

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURIST IMAGERY OF BRAZIL IN BETWEEN STEREOTYPES AND CLICHÉS

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1. Introduction

The current paper analyses the image of Brazil as it has been developing in the Brazilian mindset and subsequently spreading on an International scale. Starting point of the current analysis will be the 1964-1984 time frame – two decades characterised by military dictatorship –, and the communicative strategies of Embratur, the Brazilian national board in charge of promoting tourism and which played a major role in the strengthening and spreading of a specific tourist image of Brazil, both inside and outside the Country.

2. Brazil at the time of *Embratur*

The currently widespread image of Brazil is still based on the propagandistic and tourist imagery developed and fostered by *Embratur* (*Empresa Brasileira para o Turismo*) from 1966 onwards.

A fortíssima imagem no exterior de que o Brasil é uma grande festa não é obra do acaso. Em 1966, quando foi fundado o Instituto Brasileiro de Turismo (Embratur), houve muito incentivo a campanhas publicitárias que mostravam sempre as belas praias do Rio de Janeiro e a nudez das mulheres no carnaval. Era a época da Ditadura Militar e o objetivo das campanhas era vender uma falsa idéia de liberalismo e democracia, em oposição às denúncias do povo ao governo ditador. Porém, essa idéia prevalece até hoje. (Minini, 2004)¹

Embratur specifically wanted to create a tourist image of Brazil which could promote mass tourism, as well as improve the image of the Country on the international panorama. Indeed, from 1964 to 1984, the Brazilian government was strongly criticised by expatriate scholars and trade unionists, as well as by the international press, for its dictatorial regime and ferocious political crimes which included the disappearance of political opponents (*desaparecidos*). However, *Embratur* never officially admitted having the above-mentioned aims, as the following words of Jeanine Pires – former president of *Embratur* – clearly show:

In order to describe *Embratur*'s initiatives, it is important first to understand its mission. At the time of its creation, on November 18, 1966, *Embratur*'s main objective was to foster the tourist activity, creating conditions for the stimulation of employment, generation of income, and development in the whole country. Since

¹ ‘The image of a happy and playful Brazil which is rooted in foreign minds is not there by chance. In 1966, when the Brazilian institute for tourism (*Embratur*) was funded, the Government supported several advertising campaigns which showed the beaches of Rio de Janeiro and naked samba female dancers. That was the time of the military dictatorial regime and those advertisements aimed to spread a false idea of liberality and democracy, to contrast the accusations of the population who denounced the dictatorial regime. Yet, this is still the prevailing view of Brazil.’ [personal translation]

January, 2003, with the institution of the Ministry of Tourism, *Embratur's* work concentrates on the promotion, marketing, and support of the commercialization of the Brazilian products, services and tourist destinations abroad. (Travel Daily News, 2007)

Consequently, the tourism policy of Brazil can only be analysed considering the socio-political context within which such policy developed. Only in this way, we will be able to understand the rationale for tourism communication proposed by *Embratur* which aimed at portraying Brazil as an earthly paradise characterised by love and harmony in a Catholic and multiethnic context where peace was guaranteed by a constant fight against communism (Figure 1).



Figure 1
Calendário Turístico do Brasil, 1971, published by Embratur

Such a process of self-representation has its roots in *Embratur's* worries of seeing the international image of Brazil spoilt by the dreadful actions of the military dictatorship. Indeed, as Amado (1992, p. 336) confirms, “o regime militar e sua radicalização comprometeram a imagem do país no exterior, subtraindo credibilidade à sua ação”.² This worry was the soil over which Brazilian tourism was built, as Joaquim Xavier da Silveira wrote:

A construção, ampliação ou reforma de hotéis, obras e serviços específicos de finalidade turística constituem atividades econômicas de interesse nacional. A inclusão deste enunciado em um diploma legal significou o ponto final dos trabalhos da equipe do Governo da Revolução iniciada em 1964, com o Presidente Castello Branco, quando se resolveu dar a este fenômeno do século - o turismo - um tratamento diferente. (Silveira, 1977, p. 17)³

