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TLT-12
THE AMERICAS

Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.

"Sugar Notes"

September, 2000
RECIFE, Pernambuco, Brazil

Peter B. Martin
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Dear Peter,

I sit on the side of a nakedly brown hill in the sugarcane fields, about 40 miles from Recife, in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. Puffy white clouds float overhead in a blue sky, and bent figures hack through greenish-brown stalks a couple of feet away. However, this isn't the sugarcane harvest that I wanted to photograph — I am here about four months too soon for that. The workers, fully covered by ragged shirts and hats to protect them from the sun, are planting, just as has been done every year for almost four hundred and fifty years.

I find it amazing to imagine that sugar, a perfectly ordinary product, completely changed this Pernambucan landscape and Brazil as a whole. But it did. My gaze sweeps over what once was the *mata atlântica*, or the Atlantic tropical forest belt that ran parallel to the coast. Unfortunately for the trees, the area was particularly suitable for sugarcane, an export product the Portuguese Crown was keen on establishing in the new colony. As far as my eyes can see, the hills are a patchwork of brown and green. Brown where the cane has already been cut, green where tender stalks are maturing for harvest in September.

Sugarcane was the second crop of Brazil. The first was Brazil wood, or '*pau brasil*', a beautiful tree felled for the dye that its richly red wood yielded. Logging of these trees began soon after Pedro Alves Cabral landed in April of 1500, but declined about 50 years later.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Portuguese brought sugarcane from their holdings in the Azores and Madeira off of the coast of Africa, and began planting in the fertile areas around Salvador and Recife. Large landowners built hundreds of sugar mills, or *engenhos*, and planted thousands of acres. The sugar industry grew exponentially. Olinda, the sister city of Recife and home of the sugar barons, became one of most powerful cities in all of South America. The Portuguese had found their sweet El Dorado.

Sugar became so powerful so quickly because tastes were changing in Europe. Though refined sugar had been scarce in the Old World diet, the craving for the white crystals developed quite rapidly in the 15th century. With increased demand, the price of sugar skyrocketed, becoming a coveted luxury item. By the beginning of the 16th century, as Pernambuco was being

colonized, sugar was worth its weight in gold in the European markets.¹

This was not the first time, nor the last, that tastes outside of Brazil determined the course of the colony. As mentioned above, the *pau brasil* tree was logged to yield a deep red color used for clothing dyes. I watched an historical TV miniseries put on by the Globo network that explained that just before the time of colonization in the New World, the Catholic Church ended its ban on the use of the color red in clothing, previously reserved only for religious vestments. The rage for red ensued in the high society of European courts, which made the later extraction of Brazil wood, and therefore the continued investment in the colony itself, a profitable venture.

Back to sugar. The growing of cane required huge areas of land and considerable human labor. If Brazil had anything it had land. The Crown sliced the new colony into twelve parallel captaincies, running from the coast inland. The favored noblemen that received these huge tracts were supposed to populate, develop and defend the land from the likes of the French and Dutch. Duarte Coelho received what would become Pernambuco, and subdivided the area to other noblemen to plant sugarcane and build mills. Land was distributed between few hands, a pattern that unfortunately persists even today.

In terms of labor, the local enslaved Indians were dying off from Old-World diseases or simply escaping, and the Portuguese looked to their colonies in Africa to supply the necessary workers.

One of the most visible aspects of present-day globalization is how industries locate their labor-intensive-production operations in countries with low wages. The 'globalization' of the sugar industry centuries ago, instead had the vicious effect of dragging an enslaved African labor force to the Brazilian sugarcane fields. The pre-existing Portuguese slave trade went into high gear, forcibly transporting hundreds of thousands of Africans each year to the New World. This was the beginning of the African diaspora, which in the end stole millions of Africans from their homelands and deposited them in Brazil.² And it all started with the European sweet tooth.

Thinking about it a bit more, Gilberto Freyre, Brazil's most famous sociologist, was correct in his famous work,

Casa-Grande e Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves),³ writing that the Brazil that exists today could only have been possible with slavery. True, in the way that circular logic affirms itself, just as without sugar, slavery would not have taken on the forms that it did at that time, without slavery the sugar industry would have been totally different.

If the Portuguese landowners had had to pay workers to cut their cane, sugar would have been too costly a venture to sustain. Perhaps the large *latifúndio* (large landed estate) would not have been the best system, and would have given way to smaller-scale farming by Portuguese (or other European) immigrants. Brazil would have been a far different place than it is today. However, that would have supposed that the Portuguese crown was not looking toward Brazil as a cash-cow to feed its coffers, maintaining it as an extractive economy and investing little into the colony's development.

