

The Afro Brazil Museum: its approach and contribution to the representation of Afro-Brazilians in modern Brazil

Jessica Norberto Rocha¹

Resumo

O presente artigo aborda o contexto, a história e as principais realizações do Museu Afro Brasil. O Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) foi criado em 1978 em São Paulo e foi considerada fortemente esquerdista na orientação e mais militante do que qualquer dos seus antecessores. Como se afirma no texto Protesto Preto, em São Paulo, o movimento foi uma forte expressão de insatisfação entre os instruídos e qualificados afro-brasileiros negaram entrar no status de classe média. O Afro Brasil Museu abriu em 23 de outubro de 2004 como um resultado de mais de duas décadas de intensa pesquisa, publicações, exposições e a dedicação de seu atual diretor e curador Emanuel Araújo

Palavra-chave: Museu Afro Brasil

Abstract

This article discusses the context, the history and the main achievements of the Museum Afro Brazil. The Unified Black Movement (MNU) was created in 1978 in São Paulo and was considered strongly leftist in orientation and more militant than any of its predecessors. As stated in the text Black Protest in São Paulo, the movement was a strong expression of dissatisfaction among the educated and skilled african-Brazilian denied entering the middle-class status. The Afro Brasil Museum was open on the 23th of October of 2004 as a result of more than two decades of intense research, publications, exhibitions and the dedication of its current director and curator Emanuel Araújo

Keywords: Afro Brazil Museum;

¹ Mestranda em Divulgação Científica e Cultural na Universidade Estadual de Campinas e Coordenadora Pedagógica do Museu Itinerante PONTO UFMG jessicanorberto@yahoo.com.br

The Movimento Negro Unificado (MNU) was created on 1978 in São Paulo and was considered to be strongly leftist in orientation and more militant than any of its predecessors. As it is stated in the text *Black Protest in São Paulo*, the movement was a strong expression of dissatisfaction among educated and qualified Afro-Brazilians denied entering into the middle-class status. Although it has

difficulties in attracting a mass following, the black movement had major impacts on Brazilian life during the 1980s, exercising a degree of political influence out of all proportion to its actual membership, and provoking more state response in the area of race than at any time since 1888. (Andrews, 1992: 165)

During the 1990s, MNU has a great decrease of strength, but it has already implanted its legacy. Since then Brazilians had begun to find other means to voice their concerns about Afro-Brazilian culture and recognition. Through different means, the black movement has grown into diverse bodies in federal, state and local government, political parties and independent Non-Governmental Organizations.

By the same time, an initiative of creating a museum dedicated to Afro-Brazilian culture was being thought in São Paulo. However many obstacles, as financial, political and structural, needed to be overtaken before the approval of its implantation project.

The Afro Brasil Museum was open on the 23th of October of 2004 as a result of more than two decades of intense research, publications, exhibitions and the dedication of its current director and curator Emanuel Araújo. The artist has been working on the preservation, collection and education of the

Afro-Brazilian heritage. His collection of nearly 5000 artefacts, including paintings, sculptures, photographs, portraits, books, documents and videos, from national and international artists and authors was the first set of materials to compose the Museum's exhibitions. Since the time it was founded Petrobrás is giving financial support within the Rouanet Law from Cultural Ministry of Brazil. The management of the implantation project was under the Florestan Fernandes Institute's responsibility with the collaboration of the Municipal Secretary of Culture. Nowadays, the Museum is an institution managed by the Afro Brasil Museum Association, qualified as an *Organização da Sociedade Civil de Interesse Público* (OSCIP), which works on the development of projects, fund raising and sponsorships.

The Museum has grown to a number of 1100 items, placed in its own building in Ibiapuera Park, a prestigious and easily accessible cultural location in the centre of São Paulo city. The items are distributed in six permanent exhibitions that have their own focus points. Namely, they are: 'África – diversidade e permanência' that shows the diversity of African culture portrayed in pictures and photographs of past kingdoms and the current situation of the continent. 'Trabalho e escravidão' which deals with the role of the African slaves and its generations in the construction of Brazilian society, especially as an essential work force in all cycles of the economical development. 'Sagrado e profano' and 'Religiosidade Afro-Brasileira' which approach the mixture of different religions that ended in the appropriation and change of celebrations and costumes within the African communities, Portuguese and Indian cultures. 'História e Memória' that portrays who the Afro-Brazilians were and who are they in the history, introducing some individuals who were important since the Colonial period. Finally, 'Artes' that reveals black architecture, literature, music, and dance since the Baroque period.