So strong was the fear of seeing the image of Brazil irrevocably compromised that Brazilian military institutions went so far as to begin a real campaign of counter-

² ‘The military regime and its radicalization compromised the international image of the country, mining its credibility.’ [personal translation]

³ ‘The creation, expansion and renovation of hotels, services and other works for tourists are economic activities of National interest. Including such a sentence in a legal document was the final step of the work of Castello Branco’s Government which in 1964 had finally started to consider this important event – tourism – from a different perspective.’ [personal translation]

information and propaganda based on the use of images which were already present in the national imagery and which were related to the beauty of Rio de Janeiro, its beaches, Carnival and *mulatas*. However, although in the '60s using *mulatas* for tourist advertising was a novelty especially for the North American and European audiences, the stereotype of the *mulata* sensual had been present in the Brazilian society since the colonial period and had great spreading and affirmation in the early 20th century, owing to the Gilberto Freyre's theories on racial democracy (Figure 2).

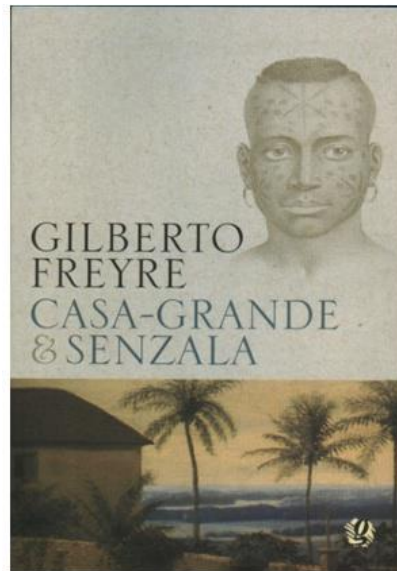


Figure 2
Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-Grande & Senzala*

For a clearer understanding of the process that lead to the development of the Brazilian tourist image, we need to reflect on the difference between stereotype and image. Being based on established opinions which are not acquired by direct experience, stereotypes are rarely susceptible to change and are difficult to modify. Conversely, as Rosana Bignami Viana de Sá declares, an image

pode ser associada a um conjunto de percepções a respeito de algo, uma representação de um objeto ou ser, uma projeção futura, uma lembrança ou recordação passada. Essas múltiplas explicações a respeito da imagem nos levam a considerar o quanto ela pode ser dinâmica e ampla no que se refere a conceito e prática. (Sá 2002, pp. 12-13)⁴

Such dynamism clearly appears when we think that images – in contrast to stereotypes – represent a subjective, personal perspective which differs according to each individual. Tourist images, on the other hand, are partial representations – almost projections of a place – based on the tourist's perception which, in turn, is frequently moulded by previously established representations, i.e. images developed and proposed by people in charge of spreading the given idea. Consequently, tourist images are easily manipulated (Alfonso 2006, p. 77).

⁴ 'can be associated to a set of perceptions about something, the representation of an object or being, a future projection, an old or recent memory. This range of possible explanations for an image lead us to see how dynamic and broad an image can be, both in conceptual and practical terms.' [personal translation]

The tourist image of a country as well as tourism communication are based on the country's literature, cinema, music and folklore. From these, well-known and recognizable elements are taken and transposed to create the desired image. The presence of traits such as Carnival, samba, and soccer in the tourist image of Brazil lead us to believe that those features, now considered an integral part of the Brazilian identity, were, till some decades ago, stigmatized insofar as they referred exclusively to the Afro-Brazilian roots of the Brazilian culture.

Indeed, when we look at the first tourist images used by Embratur, largely based on the stereotype of the sensual *mulata*, we cannot but think that this type of image has been transformed into an icon of Brazilian culture only recently, owing to ideological, literary and cinematographic reinterpretations, and is a key element in understanding the complexity of Brazilian interethnic relations.

