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O Negro e O Poder: The significance of social support and positive Black identity formation through an Afro-Brazilian politico-cultural organization in Salvador, Bahia

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Abstract

In contemporary Brazilian history, the prominence of race consciousness and Black pride is relatively new. Those who identify as Black often lack the positive social support that they need to feel empowered and esteemed. This project focuses on the role and power of Afro-Brazilian politico-cultural organizations as networks of social support for Brazilians who self-identify as Black. With specific attention on Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê, my research investigation is intended to develop an understanding of the valuation of such politico-cultural groups in the lives of Black Brazilians and how they contribute to overall emotional health of both individuals and, subsequently, their linked communities. Since its inception as the first Bloco Afro in Carnaval in 1974, Ilê Aiyê has played an important role in constructing a positive black identity and raising racial consciousness among Afro-descendents. This study explored the present-day reality of this philosophy to better understand the organization's significance in the lives of its participants. This project was accomplished through participant observation of the daily functions of the organization, discussion groups, as well as informal interviews of administrators, educators, and students. Observations and notes from conversations will be meticulously recorded in a field journal and analyzed thematically. I found that themes of safe space, black consciousness, aesthetic resistance, and education to combat violence were the most salient themes. Issues of emotional well-being were inherent priorities; they existed both explicitly in the pedagogy, and implicitly in the strong resistance rhetoric. This project demonstrated the importance that an organization of this nature has in addressing various social issues in its connected communities.

Keywords: Race consciousness, social support, emotional health, empowerment, Afro-Brazilians, Bloco Afro, political consciousness, violence

Resumo

Na história brasileira contemporânea, a proeminência da consciência da raça e o orgulho negro são relativamente novos. Aqueles que se identificam como negros muitas vezes não têm o apoio social positivo que eles precisam para se sentirem fortalecidos e estimados. Este projeto enfoca o papel e o poder das organizações politico-culturais afrobrasileiras como redes de apoio social para brasileiros que se auto-identificam como negros. Com atenção específico na Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê, minha pesquisa de investigação tem como objetivo desenvolver uma compreensão do valor de tais grupos político-culturais nas vidas dos brasileiros negros e como eles contribuem para a saúde emocional global de ambos os indivíduos e, posteriormente, suas comunidades vinculadas. Desde a sua criação como o primeiro Bloco Afro no Carnaval em 1974, Ilê Aiyê desempenhou um papel importante na construção de uma identidade negra positiva e na conscientização racial entre os afrodescendentes. Este estudo explorou a realidade atual desta filosofia para entender melhor o significado da organização na vida de seus participantes. Este projeto foi realizado através da observação participante das funções diárias da organização, rodas de conversa, bem como entrevistas informais de administradores, educadores e alunos. As observações e as notas das conversas foi registradas em um diário de campo e analisado tematicamente. Descobri que os temas de espaço seguro, consciência negra, resistência estética e educação para combater a violência foram os temas mais salientes. As questões do bem-estar emocional eram prioridades inerentes; existiram tanto explicitamente na pedagogia como implicitamente na forte retórica da resistência.Este projeto demonstrou a importância de uma organização desta natureza em abordar diversos problemas sociais em suas comunidades conectadas.

Table of Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Introduction

A. Personal Relevance

One of my main inclinations for wanting to study in Salvador, Brazil was my desire to re-evaluate my understanding of race and community in a new historical and political context. Through personal experiences in addition to my firm belief of the truths embedded in WEB Dubois' theories on "double consciousness" experienced by those who identity as Black, I want to shed light on the conditions for emotional well-being of Black-identifying individuals in Brazil. What I have come to appreciate about Brazil is the unique way in which tradition is integrated into modern society in a way that is intentional and celebrated, but simultaneously suppressed. As such, I was curious how Afro-Brazilian cultural organizations played a role in empowering individuals to celebrate their identity as a form of resistance and how they serve as support network for its members. This topic is of personal interest to me because, as an African immigrant to the United States, I struggled to find spaces where I felt confident and comfortable in my identity. I was taught to see myself as inferior, both intellectually and aesthetically. I lacked a strong support system that allowed me to take pride in my identity as a Black woman, so, as I got older, I recognized the importance of having stable sources of empowerment. The journey of decolonizing my self-regard is still a work in progress. This project was both a personal and academic endeavor that I hoped would provide clarity to the burdens of having a politicized identity.

B. Literature Review

In Brazil, what is arguably one of the most detrimental aspects of its national conscience is the promulgation of the myth of a racial democracy. Gilberto Freyre forged this pretense through claims that miscegenation and racial mixing were markers of the lack of racial prejudice; it was a way to appease the ruling class through neglect and denial of suffering experienced by the Black and Indigenous populations (Johnson III, 2008).

