

SEX, CLASS, AND STATUS IN RACIAL RELATIONS--NORTHEAST BRAZIL

W. D. Hohenthal¹

Racial prejudice in northeast Brazil² does not presume merely a situation of race contact; the racial situation is of a complex, diffuse, and subtle character, owing to the relations between the sexes and the desire to preserve social status, which factors constitute the areas of tension in interpersonal and interracial situations. At the same time, however, sex and class carry with them much less emotional charge than in cultures with puritanical standards, for instance the United States.

Furthermore, as Pierson (1955:433-434) has pointed out, the terms "Negro" (preto) and "white" (branco) as used in Brazil cannot be easily equated to similar usage current in the United States. In the latter country a Negro is anyone descended in any degree, however remote, from an African Negroid, and the designation includes all hybrids; a white is presumed to be a person of "undiluted" European ancestry. There is a great deal of Anglo-American folklore associated with the technique of recognizing persons ostensibly white but with remote African ancestry, such as "blue half-moons on the fingernails" and other highly dubious criteria, too numerous and witless to relate; in addition, there are many humorous anecdotes of a somewhat sad, necrotic kind.

In Brazil, to the contrary, a Negro is one of noticeably Negroid physical traits and of low social status, whereas a white is a predominantly Caucasoid person no matter what his ethnic origin happens to be, and including many degrees of hybridity. Therefore, as used in Brazil, the terms "Negro" and "white" are (1) categories of physical appearance; and color has supplanted race insofar as stereotypes or prejudice are concerned; (2) categories of social position; (3) capable of variation with respect to individuals owing to shifting personal relationships; and (4) designations conferring varying usage with the same individual at different times, in keeping with specific situations.

The Portuguese settlers of Brazil had no firm prejudice against interbreeding with darker-skinned peoples, whether native Indians whom they met in the land, or Negro slaves later brought over from West Africa. This attitude may be explained in part by the fact that Portugal was invaded and partly occupied from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries A.D. by North African Moors who enjoyed a culture superior to that of the peninsular Europeans of the time; the Moors arrogated to themselves superior status and were accorded a sort of grudging respect by the Lusitanians--even today in Iberian folklore the dark-skinned Moorish princess is an object of romantic and sexual desire. Another factor here was the shortage or lack of European women in the New World during the sixteenth century.

This attitude of tolerance, or even admiration, for darker hued peoples was carried over into Brazil by the Portuguese and was reflected in the

treatment of their dusky wards. During the period of Negro slavery in Brazil, interpersonal relations between Brazilian master and Negro slave were often benign.³ Slave children and scions of squirearchs enjoyed the most intimate of personal contacts; Negro children were frequently raised in the "Big House"; white children were nursed by Negro slave women; and plantation owners more often than not took a paternalistic interest in their left-handed, hybrid offspring, affording them special opportunities to advance socially and economically.

As a consequence of this early and widespread hybridization, which still continues, Brazilian society assumed from colonial times a multi-racial class aspect. As a reflection of former times, darker-skinned persons today are still concentrated in the lower social ranks, although they are gradually rising and assuming more important rôles; and while lighter-skinned persons still enjoy the greater social prestige, they do not do so because of this fact alone. As the Brazilian proverb states: "Negro rico é branco; branco pobre é negro." (A rich Negro is a white man; a poor white man is a Negro.)

Reflecting the former period of slavery (abolished in 1871), with its privilege of sexual access to Negro females by white masters, is the attitude held today by many Brazilians of all social levels that colored women are sexually facile. This pose is emphasized by stereotypes referring to the negrinha, moreninha, and mulatinha, all of them endearing or affectionate terms relating to women of African descent.

An opposite stereotype, involving psychological attitudes arising from exclusive use of the same privilege by the dominant race to the detriment of the subordinate race, is fear of sexual aggression against white women by Negro men, for which, of course, there is a parallel in the United States. This apprehension is shown in the precautions taken by white girls of good family in their infrequent opportunities of contact with colored men, especially with those of the lower class; this solicitude reflects the pattern of female segregation fixed during the colonial period in northeast Brazil, according to Gilberto Freyre (1950:ii-568 ff).

