunn). Lyrics from the song turn away from the established norm and claim the value of blackness that had been denigrated. The message fueled by the government is indirectly criticized for its total disregard of the diversity in Brazil’s population.

DaMatta’s analysis of the carnivalesque might shed some light on why or how even with the insults and persecution by the media and the public, Ilê Aiyê was able to remain after their 1975 introduction. Carnival is a social event of contrasts, chaos, and playfulness. According to DaMatta, carnival reverberates in its own liminal time. Carnival time is measured by the configuration of the social event itself – what comes before and what comes after it. Precisely what occurs before the carnival celebration in terms of Bahian social cultural politics is directed in the language produced by the *blocos afro*, such as Ilê Aiyê. Their performance is embedded or laden with meaning. It is a protest of sorts, although in alignment with the social as well as political structures involving the carnival. Ilê Aiyê did not publicly decry carnival itself as a huge affair where people lacking sufficient resources spend their time and energy partying in the streets for five consecutive days. Nor did they take up actions of boycott or violent protest similar to the African descendants in North America or in the newly liberated African countries, of which they were certainly aware. The military regime effectively squelched any notions of dissidence. Carnival then became a vehicle for hidden protest.

When Ilê Aiyê took the stage in 1975, there were no other public examples of Afro-Bahian organizations then, neither social nor political. There had been the Frente Negra Brasileira in the 1930s. C. da Silva’s interview with the director of the Godi theatre at that time, brings to light the heated debate between culture and politics as transformative agents of change.
in the status quo for Afro-Brazilians. What Ilê Aiyê hid or made irrelevant in the context of carnival was the political. During the dictatorship, that was also the most cautious measure. What they made immaterial was the need for any political modification or government intervention. This is significant, given other examples from the legal changes that occurred in the U.S. in terms of the Civil Rights Movement (Black Americans entered higher education and gained access to housing) and the revolutionary African independence movements.

Ilê Aiyê is a part of movimento negro in Bahia. In fact, Ilê Aiyê appears at the early stage of resurgence in affirmation of Black identity. Their initial means of expression was through carnival in Salvador. Ilê Aiyê was claiming public space for Afro-Brazilians that could fit amongst the trios elétricos, the fantasia, and the revelry. For the bloco afro, Afro-Brazilian was designated as dark skin, kinky hair, two parents of this same phenotype, valorization of African heritage, and the self-labeling of “negra.” Consciousness or awareness of self-identification was and still is sufficient as a form of social protest. Although, political activists who appeared in the late 1970s disagreed with the tactics of Ilê Aiyê and subsequent blocos afro as “carnivalizing” Black struggle. Blocos afro were criticized as weakening a legitimate cause in the playfulness of the carnivalesque. They were opposed for stopping short of denouncing racism and racist acts, and not emphasizing real political and economic priorities within the confines of a repressive military regime (Dunn).

The abertura or “gradual liberalization” after 1977 permitted public demonstrations and vocal opposition to the government. MNU began in São Paulo in 1978. The political organized effort could not have come sooner in the decade because of state repression. Naturally, the cultural approach was safer and more expedient at the start of the 1970s. The obstacles that Ilê Aiyê faced included a public commitment to the concepts of racial democracy and “whitening”
by both Black and White Brazilians. To speak against these ideas was essentially a subversive attack on Brazil (Turner). So, when Ilê Aiyê appeared in 1975 with cutting-edge lyrics of Afro-Brazilian affirmation in an atmosphere that rejected any emphasis on Africa and downgrades African contributions, they were taking a dangerous stance. This was problematic for many Afro-Brazilians to accept, as they had bought into the belief that through education and professional status a Black person could be perceived as less Black and therefore, more socially acceptable, while improving their social mobility (Turner).³

The theory of *branqueamento* was set forth at the end of the nineteenth century during the Abolition (1888) of slavery and well into the twentieth century when European immigration to Brazil was heavily promoted as a means of diluting its African composition, an official policy by intellectual and political elites (Agier 1995; Lesser 1999). In the 1930s, the ideology of racial democracy took hold in the formation of Brazilian nationalism where all three races would meld into one.