Achieving the status of a racial democracy is a worthwhile goal, but the challenges to achieving this ideal exist in both institutional barriers and uncontested societal norms that have only recently become agitated through the assertion and pride of Black identity. A legacy of violence towards the Black population was cemented post-1888 through systemic neglect in all areas of social and political life (Do Nascimento, 1980); this was the coerced donation of the Black population in the fabrication of a racial democracy. Abdias do Nascimento played a significant role in acknowledging and bringing attention to Brazil's myth of racial democracy, as well as calling for the dynamic organization of Black Brazilians (Do Nascimento, 1968). He defined the "pathology of normality" (Do Nascimento, 1980) that marked Brazil's implicit methods of reducing the Black population through gradual "whitening,"—a condition often, unfortunately, accepted by both the white population and black population alike (Johnson III, 2008). This was a fundamental strategy in the "systemic liquidation of the African (Do Nascimento, 1980)," in order to preserve colonially-rooted white supremacy and also infiltrate and weaken the unification and resistance capacity of the Black population.

Nevertheless, Black Brazilian resistance is by no means a new concept; however, it was only relatively recently that voices in this struggle have gained more power and validity (though the journey is nevertheless, long and arduous). Despite wide range of color classification in Brazil, there has been a shift towards a unified identify for all Afro-descendants (Figueiredo, 2015). This unified Black identity was necessary to mobilize people to actively resist forces of subordination in Brazilian society (Figueiredo, 2015). To bring to light the reality of racial discrimination in Brazil, from 1975 to 1988, during the height of the Black consciousness movement, binary racial divisions (Black and white) were strategically cultivated to break down the façade of a racial democracy (Daniel, 2006). Social efforts focused on combining the *preto* and *pardo* classifications into a unified *negro* category since

it was clear that these divisions by skin color were for the sake of diminishing mobilization capacity of Afro-descendent Brazilians (Johnson III, 2008). However, during the 1970s several Black advancement organizations were created that developed spaces for political participation, cultural elevation, employment, and education that were essential for mobilizing a unified people against the thinly veiled racism of the country (Johnson III, 2008). They were embolic of the resistance of Black people that had always existed post-slavery, but their ability to unify Afro-descendants regardless of arbitrary classifications was significant in breaking down the pretense of racial democracy. However, considering the blatant and often militant nature of their missions, it is no surprise that some were not capable of surviving, especially during the era of a military regime from 1964 to 1985 (Johnson III, 2008).

Racism in Brazil manifests in a way that attempts to suffocate and expel anything African or relating to African ancestry (Rowell, 1995). This means control over production capacity, artistic expression, and political prowess of predominately black collectives (Rowell, 1995). As expressed through the notion of a "class system of intellect," this control is a form of epistemic violence that has significant consequences on the trajectories of progress for marginalized communities (Carroll, 1990). From this system arise various forms of violence that people strive to counteract "through a self-conscious and deliberate set of pedagogies, methodologies, and tactics (Nagar, 2013)." This avenue of resistance was at the core of both militant organizations, like the United Negro Movement, and politico-cultural organizations such as Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê. In the context of Brazil's racial history, the "class system of the intellect" manifests as mental colonization—or internalized inferiority—through the acceptation of a lack of ownership over the production of societal norms, thus accepting those that exist. This includes the acceptance of the "racial democracy," based on what was taught in school curricula, the devaluation of

black beauty in favor of European beauty standards, and accepting the "whitening" of the population (Johnson III, 2008). Organizations like Ilê Aiyê and Olodum resisted against this through their own deliberate pedagogies and methodologies. They addressed the issue of mental colonization of the Black population by elevating political consciousness and blatantly proclaiming the power of the Black population to be valuable producers of knowledge and societal norms. These efforts solidify their positions as valuable sites of collective social support in their capacity to empower and mobilize.

In clinical terms, social support is defined as "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations" (Cobb, 1976). The correlation between social support and health outcomes is a widely studied relationship, with several empirical studies emphasizing the importance of access to culturally specific social support for generating positive health outcomes (Dressler, 1997). Social support networks—whether they stem from biological family or chosen family—function as sources of empowerment and self-valuation, which can be especially significant for adolescents. Having that source of empowerment, in particular, can mediate some of the psychological effects of mental health and emotional well-being of youth (Grealish, 2016). Specifically relating to black Brazilians, however, literature on the topic of social support is limited. Thus, I find it exceptionally intriguing when this question of social support factors in considerations of both race and culture.

Based on what has been previously studied in regards to emotional well-being of Black Brazilians, my next step is to situate politico-cultural groups in this question. With such a powerful history and strong leadership in the black consciousness movement, Ilê Aiyê is the ideal organization to study empowerment and emotional well-being. There are likely several different reasons why individuals began participating in this organization and different meanings that it has held in people's lives.

