

International RC21 conference 2011

The struggle to belong. Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.

7-9 July 2011

Paper title: Samba Gospel: Carnival, Media and Religious Transgression in Rio de Janeiro

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Roundtable 14.2

ABSTRACT

Samba Gospel: Carnival, Media and Religious Transgression in Rio de Janeiro

Here we are only underscoring the banal but often ignored truth the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression. (Stallybrass and White 1986)

Carnival is generally represented as one of the defining cultural characteristics of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro as one of the privileged *loci* where this cultural trait is embodied and performed (Damatta 1981; Pravaz 2008; Sheriff 1999). Whereas insiders and outsiders know Brazilian carnival by the images of people parading during the televised performances in the famous *Sambódromo*, there are also the less famous parades of so-called *blocos* downtown. During the past decades two large evangelical churches in Rio de Janeiro have gained visibility by partaking in the street carnival of Rio de Janeiro with *blocos* that also parade through the Rio Branco in the centre of Rio de Janeiro. The leaders of these churches say their participation should be considered 'strategy'. During the parade, church members look for people who are ready to hear more of the gospel or are in need of spiritual aid. What's more, during both of the *blocos*, cameramen and photographers closely follow the parade to minutely record their actions.

Evangelical participation in the carnival is highly remarkable since many evangelical churches regard carnival as highly immoral and choose to stay as far away as possible from the celebrations. Many churches organize so-called retreats (*retiros*) outside the city for their adherents to offer them a substitute for the popular festivities in the city. The two evangelical churches – *Projeto Vida Nova* and *Comunidade Evangélica*

Internacional Zona Sul – do the very opposite and organize their parades at a symbolically significant location in the centre of the city.

As I will argue in this article, these evangelical performances in the midst of the carnival celebrations not only teach us about the changing role of evangelical movements in Brazilian society (and possibly beyond) but also contribute to our understandings of carnival as a space of transgression and of socio-political conflict. Following the argument of Kevin Gotham (2005), I argue that the carioca carnival is an urban spectacle that is multidimensional; it embodies contradictory tendencies. Whereas arguably state and commercial interests hamper the critical potential of the ‘carnival of the people’, evangelical churches use the cultural repertoires of the carnival to protest against the nation’s self-image traditionally produced in/via the Rio de Janeiro carnival. Instead of portraying carnival as the culmination of Brazilianness, the evangelical churches use the carnival ‘strategically’ to show people that true joy cannot be found in the temporal inversion of roles, the drinking of alcohol or in mundane festivities.

To develop these broader arguments, the paper broadly contains four related arguments: 1) In their search for more powerful and successful acts of evangelization, evangelical churches in Rio de Janeiro constantly push the limits of purification of popular cultural practices hitherto conceived as demonic. 2) Mass media are part and parcel of such purification/evangelization endeavors, not only because the cultural practices themselves have been mediatized (and commercialized) but also because the act(s) of evangelization are staged, recorded and broadcast as spectacles that must testify to the strength of the evangelical actors to push the limits of evangelization. 3) The city is not merely the background or scene where such endeavors are played out but the symbolic, material and sensual world where the cultural practices become meaningful in relation to power and daily-life. 4) The purification of carnival-related popular practices thus shows us an unexpected resurgence of the classical notion of carnival as a space of (possible) transgression allowing for a contestation of power roles, yet in quite different and differentiated forms than traditionally described. The evangelical *blocos* (parading amidst so-called worldly *blocos*) perform spectacles that challenge the hegemonic notions of Brazilian carnival in its present socio-political and economic constellation.