

*Amaro (Brazilian Returnees) and Cultural Diffusion in Lagos: A Study of
Lagos-Pacific Cultural Relations*

Bashir Olalekan Animashaun, Lagos State University, Nigeria

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Abstract

Amaro is the traditional word used to describe the Brazilian returnees whose advent in Lagos was an aftermath of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And since their return to Lagos they have succeeded in institutionalising a replica of the Rio carnival known in Lagos as Fanti carnival. This paper examines the advent of the Amaro (Brazilian Returnees) in Lagos from 1830's and their contributions to the Lagos cultural system with an appraisal of the place of Fanti carnival in the Lagos cultural system. As one of the cultures which diffused from the Pacific to the Lagos society few years prior to the British conquest of Lagos in 1850, the Fanti carnival has become a state-wide cultural system from being an exclusive Lagos Island affair. This paper using the historical narrative and analytical methods provides insights into how the Fanti carnival became a state wide affair. The paper concludes that the introduction and eventual integration of the Fanti carnival into Lagos cultural system was as a result of the atavistic ties of the Brazilian returnees (Amaro) to their pristine cultural heritage and the transplantation of their cultural identity to cosmopolitan Lagos

Keywords: The Pacific, Amaro, Fanti, Cultural system, Lagos

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Introduction

From the 19th century onwards Lagos entered a unique relationship and forged interactions with the Pacific. This was as a result of the large number of Yoruba (ex)slaves returning back home from Brazil and Cuba to find their roots after the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Pacific. By the 1870s, Lagos witnessed a high influx of ex-slaves who only remembered Lagos as their point of departure. Most of these returnees settled in Lagos and formed a large part of the first group of African elites in Lagos largely due to their exposure to European Language and culture. They brought along with them a unique cultural heritage, a mixture of the Pacific's and African culture. This changed and impacted on the cultural configuration of Lagos, a budding colonial city. The advent of the Brazilian Returnees in Lagos no doubt came at a time when Lagos society was evolving its Victorian culture. The Lagos society as at this period (mid 19th century) was dominated by western educated (Saro) elite, who had been equipped with protestant ideology. The Brazilian and Cuban returnees encountered lots of challenges on their return to Lagos especially as a result of ideological differences and lack of western education.

Although not necessarily contemporaneous with the Saro settlement in Lagos, the advent of the Brazilian/Cuba returnees, commonly referred to as Amaro or Aguda by the indigenous population, did affect the settlement pattern of Lagos. Upon their arrival, they occupied a section of the town known today as Popo Aguda, a place that lies between the Oba's palace on the southeastern axis of the town and the race track on the northwest of the town. Having been denied of the opportunity of upward mobility in the Americas, the ex-slaves left Cuba and Brazil in search of economic and social space, Lagos offered them the most attractive economic incentives. Although at the initial stage, the political order in Lagos did not favour them as result of king Kosokos dislike for the ex-slaves. Kosoko was reputed to have plundered their property, and killed many of the ex-slaves. As a matter of fact the last line of king Kosokos cognomen is a clear testimony of what the Amaros suffered during his reign. The removal of Kosoko by the British coupled with the pressure by Consul Campbell for land allocation on their behalf paved the way for their entrance and encouraged the establishment a Brazilian settlement in Lagos. In accepting them into Lagos, the British colonial government was torn between granting them a place in Lagos because of the economic potential they offered and the risk of re-igniting the slave trade in the colony. The ex-slaves (Amaro) were, subjected to humiliating condition and made to renounce slave trading by the British Colonial government in Lagos. The fear of being deported back to the New World however left them with no other option than to face the humiliation thus killing their resistance instinct. The initial experience of the Amaro notwithstanding, their presence changed the socio-religious settings of Lagos. This paper examines the advent of the Amaro (Brazilian Returnees) in Lagos and discusses their impact on the cultural configuration of Lagos.

Body

The Amaro brought with them some aspects of the Portuguese culture from Brazil, including the "gareta" carnival which later came to assume the name "Fanti". These cultural practices introduced a basic dimension of re-contact that can be described as "recycled acculturation". The latter is relatively indicative of a two-way culture

contact or cultural diffusion among a people facing a new experience of being re-groomed at their return from the land of slavery into their original culture.