C. Objectives

The central objective guiding my project is to identify the role and power of Afro-Brazilian politico-cultural organizations as networks of social support for Black Brazilians. With specific focus on Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê, my research investigation was intended to develop an understanding of the valuation of politico-cultural groups in the lives of Black Brazilians and how they contribute to overall emotional health of both individuals and their linked communities. In this study, "politico-cultural groups" refers to organizations that address political questions through raising cultural awareness. Emotional health is approached as conditions that allow individuals to cultivate a positive sense of self and be active members of their communities. One core principle guiding my study is the belief that the emotional well-being of individuals is a strong correlate of the health of their communities, particularly for groups historically marginalized by both race and class. Politico-cultural organizations that provide a sense of collective identity can serve as sources of empowerment, mobilization and healing. Though this study of Ilê Aiyê, I aimed to develop a clearer understanding of race consciousness and identity formation in Salvador, Bahia, and explore its implications for creating and maintaining healthy communities. Additionally, does one's relation to their culture and ancestry have an effect on their emotional well-being? What mechanisms for empowerment exist for Brazilians who identify as *negra/o*? These questions will serve as the foundations for attempts to answer questions relating to the organization's capacity for providing social support.

D. Background of Organization

Ilê Aiyê has been at the forefront of raising race consciousness in Brazil. When Ilê Aiyê started the first Bloco Afro (African Block) in Carnaval in 1974, they developed a channel for integrating Blacks into Brazilian society and working towards full citizenship for the most marginalized group in society (Tosta, 2010). The "re-africanization" of Carnaval

was their most observable mission; however, the organization was composed of extremely politically conscious members who strategically chose Carnaval to tackle larger political and cultural issues (Tosta, 2010). Through the elevation of black beauty, black art and production, and black organization and mobilization, they spearheaded positive changes in the perception of black identity and ancestry. Aside from Carnaval, the organization also developed social and educational programs in the Liberdade neighborhood, a predominately poor and black neighborhood in Salvador (Kraay, 1998). Their afro-centric approach to education puts Black people as the protagonists of history and empowers youth to be conscious of their identities, histories, and politics.

The foundational aspects of the social and educational programming are Band'ere, Escola Mãe Hilda, and the vocational classes. The Band'ere program introduces youth to the percussion and other forms of Black arts (Ilê Aiyê). The Escola Mãe Hilda serves as the pedagogical core of the organization providing elementary education to children age seven to twelve, with a special focus on Afro-Brazilian history (Ilê Aiyê). The vocational classes currently only offer an African aesthetics course that certifies students as hair braiders after six months in the program. Unfortunately, due to loss of private funding two years ago, the Band'ere program was cut, the number of classes in Escola Mãe Hilda is limited, and the vocational classes are not as thorough as they used to be. What would be described as a "financial crisis" has caused an immense difficulty to the organization; the instructors that are present now are volunteers, there are limitations to how students can be involved, and also limitations in how they can successfully address their missions.

Because of the recent financial crisis, several other cultural organizations have lost important sources of funding. This project has social relevance in affirming that these organizations serve importance functions in addressing social issues that the Black population faces, such as violence.

Engagement with Organization

A. *Description of Engagement*

From December 6th, 2017 until December 30th, 2017, I worked with Associação Cultural Bloco Carnavalesco Ilê Aiyê, experiencing and learning about their engagement with communities in Salvador de Bahia. My contribution to the organization was to lead English classes for the students in the percussion, dance, and/or aesthetics classes. These classes ultimately would develop into discussion circles about topics such as the difference between life in the United States and life in Brazil, Black identity, and the significance of Ilê Aiyê in their lives.

Monday's and Tuesday's were spent with the percussion, dance, and aesthetics courses in the Ilê Aiyê headquarters in the neighborhood of Curuzu, Liberdade. Those who participated in these courses attended for a variety of reasons, but all were either from Curuzu or other proximal neighborhoods in Liberdade. Thanks to the generosity of the instructors, Grevelin Ulerio and I were able to hold English classes and/or discussion circles for approximately one hour during both morning and afternoon sessions. In total, there were approximately fifty students in these classes ranging from eleven years old to thirty years old. These students, in addition to the instructors, were the main people I interacted with throughout the four weeks. Since these courses were not held in the Curuzu headquarters for the remainder of the week, these days were spent a variety of ways. Thursdays, I would accompany the educators of the courses to the Centro Social Urbano in the periphery neighborhood of Valeria. There, I had the opportunity to speak with social workers and coordinators about their role in the community and their relationship with Ilê Aiyê as well as participate in the dance classes with the students. The opportunity arose to also speak to the youth in attendance about life in their community; however, this information was not used for the purpose of my research due to the sensitive nature of the discussions.

Most of my time with Ilê Aiyê fell during *Novembro Negro*—the unofficial month of Black consciousness. As one of the fundamental organizations in the quest for raising Black consciousness in Brazil, Ilê Aiyê held two large-scale events. On November 18th, a large music performance was held in the *Concha Acustica* in Campo Grande, Salvador and I had the privilege of helping backstage with wardrobe preparations before and during the show. On November 20th—Black Consciousness Day in Brazil— Ilê Aiyê led a festive march from Liberdade to Pelourinho. Participating in this event provided context for understanding the type of relationship that Ilê has with the neighborhood of Liberdade.

