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Signs of Carnival in SKOLinda

By Raphael Soifer

MAY 2008

OLINDA, Brazil—The beer signs faded into the pre-Carnaval frenzy after their first few days in Olinda, a city of 400,000 just to the north of Recife, the capital of Pernambuco state in Brazil's northeast. The round, yellow SKOL placards stuck into the ground every couple of meters came as a shock at first. So did the banners covering the front walls of all the bars, and of the private houses that open their windows to the thronged streets for a few days every year to sell snacks and booze to the crowds. Makeshift booths swathed in the same gaudy yellow plastic sprung up on the Praça do Carmo, at the start of the historic city center, turning the usually empty area into a bazaar of hot tapioca flour turnovers, meat and cheese kebabs, *acarajé* (a deep-fried bean patty filled with fish paste and dried shrimp), and — of course — plenty of beer. The SKOL invasion transformed the city, reducing Olinda's quaint pastel houses and sloping cobblestones streets to little more than background images in a massive, three-dimensional beer commercial. After the initial sensory overload, though, the yellow and crimson SKOL logo, the cartoon crab dancing with an umbrella, and the urgent red lettering on the signs and placards became so ubiquitous that they, along with the streets and houses, turned into just another backdrop for the increasing confusion of the days leading up to Olinda's Carnaval.

SKOL took over Olinda — which Valmir, a local poet friend, immediately rechristened "SKOLinda" — because Ambev, its parent company, won the annual bidding war for advertising rights during the city's Carnaval. Olinda's Carnaval is one of the three most acclaimed in Brazil (the other two are in Salvador and,



Olinda's central plaza.



A dancing puppet parades alongside a SKOL sign.

lowers. Pedestrians in Olinda usually give some space for the official parade — dancers, musicians and giant puppets — to pass before jumping in themselves, holding beer cans in the air and signing along. The explosion of energy calmed down for much of the next week, giving the new crops of tourists arriving every day a chance to settle into the city. The next weekend, the parties picked up again with greater fervor, and soon began to take over weekdays as the city accelerated into Carnival.

After seven months awash in the traffic jams and concrete of São Paulo, I was smitten with Olinda’s high city. The narrowness of the cobblestone streets permits only one car to pass at a time, so almost everyone walks. The sun was out, the air fresh, and the blue skies free of condominiums. Though the city was calm between Sundays, the street life

of course, Rio). The richness of its parades, as well as the preservation of Olinda’s historic center — the “high city” — helped Olinda earn the title of UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982. Since then, tourism has been Olinda’s main industry, and Carnival has become serious business, the city’s prime money making opportunity. In 2006, the Federal Government named Olinda Brazil’s First Cultural Capital, undoubtedly succumbing to local political pressure to draw even more outsiders into the city. Olinda has always been proud of its folk traditions, of the way that the city sustains its Carnival. Now, the decades-long tourist influx has reversed the pattern. These days, Olinda’s Carnival — advertised as the world’s biggest — sustains the city. It’s a lot to ask of any single festival, no matter how world-renowned, well-advertised, or beer-soaked, but as the outsiders keep pouring into Olinda, the city’s financial well-being becomes tied ever more inextricably to its Carnival, and more specifically, to the tourists’ happiness.

picked up at night, when crowds form on the sidewalks outside bars to watch traditional back-country *farró* music or brisk samba. Impromptu jam sessions throughout the high city also draw plenty of on-lookers. I latched onto one in Quatro Cantos — the Four Corners, a time-honored meeting place in the heart of the high city — where local loiterers played a range of rock and MPB (samba-laced Brazilian pop) on a battered guitar. We made quick friends when they started playing Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here” and I knew all the words, and solidified our friendship when they passed me the guitar to play Gilberto Gil’s Portuguese version of “No Woman, No Cry”.

Olinda’s accessibility charmed me almost immedi-

I made it to Olinda in early January, arriving a few weeks before the SKOL signs. The pre-Carnival rush had already begun. On King’s Day, January 6, *blocos* (street procession groups) jammed the high city, blaring *frevo*, a brass-heavy music descended from military marching bands and accompanied by acrobatic teenage dancers twirling tiny umbrellas. Catholic and Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religious processions followed the same routes, competing with the *blocos* for on-lookers and fol-



One of SKO’s more ostentatious Carnival displays.

ately, as did the small-town feel of the high city, and the tropical weather. I felt immediately that I was somewhere more essentially Brazilian than São Paulo. At the same time, I suspected that much of the high city's charm was carefully constructed in order to seduce people like me. Constructed or not, it worked. After the big city anonymity of São Paulo, Olinda's active street life and easy friendships were a welcome change. The city seemed the perfect introduction to Brazil's Northeast, which is as renowned for its hospitality as for its long history of drought and poverty.