Expressão maior da miscigenação do nosso povo, as figuras desses mistos de brancos e negros são habitualmente consideradas como reveladoras de relações menos conflituosas, menos racistas, ao menos ao nível da sexualidade. O sexo é aliás poderoso componente na definição de uma especificidade brasileira e a figura da mulata, em particular, o símbolo da sensualidade e da malícia de uma população que vive num território onde inexistia o pecado. (Lopes, 2001)⁵

In the '30s and '40s, Freyre's idea that democracy and racial integration could be reached through interracial marriages became so popular as to becloud, at least partially, the idea of *branqueamento* (lit. 'whitening') which had so far been considered the only viable solution to the Brazilian racial issue and had led to fostering migration from Europe. Freyre's theory thus led the basis for the political project of *Estado Novo* (1930-1945) of Getúlio Vargas.

From the populist regime of Vargas to the military regime of the Sixties, the notion of *miscigenação* (lit. 'miscegenation') was reinterpreted and manipulated in order to transform a mixed race and its semantic components from potential cultural icons into vehicles of tourist image. Thus, similarly to what Embratur will later do with the image of the *mulata*, the Afro-Brazilian elements were rediscovered and used to reshape the image of the nation, in order to attract a large share of the tourism – mostly men – interested in beautiful girls in bikini more than in any landscape attractions.

3. The role of *Embratur*

Embratur was founded in 1966 to shape a national tourism policy, as explained in Brazilian decree n.º 55 of 18 November 1966 which “define a política nacional de turismo, cria o Conselho Nacional de Turismo e a Empresa Brasileira de Turismo e dá outras providências.”⁶ Unfortunately, in an attempt to create an appealing tourist image able to increase foreign tourism and help Brazil get out from economic stagnation, they ended up collecting several national stereotypes and depicting Brazil as a country free of social or political conflicts where nature

⁵ ‘Specific trait of our population, this mixing between the black and the white has normally been considered indication of a low level of conflicts and racism, at least when it comes to sexuality. Sex is indeed a powerful component in defining Brazilian peculiarities and the image of the *mulata* becomes a symbol of sensuality and shrewdness of a population living in a land where sin does not exist.’ [personal translation]

⁶ ‘[...] defines the national policy on tourism, creates the National Tourist Council and the Brazilian Tourist Board and oversees other things.’ [personal translation]

induced happiness and joy: a tropical paradise, welcoming and exotic, full of beautiful women, possibly *mulatas*. Given its characteristics, *Embratur's* tourism communication could not but have dreadful consequences for the image of Brazilian women. Far from disrupting the stereotype of the sensual and easy *mulata*, *Embratur's* communication – which targeted white European or US men – extended this distorted stereotype to all Brazilian women (Figure 3).

