

*Quilombo*

**A Critical Review of a Brazilian Film**

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## Summary and Background

This paper investigates race and folklore in the Brazilian motion picture *Quilombo*, a movie about a seventeenth-century maroon slave community in Northeastern Brazil called *Quilombo dos Palmares*. In this paper, I look at criticism about the movie and how the myth of “racial democracy” is still alive in *Quilombo* despite the film’s theme of Black resistance to White oppression during slavery. I argue that while *Quilombo* appears to celebrate Black pride and history, it does not contribute to the alleviation of racial discrimination, poverty and oppression faced by Afro-Brazilians.

*Quilombo* was written and directed by Carlos Diegues, produced by Augusto Arraes and stars Zeze Motta, Antonio Pompeo, Toni Tornado, Antonio Pitanga, Vera Fischer, Mauricio Do Valle and Grande Otelo; it was released in 1984 in color and lasts 119 minutes.

### Brazilian Slavery and *Quilombo dos Palmares*

Historically, Brazil imported more slaves (3.6 million) than any other country in the Americas and was the last colony to abolish slavery in 1888 (Telles 2004:25). Many *quilombos* (runaway slave communities), large-scale revolts and resistance heroes developed in response to the harsh nature of Brazil slavery. *Quilombo dos Palmares* however was the most impressive maroon community in Brazil. It held between 11,000 and 30,000 people and resisted Portuguese, Dutch and Native Brazilian attacks until finally succumbing to the cannons of the Portuguese in 1694-1695 (Reis and Gomes 2006). Even though *Quilombo dos Palmares* lasted nearly one hundred years, Brazilian

colonial authorities preserved little documentation about the community; most recorded information was written by soldiers of fortune that were paid to find and attempt to bring down the settlement.

According to written sources and legend, the most famous rulers of *Quilombo dos Palmares* were Ganga Zumba and Zumbi dos Palmares. The film *Quilombo* begins with Ganga Zumba's flight from slavery into the mountains of Pernambuco in Northeastern Brazil, where he finds refuge and later a place as King of *Palmares*. Zumbi was born in *Palmares* during Ganga Zumba's rule but was later taken captive and raised by a Portuguese priest. As an adult, Zumbi escapes his master and returns to *Quilombo dos Palmares* to become its final ruler.

### **Afro-Brazilians and the Media**

During the November 20th, 1995 march on Brasilia, which celebrated the 300 year anniversary of Zumbi dos Palmares' death, the Brazilian government acknowledged the need for "race based policies in support of nonwhites" (Telles 2004:49). This declaration was long overdue. To illustrate this point, one should consider, for example, that although Rio de Janeiro is only thirty percent Black, its *favelas* (shanty towns) are sixty per cent Afro-Brazilian (do Nascimento 1989). Bahia, which is a predominantly Black state in Brazil, reflects the following enrollment statistics for primary, secondary and college education:

	<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>University</i>
Whites	54.46%	82.56%	82.21%
Blacks	45.52%	17.43%	11.64%

(do Nascimento 1989:82)

Blacks are less educated than Whites—even in a chiefly Afro-Brazilian state. It has become increasingly obvious to many Brazilians that the symbolic violence of poverty and the results of prejudice against Blacks are real and severe. According to Reichmann (1995:35), “in spite of the longstanding official discourse, African Brazilians continue to endure discrimination in the workplace, schools, the public-health system and politics...Among Brazil's poor, those who identify themselves in the national census as black (*preto*) or brown (*pardo*)—who make up at least 45% of the population—can expect to lose more children to disease and malnutrition, die at an earlier age, and earn significantly less than Brazilians of primarily European descent with the same levels of education, job experience and housing conditions.”

In 1994, Brazilian newspaper *Jornal da Tarde* ran a story about an organization’s race-based court battle against Brazilian multi-media colossus, *TV Globo*. The Geledes Black Women’s institute called attention to racist portrayals of African Brazilians in the prime-time television series, *Patria Minha*. According to Geledes Coordinator Suely Carneiro, “the *novela*’s (soap opera’s) white characters are diverse and complex while the black characters are frozen in a single stereotype—humble, defenseless and servile” (Reichmann 1995:37). Geledes was empowered to mount these proceedings because “in recent years, activists have been able to support their claims with official statistical evidence of racial inequalities—statistics that did not exist a decade ago because

government agencies didn't disaggregate socioeconomic data by race" (Reichmann 1995:37).