Associated with this timidity of sexual aggression are allied matters of sexual jealousy and projection of frustrations, which are demonstrated equally by white and Afro-Brazilians. Such expressions are usually in the form of stereotypes; thus, Negroes and mulattoes believe that blonde women are notoriously inconstant and fickle; they are commonly referred to as francezas (Frenchwomen), owing to the traditional prevalence of French prostitutes with dyed hair in Brazil. Similarly, the counterpart is applied to mulatto women by white men, these averring that "they would marry a mulatta if only they could be sure that the wench would be true to them." Upper-class white women are notoriously jealous of colored women, and also impute to Negro men extraordinary and unrestrained powers of sexuality.

A great deal of resistance is felt toward intermarriage of the races, particularly in the upper and middle classes, but also in the lower class when this action involves a very dark person or Negro whose marriage would threaten the social status of the lighter spouse's family. Such reaction to loss of social status frequently crops up in areas usually free of any

ordinary or overt racial prejudice. White girls of good family aver that they would not marry a Negro even of their own social level, general background, common interests and sentiments, because they "wouldn't want to bring shame upon the family."

In line with this, a good part of the African ancestors of many leading families in northeast Brazil have been expunged from the record by the device of "historical elimination," that is to say, by simply ignoring one's Negroid forebears. This is particularly true in those families in which hybridization with Amerindians has taken place to the extent that the present generation appears freer of Negroid features, or where the combination of Caucasoid features and a bronzed skin permits much more easily the disguising of African ancestry.

During the early nineteenth century a spurt of intense nationalism, associated with a nativistic vogue and literary romanticism extolling the virtues of the American Indian, induced many Brazilian families to exchange their traditional Portuguese family names for Amerindian names (ex: Freitas to Sucupira). It is to be expected that many mulattoes, then attempting to rise socially, would fervently join such a movement in the desire of eliminating historically any forebears who would remind them of previous servitude.

This claim of Indian ancestry is quite common amongst mulattoes, despite the presence of other members of the same family with unmistakable African physical characteristics. It must be admitted, however, that in Brazil frequently individuals may be (and have been) defined as "Indians," not because of any biological considerations, but because of social criteria. For instance, the term caboclo during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was applied only to coastal Indians who spoke dialects of Tupí; but gradually the term came to mean, and is now so used, to indicate any poor subsistence farmer or backwoodsman (caipira) who may be, or who believes himself to be, descended from Indian ancestors. Also, we may note the prevalence of comments in official reports of the (nineteenth century) Imperial Diretoria Geral dos Indios for Pernambuco regarding Caucasians and Negroes occasionally living with Indian tribes under governmental tutelage, thus: "E Ele indio porque é casado com india" (He is an Indian, for he is married to an Indian woman). There are so few Indians left in Pernambuco and adjacent states, and those surviving are so acculturated and hybridized with Negroes and Caucasians, that the essence of this paper necessarily deals with relations between the major elements of the racial situation in the northeast, that is to say, Negroes, Caucasians, and hybrids of these.

The concealment of the darkest member of the family, and denial of mestico or African ancestry, then, is another artifice used in Brazilian society as a technique for preservation of social status. Sometimes families are unaware of their Negro connections: the Brazilian psychiatrist René Ribeiro (1956:120) cites the case of a country gentleman in Pernambuco who had a Negro mistress, and a mulatto son by her. He educated this boy, and helped him socially to the extent that the bastard son became economically the best situated member of the entire family, which only learned of their dark relative by accident in later years. Here is a case which tends to

support Freyre's contention (1951, ii:640) that "sentiments of paternity obligation were factors which exerted considerable influence on the interpenetration of race and class in Brazil."

Colored persons in Brazil tend to repudiate their race by promoting their descendants to the white race by intentionally practicing selective miscegenation. A story is told of a Negro who had attained a certain degree of social recognition because of his profession and reputation as a musician. Without opposition from her parents, he married a very pretty Portuguese girl, but always warned his mulatto children against marrying persons darker than themselves. One of his sons fell in love with a Negress, and the father was obliged to break up the affair. All of his children, except one, contrived to marry persons lighter in color than themselves. The exception, his only daughter, ran off with a Negro, and as their first-born child was very dark, the disconsolate grandfather complained, "Todo meu trabalho atoa!" (All of my work for nothing!).

The shifting of a Negro family to a higher social class, however, is not always recognized by fellow members of the same racial group. Professor Ribeiro recounts (*op. cit.*, pp. 123-124) three cases which reflect varying attitudes of socio-economic jealousy or envy, defensive pride of race, and reluctance to admit racial affiliation by the device of ignoring the racial situation:

(a) A well-known Negro in Recife advanced to the upper class by virtue of a university degree, an important Federal job, and by marrying a white woman. He was immediately nicknamed by his less fortunate and envious Negro associates, "Flamengo," in allusion to the black-and-white colors of that famous Rio football club.