An image had been constructed that destigmatized Black skin. The process involved proudly showing off the black color as a trophy without costumes that would mask it. Moura notes that the discourse of Ilê Aiyê was centered certainly in the early years on color. “Every outfit, the choreography and associated music to the *bloco* are an exaltation of Black beauty both in front of Blacks and in front of Whites – in the case of Bahia, it is more wise to say *mais-claros* (the lighter-skinned)” (373). The audience of the *blocos afro* in general is diverse, not exclusively Black. They attract a considerable number of tourists and White urban residents to their rehearsals and shows. The aim, Moura contends, is not for the *blocos afro* to be separated, rather they seek to create for themselves a place in the middle of carnival (369).
Agier affirmed that Ilê Aiyê’s discourse is confrontational. As indicated by Moura, it was oppositional during the first years in the 1970s; however, presently it reflects accommodation (374). In the early period, the discourse was bold and courageous before there were hefty sponsorships. Ilê Aiyê tends to increasingly support explicitly the more traditional and conservative candidates during municipal elections. (See also Dunn) Moura contends that Ilê Aiyê and the other famous carnival group Filhos de Gandhi play a part amongst the elites in situating Bahia as a “model of a happy civilization in the tropics, sensual and smiling” (374), an image that the media, government and daily culture celebrates in the street during carnival.

**THE CARNIVAL CULTURAL ASSOCIATION GROUP**

What drove Vovô and Apolonia to create the *bloco* in November 1974 was the influence of Black power. The mission statement of the *Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê* is manifold: “To spread Black culture, aiming to join all Afro-Brazilians in the struggle against the most diverse forms of racial discrimination, developing cultural and educational carnival projects, redeeming the self-esteem and elevating in terms of critical consciousness, through play” (Ilê Aiyê 1997).⁴ Herein lies direct correlation with the *movimento negro* in Brazil, as entities emerge and develop, as well as with the stated objectives of the more specific MNU. In general, all those Afro-Brazilians who fight against inequality and discrimination are part of *movimento negro*, per França Santos, one of the founders of Movimento Negro Unificado in Bahia. Ilê Aiyê’s aims coincide with the MNU in valorizing Black culture and combating its commercialization, folklorization, and distortion; seeking better employment opportunities; and reevaluating the role of Blacks in the history of Brazil.
What originally led me to Ilê Aiyê was the fact that a number of the administrators and staff were affiliated with the Candomblé religion while also having the responsibility of overseeing three independent schools, two of which cater directly to children. Escola Mãe Hilda is the literacy school for students in the primary grades. Escola Banda Erê is a school of percussion for youth through adolescence. I was mostly intrigued by the message articulated to the children who may or may not have been well-versed in the religion. However, the more individuals I spoke with at Ilê Aiyê, the more it was reiterated that Ilê Aiyê emphatically does not promote Candomblé.

When I posed the question to others in Ilê Aiyê, from Vovô to the staff, about the link between Candomblé and the organization, I frequently received the response that the religion was not in the forefront; it does not serve as a point of indoctrination. Escola Mãe Hilda does not enforce Candomblé. There are students in attendance whose parents are Catholic, Protestant, or claim no religious affiliation at all. Even though all of the directors and some of the educators are involved in Candomblé to a certain extent, the religion is still disassociated from the social work and educational program of the association.

