



## November, black awareness month in Brazil

By ROOTS

The month of November is known as "Black November" in Brazil because of Black Consciousness Day, celebrated on the 20th. It's a time when the fight against racism, the struggle for land, the feminist struggle and in defence of human rights are reinforced, while at the same time the profound social inequalities are highlighted, particularly due to racial issues. In Brazil, more than 56 per cent of the population claim to be black or brown, according to IBGE data from 2022. Despite the low representation in all layers of government and in senior positions in the public and private labour market, the work of black Brazilians has been gaining more prominence nationally and internationally. In this article, we provide a brief historical context for the important date of 20 November, briefly exposing racism in the country and telling you a little about black representation in Brazil.

### Black Awareness Day

Black Awareness Day was celebrated for the first time on 20 November 1971, in the midst of Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985), in an act of resistance and appreciation of the history of Zumbi dos Palmares, organised by the Palmares Group. Formed in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, the Palmares Group was an association that studied black history and culture and opposed the idea that the Golden Law of 1888 freed enslaved people, "because it did not guarantee government assistance or support for access to land, education and work for formerly enslaved men and women". The day also represents the valorisation of the culture, history and political role of Afro-Brazilians. [1]



First evocative act on the 20th of November, performed in 1971 by Grupo Palmares, in Porto Alegre. Photo: Oliveira Silveira Collection. Source: Senado Agency.

Zumbi dos Palmares was an important leader and symbol of resistance who was killed on 20 November 1695 during an ambush by Portuguese troops. Little has been recorded about the life of Zumbi, who was born in 1655 and lived in freedom in the Quilombo dos Palmares, now in the interior of Alagoas, north-eastern Brazil. He came to prominence in 1675, when he fought off an attack by Portuguese troops on his quilombo. He was married to Dandara, with whom he had three children, and together they fought mainly for the freedom of enslaved black people. [2, 3]

According to tradition<sup>1</sup>, Zumbi was the second generation of his family in Brazil to be born in Quilombo dos Palmares. His grandmother, Aqualtune, was a princess in the Congo and, after her defeat at the Battle of Mbwila in 1665, she was sent to Brazil to be sold into slavery, where she arrived in the capital of Recife, Pernambuco. Aqualtune is said to have fled to the Quilombo dos Palmares, where she was a strategic reference and leader and also where she gave birth to the mother of Francisco Nzumbi, Zumbi dos Palmares. [4]

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<sup>1</sup> Cross-checking the references used by RAÍZES, the dates found for Aqualtune's departure from her native Congo (1665) and Zumbi dos Palmares' date of birth (1655) are inconsistent, which leads us to believe that either there is an error in the references or she may not be his grandmother, as tradition has it.



The Quilombo dos Palmares originated in 1580 and was the largest Quilombo in Latin America, with up to 30,000 inhabitants. It occupied the imagination of the enslaved people as a place of possible hope and a dignified life. However, with continued repression and persecution by the Portuguese colony, Palmares was destroyed in 1694. [3]



Zombie and Aqualtune. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

As a result of the enslavement of African people between the 16th and 19th centuries, when more than 4 million people were forcibly transported to Brazilian territory, Brazil became the country with the second largest African ancestry in the world. In resisting slavery, many people fled and came together to organise resistance and collective subsistence, forming quilombos. Some quilombos became organised communities, built far from the cities. As well as enslaved Africans, the quilombos also received indigenous people and some white people who had fled. With this diversity, each quilombo had a different formation, strategy and culture, which were similar due to the rebelliousness of the people. [5]

Even the quilombos that resisted and lived through the abolition of slavery in 1888 had to find other forms of struggle and resistance, as black people were marginalised after abolition. During the beginning of Brazil's republican period in 1889, racial intolerance was reinforced, with land concentration in rural areas and marginalisation and repression in urban areas. Some people



returned to the farms where they had been enslaved to work in still exploitative conditions, while others were left to fend for themselves, without land or housing. Many quilombola descendants remained on the land of their predecessors as a form of resistance and ethnic and cultural preservation, in an attempt to prevent the land from being taken, either by court order or by force, by farmers and/or companies. [1, 5]

It was only in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution that the state recognised quilombo areas as the definitive property of the existing community and guaranteed the right to cultural manifestations. This conquest of the land did not come easily, however. In addition to violent persecution from landowners who want to seize quilombola land, demarcation and titling of the land requires a long process with the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), a federal agency that works, among other things, on the implementation of rural settlements.

Nowadays, the Quilombo dos Palmares area is home to the Quilombo dos Palmares Memorial Park, which preserves the history and buildings of the time, and is located 70 kilometres from the capital of the state of Alagoas, Maceió. Around it, some quilombos keep the history alive and are home to hundreds of quilombolas, such as the Muquém Community, the only remnant of the Palmares Quilombo, considered a heritage site of Brazilian Afro-indigenous memory.