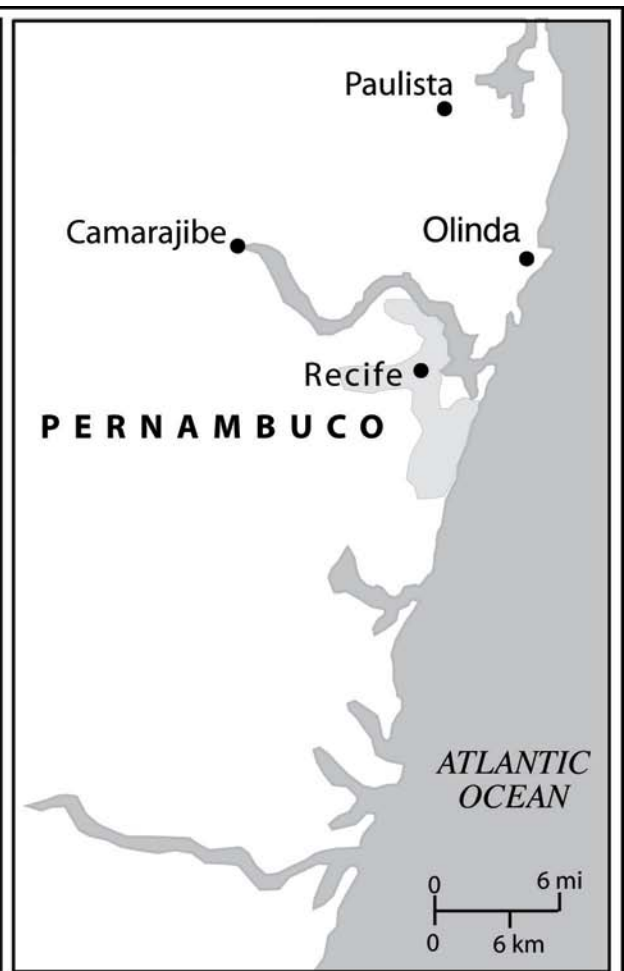
Fantasy and reality blur throughout the year in Olinda. From Alto da Sé — the highest point in the historic center, where crowds flock at dusk to watch the sun set over the Recife skyline — Olinda is a mass of green, with the tops of yellow and white colonial churches occasionally peeking through the palm trees, and a pristine blue ocean waiting at the foot of the high city. At ground level, though, the water at the city's beaches is polluted and shark-infested, and the high city is like a gated community without a gate, guarded by an elite



Icons of Olinda's Carnaval — papangu puppets, and the late local music idol Chico Science — cover walls in the high city.

police squad and circled by favelas whose residents often lack regular electricity and basic sanitation services.

Carnaval came too early this year, which friends say made preparations in the high city more desperate than





A shark warning sign stands by Olinda's not-so-attractive waterfront.

usual. Officially, Carnaval began on February 2nd, but in Olinda, what's normally a four-day festival of excess gains an extra week to give time for over 500 local *blocos* to parade, and for the hundreds of thousands of tourists meandering around Brazil's most "authentic" urban Carnaval to sink as much money as possible into the local economy. This now-traditional extension meant that the "real" partying this year started the evening of January 25th, when most locals were still trying to recover from the economic strain of Christmas.

By the time I arrived in the city, Olindenses (city residents) were repainting and remodeling their houses ahead of the rush, preparing to let them out to tourists who pay the equivalent of up to eight months' rent for a two-week stay. Work crews were tearing up sidewalks or laying new concrete, and gangs of local guides from ACNO — a local cooperative whose members, all male, range in age from 8 to 50-something — descended on any cab making its way into the high city. Whenever they saw someone they didn't know, they called out across the street in English ("Hello, my friend!"), or in simplified Portuguese. "Hey, gringo! Galego! (local slang for a light-complexion person) Want tour? Need house? Want map?" I was an obvious target, and I learned to break into a rushed São

Paulo hustle whenever I passed groups of the familiar yellow shirts. Regardless of my avoidance tactics, at least one guide would follow me for another half block, calling after me in mangled Portuguese. "Need house Carnaval?" Usually he would sidle up to me and offer, in a stage whisper, "Marijuana?" (Never *maconha*, which is apparently too difficult for gringos to grasp).