As it was, however, sugarcane sprouted from the blood and sweat of African slaves. It made the owners of the land filthy rich and all-powerful. That history was glorious for so few and painful for so many. Today it haunts Brazil in the violent fights over land reform, the growing consciousness of racial inequality, and the huge and persistent gap between rich and poor.

I grew up in a land of sugarcane, southern Louisiana, albeit from a distance. My closest contact with sugarcane, besides its refined form, was sucking on the sweet stalks that somehow appeared at our suburban New Orleans home. I do remember being fascinated and a bit scared as my older brother, Everett, recounted his stories of the cane fields. As an entrepreneurial venture, he and his friend, Pete, would hunt rattlesnakes in the sugarcane (cane rattlers, they called them). They would catch the snakes, some as long as six feet, and milk the venom from their jaws, and sell the liquid to hospitals to make anti-venom. I couldn't imagine walking in the darkened shade beneath the tall green stalks armed only with a stick, seeking out the most poisonous reptile in the area.

Where I sat on the hillside in Pernambuco, no snakes were visible. The only poison was the insecticide being sprayed on the newly planted pieces of stalk. The sprayer

¹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. p.37

² Marshall Eakin, *Brazil, The Once and Future Country* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998. p.18.) Eakin writes that 10-12 million enslaved Africans survived the "middle passage" to the Americas, with 3-4 million arriving in Brazil. He gives no estimates on how many did not survive the ocean journey. Other sources have differing numbers, with Robert Conrad in his *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery: 1850-1888* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1993. p.29) writing in footnote 23 that his estimates are around five million or even more. In the book, *Jamary dos Pretos: Terra dos Mocambeiros* (Jamary of the Blacks: Land of the Mocambeiros, written by the Projeto Vida de Negro, São Luis, 1998, p.43) the authors write that as many as 18 million African slaves were brought to Brazil.

³ Gilberto Freyre. *Casa-Grande e Senzala*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1999, p.243-244.



walked along, a large tank of insecticide strapped to his back, and his protective facemask slung below his chin. He said that he couldn't bear the heat of breathing through it.

During my first *carnaval* in Recife, I was introduced to the rural *maracatu*, or *maracatu baque solto* (*maracatu solo* beat, see TLT-3), unique to the sugarcane culture of Pernambuco. These are fantastic whirling figures with huge headaddresses of colored plastic and mylar strips, exquisitely sequined cloaks, cowbells at the back of their legs and ribbon-adorned spears. Their parades consist of about ten to 15 warriors surrounding and 'protecting' the king, queen and entourage of their royal court, reminiscent of the kingdoms of Africa.

The rural *maracatu* reminded me of Indian warriors with touches of Mad Max. In reality, they are humble sugarcane workers, friends assured me, who spend their meager salaries during the year preparing for three days of glory.

For my second *carnaval*, I wanted to escape Recife and see the sugarcane towns in the *zona da mata* where the *maracatu* lived and performed. Since cane workers

are cane workers are cane workers, I thought that if I could get to know one group, it could be my entry into the whole sugar culture.

My contact for this excursion was my friend, Massacre, a bass-guitar player with the Recife-based rap group "*Faces Do Subúrbio*" (Faces of the Suburb). He was born in Tracunhaém, in the heart of sugarcane land. In our conversations he talked about the incredible scene of the *maracatu* in these towns, that they actually come charging out of the cane fields. We made plans to meet in Recife and travel to his hometown. He promised lots of excitement on the Monday and Tuesday of *carnaval*. No problem.

Small problem. At the last minute, his band got a gig for late Sunday night, which scratched early-morning travel on Monday. However, Tuesday was still on. Not wanting to lose a day, I called my favorite taxi driver-guide-friend, Loinha, and set up an early Monday morning departure from Recife for the *zona da mata*, a 90-minute drive away.

In Recife's *carnaval*, the rural *maracatu* competed for public attention. The streets pulsed with parading groups

of urban *maracatu* (very different than the rural variety), *frevo* (frantic music and dance), *bonecos gigantes* (giant dolls, often caricatures of historical or current personalities) and *blocos* (parading groups united by a costume and theme).

In the sugarcane area, the *caboclos de lança* (the speared Indian warriors, as the *maracatu* are also called) were the only attraction. The same buses that transport the cane workers to and from their daily toil ferried the splendidly costumed groups from one town to the next in a frenzy of short presentations during the three final days of *carnaval*.

Once we arrived in the *zona da mata*, Loinha's foolproof method of finding the absolute best place to see *maracatu* was to pull over to ask the opinion of every living being along the highway — a survey method neither time-saving nor consistent. My patience was running thin since as I wanted to just get somewhere and start taking some pictures. However, his democratic approach paid off when we stumbled upon the magical *maracatu* scene in the small town of Araçoiaba.

