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For the first time, blacks outnumber whites in Brazil.

By Taylor Barnes

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Fellipe Abreu / For the Miami Herald

Rio de Janeiro's Afroreggae hosts a family-friendly 'baile funk,' with rap music characteristic of favela residents. Washington Rimas ('Feijao'), a coordinator with Afroreggae, says art and social movements have made black Brazilians proud of their race, and that such diversity enriches the country.

In the past decade, famously mixed-race Brazilians either became prouder of their African roots, savvy with public policies benefiting people of color or are simply more often darker skinned, depending on how you read the much-debated new analysis of the census here.

A recently released 2010 survey showed that Brazil became for the first time a "majority minority" nation, meaning less than half the population now identifies as white.

Every minority racial group – officially, "black," "pardo" (mixed), "yellow" and "indigenous" – grew in absolute numbers since 2000. "White" was the only group that shrank in both absolute numbers and percentage, becoming

48 percent of the population from 53 percent 10 years ago.

Experts say the shift reflects a growing comfort in not calling oneself white in order to prosper in Brazil and underscores the growing influence of popular culture. Paula Miranda-Ribeiro, a demographer at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, said another factor was the increase in bi-racial unions with mixed-race kids.

While Americans look at race as a question of origin, Brazilians largely go by appearance, so much so that the children of the same parents could mark different census categories, she said.

"In this decade there was a greater valorization [of blacks] and people today have less reluctance [to call themselves black or pardo]" she said. "White is not necessarily better."

People who declared themselves black on the census grew to about 14.5 million, now 7.6 percent of Brazil's 190 million, while pardo (loosely translated as "brown"), grew to 82.3 million, 43.1 percent of the population.

The demographics of Brazil, the largest country of African descendants outside of Nigeria, are often compared to the United States, since both have an extensive legacy of slavery.

But colonial Brazil imported a far larger share of slaves than the United States, taking in an estimated 35 to 40 percent of the trans-Atlantic human slave trade.

The U.S. census bureau, for its part, predicts that United States will become “majority-minority” by 2050, but that it will be largely fueled by the growth of the Hispanic population.

Activists and artists here say they’ve seen a greater mobilization for mixed-race Brazilians to call themselves black or pardo in recent years.

“The phenomenon I perceive are people getting out of that pressure to whiten themselves, and assuming their blackness,” says visual artist Rosana Paulino, whose doctoral work at the University of São Paulo focused on the representation of blacks in the arts.

She sees a rising self-esteem on the part of mixed-race Brazilians who stop using middle-ground terms like “moreninho” (“a little tan”) or “marrom-bombom” (“brown chocolate”) and simply call themselves black.

Growing cultural movements such as hip-hop and literature focused on experiences in Brazilian shantytowns have drawn attention to black experiences, she says. “I think people are less likely to disguise who they are.”

Mário Rógerio, a coordinator at the Center of Studies on Relations of Work and Inequality in São Paulo, which promotes diversity in the workplace, similarly says social movements in the last decade have broken down the stigma in calling oneself non-white.

“Now the scene has altered,” Rógerio said.

The emergence of high-profile black leaders has helped, he adds, citing U.S. President Barack Obama, Brazilian Supreme Court Justice Joaquim Barbosa and primetime Brazilian soap opera stars Lázaro Ramos and Taís Araújo.

It’s not just a change in color at the top: As Brazil’s middle class grows, so do the fortunes of its black and mixed-race populations. A famous recent study by Brazil’s Fundação Getúlio Vargas said that about half of blacks and mixed race people belong to the middle class.

In a heated op-ed in the popular Daily O Globo, University of São Paulo sociologist Demétrio Magnoli argued against the interpretation of the census showing Brazilians have become simply prouder of their black roots, calling censuses worldwide “tools for politicians with power based in ethnic and religious identities.”

“The movement for reclassification maybe is a sociological response to the stimulus given by the state for programs of racial quotas in universities and projected racial preferences in public service and the workplace,” he said. In this hypothesis, the ‘ethnic valorization’ dreamed of by the messengers of racial policies would translate to a tactical repositioning of individuals who... are afraid of losing concrete opportunities of social ascension.”

Translation: more people like to be black because it allows for affirmative action benefit.

Prof. Miranda-Ribeiro recognizes that affirmative action policies that use census data as a basis for quotas may influence people’s responses, but doesn’t think this negates the validity of the survey. “People who might have hidden this side [of their race] in the past now see its an advantage,” she says.

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