The Museum was built aiming to contribute to rethinking and retelling, through its collection and activities, the history of one of the most important matrix of Brazilian society and national identity, the black people. As is declared in the Museum introduction text written by Emanuel Araújo, at least three visions are extremely relevant to them: 1) to recognize the black roots in our culture and how the black was and is; 2) to highlight the discrimination, prejudice and social differentiation against the black; at last 3) to reaffirm the strength of the black through their intellectual, moral, religious, esthetical and artistic heritage.

[...] o Museu Afro Brasil não pretende ser um museu do negro ou sobre o negro, museu de um gueto étnico ou cultural, nem tampouco um museu do folclore, reduzindo a “curiosidades do passado” as raízes mais profundas das expressões da cultura brasileira. Ao contrário, o museu se propõe a re-visitar nossa história, passar a limpo nossa memória, para interrogar-nos sobre a formação de nossa sociedade e nossa cultura, fazendo-o, porém, da perspectiva do negro, a partir do olhar e da experiência do próprio negro. (Museu Afro Brasil website, 2008)

In addition to this, Emanuel Araújo, in an interview given to ComCiência, makes clear the relationship between Afro-Brazilian art or art about its origins and the construction of the group identity, as follows:

A relação entre arte e identidade nesse caso é muito importante, pois através dela pode-se determinar a valorização de certos grupos étnicos. [...] A valorização dessa arte não apenas colabora na construção da identidade do negro e da memória de certos artistas, como também para o

resgate da auto-estima desse grupo. (ComCiência, 2003)

The director and curator also points that the Museum intends to be, at the same time, a Historical Museum, which talks about the origins and fights throughout the years; a Black Memory Reference Centre, which respects the tradition and outcomes that elders have achieved in the public sectors, science, arts and literature, in the more popular and erudite fields; an Ethnographic Museum, which exhibits rituals and customs, culture fusion and register the Afro-Brazilian culture today; and also a Black Art Museum, which contains stage and plastic arts, music and dance.

In order to realize these aims, one group, called the Núcleo Museologia, was created to act in two complementary sectors: preservation and communication. Simultaneously to these areas, the Museum invests in the educational process. As is claimed in the Museum vision, it is time for recognition of Afro-Brazilians as full citizens, which means equal access to education and cultural, economic and political opportunities. In this way, its projects work to remark the institution importance for the reinforcement of the group memory and identity in the Paulista and Brazilian scenes.

[...] o Núcleo de Educação nasce com o desafio de mediar a relação do público com as exposições. Essa mediação envolve as visitas orientadas, cursos, oficinas, seminários eventos e publicações que têm como eixo a desafiadora tarefa de desconstruir um imaginário da população negra, construído ao longo da nossa história pela ótica da inferioridade, e transformá-lo em um imaginário fundado no prestígio e no pertencimento. É por meio da observação e do diálogo que buscamos promover a aproximação dos visitantes com os conteúdos, concepções e abordagens que

orientam este Museu. (Museu Afro Brasil website, 2008)

In conjunction to the collection, the Núcleo Educacional promotes artistic as well as professional qualification and cultural, historical and critical awareness of the population in general. This team produces a number of activities, of short and long duration, for target audiences that could vary in age, aims and social and cultural background. Considering the law in Brazilian Constitution that makes compulsory the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian Cultures in primary and secondary schools, the Museum also realizes qualification courses, seminars and meetings oriented to teachers reinforcing its commitment with Brazilian education. To illustrate, as part of the short duration activities, they have Oriented Visits, which last approximately one hour; and Games, which facilitate the youth relation with the exhibition. For a longer duration and deeper formation, they offer Workshops, Courses and Seminars, due to share and spread knowledge about history, memory, literature and culture and to promote debates around the ethnographic-racial issues. *Curso História e Cultura Afro Brasileira: Ensinar e Aprender na Diversidade*, *Mostra de Filmes Africanos* and *Encontro de Educação pela Cultura: Tradição e Identidade Étnico-Racial* are great examples of the latter. A point to be highlighted in this programme is that it combines formal and non-formal education to treat subjects from the National Curriculum. Approaching themes, as Afro-Brazilian History and Culture, in different way from the ones in classrooms, the Museum can influence in the teaching parameters and consequently affect public policies from the Education Ministry and Secretaries.