B. Methods

This research project was primarily ethnographic, but also auto-ethnographic in nature. Using participant observation methods, I participated in the day-to-day activities of the organization and understand the peoples' relationships to the organization as it relates to empowerment and positive identity formation. The goal of my time at Ilê Aiyê was to develop relationships organically with people within the organization and be able to conduct informal interviews with members who served as key informants in my project. These candidates included administrators and educators who are familiar with the contemporary history of the organization, as well as students who have been part of the organization for at least six months. In regards to understanding the role that Ilê Aiyê plays in people's lives, I deemed best to seek out individuals who have spent differing amounts of time with the organization to understand both motivations for coming to the organization, and motivations for permanence. These initial connections were generally made through casual conversations or discussion groups. The English classes held with students often opened up the opportunity to have discussion groups ranging from four to fifteen students. Key informants were generally identified through these discussions.

I identified two students and four educators as key informants and held informal interviews with them using questions from a question bank (Appendix 1) to guide the conversations. They were given consent forms (Appendix 2) before in order to inform them about the nature of my project. Some interviews were audio recorded, but hand-written notes were mainly used. Qualitative thematic analysis of field notes was used to find the most salient themes throughout the course of my project (Appendix 3). Limitations included difficulties establishing a clear role in the organization. This mainly stemmed from challenges in breaking the subject-object relationship between the students and myself, in particular. Language sometimes made it difficult to fully articulate my objectives, but there were often individuals present to provide assistance. Also, the lack of consistency in the interview questions limited the ability to get a more structured dataset.

C. Ethical Considerations

Since my topic deals with relatively sensitive topics, certain precautions had to be taken to ensure that I did not cross any boundaries in my relationships with the community members. This entailed using my discretion when discussing topics relating to mental health and violence that may potentially be triggering to certain individuals, especially youth. Additionally, the use of consent forms (Appendix 3) ensured that everyone interviewed had written information regarding the objective of my project and the ways in which any recorded information would be used. Transparency was essential, especially when dealing with sensitive topics and also considering how this information would be disseminated. Additionally, identity and personal information was protected through the use of aliases throughout this monograph. Lastly, I had to be conscious of not misrepresenting the communities I was involved in in order to preserve their dignity, and respect the fact that I was welcomed in.

Critical Reflection and Analysis

Throughout my experience with Ilê Aiyê, I took time to have informal conversations with either individuals or groups. These conversations often raised important topics relating to the person's involvement in the organization, the history and importance of the organization, or how the philosophies of the organization exist in practice. They were used to frame the focus of deeper conversations that existed in the form of informal interviews. I initially sensed that I was received in the organization with some hesitation. Being introduced as a researcher sometimes created distance between the students of the vocational classes and I. Additionally, I did not quite realize how timid I was in new spaces until I found myself struggling to get comfortable without feeling like a burden. It took some time for others to fully get comfortable with me being at the center; however, that was even more reason to push myself out of my comfort zone and build relationships with everyone before diving into the focus of my project. In this effort, I had to be conscious of how I could strike the balance between *participant, observer,* and *researcher.* Especially being from the United States, and realizing that there are many preconceptions of Americans in regards to our privilege, trying to dismantle the inherent power dynamics was an active process. At the same time, because I was not Brazilian and had rudimentary Portuguese skills, I often felt self-conscious that I would not be accepted because I couldn't successfully articulate my purpose or intentions being with the organization. Thankfully, the educators were very warm and receptive, and often helped in terms of clarifying my objectives to the young students I worked with. This successfully opened the door to have conversations that were often focused on exchanging experiences and reflections on race in Brazil and the United States.

People had different levels of involvement with the organization; for some, it was purely interest in the courses offered, and/or to get certified in the aesthetics class. For others, growing up in the neighborhood of Curuzu introduced them to the influence that the

organization has through social and educational programming; they were either part of Ilê's Escola Mãe Hilda in the past or part of the Band'ere program prior to the program's loss of funding two years prior. These students, in particular, had a more intimate connection to the organization, because the historical prowess of Ilê Aiyê was acknowledged as being significant in continuing participation after the programs were cut. There was also something to be said about the strength of Ilê Aiyê's foundational philosophies when considering that young students actively sought out these courses through *this* organization. Several themes came up in both individual interviews and group discussions that attested to the strong sense of both individual and collective support that students felt they received from Ilê Aiyê, even despite the limited scope of programming during the current financial crisis.