By this time the afternoon light was on the wane, bathing the scene in gold and yellow. I walked to where a large crowd circled in the center of the tiny town. Hearing tinny, fast-paced music, I poked my head through the wall of people to see a *maracatu* group whirling in their frenetic and revolving dance. The crowd hung on the ad-libbed rhymes of the singer as he sang of Araçoiaba and poked goodhearted fun at its mayor.

Waiting in the wings, stretching down the street and around a corner were dozens of groups, each from a different town. They were from Nazaré da Mata, from Tracunhaém, from Limoeiro, carrying banners adorned with beasts like lions and elephants. I walked along, dazzled by the flashes of colored costumes defining the bodies curved into resting positions. Under the weight of the headdresses, the hardened lines of sun-ripened faces broke into grins as I approached with my camera. They liked the attention. They were proud that people looked at them with wonder.

The group, *Leão das Cordilheiras* (Lion of the Mountains) caught my eye. I started photographing one member of the group who I initially mistook to be a woman. He laughed at my mistake, and allowed me to bring my camera inches from his face. Through the lens I gazed at his coal-black eyes and the way his dark cheeks pressed in around them when he laughed. When I was finished, he taunted me, saying that they would never see those pictures. I countered, saying that they would, and jotted down the name

of their hometown: Carpina, Pernambuco.

The next day, Massacre kept his word. We piled into a VW bus with three of his friends, one of whom got more attention than I, even with my "look at me, I'm a gringo!" uniform. *Canibal* (Cannibal), the founder of the hard-rock Recife band "*Devotos do Ódio*" (Hate Devotees) is a muscular man with deep brown skin and long rastafarian dreadlocks. The townspeople certainly didn't tire of gawking at him. The kids running nearby would call out, "Bob Marley" (they pronounced it "BOE-bee MAH-lee"), trying to get a reaction from his stern face.

As we entered Nazaré da Mata, lo and behold, I ran into the *Leão das Cordilheiras* group from Carpina once again. As they danced, one member pulled on my sleeve and asked me to shoot a picture of the group's owner, Zé Duarte, which I did without giving it much thought. As the *maracatu* exited their presentation I promised that I would try to come to their town with pictures someday. The timing of this meeting was perfect because as their bus pulled off, the

skies opened up in rain, dampening the festivities for a couple of hours. Our group took advantage of the respite and ducked into a restaurant to have the local goat dish.

Two months later I was back in Pernambuco, armed with low-grade inkjet prints of my *carnaval* images determined to find the Lions in off-season. I walked to Loinha's usual taxi stand near the beach in Boa Viagem to see if he was up for a challenge. As soon as I saw him, Loinha told me that a police officer had been killed recently in the Muribeca garbage dump where he had accompanied me (see, TLT-9). He told me he wouldn't take me there again, that he didn't want me to go. I calmed him, telling him that I only wanted to find the *maracatu*.

Carpina lies along the main two-lane asphalt highway that connects the *zona da mata* towns. It looks prosperous at first glance: gas stations, motorcycle dealerships and a medium-sized hotel at the town's entrance. The air is fresh and the pace slow. Loinha, who grew up in the interior and calls himself a "*matuto*" (hick), kept repeating that if he could afford to retire, it would be in a place like this. His animated spirit showed as he honked at anyone we were passing. I would ask him if he knew the person he had just waved at, a pointless question in his mind.

We needed Loinha's extreme affability to find the group since, contrary to my preconceptions, few in Carpina knew the *Leão das Cordilheiras*. I would whip out the shots of the warriors, but it was the picture of the owner and leader, Zé Duarte, that hit paydirt. A kindly man who knew where the Duarte "who played around with *maracatu*" lived and, as so often happens in small

towns, offered to accompany us to our destination.

At a small white house, guarded by a contingent of fedora-clad, salty types playing dominos, I asked for Zé Duarte. A thin man with wiry white hair and a smile of crooked teeth unfolded himself from a chair. His worn t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops were perfect camouflage; I wouldn't have picked him out as the man I'd photographed in Araçoiaba. But there he was, all 79 years of him. Even in his modest attire he was no less dignified than when he commanded the spectacular *maracatu*.

I handed photos to him, asking if he remembered me from *carnaval*. He nodded, engrossed in the photos, and blankly said that he did remember me running around snapping pictures. I thought Zé was bluffing, just being nice to me until he added, "but your hair was longer."