(b) A Negro judge in a northeastern city once required a house-servant, and a colored candidate was sent to him by a colleague. Knocking on the door, the applicant was confronted by a Negro woman, of whom the would-be servant demanded, "Go tell your mistress . . .," whereupon the other interrupted, saying, "I am the mistress." The applicant then retorted, "Ah, this is a Negro house?" Pardon me, I do not work for Negroes, though I am black."

(c) A university graduate, mulatto, whose intellectual bent impelled him to submerge his racial traits in the interest of obtaining social status to the point of denying that he ever had anything to do with Negroes, when challenged with respect to certain of his companions, replied with surprise, "Oh, is he a Negro?"

It should be observed at this point that in Brazil racial attitudes and opinions frequently can be (and often are) expressed overtly without the guilty emotionalism peculiar to the United States. One may speak freely about "niggers" (using this term) even to obvious Negroes. An ambivalent attitude certainly exists; thus a Negro, quarreling with a white man, may in exasperation call the latter a "damned nigger" (*nêgo danado*), but on the other hand, two white men may address each other as "my nigger" (*meu nêgo*) as a friendly term of intimacy. Such usage obviously depends on tone of voice and the emotional or social circumstances, as in the United States

where similar modes surround the epithet "son-of-a-bitch." If the latter is prefaced by the adjective "old," and uttered with a wink or a nudge in the ribs, it becomes actually a term of endearment, and would hardly shock an archdeacon.

Occasionally, Brazilians will aver that what frequently takes place in their society is the substitution of race by class . . . this in order to explain the anomaly of acceptance of Negroes in social groups priding themselves on white ancestry; the explanation may be phrased as follows: "When a Negro obtains a better position, and is accepted socially by virtue of his University ring [indicating professional field], it is not the Negro but rather the Negro's ring that is accepted." Perhaps this anecdote will serve to illustrate the point: a certain Caucasian merchant had three teen-age daughters; one of them fell in love with a lower-class workman, and the father accepted his new son-in-law only because he was white. Another of the girls had a Negro swain, who studied law at the University; he was acceptable owing to his future profession. The father habitually advised the third girl, as yet unattached, "Operário só se fôr branco; negro só se fôr doutor!" (A workman only if he is white; a Negro only if he is a doctor!).

However, attainment of professional degrees does not always automatically result in the presumed accompanying rise in social status. For example, in Brazil a cleric has incontestable social prestige, especially if he is Catholic; and as a consequence, many mulattoes attempt to obtain the desired social recognition through the exercise of being a religious minister. Sometimes this occurs, and there are stories current which reflect the general sympathy felt for such outstanding individuals, to wit: a certain Brazilian bishop going to Rome had his dark skin noticed with surprise by another foreign prelate, who ejaculated, "Est niger!" (He is black!), to which a third high church dignitary retorted, "Sed sanctis!" (But holy!). There are many versions of this tale.

Nonetheless, sacerdotal regalia and office do not always guarantee to Negro priests the desired prestige and social recognition inherent to their position. The case is cited by Ribeiro (*idem*, p. 127) involving a Negro priest assigned to a small town in the sertão (bush) the population of which was largely white and vociferously proud of being so; the priest noted with discomfiture that hardly anyone attended church services save extremely religious women (beatas), old people of the poorest class, and children undergoing catechism. Upon inquiry, one of the beatas blurted out, "May the Holy Virgin forgive me, Senhor Vicar, but the truth is that they don't come because you are black!" and forthwith requested for herself a transfer to another parish. Extreme cases such as this, however, are exceptional, the usual thing being that a colored priest is accepted by virtue of his clerical status, and not because of his ethnic origin.

Catholic priests of Negro ancestry fare much better than Protestant ministers of either Caucasoid or Negroid race. As Brazil is overwhelmingly Catholic, there is naturally greater social prestige for those communicants and divines of the Roman faith. In point of fact, Protestant evangelical sects recruit their members largely from amongst the lower socio-economic

(largely Negroid) classes, and Catholics generally refer to Protestant celebrants as gentinha (no-account folk) or as crentes (believers, in the sense that they are devotees of the wrong faith). Even within the evangelical cults there seems to be some sort of social rating, thus Presbyterians are reckoned as being superior to Baptists, but the general attitude is that being a Protestant is equivalent to being either a Negro or of the lowest socio-economic class of ignoramuses.