Since the group discussions were generally with youth, I was able to pinpoint students above the age of consent who would serve as key informants amongst that sample group. Two such informants were Mathew Silva (20) and Michel Cera (30). Mathew is a student in the percussion class and has been part of Ilê Aiyê for ten months; Michel is a student in the aesthetics class and has been involved with Ilê Aiyê for 23 years. The varying lengths of their involvement was significant to helping me understand the types of relationships that people had with the organization. This analysis of my encounters was predominately based on my conversations with them in addition to the discussions that occurred with students and instructors during the English classes.

Race and Space

For Mathew, his involvement with Ilê was primarily because Ilê gave him the opportunity to learn instruments that he never had access to growing up. However, further discussions with him showed that his interest in the organization was also very political; as a law student in a private university in Salvador, he took a natural interest in the militant history of the organization. He cited that Ilê Aiyê, capoeira, and other "manifestations of

Black culture" were prohibited because the government had always tried to marginalize these forms of expression. Additionally, he felt that Ilê Aiyê was a representation of his culture and his identity and that he was proud to say that he was part of Ilê. Especially in regards to his university experience, he felt that it was not "his place;" racism is something that happens when you are in the university or work setting, but you escape that when you are in a place like Ilê Aiyê.

This conversation with Mathew alluded to some interesting conversations I had on racism and space that I had with the percussion students in both Liberdade and Valeria. We talked about their experiences with racism and if race consciousness plays an important part in their lives. I found that since most students have lived in predominately Black neighborhoods for most of their lives, they do not experience direct racism; it mainly exists when they leave these neighborhoods for work, studies, or leisure. They are not in places where the "double consciousness" (Dubois 1903) of Black identity comes into play, nor have they had difficulties identifying as *negro*. They had no doubts about their identity and limited difficulties taking pride in their identity, but they also were not unaware of racism that exists in Brazil at the institutional level. There was awareness that their neighborhoods were neglected, especially when it came to "selling" Salvador to the exterior. For these reasons, they believed in the teachings of the organization and the importance of uplifting and empowering the Black population. This notion was more salient in Liberdade than it was in Valeria because Ilê's presence and mission is widely known; in the periphery community of Valeria, all of the students had only been introduced to Ilê Aiyê when they started attending the classes at the Centro Social Urbano (CSU). Regardless, for all of the students I interacted with, they felt that Ilê Aiyê was a safe space, both physically and psychologically. This was important for understanding Ilê's role in providing social support and protection of the emotional well-being of youth.

Novembro Negro, Black Consciousness Day, and Identity

The bulk of my times spent with Ilê Aiyê fell during *Novembro Negro*—the unofficial month of Black consciousness. There were several powerful events and interactions during this time that were formative to me and my project, particularly, the march on November 20th. Thousands accompanied the band across Salvador, singing and dancing to their powerful music. What I witnessed was an overwhelming sense of connection to the lyrics that highlighted the strength of the Black population as well as commemorate important Afro-descendant leaders like Zumbi das Palmares (this day is the anniversary of his death).

On this day and the following, the weekly English classes we held with the percussion and aesthetics classes surrounding the theme of Black Consciousness and the significance of November 20th to them. This opened up the opportunity to broadly discuss Black consciousness and identity, particularly in the context of Ilê Aiyê. When we asked students what words they would use to describe the importance of Black consciousness on November 20th and everyday, they stated: respect, identity, determination, freedom, knowledge, rights, equality, fight/struggle, strength and power. To each of the students, the notion of race consciousness that has been elevated throughout their experiences with Ilê Aiyê was different. However, they collectively recognized and felt the sense of empowerment that arises from this form of resistance. The percussion class, in particular, expressed a great deal of enthusiasm in the march when we held class with them the morning of. I recall walking into the classroom and the students, ages eleven to seventeen, were all singing and drumming, determinedly working together to make sure they got the song right. Since they learn to play the music of Ilê Aiyê, they are more connected to the lyrics fortified with resistance and empowerment rhetoric. These students have aspirations to be part of the band that plays during these marches and during Carnaval because they believe in the power that

an organization like Ilê Aiyê has in empowering the black population. This sense of hope and pride was indicative of the positive form of social support that they received from Ilê Aiyê.

When asked about how Ilê Aiyê has played a role in helping with any questions of identity, this opened up an interesting conversation about what it meant to identify as *negro* (as opposed to just pardo/preto); the students felt that, through the music, Ilê helped in their personal identification as *negros*. To be *negro* was "something internal, not just about color" (Vincent). According to the percussion instructor, Vincent, being part of Ilê Aiyê's band since the 1990's allowed him to gain more knowledge of his rights and to recognize that the *luta* (fight or struggle) of the black population must be daily and deliberate.

