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Parading Democracy: Power, Violence, and Giant Puppets in Olinda's Carnaval

By Raphael Soifer

JUNE 2008

When I first realized that Arlindo Siqueira was going bald, I was standing behind him on a shaky plastic chair with a friend's video camera in one hand and a can of SKOL beer in the other. I wasn't fixated on Siqueira's scalp for lack of visual stimulus. Saturday night of Olinda's Carnaval offers a lot more to look at than just the back of a *vereador's* (city council member's) head. Hundreds of people thronged into the makeshift rooftop bar from which Siqueira was holding court, loading up on snacks and free beer. Below us, thousands of loud, sweaty partiers crammed into the narrow cobblestone passageway at the end of Rua do Amparo, the main street in Olinda's high city. But even with all the commotion, Siqueira's bald spot held my attention. As I balanced myself precariously over him, watching the chaos intensify all around us, I felt — very briefly — that I'd uncovered one of his greatest secrets. I couldn't accuse Siqueira of trying to hide the bald spot, since his

publicity photos always show him from the front. At the same time, I couldn't help noticing that both of the giant Arlindo Siqueira puppets flanking the candidate on either side had full heads of hair.



*Filming Arlindo Siqueira,
too late to catch the bald spot.*

I was already well acquainted with Siqueira's face. After the SKOL placards (RS-7), his photo was easily the most ubiquitous image of Olinda's Carnaval, especially outside of the historic center. A long-time *vereador* and current mayoral candidate, Siqueira popped up on post-

ers, calendars, and t-shirts. His advertisements urged citizens to "Do like Arlindo Siqueira — Ally Yourself with the PTB!" (The centrist Party of Workers of Brazil, not to be confused with Lula's PT, the left-leaning Workers' Party, or with the PTdoB, the right-wing Workers' Party of Brazil). And while you're at it, why not check out Siqueira's website? Thanks to him, the posters told us, "Olinda has a blog!" (www.arlindosiqueiraolinda.blogspot.com, for those who might be interested).

2008 is a local-election year in Brazil. In Olinda, where the current PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil) mayor has reached her limit of two four-year terms, the contenders' visibility is crucial. All of the city's candidates made an extra effort during this year's Carnaval, putting up posters around the city, distributing hats and t-shirts, and sponsoring parades where giant puppet versions of themselves bobbed up and down alongside the dancing cans of SKOL and Pitú.

After a while, most of the cheesy, grinning photographs of overly made-up



A portrait of the vereador as a giant puppet (with his oldest, non-screaming daughter).

candidates became a blur, along with the seemingly endless series of political-party acronyms.

Siqueira, however, was impossible to miss, even in his moments out of the public spotlight. The *vereador* drives around Olinda — or, more often, is driven — in a black SUV with tinted windows. The darkened glass might make the ride more private, but it's hardly anonymous. The car is far too expensive for the average Olindense, and it's covered with at least a dozen red, white, and blue bumper stickers, reminding us to vote for "ARLINDO SIQUEIRA 14" (the PTB's ballot code). After a while, I began to wonder whether Siqueira was flaunting his image to win the election, or whether he hoped to win in order to better flaunt his image.

In Brazil's Northeast, ideology has often been a minor concern in local politics. Since the Portuguese court assigned strips of Brazilian land to (mostly unwilling) aristocrats in the 16th century, family name, connections, and a mix of gifts and threats have become the traditional political currency. Arlindo Siqueira, who is at least the second-generation career politician in his family, seems to have most aspects of this currency in abundance. His father, Élio Siqueira, was a *vereador* as far back as the early 1970s, when Brazil suffered through the most brutal period of its 21-year dictatorship. Even then, the country maintained a system of local elections. *Vereadores* — and all political representatives — came from one of two parties: the generals' ARENA (National Renewal Alliance), and the official "opposition" MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement). The parties disputed local and congressional seats, but the system was almost always rigged to favor ARENA. Anyway, since most of the significant opposi-

tion figures had been exiled, imprisoned, or killed, there weren't major disagreements between ARENA and the MDB, which were known respectively as the "party of yes," and the "party of yes, sir!"

ARENA and MDB were dissolved in 1979, when Brazil offered amnesty to political exiles and began limping its way back to direct democracy. The subsequent growth of independent parties has led to an array of ideological opinions that nearly matches the bewildering proliferation of political party acronyms. Recently, this has led to bizarre local alliances, like the pact between Lula's PT and the right-wing PSDB in Minas Gerais state. (Aécio Neves,

the PSDB governor of Minas, is seen as the favorite opposition candidate to replace Lula). It also gives the bosses who dominate local politics the opportunity to jump from party to party, Joe Lieberman-style, when they're caught in unusually humiliating or corrupt situations.