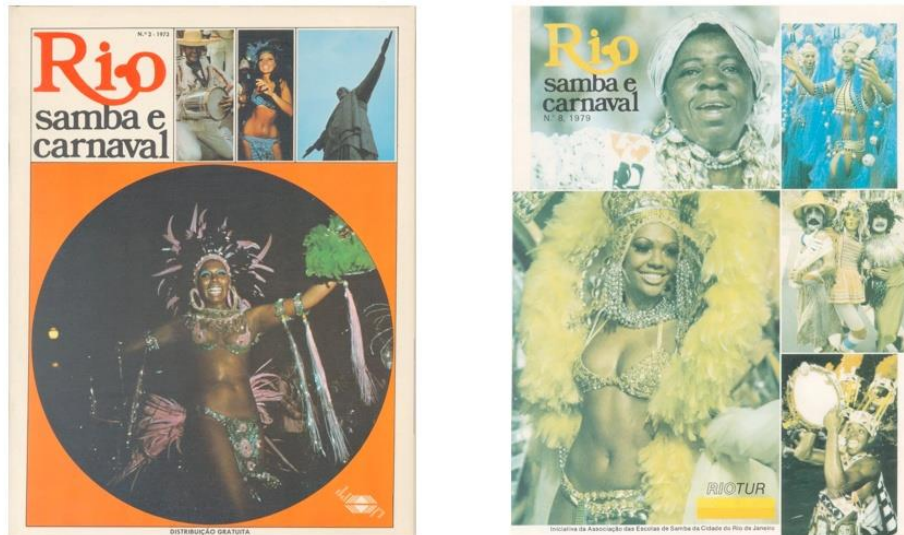


Figure 3
Covers of the *Rio, Samba e Carnaval* magazine

It must be noted that a tourist image based on a commercial use of the female body recalled the negative and discriminating stereotype of the sensuous and intriguing *mulata* so typical of the colonial slave period. Suffice to say that, in 1711 the Jesuit father Andreoni (full name André João Antonil), in his work titled “*Cultura e Opulência no Brasil por suas Drogas e Minas*” (book 1, chapter 10), described Brazil as the paradise of *mulatos* and *mulatas*, the purgatory of the white and the hell of the black (Cfr. Antonil, 1982) and added that *mulatas* used their sensuousness as a means of social climbing – the latter being an element which frequently appears in the literature. Antonil was not the first one to underline this feature, nor will be the last to defend the myth of the *mulata's* tropical sensuality.

Embratur began its propagandistic activity of tourism promotion at the beginning of the ‘70s,⁷ when the Brazilian regime started exploiting the prestige that Brazil had recently gained for winning the Football World Cup in Mexico. The image of Brazil was then enriched with other easily recognizable elements, including Rio de Janeiro Carnival and the statue of Christ the Redeemer – now the best known symbol of Rio and, consequently, of Brazil.

For the first time ever in Brazil, alongside the already-described interest for international tourism, *Embratur* also developed plans for the national promotion of tourism. A program titled “*Conheça o Brasil*” (“Get to know Brazil”), targeted Brazilian families and offered them a network of accommodations that was slightly different from the one reserved to international tourists (*Embratur*, 1973).

⁷ The year 1970 was proclaimed first National Tourism.

In 1973, on the occasion of the ‘Brasil Export 73’ event, *Embratur* tried to build its tourist discourse around the following idea: “*Turismo é cultura, é folclore, é futebol, é artesanato, é música, é arte popular, é moda, é joalheria, é pintura, é, em última análise, a expressão mais complexa da interação social*”⁸ (*Embratur* 1972, p. 10). *Embratur*’s discourse offered a highly varied and to some extent ambitious type of tourist product which covered everything, from architectural to natural beauty, encompassed the whole complex and complete range of Brazilian artistic production, and included the usual stereotype of a welcoming, happy and friendly people. While *Embratur* was proposing this new type of message, in 1975, the journal “*Rio, Samba e Carnaval*” – translated in several languages – relapsed into the image considered by many the best tourist attraction: Brazilian women.

As the images in these pages testify, communication had never been so explicit in Brazilian tourist discourse. In their graphics, these images resemble the pictures that *EMBRAFILME* – a national board for film production, in other words, the filmic counterpart of *Embratur* – used in the late ‘60s to advertise a series of highly-popular erotic films (the so-called *Pornochanchada*, Figure 4) which aimed to distract the public from politically-involved films (*Cinema Novo* and *Cinema Marginal*) by offering a more attractive alternative based on the display of the female body.



Figure 4
Poster of a film belonging to the *Pornochanchada* genre

Such a sudden surge of explicitness in tourist communication, which would inevitably lead to the promotion of an increase in sex tourism, coincided with a very specific cultural policy of the Brazilian military regime. The grimmest phase, characterized by the passing of Institutional Act n.5 (*Ato Institucional n° 5*) and the institutionalization of censorship and repression in every field, took place from 1968 to 1974, and was followed by a time of political relaxation. Indeed, from 1975 onward, the Brazilian Government promoted a new kind of national culture by means of the *Política Nacional de Cultura* (‘Cultural National Policy’).

⁸ ‘Tourism is culture, folklore, football, craftsmanship, music, popular art, fashion, jewelry, painting, that is a very complex expression of social interaction’. [personal translation]

Consequently, the construction of a tourist image of Brazil based on the beauty of Brazilian women, considered as *a maior atração* ('major attractions'), began to consolidate and transform into a stereotype outside national borders. This stereotype was then used, either implicitly or explicitly, in several tourism campaigns in the following years.

