

Afro-Brazilians Have Something to Celebrate

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(Bloomberg Opinion) -- In the 131 years since slavery ended in Brazil, Brazilians of African descent haven't had much to celebrate. Emancipation itself came late — making Brazil the last New World nation to outlaw slavery — and was hardly a gift for the 750,000 indentured laborers who overnight were freed to fend for themselves, no mule, no 40 acres, often as wage slaves for yesterday's masters. So last week's announcement by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics that black and brown students were now a majority on public university campuses was good news indeed. What's more, in less than two decades, their numbers had more than doubled: Last year, 55% of all Brazilians of color aged 18 to 24 were in college, compared with fewer than 26% in 2005. That's an encouraging trend in a country where 56% percent of the population define themselves as black (negro) or brown (pardo). Word came in time for National Black Consciousness month, the occasion Brazilians set aside to remember both the infamy of slavery and the debt the country owes to what demographers call the world's largest population of African descent outside of Nigeria. To be sure, the celebration is not a national consensus. Not even a fifth of Brazil's 5,570 townships observe the Nov. 20 holiday honoring the death of 17th-century rebel slave leader Zumbi dos Palmares, who ran an independent colony of runaway slaves, which survived for a century. No admirer of Zumbi, President Jair Bolsonaro was elected by a cranky right-wing demographic that disparages the banners of diversity and attacks identity politics. Nonetheless, recognition of slavery's legacy and regard for Africa's contribution to national culture have never been so high. In Brazilian film, literature, cuisine and fashion, slavery and its scars are undergoing a makeover. A family experiment in hair care catering to black women grew from a backyard laboratory in Rio de Janeiro into Beleza Natural (Natural Beauty), a nationwide beauty salon chain, which opened its first international branch in New York in 2017. The story of Palmares, Zumbi's independent slave republic, inspired one of Rio's favorite carnival troupes, a Netflix historical series and a five-episode television documentary that aired last year and reprised this month. Matriarchs, a multimedia exhibit, explores the cultural contribution of women in a Brazilian city where off-book slavery lingered well into the 20th century. Journalist and best-selling popular historian Laurentino Gomes recently published the first of a three-volume set on slavery. Rio is ground zero for the cultural awakening. In 2011, archaeologists excavating its dock district ahead of the 2016 Olympics unearthed the vestiges of a past that all but a handful of scholars and history buffs would prefer to forget. Only a jumble of flagstones remains, but the Valongo Quays was once the setting for one of the New World's largest slave markets. Now the monument to Valongo is the centerpiece of the city's Little Africa, a United Nations heritage site and a magnet for researchers and school field-trips. True, civic groups find little to cheer in statistics showing that non-white youths still drop out of school earlier, earn less, and die younger than their white peers. And in 2018, the homicide rate for black and brown Brazilians aged 15 to 29 was 98 per 100,000, three times the rate of their fair-skinned counterparts. Yet in a land where off-white social mobility has been largely confined to pop music or the football pitch, advances toward equality in the classroom are remarkable. The rise of blacks on college campuses is a direct result of policy intervention, when federal reformers established admission quotas — for government service in the 1990s, and by the early 2000s for blacks and low-income and public school applicants to university. Not everyone applauded the initiative. But fears that lowering the admissions bar for poor students from pauperized schools would drag down university education have proved unfounded. Students admitted on racial quotas have been shown to do as well as their fair-skinned peers, although slightly below average in medicine and sciences. Getting into college is just a beginning, however. Census statistics also show that white university graduates earn 45% more than non-whites with diplomas. Less than a quarter of federal lawmakers and only three in ten company managers are black or brown. A recent survey on innovation found that a third of tech firms had no Brazilians of color on staff. "The market is not attuned to young black candidates," said Claudia Costin, who directs the Center for Excellence and Innovation in Education Policies at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Rio. Brazil's conflagrated politics are no help. As Costin notes, "In a time when Brazil is badly polarized, public policies like inclusion and diversity which are important for productivity and growth have fallen off the agenda." Fortunately, though, Brazilian society seems to be moving ahead of its policymakers. While color was once a badge of inferiority, the number of Brazilians who define themselves as dark-skinned or black has grown steadily this decade, with the share of self-identified blacks increasing 25% since 2012, according to economist Marcelo Neri, who studies social policy at the Getulio Vargas Foundation. "Part of that might be due to quotas, but part also to cultural pride," said Neri. Emancipation is also self-made. 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