After so much exposure to Arlindo Siqueira, finding his bald spot was like a momentary glimpse of some hidden embarrassment, a confirmation that the emperor has no clothes. In his case, though, even a significant political scandal wouldn't have been much of a revelation, because no one really expects this emperor to have any. After years of political upheaval, in which many of the same names always seem to come out on top — often championing positions opposite the ones they held in the previous election — it's no surprise that most of the voting public is disillusioned. The education system doesn't help much, either. Dictatorship-era civics classes in the public schools, which stressed obedience above all else, went out with the generals. These days, though, participatory democracy is one of many areas — like critical reading, advanced mathematics, and rudimentary geography — that most public schools, especially in the Northeast, never really cover.

Not surprisingly, campaigning in Olinda is based much more on pomp than on policy, and a successful candidate is likely to be the one who hands out the most swag during an election year. Residents of poor communities are accustomed to political season giveaways like free bricks and bags of concrete to spiff up their homes, private dental and medical services to avoid overcrowded public hospitals, and *cestas básicas* ("basic baskets," caches of food and household staples that employers distribute



Selling booze and snacks at the PTB's Carnival hangout.

with — or in lieu of — a monthly paycheck). Often, the goodies come with strings attached. Throughout Brazil, stories abound of politicians distributing single shoes to favela residents, promising the complete pair if they win the election. There's an uglier side to the manipulation, too. Friends from the interior of Pernambuco tell me about opposition candidates and nosy journalists in their hometowns being "disappeared," their bodies burned in fields of dry hay that locals know to leave alone. Politicians don't often spend much time refining their platform proposals, as they tend to be much more occupied with pageantry. Occasionally, candidates will lay out the details of a plan for improved infrastructure or education reform, but they spend much more energy handing out clothes and gifts in poor communities and sponsoring Carnival parades.

The rooftop bar where I teetered over Siqueira was the place of honor for the *Homem da Meia Noite* (Midnight Man) procession, by far Olinda's largest bloco, and one of the iconic images of Carnival in Brazil. The Midnight Man, the most revered of Olinda's famous giant puppets,

parades through the city on Carnival Saturday in a green-and-white smoking jacket and matching top hat. As the enduring symbol of a city that's based its livelihood on Carnival, the puppet — who in 2008 paraded for the 76th consecutive year — has a lot riding on his massive papier-mâché shoulders. He handles the pressure well, though. There were no signs of nerves in his serene, slightly creepy smile, and if he felt any discomfort in his relationship to Siqueira — who, for the past several years, has been the parade's sponsor — he didn't betray it.

Watching over the parade from his rooftop hangout while a large video screen broadcast his speeches to the streets below, Siqueira was counting on many, if not most, of the tens of thousands of parade spectators' votes. He had good reason to expect them, too. Almost all of the locals over 16 will vote in the October mayoral election. As part of Brazil's staggered transition away from dictatorship, the country spent four years under a nominally civilian government appointed by the outgoing generals. Finally, in 1989, the *Diretas Já!* movement (Direct [Elections] Already!, mistranslated in RS-1) that helped bring down the dictatorship achieved its goal, and the general population began to vote for their representatives at all levels. The transition to full-out



The Midnight Man celebrates his 76th birthday, making his way down Rua do Amparo in Olinda's high city.



Another Siqueira-sponsored bloco carries his standard in front of a rival politician's signs.

democracy came with a hitch, though; voting in Brazil became not a right, but rather a civic obligation. (16- and 17-year olds, who can opt out of voting without penalties, are the principle exceptions to the rule). Adult non-voters have to pay a small, mostly symbolic fine, but they're also cut off from many civic opportunities. Brazilians are required to present their up-to-date voter's documents when applying for work permits, starting businesses, or otherwise taking on the country's massive bureaucracy.

I hadn't expected to watch the Midnight Man from Siqueira's rarefied hangout. Instead, I'd planned on being part of the sweaty mob in the street below. In the run up to Carnival, I didn't bother — or even consider — getting a press pass. But an enterprising videographer friend with an up-to-date voter's card hooked me up with Recife and Olinda press credentials at the last minute, in exchange for my agreement to capture a Siqueira's-eye view of the Midnight Man parade. The pass made my night much calmer. Instead of jostling for a view of the parade and trying not to get trampled, I looked on serenely as Siqueira family members ushered the candidate's screaming toddler daughter into the stiff embrace of a giant papier-mâché facsimile of her father. I thought of trying to catch a few surreptitious close-ups of the back of Siqueira's head, but he had already

donned a "Proud to Be Olindense" cap.