According to Matilde Ribeiro (2006), the previous Secretary of Secretaria Especial de Políticas da Igualdade Social (SEPPPIR), this action is just the beginning of a whole process of transformation and consolidation of Brazilian thoughts about

black and race issues, to build a society with less social discrepancies. Moreover she complements saying that

A parceria do Governo Federal com as atividades do Museu Afro Brasil, por meio da SEPPIR, explicita o desafio lançado para o enfrentamento da problemática racial. O Governo Federal inaugura uma nova era no tratamento dispensado pelo estado brasileira as iniquidades resultantes do racismo, de preconceito e da discriminação raciais, passando a permitir ações, em diversos níveis governamentais, que estimulem e fortalecem a construção da transversalidade nas políticas públicas.

In order to conclude, the Museum put an effort in the assessment of its exhibitions and activities aiming each time the improvement. Before knowing the results the Afro Brazil Museum would bring in the future, the curator in 2003 already had a positive evaluation of the impacts of black roots exhibitions. In the interview given to ComCiência, he says:

ComCiência - Qual a sua avaliação da trajetória e do impacto das exposições no Brasil que recuperam as raízes negras?
Araújo - Eu encaro esses trabalhos como um esforço consciente para que a consciência se faça, aconteça, e isso de uma certa forma, tem ocorrido. Muitas das exposições e publicações têm tido uma ressonância até maior fora do Brasil, mas o que ocorre aqui é muito importante porque faz com que pensemos que não estamos falando no deserto. É uma ação que tem progredido. É possível ver isso pelo próprio espaço que as posições têm ocupado, pela mídia que se volta às vezes para refletir sobre o assunto, e pelo público dessas exposições. (ComCiência, 2003)

The document *Museu Afro Brasil: Imagens, Sons e Sentidos de um Novo Tempo*, published in commemoration of the second anniversary of the Museum's foundation, brings numbers that permits the analysis of the Museum's outcomes so far. According to it, 12.000 people have visited them per month, which results in a total of 214.400 people within one year and a half (between October 2004 and August 2006). Considering that there were no regular publication and notification in the media and press and the Brazilian parameter of visits in museums, these numbers are held to be high ones.

Another positive outcome was that until the time the document was published, 47.000 people from educational institutions had participated at least in one of the educational programmes. This shows that the Museum has been projected as a place for research and learning for African and African-Brazilian studies in the country, which perfectly corresponds to its aims.

About the visitor evaluations, they reported that both oral and written positive feedbacks are being given since the first day it was open to the public. Visitors produced gentle comments on the exhibitions and collection, as well as in the role of the educator. These oral products are being collected by members of the staff who feel proud and motivated each time they listen and have the museum action recognized by the population. In the same level, notes on the visitor's book are being saved and being part of an archive for further studies on how the impact on the population life is, mainly those concerned with racial awareness and cultural knowledge.

To finalize, the Afro Brasil Museum was also well recognized in institutional means. The museum has won the awards of Cultural Institution of 2004, given by Associação Paulista de Críticos de Arte, which permitted even more national and international visibility.

References

- Andrews, George. 'Black Political Protest in São Paulo, 1888-1988', *Journal of Latin American Studies*. 24 (1992), 147-171.
- ComCiência, *Arte do negro no Brasil: conscientização e valorização de um grupo étnico – interview*, (Campinas, SBPC/Labjor, 2003)
- <http://www.comciencia.br/entrevistas/negros/e.htm> Consulted: 30th November 2008.
- Davis, Darién. 'Afro-Brazilians: Time for recognition', *Minority Rights Group International Report*, (London, 1999).
- Santos (dos), Luiz Carlos, *Museu Afro Brasil: Imagens, Sons e Sentidos de um Novo Tempo*, (São Paulo, Museu Afro Brasil, 2006).
- Museu Afro Brasil, *Jornal das exposições 1*, (São Paulo, Museu Afro Brasil, 2006).
- Museu Afro Brasil, *Revista Pontão de Cultura 2 – Negras Memórias*, (São Paulo, Museu Afro Brasil, 2006).
- Museu Afro Brasil, *Revista Pontão de Cultura– Negras Memórias*, (São Paulo, Museu Afro Brasil, 2006).
- Museu Afro Brasil:
- <http://www.museuafrobrasil.com.br/animacao.htm> Consulted: 26th November 2008.
- Owensby, Brian. "Towards a History of Brazil's 'Cordial Racism': Race beyond Liberalism", *Society for Comparative Study and History*, (1995), 318 - 47.
- Secretaria Especial de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial - SEPPIR:
- http://www.presidencia.gov.br/estrutura_presidencia/seppir/ Consulted: 30th November 2008.
- Silva, Petronilha and Barbosa, Lucia, *O Pensamento negro em educação no Brasil: expressões do movimento negro*, (São Carlos: EDUFSCar, 1997).