Presently, Brazilian television shows more programs with Black characters than before but change is slow; the viewer can expect to continue to see the same stereotypical images of Afro-Brazilians as they always have. People's opinions are shifting however, and one-third of those interviewed by Araujo said that Afro-Brazilians on television are depicted "in a negative way—not as good as they really are" (2000:10).

### **The Myth of Racial Democracy**

At the 1984 Cannes' Film Festival press conference, Diegues stated that *Quilombo* "is a film about 'racial democracy'" (Tournes 1984:3). It is useful to define what this term means to Brazilians. Until the release of *The Masters and Slaves* in 1933, a novel by Brazil's famous author Gilberto Freyre, Brazilian race relations were dominated by ideas of White supremacy and racial degeneration (Vianna 1999). *The Masters and Slaves* however promoted Brazil's miscegenation as the nation's strongest characteristic. Freyre argued that the indigenous, Portuguese and African descended Brazilians were warmer to one another when compared to how Blacks were treated by Whites in the United States. Freyre also believed that Brazil's problems were solely class-based. In the late 1930s, the Brazilian government officially promoted "racial democracy"; however, the concept coincided with *branqueamento*—a term used to identify a set of laws which barred all African and Asian immigrants from entering the country and paved the way for the elimination of non-White Brazilian races. Therefore,

“racial democracy” acted as a blanket for the continuation and maintenance of White supremacy.

### ***Quilombo: The Mulata and Acceptance-Resistance to Racial Democracy***

In *Quilombo*, Ganga Zumba has three wives who each represent Afro-Brazilian religious figures: a young *Mulata* (mixed race woman: one parent Black and one White) named Iansã, a White Dutch prostitute (Oba) and a phenotypically Black Brazilian (Dandara). For many Brazilians, the *Mulata* represents sexual pleasure. In *The Masters and Slaves*, Freyre claims that “with reference to Brazil, as an old saying has it: ‘White woman for marriage, mulatto woman for f---, Negro woman for work,’ a saying which, alongside the social convention of the superiority of the white woman and the inferiority of the black, is to be discerned a sexual preference for the mulatto” (Goldstein 2003:103). In the *Quilombo*’s behind-the-scenes feature, an unnamed White assistant script writer/producer notes how Iansã demonstrates this tropical carefree sensuality. We are also told that Oba, on the other hand, is the Goddess of wisdom and guidance; she helps Ganga Zumba and the inhabitants of Palmares decide how best to negotiate with the Portuguese. Anderson’s research (2006) shows that Ganga Zumba never even had a White wife. Apparently, as evidenced in *Quilombo*’s scenes when Ganga Zumba attempts to establish a peace accord with the enemy, only Oba can read the documents in Portuguese, whereas Iansã can hardly speak the word ‘America’. Dandara, who does not appear in the *Palmares*-Portuguese mediation scene, is portrayed as a hardworking fighter—and she is pure black. Hanchard (1994) contends that Western writings typically cast Black women in this warrior or superwoman role. I argue that these three

examples demonstrate, contrary to Diegues' imaginary utopia, the reiteration of Brazilian stereotypes, via Iansã's sexuality, Dandara's heroism and Oba's embodiment of White dominance. Diegues tries to combat Brazilian racism by making a film with numerous Black actors; ironically, he recreates some of the same societal and ideological problems that plague Afro-Brazilians. Hanchard claims that "attempts at subversion hold new contradictions, as those who seek change may reconstitute certain ideological subsets of the dominant group even while contesting a social whole" (Hanchard 1994:23).

In the behind-the-scenes interviews, vague comments play a noteworthy role in both the resistance to and passive non-questioning of racial democracy (Twine 1998; Sheriff 2001). Some actors lash out in monologues without naming who or what is responsible for their suffering. What does the following interviewee mean when she exclaims that "the spirit of Zumbi continues, the spirit of *Palmares* continues, the sense of establishing the future today of an equal and just society (continues)" (Diegues 1984)? Is she referring to oppression by Whites? If so, why would Diegues put her interview first in *Quilombo's* behind-the-scenes feature? I posit that her words are appropriated by Diegues to support racial democracy and not to express a message of conscious Afro-Brazilian opposition to subjugation.