What encompasses Ilê Aiyê’s message to its students, from the children in Escola Mãe Hilda to the adults in the Escola Profissionalizante, is the importance of self-affirmation and racial identity. Each of the three schools at some level focuses on “raising consciousness” or procuring an increased self-awareness as an individual and as part of the collective Afro-Brazilian identity. It is apparent that identity is weighed at least equally with academics. I am reminded of professora Santos’ class at Escola Mãe Hilda and how the children were quite vocal in affirming their own phenotypical features that brought them the most pride or the ones they could readily recite.
Ilê Aiyê has four basic principles that are the cornerstone for its projects and subsequently, passed on to students. One, valorization of the Black population promotes the positive transmission of the history and culture. Two, the defense of Black people will be guaranteed by the act of solidarity with many social struggles. Three, respecting elders as the basis for good behavior will ensure the preservation of the Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. Four, maintenance of a musical legacy is strength of the carnival group itself (Ilê Aiyê: 25 Anos de Resistência).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Of Brazil’s population of 150 million people, Afro-Brazilians represent 53 percent and whites 47 percent. Illiteracy among Afro-Brazilians is 28.5 percent versus 11 percent for whites as of the 2001 census results. Income distribution shows that the poorest 20 percent of the population owns only 2.6 percent of national wealth, while the wealthiest 10 percent commands 48.1 percent. If we compare ourselves with India, where the poorest 20 percent of the population has 8.8 percent of national wealth and the wealthiest 10 percent commands 27.1 percent, the extent of how skewed the distribution of wealth is in Brazil becomes apparent (Leal 2001: 291).

James E. Scott differentiates between dominant and subordinate in terms of public and hidden transcripts. “The public transcript is…the self-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (1990:18). It is the open, public interaction between dominant and subordinate, which according to Scott can be misleading in defining power relations precisely because of what is not allowed to occur:
At its most elementary level the hidden transcript represents an acting out in fantasy – and occasionally in secretive practice – of the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination. The frustration, tension, and control necessary in public give way to unbridled retaliation in a safer setting, where the accounts of reciprocity are, symbolically at least, finally balanced (38).

Looking at carnival when Ilê Aiyê makes its debut amid fear and recrimination, their public performance even in its boldness was also disguised in terms of the festive occasion – a time set aside for play, madness, and entertainment.

The act of domination itself poses a hidden transcript or a subculture amongst subordinate groups. Thinking back to the criticism that Ilê Aiyê received in 1975 and long afterwards, the backlash from the media and a Bahian community entrenched in the status quo fits well into Scott’s analysis. A sizable autonomous assembly of subordinates might have been implicitly threatening to the state.

The hidden transcript implies that all performances, which are in effect social actions, cannot be taken at face value. They include gestures, language, dress, mannerisms, codes, and patterns of speech. In theory, the systematic subjugation brings up a reaction that involves a longing to strike or speak back to the oppressor while remaining within the law. This can include rumor, gossip, oral traditions, and rituals of reversal (Scott 1990). Both the dominant and the subordinate group have their own set of “rules” known only to members of that group. The subordinate could consist of the entire Afro-Brazilian population. Although for the purpose of this study, the attention is specifically focused on Ilê Aiyê. What is hidden is concealed, obscured, or put out of sight. It even goes so far as to be disguised, which is simply to provide with a false appearance or to hide the true nature or character. Given the fact of an authoritarian
regime and public censorship, certain expressions had to be masked that were in opposition to the economic, social or political dictates. Ilê Aiyê parades in carnival. They perform with controversial lyrics. However, they do not challenge Brazilian power relations, while clearly mindful of the deplorable conditions of Afro-Brazilians. Again, this goes back to what Ilê Aiyê chooses to make inconsequential at the time of their social protest on the carnival stage – the very argument that places them and other cultural groups in conflict with the MNU. Stopping at their carnival performances would suggest that Ilê Aiyê complied to some degree with the relationship of the power holders. Others have questioned this lack of open confrontation in terms of race in Brazil.5