He swept his thin, spotted hand back motioning for me to enter his home. I chose a small wooden stool that had my knees crowding up to my chest, like an NBA player on the sideline benches. He and five other men took their places around me.

I explained to him my interest in the tradition of the rural *maracatu* and its link to sugarcane. I wanted to know where it all came from, why did it take the form that it did? Zé measured his words, revealing some things, and keeping others to himself.

Zé explained that the rural *maracatu* came from the rural workers, from the sugarcane. "Each *engenho* (sugar mill) had a group of *maracatu*. The *senhores dos engenhos* (owners of the sugar mills) would talk to each other and one would say, 'I am going to send my *maracatu* into the streets.' The other would say that he was putting his group into the streets also. This was to fight. Nowadays it is all playfulness, folklore and beauty. Then it was for fighting. The *senhores dos engenhos* would say to the *maracatu*, 'if you come back beaten, you're fired.'"

Duarte admitted to doing his share of fighting during his youth, "*brincando*" (playing) in the *Maracatu*. "I got beaten and even shot at."

I prodded him about origins of today's *Maracatu*, their large headdresses, beautifully sequined capes and ribbon-laced spears. Zé repeated that it all came from the rural workers, the sugarcane workers, their way of "playing" during *carnaval*. He said nothing about the tradition's connections to Indian culture, nor the traditions of Africa brought by the slaves — both explanations given to

me at the Museum of the Northeasterner in Recife last year (TLT-3).

However, Zé did take pains to differentiate between urban and rural *maracatu*, saying that the former was more connected to the sea, to Indians and Africa, whereas his *maracatu* was based in the lives of the rural workers of Pernambuco. Period. He was making his point.

"They also use Xangô, and we don't use Xangô." The deity of Xangô represents justice in *candomblé*, the Afro-Brazilian religion that draws on and blends African deities and European Catholicism. However, as I understood him, Zé's point was less about Xangô and more that the urban tradition was firmly based in *candomblé*. Even the colors of the urban *maracatu* would honor their deities. On the group level, the rural *maracatu* didn't have specific connections to *candomblé*, though individual members may have been *candomblé* adherents.

"Three days before [*carnaval*], nothing... no drink, no women. [Sexual] relations bring about a lot

of bad things." He elaborated that the *camarada* (gang) had a mission to fulfill and had to be careful about women because, "that which is bad sticks to the *camarada*."

When I asked why women were so feared during this time, he repeated a saying that I had already heard. "If a woman climbs a *jaca* tree⁴, it ruins the *jaca* fruit." As he talked and the other men nodded, I could tell that they felt they were revealing the fundamentally mysterious and potentially evil power of women. It was interesting that in such a macho culture, there was a need to demonize women. Women were seen as both submissive and powerless, or more powerful and destructive than grown men could handle. For warriors with a mission, it was best just to avoid contact.

Above us, from rafters in the dimly lit room, hung the bundled headdresses. Colorful spears leaned in one of the corners. It felt strange to think of them as inanimate, that they didn't bounce and twirl all on their own.

Duarte stored everything in his house for the 105 members of his group, and he admitted to spending all of his retirement money on this *brincadeira* (play). He opened a worn leather satchel, and pulled out the legal document officially establishing the group on the fifth of July, 1948. It named José Duarte Nascimento (Zé Duarte) as the founder.

I ask Zé if there were any members that were cur-

⁴ *Jaca* is a large, heavy fruit with a tough peel and a glue-like substance inside. What one eats is the pulp surrounding the seeds, which has a banana-like flavor.

rently working in the cane fields that I might talk to and photograph. My imagination jumped from photos of a *maracatu*, in full regalia, to shots of him cutting cane in the fields.

He scratched his cheek, assured me that there were and walked outside to confer with the Fedora-wearing men still slapping dominos down in a hotly contested afternoon match. After all of the talk about *maracatu* coming from the rural workers, however, Zé and his buddies couldn't come up with the name of a single member that they knew well who was also a cane worker. It was only inside my head, then, that the hundred-member group was a tight-knit family.

Zé looked at me and said, "but you still want to photograph the cane culture, right?" He told me to return the next morning at six o'clock, and he would find some people for me to shoot.

The next morning I shot pictures of Zé gardening his own little plot of land, photographed some of his friends at their small houses, and even met a member of another *maracatu* group. Though I was having great fun, I still was no closer to the cane culture.

Around lunchtime, I bid Zé farewell, telling him I would return in the next few days. Loinha and I took a back way out of town, picking our way down a muddy and rutted dirt road that led through the cane fields. As he maneuvered his bright red Fiat station wagon, all the while grumbling about getting stuck, I spied a group of about 30 people, wrapped up like desert-wanderers against the sun, working on a barren hillside. Loinha knew me well by then, and pulled the car over so that I could scamper up the hillside to where the planting was going on.