The simultaneous rebellion against and preservation of racial democracy in the behind-the-scenes' interviews can be further clarified by Hasenbalg and Silva: "harmony and the avoidance of racial confrontation seem to be the translation or natural expression, of the racial ideology in Brazil (Goldstein 2003:132)." Diegues does little, if anything, to directly confront contemporary issues of racial inequality in Brazil. He purposely avoids these nasty problems by creating a utopia that cannot question modern Brazilian

inequalities because *Quilombo dos Palmares* existed hundreds of years ago. In true Freyrean style, Diegues practices what Hanchard calls “a national project of conservative liberalism, complete with the paternalism and patron-client relations that have marked Brazilian society and culture from colonial times to the present” (Hanchard 1994:54). Who is White in the film? Diegues (director, script writer), the producer and the entire production and camera crew, with one exception, are Caucasian. Why did Diegues have to write the script himself? Is this not a White Brazilians’ words in the proverbial mouths of Black resistance? How does this film make a difference for the average Afro-Brazilian? Film critic de Souza notes that “it is too bad that the talents (of these actors) were not sufficiently taken advantage of by the director. “Carlos Diegues uses these actors as objects of scenery, instead of material for the dramatic enrichment (of the film)” (translation mine; de Souza 1984:69). Stam echoes de Souza’s criticism: “too often, the actors, including the most talented, are reduced to the role of mannequins; they become plastic objects of the *mise-en-scene* rather than living and breathing incarnations of characters” (Stam 1986:44).

### **Quilombos and their Significance to the Black Radical Tradition**

In *Quilombo*, Diegues creates a utopian vision of a time when property was distributed equally amongst a diverse group of Blacks, native Brazilians and wronged Whites—a true “racial democracy.” Kent posits that the “most apparent significance of Palmares to African history is that an African political system could be transferred to a different content; that it could come to govern not only individuals from a variety of ethnic groups from Africa, but also those born in Brazil, pitch black or almost white,

latinized or close to Amerindian roots; and that it could endure for almost a full century against two European powers, Holland and Portugal” (Dávila 2006). For Diegues, *Quilombo* represents an alternative to the military dictatorship which ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 (Vianna 1999). “My film is not a historical document; it is a work that discusses Brazil’s current (political) situation” (translation mine; Tournes 1984:3). Several authors however agree that most Brazilians see the city *Quilombo dos Palmares* and Zumbi as manifestations of Afro-Brazilian challenges to slavery and the contemporary hope for economic, class and political fairness—and maybe even resistance to capitalism (Dávila 2006; Stam 1997; Metalluk 2006; do Nascimento 1989). Stam states that “it is no accident that a Brazilian black liberationist calls his militant anti-racist movement ‘Quilomboismo,’ or that popular musician Milton Nascimento composed a ‘Quilombo Mass’” (Stam 1986:42) or “that black activist Paulinho da Viola founded a black consciousness *carnaval* group, the Quilombo Samba School” (Stam 1997:44). Dávila (2006) maintains that large samba bands from the Northeast of Brazil, such as Olodum and Ilê Aiyê, rally around this Black radical (roots) tradition via songs texts like:

“*Quilombo*, here we are  
My only debt is to the *quilombo*  
My only debt is to Zumbi”

Cedric Robinson states that this Black radical tradition is “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation, and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective

being, the ontological totality” of Afro-descendants throughout the Americas (Robinson 2000:171). In *Quilombo*, Diegues does not support the Black radical tradition’s version of Zumbi and *Palmares*. Diegues is only concerned with an imaginary utopia, which “is a safe and never-ending adventure” (de Souza 1984:68). For advocates of the Black radical tradition, Zumbi in *Quilombo* represents a solution to the troubles of the Third World Afro-Diaspora; for Diegues, he represents the leader of a utopian racial democracy that Brazil should and possibly could be. Diegues’ intended allegory is Brazil’s brutal military dictatorship; nevertheless, *Quilombo*’s underlying subtext can be understood as a form of racial exploitation.