Tourists come to Olinda from pretty much everywhere. Paulistas and wealthy southern Brazilians show up in droves during Carnaval, and even a fair number of *cariocas* forsake Rio's legendary celebration to make the trek north. The really big money, though, comes with the gringos. Olinda's wealth of local Carnaval traditions — frevo music, *maracatu* (polyrhythmic percussion) groups, and parades of giant puppets — as well as the high city's quaint, provincial, and unmistakably Brazilian character have made Olinda a major destination for travelers from throughout the world. In São Paulo, I could usually count on being the only foreigner in any given social setting. At Cooperifa (RS-6) and beyond, I was the token gringo. Arriving in Olinda, though, I was just one more in a long line of partiers and grad students with funny accents. When I looked for housing (accompanied by two especially persistent ACNO guides), prospective landlords who found out I was staying beyond Carnaval already knew to ask, "What are you researching?"

Research topics abound in Olinda, as do the foreigners ready to dive into them, whether they're professional percussionists looking to expand their repertoire, or doctoral students with research appointments at UFPE (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, in Recife). *Ma-*



Maracatu drummers parade during the "Night of the Silent Drums," a pre-Carnaval commemoration of Afro-Brazilian cultural resistance.

maracatu, a hypnotic, polyrhythmic percussion beat with close ties to Afro-Brazilian religious practices, attracts many of the outsiders, some of whom take lessons for months at a time. Some even manage to play in Carnival processions with a *maracatu* “nation,” a traditional ensemble of dancers and drummers. The popularity of *maracatu* and Pernambuco folk culture in Europe has led to a reverse immigration, with locals — especially young men from the favelas — saving up to buy tickets to France or Germany, where they dream of striking it rich teaching percussion, dance, or *capoeira* (a traditional Afro-Brazilian fusion of dance and martial arts).

Recife — Olinda’s bigger, more developed neighbor — is probably where the Brazilian expression “*Só pra inglês ver*” (“Only for the English to see”) was born. As with “gringo,” a number of different stories explain the phrase’s origin, but the most believable stems from the mid-19th century, when England’s abolition of slavery threatened Pernambuco’s slave-based sugar economy (which was reliant on English exportation). Supposedly, city authorities in Recife constructed a second, hidden port for slave ships, leaving the city’s main port slave-free, “*só pra inglês ver.*” It’s long been a catchphrase for internationally visible affairs throughout Brazil. More recently, it’s become a way of life in Olinda. In the high city, for example, the local



“Carnaval belongs to everyone:” a shuttered tourism office takes the place of community workshops in Praça do Carmo.

cops all belong to the “Tourist Police” force, a heavily armed, highly trained squad that patrols the city in cars labeled in English. My first landlady in the city — who proclaimed that, after this Carnival, she would only rent to gringos — told me I had no need to worry for my safety in Olinda. The tourist police deal with thieves harshly, she said. “They treat you guys better than they treat the people who live here.”

During Carnival in the high city, outsiders are the focal points for every link along an economic food chain that ranges from 200 *real* “day suites” in local luxury hotels to armed robberies blamed on teenage boys from the nearby favelas. Developing this food chain is the primary aim of local politics. For the past eight years, Olinda’s mayor has been a member of the PCdoB, the Communist Party of Brazil. The party’s platform seems to be based entirely on stimulating more tourism, which is disconcerting coming from a bunch of commies. Equally disconcerting is the party’s strangely Reaganite adherence to trickle-down economics. (Although municipal policies that favor hotels and car-rental agencies also favor the state). Two weeks before the start of Carnival, city police raided an abandoned building that had been occupied by a local cultural collective called the Free Earth Movement (MTL). The next day, crews turned it into a state tourism office,



A maracatu dancer spins through the high city.

with brightly colored, stylized blue signs proclaiming that, "In Pernambuco, Carnaval belongs to everyone." The office has never opened. A couple months later, in mid-March, the city demolished a fish market, collectively owned by local fisherman for the past 25 years, to clear the path for a new, tourist-friendly walkway between the seashore and the entrance to the high city.