Quilombola community of Muquém, in Alagoas. Photo: Adriano Vizoni. Source: [Folha Press](#)

## Racism in Brazil

Commemorative dates mark symbolic moments, but they shouldn't be confined to that. The history of slavery and racism in Brazil is long and began with the colonisation by the Portuguese in 1507. Its institutionalisation as an economic policy to increase the wealth of European sectors structured a racial, social and gender inequality that is unlikely to be repaired. Racism was made a crime only 34 years ago, with the Racial Crime Law 7716 of 1989, which determines acts of "discrimination or prejudice based on race, colour, ethnicity, religion or national origin" as a crime. [6]

Violence against black people has alarming figures: in 10 years (from 2008 to 2018) homicides of black people have increased by more than 11 per cent, while those of non-black people have fallen by 12 per cent. The number of black people murdered is four times higher than that of white people. If the gender filter is applied, the situation gets worse: 66 per cent of women murdered in 2019 were black. [7] In the prison system, 68 per cent of prisoners are black, with more than 400,000 people incarcerated in the country. [8] In addition to social violence, institutionalised police violence kills black men in particular every day. In the state of Bahia alone, police violence kills 1 black man every 4



hours. "[...] the experience of being a killable black body on every street corner in this country is very difficult. In fact, it's frightening, desperate and cruel, especially for us black men who have black children. We are frightened by the possibility that they will experience the same violence and cruelty that we have experienced [...]" said lawyer Joel Luiz Costa, in a plenary session at the Supreme Court in November 2023. [9]

In the labour market, the number of black and brown women working in domestic services is double that of non-black women, according to data from 2019. This still shows a legacy of slave labour, when black women were subjected to housework, caring for the children of slaveholders and farming, working double or triple shifts. The average income of black Brazilian families is less than half that of white families, at 508.9 and 1,097 reais respectively (2017 data). [2] If we use the gender cut-off, black women earn 70% less than white women. [7] The discussion around family income also involves food security and access to health and education for the population, areas severely impacted by the pandemic that hit the country between 2019 and 2021.

The effects of the COVID pandemic have been drastic in Brazil. In São Paulo, for example, during the peak of the disease in August 2020, the number of deaths among black people was much higher than among white people. Poorer, peripheral neighbourhoods became infected much more quickly than wealthy neighbourhoods, mainly due to the lack of access to basic sanitation, the impossibility of staying at home because they had to work to earn an income and the chaos in the public health system. With the paralysis of commerce, domestic work and construction, more than 27% of young Brazilians between the ages of 18 and 24 became unemployed. [10]

In addition to the data revealing structural injustices, political attacks are focused on black people in an attempt to silence them, as was the case with Marielle Franco, then a councillor in Rio de Janeiro, who was murdered at the age of 38 on 14 March 2018 and whose case has still not been solved. She was an important figure who supported struggles against sexist violence and violence in the favelas, the dignity of women's labour and women's rights. Her murder was fuel for black, popular and feminist mobilisation, especially in the fight against violence against women, and gave rise to Bill 1086/23 establishing the Marielle Franco National Day for Confronting Political Violence on the Basis of Gender and Race.



## **Black representation in Brazil**

For democracy to be truly effective and for the rights of the black population to be guaranteed, political representation must be proportional to the composition of the population. The majority of the Brazilian population is black. However, in Brazil, this representation is still far from balanced. Of the 513 federal deputies, 67 are black, only 24 per cent of the total. Although the 2022 elections saw a record number of black people elected, the figure represents just 26 per cent of all elected candidates. [11] In the ministries, considering the 2023 composition, only 5 of the 37 ministers are black. For the first time in the country's political history, 1 minister is indigenous and 11 are women. [14]

Every advance is crucial, however. Black and popular mobilisations gained momentum after the abolition of slavery and with technological advances that made it possible to circulate publications aimed specifically at the black population, a way of giving voice to and promoting coordination between peoples. International struggles, movements and personalities were a reference point for national mobilisations, such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. [12]

One of the oldest (and still active) movements in Brazil is the Unified Black Movement (MNU), created in 1978, which seeks to combat all forms of racism and exploitation of black people, and which fights for an end to police violence. Its achievements include the creation of National Black Awareness Day on 20 November, the demarcation of quilombola lands, the law requiring the inclusion of Afro-Brazilian history and culture in primary and secondary education in schools and the quota laws in universities.

Another important achievement was the recent creation of the Ministry of Racial Equality in 2023, headed by Anielle Franco. The ministry is responsible for promoting public policies to combat racial discrimination and expand opportunities for black people, developing projects such as the Formation of Anti-Racist Initiatives, which establishes actions such as reserving vacancies for black and brown people and the Quota Law in public tenders, as well as promoting courses with racial themes. [13] Other programmes that symbolise progress in the fight against racism are being expanded, such as the National



Policy for the Integral Health of the Black Population, which combats inequality in the public health system, the Ethnic and Racial Diversity Incentive Programme (Pider), which grants tax incentives to companies aimed at affirmative action for the black population, and the quota programme to increase access for black people to federal higher education institutions, guaranteeing 50% of places for students from public schools.

In addition to advances in public policy, black personalities have gained prominence in the areas of culture and education, such as: Conceição Evaristo, the first black writer to receive the Juca Pato trophy for Brazilian literature, in 2023, with her book "Canção para ninar menino grande" (Song for a big boy's bedtime); Sueli Carneiro, a multi-award-winning writer for her extensive theoretical contribution; and Liniker, the first black trans artist to occupy a seat in the Brazilian Academy of Culture.

Finally, the multi-artist Nitorê Akadã made a pertinent talk about black consciousness. In an interview with the singer Péricles, she says that we should "be aware that we [black people] are not descended from enslaved people, but from intellectuals, farmers, artists, who came enslaved to this land [Brazil], who contributed and contribute a lot to the development of this nation. So to be conscious, to be aware of this blackness, is to be aware of this enormous contribution and the cultural, ancestral and historical wealth that we have." [15]

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