Slavery as Forced Migration: The long struggle for the recognition of Little Africa in Rio de Janeiro's Port area

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Abstract

Much of today’s population in Brazil are the descendants of one of the most important forced mass migration in world history: namely, slavery. Brazil was the destination for 40% of enslaved Africans, and 60% of those landed in Rio de Janeiro, the largest slave port in human history. Between 1801 and 1825, 1,667,162 captive Africans landed in Rio, most of them at the infamous Valongo wharf. In recent years, the city’s vast port revitalization project, Porto Maravilha, has unearthed several vestiges of the slave past, especially the Valongo wharf itself. Paradoxically, this controversial project is also the source of the expulsion of descendants of those slaves, who have long inhabited the port area, long known as Little Africa.

This paper posits slavery as a form of migration, with complex social, cultural and territorial ramifications. It traces the history of the black residents of Rio de Janeiro’s port and their struggle to remain in an area where their ancestors had managed to lay their roots, against all odds. It describes their sustained efforts to keep alive the memory of their past, to define their identity in a heavily prejudiced society and to gain recognition for their cultural contribution to Brazilian society, which include iconic Brazilian cultural products such as samba, capoeira and carnival, all born in Rio’s Little Africa. The article examines a particular group of Afro-descendants, the Quilombo da Pedra do Sal, and their struggle for legal recognition, access to land, and right to the city, in the context of rising gentrification related to the port’s revitalization. It details various forms of resistance deployed by members of the Afro-Brazilian community to reinvest symbolic urban spaces in the port area and to visibilize their struggle, especially as the Valongo is under study by UNESCO as immaterial world heritage.