The municipal policies of stimulating an all-tourism economy mean that the streets with the best hotels get regular trash collection and decent water delivery, which many neighborhoods outside of the high city lack. It also leads to the annual transformation of the historic center into a living billboard for the beer of the year. Ambev's dominance of this year's Carnaval made it difficult to buy any beer except SKOL in the high city. The company set up a drink distribution center in front of the former municipal music conservatory, which has been abandoned for the better part of a decade. The distribution center sold 12-packs of Ambev products to booth vendors, and to the poorer families that show up with all the styrofoam coolers they can afford to line the streets of the parade routes and keep the revelers trashed.

Ambev's advertising strategy made it nearly impossible to take pictures of the thronged streets without at least a few giant logos for SKOL or other company products in the background. Just to ensure that no one missed the point, most of the major Carnaval parades in the high city featured dancers dressed as anthropomorphic cans and bottles of beer. Not be outdone, Pitú — the local cachaça powerhouse, whose signature sugar-cane liquor retails at around three *reais* (two dollars) for a one-liter bottle — paraded similar costumes. These included Pitú Cola, a low-alcohol mixed drink, as well as the company's newest product, a 473-milliliter (16 ounce) container of the 80-proof cachaça that opens like a can of beer. It goes down a lot harder, though.

Olinda, like the rest of Brazil, has no prohibitions on consuming alcohol in public. As elsewhere, cans of beer usually cost the same as soft drinks, and in local bakeries and greasy spoons, shots of cachaça are often cheaper than cups of milk. Pernambuco is notoriously hard drinking. According to the *Diário de Pernambuco* newspaper, the state has the third highest rate of binge drinking in the country, and leads Brazil in fatal incidents of domestic violence. It takes some effort to stimulate even more boozing for Car-



Just in case you missed the signs, a SKOL-sponsored bateria (percussion ensemble) parades at a pre-Carnaval ball.

naval, but many folks are willing to take on the task, and most of them don't even work for Ambev or Pitú. One of Carnaval's most incessantly overplayed songs — which, as I write in late April, I continue to hear at least once a day — gives a glimpse of local party etiquette:

*Vamos embora/prá um bar
Beber, cair, levantar*

*Beber, cair, levantar
Beber, cair, levantar...*

*Let's go out / To the bar
To drink, fall down, and get up*

*Drink, fall down, and get up
Drink, fall down, and get up...*

There aren't many other lyrics, but the song goes on giddily for about five minutes.

Most people would probably enjoy Carnaval perfectly well without the booze, but I haven't met anyone who would be willing to try. Normal daily life in Olinda is pretty much like that, too. During Carnaval, the SKOL and Pitú ads help encourage the backpacker set to keep boozing, but their real intended audience is the local partiers who stick around after Carnaval is over, who will still be in Brazil and ready to hand over their cash for a cheap drunk.

In Olinda, the party goes on year-round, albeit in closer quarters and with somewhat lower intensity. It includes a lot more than alcohol, too. Pernambuco vies

with Bahia state, its perennial rival in the Northeast, to produce the most marijuana annually, and Olinda prides itself on being the self-proclaimed pothead capital of Brazil. In Olinda, several friends tell me, “even the mayor smokes,” before explaining regretfully that, in fact, the last mayor did, but the current one probably doesn’t. Cocaine has always been priced beyond the reach of most folks in Pernambuco. Crack, however, has hit Olinda and Recife hard in recent years. Rocks sell for about 20 *reais* each — cheaper than coke, but still more than 5 percent of the monthly minimum wage — and stick-thin, sunken-eyed crackheads are a common sight (though rarely in the high city). Especially in poor neighborhoods, horror stories abound of addicts stabbing or shooting old ladies who refuse to part with the last 50 *centavos* needed to buy another hit.