As I walked among the workers, talking and photographing, the monstrous *Usina* Petribu (Petribu sugar-processing factory) loomed about a mile in the distance. The *usina* was their employer, and its owner, Paulo Petribu, owned the cane and the land where it grew. According to the overseer, Ron José Bezerra, "Petribu's land has no end...[it goes] until Happiness."⁵

For their labors, the cane workers made about U.S.\$100 per month, fifteen bucks more than the minimum wage. There were no health benefits, though the *usina* did build a school for the children of their workers. Many were employed all year round for cleaning and planting, but the work was especially heavy during the harvest months of September through February. They could work either in the fields, in teams of about 30, or in the *usina*, where the grinding and processing of the cane took place.

Sixty-year-old Paulo de Nazinha, who started in the

cane fields when he was fifteen, leaned against his hoe and told me that he preferred the heat of the fields to fooling with the machines of the *usina*. "*Cabra brinca ali, cabra morre.*" (A guy plays around in there, and he dies). My back bristled thinking about my brother's adventures, and I asked him about snakes. "*Tem cobra a vontade na cana...mete inchada, pronto,*" (There are snakes galore in the cane...bring your hoe down, and done) he added without any great concern.

"*Trabalho aqui é osso,*" (work here is bone). I asked 50-year-old Manoel Pedro da Silva, whose dark brown skin glowed in the sunlight, what he meant by that, given that "osso" literally means 'bone' but also a 'difficulty'. I thought they may be working him "to the bone." No...I was completely wrong. He meant that the work was good and appreciated. It gave him money to eat with, and a house to live in.

Isaia Eustáquio Farias, 43, with his right eye trained on me and his left gently wandering towards the hillside, had a different opinion. "*Brasil é rico, e o que nos ganha é muito pouco...nao dá para viver.*" (Brazil is rich, and what we gain is very little...it is not enough to live on).

In 1987, the *Usina* Petribu purchased the house where Isaia lived with his wife and two children. Though he was an employee of Petribu, the company kicked him and the rest of the families off of the land to clear it and plant more sugarcane. With nowhere to go, he opted to follow the great Northeastern migration dream of going to the big cities of the South to find a job. He brought his family to Rio, where his brother lived, and got employed as a caretaker at the home of a rich hotel owner.

However, with the meager salary that he earned he could not meet family expenses. In a few frustrating months, he packed up his family again and made the return journey to *the zona da mata*. He got re-hired at Petribu, and has spent the past 13 years working the cane fields.

After talking with him during his lunch (rice and beans in a plastic box), I picked up his hoe to try his work. Rows for planting curved around the hillside. One person passed, hacking off a foot-long piece of cane stalk and placing it lengthwise in the shallow trench. The insecticide guy next passed, and then Isaia's job was to cover the stalks with the clumped earth.

My first hoe-fuls of earth were clumsily done, but effective enough. Isaia smiled and pointed out my efforts to the amusement of others in the area. Shade and sun passed over my shoulders, successively cooling and heating the sweat that I had quickly broken. My actions got a bit smoother — come down with the hoe, scoop up the dirt, place it in the trench and pat it down. I lasted about five minutes before my forearms started to ache. Hand-

⁵ *Chã de Alegria* (Plateau of Happiness) is a town about 20 kilometers from Carpina.

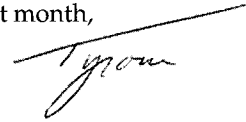
ing the hoe back to Isaia, I kidded myself into thinking that I was over-trying, that I hadn't gotten the swing of it yet. Truthfully, in minutes my capacity to endure their daily toil was completely exhausted.

As I sat down to rest, I looked out at the other hills. I loved the sight of the pretty softness, like a large garden that has been groomed meticulously. Yet I realized that what impressed me about this land was the sweat and blood that had been poured into it. Cycles of planting and harvesting, first by Indians, then by African slaves, now by low-wage labor like Paulo, Manoel and Isaia. The landscape had been tamed and molded like a front-yard lawn in the suburban United States. Hands worked it con-

stantly, ceaselessly. From this effort grew not only sugar, but Brazil itself.

In the end, I didn't find a *maracatu* cane worker, though I understood the culture surrounding sugar a little better. Everyone also emphasized that I needed to experience the harvest season. Later that day, after giving Isaia a ride to his home, I met his family and received an invitation to stay in their home if ever I were back. Hopefully, a return will be possible when the cane is being cut and processed, before my fellowship ends in December.

Until next month,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tyson", with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.