### **Appropriation of Black Resistance for Use as a Symbol of Nationalism**

According to Araujo, “the cultural industry has always had the need to appropriate aspects of black culture to enrich its products and its sponsors” (Araujo 2000:12). Diegues manipulates the story of *Quilombo* for his nationalistic and “culturalist” purposes. Hanchard (1994:21) defines culturalism as:

“the equation of cultural practices with the material, expressive, artifactual elements of cultural production, and the neglect of normative and political aspects of a cultural process. In culturalist practices, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Diasporic symbols and artifacts become reified and commodified; culture becomes a thing, not a deeply political process. Peter Fry (1982) has noted that Afro-Brazilian artifacts and cultural practices consistently have been transformed into national cultural symbols.” (Hanchard 1994:21).

All *Black* politics are lost in *Quilombo*. Diegues tries to do with Brazilian film what Vianna claims Brazil’s national government did with samba in the 1930s. Vianna

believes that samba helped construct Brazilian national identity in the early 20th century. Brazil invented both the authenticity and tradition of samba in order to develop a homogenous sense of cultural nationalism amongst groups of rich and poor; Black, White and *Mestiço* (mixed race of White and indigenous peoples); and across distant geographical regions. *Quilombo* is also a nationalist project. It is an instructive film that educates the viewer about what Brazilian society should strive to become: a racial democracy where all people are equal. This is a very noble concept. Unfortunately, Diegues' ideal world is nothing more than a dream; *Quilombo* does not deal with *braqueamento* or any of the serious current realities that Black and *Mulato* Brazilians endure on a daily basis.

Diegues also takes a Gramscian approach in *Quilombo* to ask how one resolves what Hanchard (1994:20) calls “the two predicaments that Gramsci sought to address, (which were) the following: how do subordinate individuals (groups) forge counter-hegemonic values out of existing, reactionary ones without reproducing the latter in new forms?” In *Quilombo*, Zumbi, after temporarily defeating the Portuguese, declares that “if I enter their capital, even as a conqueror, I will have to do what they do....we will end up with slaves, like them” (Diegues 1984). On the surface, this scene is a statement against co-operation with the real Brazilian military regime in power at the time; however, this example also shows that Diegues does not support a united Pan-African movement. The only way for Zumbi to succeed is through the racially democratic utopia of *Palmares*, which fits naturally into the framework of racial democracy.

None of the Blacks interviewed in *Quilombo's* behind-the-scenes feature spoke at length about the film. Only several unidentified Whites discussed character development

and hidden nuances in the movie. Were these Whites considered more intelligent than the film's Black actors? Why did not Diegues have the behind-the-scenes crew interview an Afro-Brazilian intellectual for his/her opinion about the movie? *Quilombo's* actors are only pawns in Diegues' script; they do not take part in creating the film. Why is a White Brazilian man the only one in charge of the dialogue for a story about Black resistance to White domination? Could Diegues have worked with a Black script writer or co-director? If, according to racial democracy, Afro-Brazilians are not inferior to Whites, why are they not equally represented in the production of *Quilombo*?

I believe that Diegues sees *Quilombo dos Palmares* as the remains of a culture that graced and influenced Brazilian history but no longer resonates with contemporary issues of discrimination. Diegues takes the air out of Black resistance movements and replaces it with a utopian cry for racial democracy.

### **Conclusion**

Like Diegues, a significant number of Brazilians continue to trust that racial democracy forms the bedrock of Brazilian mores; many also still adhere to the concept of whitening when judging the merits and values of others (Telles 2004). Brazilian society today does not need more movies like *Quilombo* which do not accurately represent the views of Afro-Brazilians. Blacks should continue to push beyond identity politics and engage the media in Brazil-wide debates about the racial, collective and financial issues that concern Afro-Brazilians (Stam 1997; Hanchard 1994). Only works by Black activist film directors, script writers and actors can accurately deal with the inequities of Brazilian society; only their films can tell the true story of Afro-Brazilians to the Brazilian public at large.

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