When considering the racist history of Brazil and the fact that these voices of resistance have only relatively recently started being heard (Johnson III, 2008), it is important to uplift youth to be able to see the beyond this. The mobilization focus of Ilê is the source of empowerment for many of the members, and it allows them to envision a future where they are seen as equals in Brazilian society. My assessment of the social support that Ilê Aiyê gives was that the well-being of its members was an inherent priority, and not necessarily overt. In seeing the family-like connection that these students had to each other and the organizations, its fundamental role in these students' lives was visible. By deliberately engaging in this type of organization, the members were also engaged in active resistance against epistemic violence towards the Black population. The assertion of pride in Afro-descendent identity has shown to be fundamental to this cause.

Aesthetic Resistance

A similar lesson/discussion about identity and Black consciousness was held with the aesthetics class with a group of six students, four female and two male. Discussions were initially broad, with a focus on the importance of Black Consciousness Day in Brazil as a whole. They were then narrowed to the notions of beauty and representation, and why the

aesthetics class is important in the grand scheme of Black consciousness. Elevation of Black beauty and the preservation of traditions of African descent are the core ideas that they aim to instill in students, as well as equipping the students with the means for developing careers though this certification process. Through this discussion, student Michel Cera was recognized as a key informant to my research topic. He was a significant contributor to contextualizing the class in the theme of the day and Brazil's current social contradictions. Having had 23 years at Ilê Aiyê, he developed an intimate relationship with the organization and provided significant insight on my topic of interest.

In understanding the significance of the class, the following was covered during the discussion. To the students, the class is part of a process of raising awareness of the beliefs of Ilê Aiyê and the reclamation of culture and history in Brazil as a whole (Michel). It is involved in educating people about these Afro-Brazilian beauty traditions and allowing them to spread it when they acquire this new skillset. The importance of challenging beauty norms was important because of "difficulties in having Black pride" in Brazil and the hidden nature of mental colonization/slavery (Michel). This active reclamation process by way of aesthetic resistance is a method of decolonization that is essential to Ilê Aiyê in both Carnaval and their educational programming. It is a reminder of the African ancestry of Brazil, and that this entails a rich history or descending from kings and queens (Michel). The Black population constructed Brazil and have agency in constructing the future as well (Michel). Additionally, with colorism still being a prevalent issue within predominately Black spaces, it shows that colonization is still present today, even in its implicit form (Michel).

For some students, like Michel, it was more sentimental to talk about the support that he's received through Ilê Aiyê, especially as a queer Black man in Brazil. Considering that has been part of Ilê as a youth and adult, the organization was formative in shaping his perception of his identity, emotional well-being, and his political views as well. He portrayed

his relationship with the organization as that of a father and son, citing the important elders in the organization who have shaped who he is today. Ilê Aiyê is the base of his life and he has participated in everything from the Escola Mãe Hilda to teaching Afro dance. He discovered the meaning of Black power here and that became foundational to sustaining his self-esteem. His connection to the organization was a direct reiteration of Ilê's mission and philosophies; his experiences highlighted the active decolonization process that students are engaged in when they are involved in these sorts of activities. It is a process that is often individually initiated, but catalyzed by the work of support networks such as politico-cultural organizations.

For me, this was a constructive conversation that brought together some of the dominant themes that I sought to study though this ethnographic experience. The cultivation of strong emotional well-being for Black youth entails positive representation of one's identity in order to generate a strong sense of self within a larger, oppressive system. It was powerful to engage in these conversations with people that had a range of connection to the topics, and to understand the varying facets of decolonization in action. The relationships that people developed with the organization were innately acts of resistance in an effort to undo "mental enslavement" that still exists in the Black population (Michel). In protecting the future emotional well-being of students, it is important to preemptively prevent the internalization of subaltern identity at early stages. This importance is something that I had realized in my own life, and with my time at Ilê Aiyê, I felt that this type of education would have been fundamental to how I perceived myself and my potential as I got older.

Violence and Education

One of the most enlightening days during my time with Ilê Aiyê was with Selena, one of the primary educators in Escola Mãe Hilda. I sat in on her class with seven children, ages six to eight, the Thursday before Black Consciousness Day. On that day, the kids did an

activity where they selected images from Ilê Aiyê's magazine that they thought were beautiful along with the following sentences: "The day of November 20th represents the fight of Black people against discrimination" and "Zumbi was the leader of the Black people." Selena then had them each go around and say why they felt that this day was important. She also had them affirm that their clothes, hair, and skin were beautiful and no one can say anything against them.

Observing this reaffirmed why I felt that conducting this project with Ilê Aiyê was important both academically and personally. In instilling these affirmations in young children, Selena set the tone for how these children should view their self-worth. By taking pride in their identity, they are taught to be strong and resilient when facing any discrimination that they would likely face throughout their lives. Additionally, this was the clearest act of resistance I witnessed; here was a school that created a new set of pedagogies that is outside the "normal" system as a deliberate effort to break down the "class system of the intellect" as it exists in Brazil and fight against epistemic violence. Witnessing Ilê Aiyê's philosophes in action, especially the focus on identity empowerment in children, made me wish that I had this same form of support growing up. I have always struggled with finding solace in my identity, mainly because I never neatly fit into a category of identity, yet I was expected to. In this moment, I felt the personal significance of having this positive formation of Black identity at an early age.

