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Olodum da Bahia, a History of Cultural Inclusion

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Abstract. This article focusses on the relationship between the Olodum Cultural Group and young teenagers from Maciel Pelourinho, Salvador - Bahia - Brazil, who during the 1970s and 1980s lived in a situation of deep social vulnerability and had few opportunities. At the time, Pelourinho, the Historical Centre of Salvador, was inhabited by people living in undignified conditions since the district lacked basic infrastructure and was overrun by theft, crime, prostitution and drug trafficking.

In this context, the Bloco Afro Olodum was created, with the intention to provide opportunities for the population of Maciel Pelourinho and to give black Bahians the possibility of joining the carnival as part of a group with their own identity.

Keywords. Olodum, Culture and Education.

1 Olodum

Olodum is a word that originated in the Yorubá language, and in the religious ritual of Candomblé means “God of Gods” or “Greatest God”—Olodumaré. It represents more of a Universe-creating God than an orixá.

The Afro Olodum Bloco was founded on the 25th April, 1979, in Rua Santa Isabel in the district of Pelourinho as a leisure option for the residents of Maciel - Pelourinho, with the aim of ensuring their right to join the carnival in a group and in an organised manner. Over the years, Olodum developed affirmative action in the city of Salvador, and more specifically in Pelourinho, where it was headquartered in “A Casa do Olodum”. It fought social discrimination, stimulated the self-esteem and pride of Afro-Brazilians, and helped defend the civil and human rights of marginalised people, mainly in Bahia and Brazil.

The group’s construction and evolution developed over five years with percussion rehearsals, which subsequently transformed into the Olodum Band, the great socio-economic driving force behind Olodum; it adopted the colours of the Pan-Africanism movement –green, red, yellow, black and white—which became known as the “colours of Olodum”. Green represents the equatorial forests of Africa; red the blood of the blacks; yellow the gold of Africa and black the pride of the black race, while white represents world peace.

The *Rufar dos Tambores* Project, nowadays known as the *Escola Criativa Olodum* (Olodum Creative School), was

created in 1983. In the beginning its intention was to teach the children hanging around on the streets of Maciel–Pelourinho to play an instrument. As a result of this initiative, the first Mirim Olodum Band was created, made up of children from Pelourinho.

Following this, the Olodum Cultural Group was created in 1984. With the experience gained with the Bloco, it embarked on a mission to improve and raise the cultural level of the community of Maciel - Pelourinho, and particularly that of the children living there. The main objective behind the creation of the Olodum Cultural group was to develop a culture and education project for the children living in the community.

Up until 1983, afro groups were only identified as groups that played music of an African origin. Only after the initiatives to revamp Olodum, such as the creation of the Creative School, the Mirim Band, among others, the groups began to behave in a more authentic manner. Therefore, the process initiated by the Olodum Group with the Pelourinho children sought to understand reality through art and music, as well as analyse the context in which they lived and with whom they related, becoming a whole field of meaning. In 1987, the composition “Faraó” became a milestone in Bahian music and leveraged the success of the group, so its objectives became more profound. “We wanted to transform the festive carnival into affirmative action within the black communities,” stated João Jorge¹. Today, the Olodum Cultural Group teaches courses in percussion, cultural production, dance, singing and theatre for children and teenagers from all over

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¹ President of the Olodum Cultural Group.



Figure 1. Lucas Di Fiori.

the city of Salvador, particularly from Pelourinho and consequently provides employment to hundreds of new young artists from both the local and national scene.

2 The Olodum Band, Culture and Education

The Olodum Band is made up of 19 musicians—3 singers, 6 harmonium players and 10 percussionists—the majority of whom come from the social project set up by the Olodum Group when it was created in 1984. Today one of the singers of the Olodum Band, Lucas Di Diori², originally from the Mirim Band, is the best example of how a non-formal education can provide intellectual growth and contribute to create an emancipated citizen, as in addition to travelling to various countries around the world and having contact with their cultures (music, dance, cuisine and theatre, among others) the members of Olodum have a wide-ranging cultural-artistic repertoire, which leads to their development as humans and professionals.

The Olodum Band has now toured 35 countries around the world and thousands of cities, playing music to more than 20 million people throughout its history. It is worth remembering that Olodum's music is an important instrument in the struggle against preconception and discrimination, as well as reclaiming and encouraging self-esteem among black people and their communities.

With a DVD and eleven CDs recorded in Brazil and 4 abroad, and over 5 million copies sold, Olodum is an extremely successful band with a new show every year touring Brazil and the world. In 2009 the show "*Povo das Estrelas*" (People of the Stars) was presented to the world to mark 30 years of Samba-Reggae, reviving big hits like *Faraó*, *Protesto do Olodum*, *Rosa*, *Requebra* and *I miss Her*, among others.