I agree with Scott’s rejection of the thin theory of false consciousness in this case which asserts that the dominant group is able to maintain its positioning because it persuades the subordinate group that its situation is “natural and inevitable” (72). Ilê Aiyê denied the racial democracy ideology. They did not believe in the naturalization of the status quo. Nor do they endorse the power arrangement as it is today. Ilê Aiyê imagines the reversal of the “existing distribution of status and rewards” with its *Festa Beleza Negra* as blackness is identified with beauty and honor. Annually, fifteen days before carnival, a queen is elected as the “*Deusa de Ébano*” (“Ebony Goddess”) to reign for a year. There has been a reigning queen since 1976. The contest is open to women, eighteen and older, throughout the city. Each contestant is judged based on hair, makeup, dance, overall presentation, and clothing that she must make herself representing Ilê Aiyê’s carnival theme. Based on the given theme that in some ways is homage to Africa or Afro-Brazilians, contestants must create their own costumes and arrange their performance in such a way that draws a connection. Literacy is also a requirement. The selected queen will be the central figure atop Ilê Aiyê’s stage in carnival, constantly dancing – though the
ever-popular samba is not Ilê Aiyê’s dance of choice. The women are expected to know how to
dance since they will be doing so much of it in shows all year. However, the choreography is
what is known as afro dancing, which combines movements frequently seen in Candomblé
houses. Throughout the year, the queen travels on national and international trips representing
the *bloco* on radio and TV, as well as working with young girls in community programs.

As subordinate group, Ilê Aiyê decides its own criteria of beauty where dark skin is an
advantage and the candidate’s costumes are created in the image of a particular theme. The *
Beleza Negra* pageant yearly draws large numbers of young women who would otherwise not
find such welcoming opportunities in the public contests sponsored outside of the Black
community. The cultural practice of the subordinate is then chosen to emphasize specific values
and beliefs that are effectively controlled. The audience for *Beleza Negra* is primarily residents
of Liberdade.

Scott refers to carnival as “an institutionalized form of political disguise” and where
“biting songs and scolding verse can be sung directly to the disrespected and malefactors” (173).
The fact that Ilê Aiyê used its explosive song lyrics intentionally during its debut of “Que Bloco
É Esse” to ridicule White Brazilians, the elite, was not out of the ordinary in the social history of
carnival. The remarkable feat for Ilê Aiyê is that their songs were recorded and broadcast over
the airwaves leaving the protection of a festive atmosphere. In the ambiguity of play and
seriousness, the intention was to make a statement denouncing that what is *not* Black is
inherently superior (notably hair and skin).

Ilê Aiyê’s claim to an essentially imagined idea of Africa is not touted as necessarily
better than things European. Africa is constructed in the sense that only a few of the members
have ever traveled or visited parts of the continent, most notably western Africa, which attributed
greatly to the foundation of modern Bahian society. Ilê Aiyê, as well as other social activists who draw reference to a historical past, rely on an image that shapes their communion of kinship. For Ilê Aiyê, this idea of what Benedict Anderson refers to as an “imagined community” operates on two levels. First, there is the perception of Afro-Brazilians as one unit. Second, is the representation of Africa as a collective homeland. For Ilê Aiyê the fact that nonwhites have numerous color terms to refer to themselves that takes into account skin color, hair texture, educational level, professional status, and facial features does not negate the bloco’s impression of a single ethnic group. Yet, this racial identification of wearing the “Black” label is situational and based on the individual’s own consciousness, not solely their appearance. Racial identity is constructed by the individual seeking social or economic advancement, and on the part of Ilê Aiyê as a means to recreate community thereby, gaining some collective advantage.

The association revises the boundary of “Black Brazilian.” Ilê Aiyê does not acknowledge the category as the census, which designates only 6% of the Brazilian population negra. It is in the cultural association’s interest to include the broad racial classification of pardos, as these individuals do have some degree of African ancestry. Furthermore, the larger the combined base the more likely group members themselves will feel a sense of empowerment, as well as present signs of increased communal accord to the dominant group. This idea of imagining the full ensemble of pardos and prêtos as a solidified (although not unified) Black Brazilian community rests also with the socio-economic inequality and discrimination experienced by individuals identifying with either color category.