Olinda's high city fills seemingly beyond capacity for the Midnight Man. As the parade's starting time approaches, the streets get so jammed that it can easily take upwards of half an hour to walk a single block. Although the procession is a requisite stop on tourist itineraries, it's still mostly Olindenses who line the parade route. As with most of Olinda's blocos, the Midnight Man's onlookers merge with participants. Due to the size of the crowd, though, parade organizers take precautions that most other blocos ignore. Lines of private security guards keep the dancers and musicians separated from the mobs, and the puppet centerpiece has his own security cordon.

The parade's metallic green-and-white costumes stand out from the crowd, though more for their uniformity than for any particular flamboyance. Revelers in extravagant costumes frequently overshadow the Midnight Man's entourage. So do the teenage gangs from the nearby favelas, who travel in packs, and who prepared for this year's Carnival *en masse* by dyeing their hair bright yellow or hot pink. Most of Olinda's partiers throw a costume together at the last minute — a silly hat, a giant wig, or a store-bought mask — but others spend time and creative energy transforming themselves into superheroes, walking iPods, or traditionally costumed *papangus* (masked clowns inspired by European Carnivals).

Politicians are also perennial favorites as Carnival costumes, but 2008 was the year of the cop. Police uniforms with a skull, guns, and dagger motif were everywhere, inspired by *Tropa de Elite* (Elite Troupe), the hit film



Military police (in striped vests) and parade security (in SKOL and Pitú shirts) separate the Midnight Man's frevo dancers from the madding crowd.

Costumes inspired by Tropa de Elite:



Fantasy (foreground) and reality (background) hang out a few meters and a flimsy wooden barricade away from each other.



"Mission: Drink, fall down, and get up."



"It just won't catch you;" "Catch one, catch 'em all"



Real cops. It's not a great picture, but it took nearly 15 minutes and a lot of waving my press pass to convince the squadron leader to let me take it.

about Rio de Janeiro's SWAT team. Most of the outfits were obvious take-offs, like the men toting water guns and wearing pink berets, or the teenage girls in miniskirts and skull-and-guns halter-tops. Frequently, though, I'd look into a crowd of beefy guys and have a hard time telling whose Military Police insignia was the real thing.

Legitimate cops were out in force, too, as part of a concentrated effort to reduce the violence of Carnival. The period's heightened substance abuse and flamboyant sexuality are a dangerous combination, and the crowds of tourists clutching high-priced cameras are obvious targets for petty crimes that easily get out of control. Murder rates spike during Carnival, especially in Olinda and Recife, but violence is endemic year round in Pernambuco state. According to the *Diário de Pernambuco* newspaper, 1500 people were killed in this state of just under eight million in the first four months of 2008. Like other large Brazilian cities, Recife has a daily TV program that amounts to a sensationalized police log, covering the most grisly stories of the past 24 hours in vivid detail.

As violence increases nationwide — or at least be-
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comes more visible — police are growing in popularity, and calls are rising throughout Brazil for greater vigilance and more extreme solutions. A growing national movement aims to reduce the age of criminal majority, enabling courts to try kids as young as 14 as adults. In the mainstream press, columnists urge a reintroduction of the death penalty, banned since 1988 (except for military crimes in a time of war) in this overwhelmingly Catholic country. And Captain Nascimento — the unstable anti-hero of *Tropa de Elite* who tortures, coerces, and murders his way through Rio's favelas — has become a national role model for tough, competent law enforcement.

This Carnival, city governments in Olinda and Recife made an extra effort to keep tough, competent cops on the street. Security may be local politicians' most vital concern during Carnival, but — especially during an election year — it's only one of many. Carnival's lack of restraint extends to public spending, as officials feel pressured to give their citizens (and the tourist cash cows) the best possible party. In both cities, a majority of residents may lack decent water and sewage services, but they can be assured of dozens of free Carnival concerts featuring

national superstars. By now, it's something the public takes for granted. All over Brazil, brightly lettered signs posing as thank-you notes hang alongside public works projects ranging from newly paved roads to minor renovations of public schools. The signs are addressed from a local community to whichever politician made the project possible. There are no "thank you" signs during Carnival, though. It seems as though paving roads, fixing buildings, or improving trash removal are extraordinary gestures, but pageantry, parades, and mega-shows are simply the public's due.