Additionally, since the Band'ere program was cut and Escola Mae Hilda functioning was limited, Ilê Aiyê is no longer able to occupy as much time in student's lives as it did before the financial crisis (Selena). This left educators pre-occupied with how they can successfully keep youth from going down the wrong path, especially in neighborhoods like Curuzu and Valeria which have begun to strongly feel the violent impacts of drug-trafficking on their communities. In my conversations with Selena as well as the dance instructors,

Sousa and Daisy, they feel that they play in important role in keeping students safe and on the right path by occupying as much time of their days as possible. At this point, these teachers are essentially volunteers, or only get paid when there are sufficient funds. When asked why they stay, they said "if I don't, who will" (Selena)? Selena, in particular, has the qualifications to work in other schools if she choses, but her relationship with the students is too close to leave. Being from the neighborhood of Curuzu, she knew her students' families and any family issues that would prevent them from accessing social resources. She also said that sometimes the violence in the community is so bad, that the students' parents will prohibit them from going to school because they are safer at home. When seeing how violence affected the lives of young children, the extent of violence and its influence on community dynamics became clearer, and the necessity of Ilê Aiyê's presence in Curuzu was more solidified. Especially considering the high rates of violence in Brazil and that the victims and perpetrators are often Black youth (Reichenheim 2011), the efforts of these educators are substantial and contribute to diminishing violence in the communities. When this issue is respectfully viewed as an issue of public health, the significance of a politico-cultural organization that addresses these issues and the corresponding emotional health issues becomes more apparent.

<u>Conclusion</u>

From my conversations with students, faculty, directors, and other partners of the organization, there was always a sense of hope that Ilê Aiyê would always be sustained. Considering the organization's role in the community of Liberdade and in resistance efforts of the entire Black population, they deemed it too significant to ever disappear. I felt this hope alongside its members, because even my brief time with them was immensely fruitful. My experiences being with Ilê Aiyê for almost a month opened my eyes to interesting questions about my identity and connection to my topic. Many times, conversations with students turned into opportunities for them to ask questions about what life was like in the United States, especially as a Black woman. Their curiosity made me confront questions of self-regard and positionality that I hadn't realized before. Since I have gone through phases of what I considered my dominant identity to be (Arab, Afro-Arab, African, and Black), I was always so focused on finding places where I felt most comfortable and accepted. Lacking these spaces caused me to internalize certain convictions of interiority that I wasn't able to combat until I learned to have pride in my complex, non-compact identity. Sharing these experiences with students put into perspective the differences in support systems that I have had and the kind that students received through Ilê Aiyê, and how having a network as strong as Ilê would have been beneficial during my identification process. While the people I spoke to often never had doubts about their racial identity, it made me wonder what conditions generated the doubts that I always had and how mechanisms of mental colonization can differ depending on how a society understands race.

Nonetheless, there was something reassuring about Ilê Aiyê being a large part of my experience in Brazil. While it was not a traditional research experience, the auto-ethnographic nature of my time was fruitful for deconstructing and reconstructing my identity in the context of Brazil and the African diaspora overall. I felt that my ability to thoughtfully

engage with my project and build relationships at the organization was largely due to the fact that the "self" was implicated in my research questions. This helped diminish the subject-object relationship that can often be problematic with ethnographic research. While this is not always possible, it facilitates the ability to find common ground with the communities you study and, from my experience, made people more receptive to my project when they saw that I valued their work in my personal life as well. This experience gave me hope in regards to dismantling the barriers that I had set up for myself by internalizing assumptions of inferiority; the rhetoric of viewing Black identity as the source of strength was overwhelmingly powerful in expanding my own horizons for the future and inspired me to want to share what I learned with youth in my community back home.

My involvement with the organization could have been more rigid, especially in regards to structuring the English classes and in carrying out the interviews. In wanting to focus on experiencing the organization along with its participants, I was not always comfortable being in the "teacher" position. The contradicting focuses likely made it difficult to feel fully accepted by the students. In retrospect, more engaging activities could have been utilized during the English classes so that all students would have felt that our sessions were a valuable use of time. Additionally, this experience provided an ideal opportunity for more structured qualitative research on mental health of students in the organization. I do not believe that time allowed for me to both build relationships and conduct that form of research, but I see it as a worthwhile focus for future research. It would also be interesting to see if there is any relationships between the social support people have being part of Ilê Aiyê and health outcomes of the community.

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<u>Appendices</u>

<u>Appendix 1: Question bank</u>

General Questions

Quanto tempo você esteve com Ilê Aiyê?
- How long have you been with Ilê Aiyê?

Como você esteve envolvido com Ilê?
- How have you been involved with Ilê?

Qual é o significado de Ilê para você?
- What is the significance of Ilê to you?