The African-Brazilians that arrived in Lagos had been greatly acculturated by their Brazilian slave captors-turned-mentors for instance, the main Christian denominational faith of Catholicism was profoundly impressed upon the lifestyle of the returnees, an attribute that gave rise to their being referred to as “Aguda,” the popular name by which the adherents of the Catholic denomination are called. Similarly, the taking on of Portuguese names was greatly reflected in the overall social presentation of the people. The phrases from the Portuguese language during normal conversation or discussions have come to prevail over time, and the impact of Portuguese influence is easily noticeable on the general lifestyle of the African-Brazilian in Lagos. Consequently, they began to practice the trades which they had learnt while in the land of their captivity. Such trade included building, tailoring, carpentry and welding amongst others. These were soon emulated by the people of Lagos who came to acquire some of the traits in African-Brazilian life patterns. Such acquired cultural traits of African-Brazilian origin cut across different aspects of the people’s lifestyle. These include religion, music, dances, festivals and carnivals, social performances, dress modes, food types and their preparations as well as architectural designs. Indeed, the impact of the architectural aesthetics in Lagos Island and beyond has proved a major point in establishing the presence of African-Brazilian influence in Lagos. A major aspect of the acquired cultural traits is the Fanti Carnival. The Fanti carnival has its roots in the cultural expression of the African-Brazilian returnees in Lagos Island and dates back to the advent of the returnees in the mid-nineteenth century. The introduction of the Fanti carnival in Lagos can be traced to a “fill-gap” incident among the early returnees borne out of the need to introduce one of the events that had “kept them going” during their sojourn in the New World. It was seen as a way of breaking the monotony of adjusting to the cultural life in their new environment. The strains involved in adjusting coupled with the desire to be associated with a distinct cultural life motivated the returnees to introduce the Garetá carnival. The Garetá was a socio-cultural activity that was practiced by the Amaro during their sojourn in the New World. Fanti has been mostly depicted as having emerged out of the carnival known as “Garetá,” which is widely accepted as the Portuguese expression for “mask.” Also, it has been associated with the name “Fancy” especially among the Olowogbowo residents, given its highly decorative pattern as commonly reflected on participants’ costumes. It started mainly, in an atmosphere of jollity as embodied in the festive terrain of dance, music, colourful costumes, typical African-Brazilian cuisine, display of competitive flute and diverse entertainment acts. The Garetá carnival is mostly celebrated to coincide with the Catholic celebration of the end of the Christian fasting period that culminated into the Easter season. Hence, it is indelibly identified in Lagos, in the early period, as a Catholic faith carnival, because African-Brazilian descendants have been identified with the faith.

The Island of Lagos, which by far predates the state named after it, was originally given its name by the Portuguese who called it “Lago de kuramo”, having been attracted to the area by its suitability as a slave port. Originally, its earlier refuge-seeking settlers called Lagos “Eko”, and it is still very much known by this native name in contemporary times. Indeed, the central part of Lagos is commonly referred to as “Isale Eko”, a term that may be taken to infer “the Downtown Lagos”.

“Fanti” as the name for this contemporary carnival has been traced to two main sources. The first source suggests that the name was derived from the enthusiastic reaction of the people in Lagos, to the ingenious contribution to the carnival which held in the year 1936. The Togolese and Ghanaian settlers in the Lafiaji area of Lagos are given the credit of the coinage ‘Fanti’. During the carnival performance of the year 1936, this group of settlers who were mostly western, did not have the wherewithal for the elaborate costumes that were demanded by the conduct of the carnival and so came out in the relatively Cheaper “Ankara” cloth (a locally printed cotton material of Ghanaian origin). This generated remarkable appraisal from the people of Lagos and so their group came to be known by the name Fanti and this came later to be adopted as a reference title for the African-Brazilian carnival.

The second explanation sees Fanti as an adulteration of the word “fancy” by which the carnival was claimed to have been known at a point during its early stage in Lagos. “FANCY” was particularly associated with the Sierra-Leonean sub-group of the Lagos indigenes in the Olowogbowo area of the Brazilian quarters. This refers to those who claimed to have chosen to identify their own carnival group by the title “Fancy”. Some members of the Fanti Carnival Association have insisted on the “Gareta” explanation. As a result, the correspondence logo of the Association’s presently depicted by the artwork and lithographic representation of “Gareta”. Sometimes, there is among the people of Lagos, a mix-up in terms of appellation, of both Fanti and Fancy. Some have even suggested that Fanti is a corruption of the word “Fancy”, but there is no doubt that the name by which the carnival is known in contemporary Lagos state is “Fanti”.