The public does especially well in Recife. For decades, the city's Carnival metamorphosed every couple of years, from unorganized chaos to cacophonous processions down the beachfront in high-priced Boa Viagem to *trios elétricos* (loudspeaker-bearing trucks) circling the city and blaring live *axé* music from rival Bahia state. Under João Paulo Lima e Silva, the two-term PT (Worker's Party) mayor who, like Lula, was once a factory worker, Recife has settled on a policy of "decentralized poles" throughout the city. The city government puts up outdoor stages in the downtown nightlife district of Recife Antigo, as well as in neighborhoods along the periphery, where residents participate in choosing the local and national acts to headline their concerts. At any given moment during Recife's Carnival, partiers have an array of municipally sponsored entertainment options, with a focus on local artists and on folk traditions like *frevo* and *maracatu*. While the booze advertisements that take over Olinda are also easy to find in Recife, the City Hall logo is more common, along with the slogan: "The big

project is taking care of the people."

Thanks to my press passes and my housemate, an administrator with Pernambuco's ruling PSB (Socialist Party of Brazil), I saw a lot of "the people" during Carnival. Usually, they were behind a series of enforced barriers. Foreigners' descriptions of Brazil often laud Carnival as a time where social boundaries dissolve, and rich and poor party together. There's definitely ample boundary testing, but there are plenty of divisions that no one's willing to test. My socialist housemate wouldn't deign to attend events with a crowd that he deemed overly "*povoão*" (common or populist; literally, "big people"). He still had plenty of options, especially among the high-priced Carnival balls that unite many of the bands playing free outdoor gigs in Recife in exclusive, air-conditioned convention halls. As I looked down at the throngs during the Midnight Man parade, or watched concerts in Recife Antigo with a handful of photographers and hundreds of teenagers from well-connected families — while tens of thousands of the *povoão* danced on the other side of metal barricades — Brazil's famously lopsided class divide felt especially alive to me.

Lopsidedness isn't limited to the crowds. While big-name groups like Nação Zumbi and international acts like the Spanish experimental pop star Manu Chao get paid up front, local artists wait until long after Carnival to get their much-needed loot. Recife's cultural division offered many of my musician friends Carnival contracts with the caveat that their payments for Christmas shows would be withheld until after Carnival. In mid-April, more than two months after their gigs, most were still going to City Hall every day with armloads of papers (including voter's ID) to wait for four months' worth of paychecks. The delay was especially tough on people in auxiliary industries, like Jefferson, my videographer friend, who was waiting for the still-unpaid local bands to buy his concert footage.

Although it was slow to pay its local artists this year, the Recife government was perfectly capable of shelling out for samba in Rio de Janeiro. The city paid three million reais (around U.S.\$1.8 million, though it's hard to tell as the dollar continues to plummet) to Mangueira, the most popular of Rio's "samba schools." Mangueira, which is expert in attracting outside sponsorship, based its annual parade on the hundredth anniversary of *frevo*, the signature Carnival



"The people" dance a ciranda under the balcony holding the opening night VIP party in Recife Antigo.

music of Recife and Olinda. The decision wasn't popular on either end. Recife's complained that their cultural funds shouldn't leave the city, let alone the state. In Rio, Mangueira members were appalled that their samba school would use 2008 to honor *frevo* instead of commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Cartola, one of Mangueira's (and Brazil's) most beloved composers. Mangueira's Sunday night parade — which was broadcast live, without sound, between concerts in Recife Antigo — was a mess, uncoordinated and sopping wet under an untimely rainstorm. Mangueira nearly lost its place in the elite samba school league, and Recife officials scrambled to try to justify their investment. (João Paulo, the city's mayor, always seems to emerge unscathed from scandals and embarrassments, much like Lula).



Brawling under the Brazilian flag during the Midnight Man parade.

Frevo and samba, like almost all of Brazil's most beloved Carnival traditions, emerged out of popular movements that the upper classes of the time derided. These days, the musical styles are at the heart of "authentic" Carnival in Recife and Rio, and the major *frevo* clubs and samba schools count on serious financial support from above, from both public and private donors. The official recognition of folk culture is a major improvement over past marginalization, but it's also produced a culture in which the most exuberant, homegrown aspects of Carnival have grown reliant on outside funding. The vast majority of participants still work their hearts out for Carnival as a labor of love, without seeing financial benefits beyond the occasional subsidized costume, or the even rarer free drink. Still, the transition from a folk art



A glitzy show, sponsored by City Hall, celebrates 100 years of frevo in Olinda.

for "the people" to a well-paid "cultural manifestation" is tricky and full of potential traps, as my still unpaid musician friends complained as they languished in lines at Recife's City Hall.