The educational material and the songs formulate a concept of Africa as a birthplace, reservoir of historic achievements, and body of illustrious ancient civilizations of which Black Brazilians today are successors. They are part of an imagined reality that they did not choose.
There is a “natural” connection to an African ancestry used as an instrument by Ilê Aiyê to elevate the consciousness of Afro-Brazilians. Africa then, like lessons on Zumbi of Palmares in 1695, Revolta dos Buzios (Revolt of the Cowrie Shells) in 1798, or Revolta dos Malês (Revolt of the Malês) in 1835, represents possibilities and hope for overcoming seemingly insurmountable struggles. And subsequently, through song lyrics, which have been publicly recorded by the time of carnival, audiences experience simultaneity and the collective is brought together by shared language. “At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody” (Anderson 1983: 132) as a community of sorts is being conceived. For Anderson shows that nations and therefore, subgroups are born in language, not in blood where others can be called into the imagined community (133). In close proximity to this ideology of an imagined community is the use of invented traditions.

What Ilê Aiyê imagines is a singular Afro-Brazilian community not fragmented by color categories that do little more than differentiate non-Whites from Whites and maintain existing power dynamics in the hands of a few.

The Festa Beleza Negra has become a tradition in Liberdade just as Ilê Aiyê’s grand departure from the neighborhood on the Saturday of carnival before joining the actual procession in the main artery. Some thirty thousand people, including local and national media, attend the ceremony in Curuzu (Ilê Aiyê: 25 Anos de Resistência: 10). The group gathers at the home of Mãe Hilda for a ritual of offerings to the orixás – namely, scented water and white manioc flour – and the setting free of white doves for a peaceful carnival. Popcorn is thrown out into the crowd in honor of the orixá Obaluaé. Then, fireworks end the ceremony. All the obligations are white as a sign of peace. The liberation of the doves “…is the shout of peace and of mercy for to cover the head of all and leads to protection…” (Mãe Hilda: A História da Minha Vida: 17).
Mãe Hilda is accompanied by her Candomblé devotees in the front of the line. The character of Ilê Aiyê is highly regarded as grounded in traditional African roots. Yet, it is Agier who points out that the group’s grand departure from Curuzu is actually a hybrid of customs. The ritual ceremony pulls its inspiration from Umbanda, Catholicism, the Rio carnival, and the imaginings of Africa. There is a tendency within Ilê Aiyê, Agier explain to make the distinction that their choreography, texts, images and heroes are “pure” and in the sense of relating to an African past and showcasing “Africa in Bahia.” However, Agier vehemently asserts that is extremely modern (2000: 377). This first carnival performance of Ilê Aiyê takes place without using the protective cords or security enabling the large crowd to take part from within as well as outside the community.

This customary practice of the blessings by Mãe Hilda and releasing of the white doves to invoke Oxalá is done so that the orixás can guide the bloco for a safe and prosperous carnival. The history of their departure for carnival tells something about the religious connection of the association that is not freely given in interviews. The symbols used are linked with Candomblé. There is the mãe-de-santo, throwing of popcorn for Obaluaé, other Candomblé initiates present, and the ceremony occurs outside of Mãe Hilda’s home, the terreiro. Mãe Hilda is the filha-de-santo, child of the saint, of Obaluaé. Vovô is an ogân of the house of Obaluaé, Mãe Hilda’s Terreiro Ilê Axé Jitolu. The orixá Obaluaé not only cures, but can tell why the community has illness or suffering (Browning 1995). Hobsbawm’s definition of an invented tradition certainly applies to Ilê Aiyê’s carnival departure as well as Festa Beleza Negra, “…essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (1983: 4).
Why is there the need for this ceremonious display leading to the already impressive carnival procession? Ilê Aiyê is simply leaving Liberdade to join the other blocos afro, afoxés, samba clubs, trios elétricos, and revelers at the main square in nearby Campo Grande and for a parade to the Pelourhino. Yet, Ilê Aiyê seeks protection and prosperity. The religion of the founders and president, Mãe Hilda and Vovô, is Candomblé and Ilê Aiyê is venturing outside of its home environment, away from protected space. Recall that their debut and early parades occurred during the military dictatorship, when it was not safe for them to openly bring any attention to race or socio-economic inequities. Protection was needed because they were also taking a bold step declaring, through music, rights of Afro-Brazilians as full citizens. As a result of following obligations to appease the orixás, it can be inferred that an aspect of the Candomblé religion is to safeguard the individual from harm and negative energy. Ilê Aiyê would be traveling and meeting up with opposition and the outcome uncertain. In the case of prosperity, it encompasses well-being and joy, precisely the elements that carnival would incite. The departure works to establish group cohesion amongst the members of the bloco while bringing together the people of Liberdade in unison as it sends its representatives forth, glorious carnival players. The purpose is not to garner support for the Candomblé as much as to construct community solidarity. In addition, carnival can be dangerous for Ilê Aiyê as well as for the other bands in spite of the cordoned-off protective space due to the mix of thousands of participants, heavy drinking, raucousness, lewdness, and debauchery. The anonymity provided by the audience can result in violent eruptions. However, Ilê Aiyê has not had any incidents of disharmony or violence during their carnival parades (Browning 1995).
**INFUSION OF THE DIASPORA**