The group is continuing along its route highlighting current world events, with a view to staying in touch. An example of



Figure 2. Inaugural class—Creative School.



Figure 3. The Olodum Band.

this is the large interactive network in which Olodum participates with its members, who are fully plugged into the virtual world through computers. This is another element to add to the group's affirmative and socio-educational actions, providing access to the population of Maciel Pelourinho that interacts with Olodum.

The Afro matrix forms the basis for Olodum's music, and also forms part of the basis of Brazilian culture, along with the Indigenous Matrix and the Portuguese Matrix. Therefore,

² Singer of the Olodum Band who started his musical path in the Mirim Olodum Band and today has a consolidated career in the Olodum music project.



Figure 4. The Mirim Band.



in its most obvious way, through (musical) creativity, Olodum draws attention to and presents aspects, moments of reflection and debates at seminars and meetings, both at the Creative School and at the “Casa do Olodum”.

We know the influence of words of African origin on our vocabulary, so in a certain way this contributes to the developing and learning process of young people who approach the group through music. Therefore it is worth emphasising that greater educational coverage is still necessary in these communities that can only find opportunities in social groups, NGOs or social movements. Although these entities offer education, it is still necessary to provide formal education for the states in the Brazilian north east, particularly Bahia.

3 Final Considerations

As a result of Olodum’s experience, in addition to Lucas Di Fiori many others have become successful, such as Bira Jackson, the percussionist who dances in the clip with Michael Jackson, and Mestre Memeu, who now presides the Olodum Band at shows around the world. The Olodum Cultural Group is one of the representatives of Brazil’s musical and cultural scenario and is a significant movement against racism, discrimination and all forms of apartheid. We believe that it is one of the ways to raise the cultural level and to make it possible to interact with cultural elements inside and outside the city of Salvador, the State of Bahia and Brazil, as we believe that only interacting through means of communication only reveals one side of society. As this is the case, we re-affirm that opportunities must exist to access the cultural heritage produced by humanity and that education should be accessible to all.

Other responses have come out of the Olodum School, such as the experience of the Mirim Olodum Band, formed by children aged 7 to 15. Internationally renowned, it has participated in cultural events in many countries: France, Germany, Netherlands, Panama and Japan. The importance of Olodum for Bahia and Brazil is shown in the process of education for artistic-cultural talents, as great musicians have started out in Olodum’s Mirim Band.

The following names illustrate the group’s educational experience: Gilmário Marques and Pacote do Pelô—percussion musicians; Andréa Reis—percussion master; Reinaldo—from Terra Samba; Rafael—Rapazola group; Macio Brasil—percussionist for Ivete Sangalo; Jorge Ricardo—a young entrepreneur, acting in the entertainment, leisure and cultural production business sectors

The Olodum Music and Art Festival (FEMADUM) was originally created as a music festival to choose songs for the Olodum Afro Block carnival. It is currently the most important public Afro music and arts event in Brazil.

Musicians from two categories attend the festival; Samba Tema, with compositions that must make reference to the theme of the bloco, and Samba Poesia, which are free compositions that discuss aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture and/or references to Olodum as a cultural organization.

The production of elements that publicise and expand the culture of those who live at the base of a city’s cultural production, can only be offered opportunities by events like FEMADUM, which simultaneously provides employment and income to the Pelourinho community.

Over time, year after year, Olodum has become one of the largest representatives of African culture in the Bahia carnival that parades through the avenues and streets of Salvador and is considered the greatest popular celebration on the planet; at the same time the group provides for the economic needs of the Band members. One of the Afro group’s features is to present a theme inspired by African culture, with its fantasies, music, dance and symbols at the carnival parade every year.

And it is at this moment, when education meets art, that Olodum can celebrate the achievement of its greatest objective, the appreciation of, and respect for black culture.

Thus the diverse range of elements that Olodum presents to Brazil and to the world places an emphasis on the cultural importance of the symbols and meanings that the culture offers to the entire populations of Bahia, Brazil and the world.

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http://www2.uol.com.br/olodum/banda_mirim_olodum.htm

Networks

Facebook: www.facebook.com/bandaolodum.official
Twitter: www.twitter.com/bandaolodum
YouTube: www.youtube.com/tvolodum
Orkut profile for the Production of the Olodum Band:
<http://www.orkut.com.br/Main#Profile?uid=5170794543622969360>
Official Olodum Band Community:
<http://www.orkut.com.br/Main#Community.aspx?cmm=1429678>
Official Olodum Community:
<http://www.orkut.com.br/Main#Community?cmm=154385>
Photos at <http://olodum.uol.com.br/content/aula-inaugural-escola-olodum>
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