Aspiring mayors pay better — or at least more quickly — than sitting ones, which was how I found myself hovering over Arlindo Siqueira around 12:30 a.m., as the first notes of the Midnight Man's *frevo* theme sounded from Rua Bonsucesso, just around the corner from Siqueira's rooftop hangout. Siqueira contracted Jeferson to film a Carnival highlight reel, which the candidate would later use for his campaign. Since Jeferson had brought me along for the ride, I rehearsed my sequence — a close-up on the Midnight Man, pulling away as he bowed to Siqueira, and then panning over to the *vereador* — as I waited for the actual puppet to make his way through the mass of people on Rua do Amparo.

The crowds, the heat, and the frantic pace of the music inspires much of the Midnight Man crowd — especially the gang members with their florescent-colored hair — to slam dance. Not surprisingly, the dancing often degenerates into fistfights, or worse. This year, the brawls started early. By the time the *frevo* band at the head of the procession made it past Siqueira's place of honor, many of the musicians had given up trying to play, and were simply moving through the crowd as quickly as possible. Shoving matches and fistfights flared up every minute or so on the street below us. The police, few and far between, would try to halt the conflict with unsparing nightstick blows.

In spite of the band's confusion, the Midnight Man, in a shiny white-on-green ensemble, passed Arlindo. I followed with my video camera as the giant bowed to Siqueira in all his forms — both flesh and papier-mâché

— and the *vereador* grinned and gave the puppet a thumbs-up. Soon after the Midnight Man passed, someone started yelling hysterically on the street below us. Crowds shuffled out of the way as two men carried a friend's limp, bleeding body through the packed street, looking frantically for an exit route.

A few minutes and several fistfights later, a single gunshot echoed down Rua do Amparo. The crowd scattered, and Siqueira and family ducked for protection, stooping behind the low concrete railing or behind giant puppets. Eventually, a line of about a dozen Military Police snaked down the street. The crowd along the parade route applauded enthusiastically, probably expecting some *Tropa de Elite* action in real life. I can't say whether they got it or not. Watching the parade from on high, things seemed to return to normal as soon as the police had ambled up Rua do Amparo and out of sight. Before long, the crowd below us was dancing again, and the Siqueira family was back on its feet. There was no mention of the parade violence in the press coverage the next day, and no record, in the post-Carnaval police report, of the stabbing and gunshot deaths that — rumor had it — were the aftermath of the Midnight Man parade.

Carnaval ended three days later. The crowds scattered, leaving the cobblestone streets almost empty again. The giant puppets went back to their workshops (although



Arlindo Siqueira and friends (including one who appears to be a wayward member of the Village People) hanging out on the rooftop bar under a sculpture of the vereador, on the last day of Carnaval.

the Midnight Man stands inside the door of a bar and social club that bears his name), and the most of the campaign advertisements disappeared for a few months. The *povão* went back to their 12-hour-a-day jobs or frustrated searches for employment, while the partiers on the other sides of the barricades returned to air-conditioned offices and well-guarded high-rises.

The election has intensified, although I haven't talked to anyone who can identify any of the candidates' positions. Possibly sensing this gap, Arlindo Siqueira finally began to distribute campaign literature in early June. On the first page of his pamphlet, before his proposals for education, health care, and policing, is his plan to create a year-round mini-Carnaval to boost tourism and create more jobs. Siqueira proposes a 24-hour "cultural corridor" in Olinda's high city with bookstores, trinket shops, and bars catering to tourists around the clock. Every night, he promises, a publicly subsidized bloco will parade down the corridor from 7 to 9 p.m. sharp, to draw in the crowds and further "professionalize" Olinda's musicians. As the election intensifies, all the candidates have begun to return to Carnaval. Blocos show up every couple of weeks when politicians sponsor *frevo* processions through the high city, and musicians and dancers parade in brightly colored t-shirts with their candidate's name and image.

On TV, the election takes on more somber tones, as campaign ads highlight the impoverished living conditions of city residents. Standing in front of driftwood shack favelas, or speaking over close-ups of open sewage systems, opposition candidates pledge to do better than their predecessors. Meanwhile, nominees from the ruling parties smile at the entrance of new municipal buildings, citing current administrations' achievements and promising to keep up the good work. News reports are still full of gang executions and random assaults, outbreaks of dengue pushing public hospitals beyond capacity, and newly polluted swamps threatening the livelihood of still more fishing community. Through it all, though, the candidates remain seemingly unblemished, shot from flattering angles in spotless suits and with full heads of hair. □

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ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4303) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4545 42nd Street NW, Suite 311, Washington, D.C. 20016. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers on our web site.

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