As a minor attitude, or perhaps an ancillary one, is the notion that the provenance of a given family, particularly if it is a principal (nobre) area or region, should confer greater social prestige; that is to say, a region where economic and social development has been the greatest, with the establishment of "cultured" or "urbane" convivial standards; of more frequent relations with the centers of intellectual and cultural diffusion; and where the standard of living also has been high. All this is, of course, in contrast to rustic regions where the inhabitants are ignorant hill-billies, having the simplest sort of life, and maintaining an inferior course of existence.

In some cases, this attitude of superiority of locale involves racial considerations as well, for instance: a very dark mulatto, a widely traveled and well educated man, in conversing about Brazilian cities he had visited, referred to São Salvador da Bahia with undisguised contempt, describing that metropolis as "a center of crude and superstitious niggerdom [negrada]." In this situation the subject perhaps reflected the vague or diffuse attitude of dislike manifested by people desirous of shedding their Negro ancestry or affiliations, fairly common to northeast Brazil. His opinion may have been motivated by recognition of the large Negro population of Bahia, and also by the very numerous (or more noticeable) retentions of African traditions in that city. That this attitude is not unique is reflected in the common gibe of northeastern Brazil, "O branco da Bahia" (The white man from Bahia), indicating an individual whose pretensions to being white remain in doubt, or whose pretensions can be easily challenged.

Conclusions

In northeastern Brazil social recognition of the individual was originally predicated on the assumption of a person of worth (filho d'algo or fidalgo, "son of someone") being European (Caucasoid), Catholic, and economically and/or politically powerful, which frequently presupposed a man to be an owner of property and slaves.

But very early in Brazilian history, even in colonial times, there were permitted exceptions and substitutions of these conditions as a consequence of (1) the functioning and subsequent reduction of the semi-feudal and patriarchal system, (2) miscegenation and acculturation with respect to Negroes and Amerindians, and (3) an increasing development of social forms termed "individualistic."

These movements of individuals, and even of entire families, from one social class to another, and from one race to another, despite erratic

shufflings and contradictory attitudes, have tended to prevent in Brazilian society the establishment of a fixed racial ideology, such as we observe in the United States. Racial prejudice in Brazil seems to be of exceedingly diffuse and shifting character.

Those exceptions in Brazilian society, where we note firm reluctance to racial hybridization, may be partially explained by adherence to extreme class endogamy because of loyalty to aristocratic traditions; by unyielding loyalty to what are regarded as standards of European culture; and retention of the patriarchal and traditional forms of Brazilian family and colonial society.

As a consequence we note the differences between races and cultures becoming accentuated in the upper classes; racial prejudice thus inhibiting such matters as interpersonal and interracial relationships, particularly with regard to intermarriage between Negro and white, but not so much with respect to mulatto-white unions, and even less so regarding affiliations between whites and quadroons or octoroons. These attitudes, however, are not restricted to the upper classes of Brazilian society, but tend to permeate downward, thus influencing attitudes of the society in general, which is reflected in common agreement that social worth is largely measured according to skin color, this consideration being frequently modified by social status afforded by peculiar professional attainments or affiliation.

ENDNOTES

- (1) This paper was read at the First Annual Anthropological Meetings, May 18, 1957, sponsored by the Kroeber Anthropological Society. The present version is somewhat modified and expanded.
- (2) Northeast Brazil comprises mainly the states of Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, and Sergipe; contingent states would be Piauí to the north and Bahia to the south.
- (3) Literally taken, this statement is entirely misleading and may be challenged as erroneous; what is meant here is that, despite the obvious horrors and cruelties inherent to slavery, well attested to historically, in Brazil there was a certain measure of benignity frequently developed between master and slave, and offspring of both, so anomalous (by comparison with conditions elsewhere) as to be noteworthy. Obviously, all was not ever well between master and slave in Brazil, nor is this implied.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Freyre, Gilberto

- 1950 Casa grande e senzala. 2 volumes, 6th edition. Livraria José Olímpio, Rio de Janeiro.
- 1951 Sobrados e mocambos. 3 volumes, 2nd edition. Livraria José Olímpio, Rio de Janeiro.

Pierson, Donald

- 1955 Race Relations in Portuguese America. In "Race Relations in World Perspective," edited by Andrew W. Lind. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Ribeiro, René

- 1956 Religião e relações raciais. Ministério da Educação e Cultura, Serviço de Documentação. Imprensa Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.