At a point in the history of Fanti in Lagos, the carnival was labeled as violent, but later metamorphosed into a large organization that currently spans a wide terrain of the geographical spread of Lagos state. The case of Fanti in Lagos state testifies to this. At a point in the early history of Fanti, some elements of disorderliness that was borne out of unbalanced introduction of other cultural mannerisms in the different traditional set up in early Lagos, began to be noticed in the carnival. At this initial stage of the carnival, it went through some cultural shock as the effects and fanfare attributed to Fanti began to be negatively affected.

For example, the members of the Egungun masquerade group introduced the use of the cane that was characteristic of the Egungun festival. Members of the group believed that the introduction of the cane into Fanti, will enable the “visitor” from the realm of the spirit to make use of the cane on his visit, to ensure discipline and effect decency during the Fanti carnival. Similarly, the “Opanbata”, the ritual stick that is used during the Eyo festival for blessing the people by lightly tapping them on the shoulder was introduced into Fanti, albeit with an undertone of violence. The use of the cane and the stick among other things and the ensuing violence that was precipitated by them thus discouraged the African-Brazilian custodians of this carnival and caused some lull in the regular performance of the carnival.

Although, the performance of Fanti was perceived for a long time to have lost its original gaiety, it soon began to pick up social recognition once again when in the early nineties, there came a new initiative to clean up the organization and introduce discipline and decency into it. Unfortunately at this time, there began to creep into the Fanti scene, the appearance of certain elements of rivalry between the African-

Brazilians who were the original custodians of the carnival and the early settlers. As part of the efforts to resuscitate Fanti, “family pride” concept was introduced at the early part of the 1990s by a new leadership structure in the carnival organization. This was to serve as a platform on which the element of pride in family decent could be tapped to reawaken general interest in the carnival.

It has been discovered that sometimes during the performance of Fanti, songs which indicate the silent rivalry or cooperation that lurk behind the social relationship set up between the native settlers and African-Brazilians in Lagos are rendered. These songs can be seen to have invaluable interpretation for the socio-cultural set up of the people of Lagos. These songs sometimes are considered to be vulgar and are often rendered in a manner that adults of major street paths of the Fanti procession may assume that they are the victims of the mockery. In most parts, these songs are reflections of existing inter-group tensions among adult population on the Island of Lagos.

Indeed, gender reversal in terms of dressing and mannerism was a major part of the carnival performance in Lagos. An aspect of “free dressing” in which some male members of the carnival had come out in female attire thus permeated the carnival scene. For example, the Fanti people of Lafiaji also came out with gender reversal acts in which men dressed like women and referred to themselves as “IyawoOlele” (fake bride) in their “Ankara” wears. The term implies the status of a newly wedded wife who would usually be seen to walk with elegant gait and exaggerated strides. Indeed, some participants who exhibit transvestite characteristics often go to the extent of engaging in pseudo-breastfeeding, an act that is deemed relevant to the entertainment environment of Fanti but which is frowned upon in the everyday life of the Lagos Island.

Nowadays, Fanti carnival has extended beyond the Lagos Island to other parts of Lagos state that were hitherto not included in the hosting of this cultural event. With the extension of the carnival to the other parts of Lagos state, it has now become an all-embracing holiday event that cuts across religious borders including Muslims festival periods. In short, Fanti is becoming more and more identified with notable holiday celebrations in Lagos state. Consequently, various forms of music from other cultural backgrounds have been introduced into the carnival, including fuji, juju and brigade band music. Fanti carnival performance is reminiscent of political manipulation which looms large at periods of political contestation. This manifests in the covert rivalry between some traditional political institutions, diaspora community of the African-Brazilians and the state government.

Conclusion

The performance of Fanti carnival in Lagos has provided an avenue whereby social relationships that are related to diaspora settlement in the area can be examined. This implies that the existence of this seemingly entertaining cultural aspect of the culture of the people of Lagos as introduced by the Brazilian returnees goes beyond mere aesthetic appeal that largely characterizes the subject.

Appendices

The Amaro and Saro have in actual fact played important roles in the socio-political and economic evolution of Lagos just like the indigenous element yet they were regarded as returnees in Lagos. They were regarded as returnees simply because they migrated to Lagos in order to be free from slavery and white domination. As they settled in Lagos however, they began the process of acculturation through inter-marriage and other forms of interaction and this afforded them the opportunity to contribute to the growth and development of Lagos. The returnees no doubt returned to Lagos with a sincere sense of attachment to its people and value and viewed their return to Lagos with immense patriotic enthusiasm.

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Contact email: bashiranny@gmail.com