Por que você começou vir para Ilê?
- Why did you start coming to Ilê?

Seu tempo aqui mudou como você se vê?
- Has your time here changed how you view yourself?

Seu tempo aqui mudou como seu orgulho em sua identidade?
- Has your time here changed how your pride in your identity?

Qual é a sua principal fonte de empoderamento?
- What is your main source of empowerment?

Qual parte dos ensinamentos de Ilê Aiyê você se liga mais?
- What part of Ilê Aiyê's teachings do you connect to most?

Em que espaços você se sente mais confortável e seguro?
- In what spaces do you feel most comfortable and safe?

Questions for Educators

Por que você começou a ensinar com Ilê Aiyê?
- Why did you start teaching with Ilê Aiyê?

O que torna a educação em Ilê Aiyê diferente?
- What makes education at Ilê Aiyê different?

Qual é a melhor parte sobre ser educador aqui?
What is the best part about being an educator here?

Qual é a importância desse tipo de educação na vida de seus alunos?
- What is the importance of this type of education in the lives of your students?

Quais os desafios que enfrentou com a recente crise financeira?
- What challenges have you faced with the recent financial crisis?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

SIT Study Abroad

School for International Training

*Rua dias D'Ávila, 109, - Barra, CEP: **40.140-270** Salvador, Bahia, Brasil*
Tel / Fax: (71) 3032-6009   www.sit.edu/studyabroad | www.worldlearning.org

Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido

Prezado(a) Senhor(a)

Gostaríamos de convidá-lo(a) a participar de nosso estudo **A Identidade Negra: Apoio Social e Formação Coletiva de Identidade Negra através de uma Organização Político-Cultural Afro-Brasileira**, que tem como objetivo **entender o valor de grupos político-culturais como redes de apoio social na vida de brasileiros negros e como eles contribuem para a saúde emocional como um todo de indivíduos e suas relativas comunidades.**

O estudo, consistirá na realização de entrevistas, observações e/ou participações junto as atividades da entidade parceira e posteriormente haverá a análise do conteúdo destas entrevistas e/ou observações. Será conduzida dessa forma, pois pretendemos trabalhar com a experiência de vida dos(as) participantes do estudo.

Trata-se de um estudo, desenvolvido por **Ninar Hassan Taha** orientada por **Edmilson Lopes das Neves.**

Garantimos que, a qualquer momento da realização desse estudo, qualquer participante e/ou estabelecimento envolvido, poderá receber esclarecimentos adicionais que julgar necessários. Qualquer participante selecionado(a) tem o direito de recusar-se a participar ou retirar-se do estudo em qualquer fase do mesmo, sem nenhum tipo de penalidade, constrangimento ou prejuízo. O sigilo das informações pessoais dos participantes será preservado, especificamente, quanto ao nome, à identificação de pessoas ou de locais. Todos os registros efetuados no decorrer deste estudo serão usados para fins acadêmicos e serão inutilizados após a fase de análise dos dados e de apresentação dos resultados finais na forma de monografia ou artigo científico.

Em caso de concordância com as considerações expostas, solicitamos que assine este "Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido" no local indicado abaixo. Desde já agradecemos sua colaboração e fica aqui o compromisso de notificação do andamento e envio dos resultados deste estudo.

Qualquer dúvida ou maiores esclarecimentos, entrar em contato com a responsável pelo estudo:
e-mail: gabriela.ventura@sit.edu   **Telefone:** (71) 99719.6010 (do SIT Study Abroad: Brasil-Saúde Pública, Raça e Direitos Humanos).

Aluno: Ninar Hassan Taha Estudante no Programa do SIT Study Abroad: Brasil-Saúde Pública, Raça e Direitos Humanos _____ , ____ de _____ de 2017. (Cidade) (Data) (Mes)	Orientadora : Gabriela Ventura _____ Orientador(a): Edmilson Lopes das Neves

Eu, _____, assino o termo de consentimento, após o esclarecimento e da concordância com os objetivos e condições da realização do estudo "**A Identidade Negra: Apoio Social e Formação Coletiva de Identidade Negra através de uma Organização Político-Cultural Afro-Brasileira**", permitindo, também, que os resultados gerais deste estudo sejam divulgados sem a menção dos nomes dos participantes.

_____ , ____ de _____ de 2017.   _____
(cidade)   (Data)   (Mês)   Assinatura do Entrevistado(a)

Appendix 3: Thematic Analysis

Primary Themes	Secondary Themes
- Safe spaces - Racism outside predominately Black areas - Positive sense of self/black identity - Unity	Race and Space
- Political consciousness - *Luta* + resistance – everyday struggle - Mobilization	Black Consciousness
- Beauty + self-esteem - Experiences of Black women - Mental colonization - Colorism	Aesthetic Resistance
- Violence - Community partnerships - Knowledge of rights - Social programming - Time spent with organization	Violence and Education