A change of direction in tourism communication took place starting from 1997, when the use of the 'Brazilian woman' stereotype to attract foreign interest was dismissed and a fight against sex tourism began. This led to a re-interpretation and re-construction of the image of Brazil and of all the Afro-Brazilian features connected to the sensuous woman stereotype, such as Carnival and samba. These elements have been detached from their Afro-Brazilian roots and are currently used in tourism communication to identify Brazilian national identity.

To conclude, we could say that, despite a clear failure of racial democracy in Brazil – indeed Brazil is still marked by a serious social and economic divide which sees people of African origins in subordinate position –, official Brazilian tourism communication from the '60s onward has always promoted an image of Brazil based on love for music, harmony between different races and skin colours, and the sensuality and beauty of its inhabitants. The country was depicted as an exotic land of Carnival, football and samba dancers, and the violent aspects of urban areas such as Rio de Janeiro were kept hidden, as they would keep at a distance the average tourist – well informed by fellow-tourists about the existence of a high criminal rate connected to drug trafficking.

However, despite all attempts by the Brazilian boards to hide social and urban problems from the International view, many things have changed in the last two decades. Both in film and literary production, the view on Afro-Brazilian people and their world has passed from seeing them as subordinate passive subjects to active agents. Similarly, drug trafficking is no longer considered an isolated problem, but rather a social issue in need of analysis and solutions: although the social divide cannot explain the origins and existence of drug trafficking, it clarifies why so many youngsters are engaged in criminal activities and cheer for the *movimento* ('drug trafficking bands') as they would do for their favourite football team.

This has brought about novelties also in the tourism sector. Starting from 1992, in order to re-attract some of the tourists that urban violence had kept afar, a high number of tourist agencies and associations in Rio de Janeiro have started offering tourist packages which promise adventure in the *favelas*, advertised with name such as *favela* tour or *favela* adventure.

4. Concluding remarks

It must be admitted that, thanks to its tourism policy, the Brazilian military regime managed to reach its goal. Indeed, while the wrong deeds of Pinochet or the 'disappearing' of thousands of Argentines in the '70s are known world-wide, the international public opinion almost generally ignores that Brazil was ruled for twenty years by a dictatorial military regime and that those years were characterized by torture, thousands of victims, expatriates and *desaparecidos*.

However, if on the one hand the Brazilian tourism policy has had positive commercial and propagandistic results, on the other hand it has generated great social damage – a damage which is only recently been acknowledged and tackled.

In fact, a tourist image so strongly based on the ideas of sensuality and sex has led to a dramatic increase in sex tourism, especially in North-Eastern towns, such as Fortaleza, Natal and Recife; this has then quickly degenerated into pedophile tourism. The underage sex market of the most disadvantaged areas in the North-East of Brazil is so flourishing as to have attracted not only the attention of the police and the media, but also that of literature and cinema which have recently started depicting some towns in a highly negative way.

Apenas recentemente o Brasil começou a perceber os primeiros reflexos sérios da imagem turística até então criada e arraigada. Cada vez mais vemos cidades tentando alterar sua imagem turística, uma vez que tal imagem, somada às demais informações sobre o local, vinha trazendo aspectos negativos cujas conseqüências eram problemas sociais, ambientais ou econômicos. (Alfonso 2006, p. 130)⁹

Nevertheless, changes have been recently seen in the composition of incoming tourists fluxes: although the majority of tourists are still male Americans and Europeans (mostly Italians and Germans), a gradual increase can be noticed in the number of families and groups of women that travel to Brazil every year.



Figure 5
Advertising campaign against sex tourism in Brazil

This radical change in the composition of incoming tourists fluxes mirrors a change of policy in Brazilian official tourism communication – partly induced by foreign human rights organizations (Figure 5) – which has substituted all images of women in bikini with images of Brazilian landscapes, works of art and cultural events.

⁹ ‘Only recently has Brazil started becoming aware of the serious consequences of the tourist image created and spread in previous years. More and more towns try to change their tourist image, when they see that such image, added to other pieces of information about the local situation, carry serious negative aspects which lead to social, environmental or economic problems.’ [personal translation]

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