As Carnival approaches, gringos and locals alike jam the high city’s narrow streets until, eventually, what would normally be a five-minute walk can take over an hour. Faced with armies of stoned, drunk partiers taking over the neighborhood, SODECA — the community association formed by some of the high city’s oldest and most conservative families — put up their own signs: “Have fun, but don’t disrespect our families;” “Take care during this party: Pee in the bathrooms.” (The city government erected a total of about eight portable toilets in the high city. Taking advantage of the opportunity, local families rented out their bathrooms for between 50 *centavos* and one *real* a pop.) SODECA’s signs, even more



SODECA tells us where to pee.

than the SKOL and Pitú advertisements, are intended for local consumption. During Carnival, Europeans piss on the city’s sidewalk by the thousands, but most of them can’t read the signs, and anyway, nobody expects any better of them. They probably think it’s a time-honored local custom, and basically, it is. As the prominence of the Tourist Police shows, Olinda plans to take good care of its visitors, overlooking minor misconduct as they spend all their money partying and then go home.

Most go home. But in recent years many tourists have stayed, blurring the lines between locals and visitors. The weather’s good, the housing prices are cheap, and the Europeans — especially Italians, Germans, and Swedes — like it here. All across Brazil’s northeastern coast, tall, blond, moneyed folks are buying up fisherman’s cottages and turning them into beachfront condos. English-language billboards advertising a tropical paradise “Perfect for you!” have begun to spring up in Rio Grande do Norte, two states north of Pernambuco. There, the gringo invasion of the coast, especially of the pristine Pipa beach, has earned the state a new moniker: *Rio Grande dos Nórdicos* (Big River of the Norse).

The result of the foreign influx is a cruel punchline to Olinda’s careful development of a tourism-based economy. Much of the money that passes through Olinda is now on its own weird sort of vacation, coming through Brasil only to make its way back to northern Europe. As the gringos take over more of the local real estate, plenty of Brazilians are essentially sending their rent money overseas. Long-time residents of the high city are having a hard time finding places to stay when they move houses. Prices keep going up, and many new landlords prefer to rent to travelers who will pay in Euros, and with whom they share a native language.

When Brazilians do manage to rent a place from Europeans, they’re often met with condescension, not to mention with conduct that’s illegal under Brazilian (and presumably European) housing law. I spent my second week in Olinda living with Marilda, a Brazilian roommate, while I waited for my Carnival subplot across the street to open. When her landlady — an NGO administrator who works with workers’ rights movement throughout Latin America — arrived from Sweden, she welcomed herself in as we were eating dinner, and explained that she would need to take Marilda’s phone the next day for important business. Marilda pointed out that she’d been living in the house for eight months and needed the phone for her own work, but that didn’t make much difference. When she arrived home the next afternoon, her phone was still there, but the landlady had ripped her phone jack and cable out of the wall.

Olinda is a study in gentrification on a global scale, a city based around a center where most parts of the visual landscape — the city’s houses, outdoor advertisements, and even street signs are on sale to the highest bidder. As the city’s renown grows, it’s hard to imagine that many



(above) A giant "Tourist" puppet parades through the high city on the last day of Carnival.
(right) The man carrying the Tourist puppet on his head.



high bidders could come from Brazil, let alone from Olinda. Foreign tourists, attracted by the practices that made the city so welcoming — the *blocos* that anyone can follow, the percussion lessons anyone can take up — are beginning to push away the residents who have maintained those traditions.

Looking at the birds-of-paradise in full bloom swaying gently outside my kitchen window in the furnished guest cottage where I'm paying gringo rental rates, I understand immediately why people like me keep showing up in Olinda. It's hard, though, to feel particularly optimistic about the city's future. As more gringos come to stay, the Brazilians who have made Olinda one of Brazil's cultural capitals will become increasingly harder to find. Music will still be out in the streets at night, or at least inside the bars, but it won't appear with the same force as when a group of friends meet on a sidewalk and decide to split a beer, a joint, and a guitar. It's that sort of classically Olindense encounter that draws outsiders into the city, and even if I play the guitar and pay for the beer, it's hard not to see how my presence here is chasing it away faster. Olinda may be damned by its own good will, cursed by its surfeit of down-home, northeastern Brazilian authenticity to become artificial.

If the tourists were to stop coming, on the other hand, the city's reorganization might well be prolonged and painful. The investments of public and private money — like the 36 million *reais* that Petrobras, the state oil company, chipped in to sponsor a beautification project burying the old city's telephone wires, making it look more authentically colonial — probably wouldn't come in to help turn a new pedestrian walkway back into a fish market. The rush for tourism has made Olinda what it is today, and so the city is tearing up the streets and putting in new signs, constantly at work on next year's Carnival. □

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