Ilê Aiyê’s parade is not a fixed idea of Africanness. It is always combined specifically with Brazil be it incorporating the Diaspora beats of reggae, merengue, and mambo, infusing variations on Candomblé drumming patterns, or blending *orixá* choreography. “The Bahian Carnaval rewrites African history in terms which are meaningful to its participants. This inscription includes the orixás, even in accounts of non-Yoruba cultures” (Browning 138). This mixing of Africa, the Americas and Brazil in performance could suggest that inaccurate information is publicly disseminated and history is therefore made and retold subjectively. On the contrary, this approach brings Ilê Aiyê from outside of the events as they are remembered and reclassified and locates the *bloco* in the changing process itself giving voice to its own value system.7

To some extent, all histories must rely on mythic prefigurations in order to render the past meaningful and coherent. In this sense, the *afoxés* and *blocos afro* are not so much spreading misinformation about Africa, as constructing a powerful, grass-roots discourse which challenges traditional notions and myths of Africans and their descendents in Brazil (Dunn 12).

Band’ Aiyê has three CDs and one vinyl recording. Due to the high cost of production, these are primarily recordings of their live shows. Ilê Aiyê’s musical explosion in the 1975 carnival had very much to do with racial politics – the economic status of Afro-Brazilians, the independence movements of African countries, and the lack of opportunity for Afro-Brazilians within the Bahian carnival. In the 1970s, their music was also centered on religion, as well as Zumbi of Palmares. During the 1980s, the attention toward social problems and social movements became stronger. By the 1990s, Vovô remarked that the idea of Black music began
to weaken because composers were concerned more about crossover appeal (Conceição and Silva 2001). However, it was in the 1990s that music spoke also of love, what he refers to as “Black Romantic” and credits Ilê Aiyê as being a source for this new focus on admiration for the beloved woman (Conceição and Silva).

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1 *Bloco afro* is short for “bloco Afro-Brasileira.”

2 An *afoxé* is also a musical instrument known as the *xequerê.*


4 “Play” is used in the sense of music, song, and dance.

5 See Hanchard (1999) for an in depth discussion on Brazil’s racial politics.


7 According to Wade (1993: 23), there are two approaches to view history. “With the first approach, the analyst stands outside the events of history [to retell].” In the second approach, “history begins with consciousness and does not just happen; it is *made*…” The analyst is part of the changing process of racial classifications and realizes there is no objectivity. “…the analyst would see in the tendency to equate phenotypical variation with what ‘we’ already expect to define as ‘racial variation’ the observer’s situatedness in a tradition in which ‘we’ explain ‘them,’ ‘ourselves’ in our relations with ‘them.’ It would detect the observer’s transference ‘into the object the principles of his relation to the object’ (Bourdieu 1977: 96).”