

# Dance of the Diaspora: Afro-Brazilian Movements in Salvador

João Carlos Souza Silva<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> State University of Campinas, Brazil

Correspondence: João Carlos Souza Silva, State University of Campinas, Brazil.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the vibrant cultural landscape of Afro-Brazilian dance forms in Salvador, Brazil, emphasizing their role as both a reflection and a reinforcement of community identity. Through a historical lens, we examine how these dances have served as mediums of resistance against cultural assimilation and oppression, while also fostering social cohesion and affirming cultural heritage. We delve into the evolution of these dance forms, from their origins blending African, indigenous, and European influences, to their modern-day manifestations and their impact on global Afro-diasporic communities. The study highlights how contemporary dance groups in Salvador innovate and preserve these traditions, ensuring their relevance and vitality both locally and internationally. Through this analysis, we showcase the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation and the profound role of dance in cultural preservation and social transformation within Afro-Brazilian communities.

**Keywords:** Afro-Brazilian dance, cultural identity, resistance and resilience, Salvador, Brazil, cultural preservation

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## 1. Exploring the Roots

The vibrant tapestry of Afro-Brazilian dance forms in Salvador, a city that pulsates with cultural heritage, is deeply rooted in the historical interplay between indigenous, African, and European influences. Salvador, often considered the heart of Afro-Brazilian culture, serves as a living museum where the past and present merge through dance. The origins of these dance forms can be traced back to the arrival of African slaves in the 16th century, who brought with them rich and diverse cultural traditions from various parts of Africa. These traditions, preserved and transformed over generations, became a fundamental aspect of the

cultural landscape in Salvador.

Dance served not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a crucial means of maintaining cultural identity and resistance against the oppressive conditions of slavery. Over time, these African dance traditions mingled with local indigenous and Portuguese cultural elements, giving rise to unique syncretic forms that are emblematic of Salvador's cultural identity today. This blend highlights the resilience and creativity of the Afro-Brazilian community, as these dance forms adapted to new realities while retaining elements of African heritage.

The influence of African heritage on Salvador's dance traditions is evident in the rhythmic complexity, the profound use of body movements, and the spiritual significance embedded in these dances. These elements reflect the African worldview and cosmology, emphasizing community, connection to nature, and the spiritual interplay between the ancestors and the living. As such, these dances go beyond mere entertainment; they are a celebration of life, history, and identity, echoing the enduring spirit and vitality of the Afro-Brazilian community in Salvador. Through the preservation and evolution of these dance forms, Salvador continues to honor and revitalize its African roots, ensuring that the legacy of its ancestors is carried forward into the future.

## 2. Cultural Synthesis and Evolution

Afro-Brazilian dance forms in Salvador are a vivid illustration of cultural synthesis, where the rhythmic beats and vibrant expressions are a testament to a long history of cultural blending and evolution. These dance traditions, which originated from the confluence of indigenous Brazilian, African, and Portuguese influences, have become emblematic of Brazil's rich multicultural heritage. This blending began with the forced arrival of African slaves who brought with them diverse dance traditions from across the African continent. These traditions merged not only with each other but also with the local indigenous dances and the European styles brought by Portuguese colonizers.

The evolution of Afro-Brazilian dance forms can be seen as a dynamic and continuous dialogue between these varied cultural elements. Each epoch in Salvador's history, from colonial times through Brazil's independence and into the contemporary era, has left its imprint on these dances. In colonial Salvador, dance was often a covert form of resistance and a secret means of preserving ancestral knowledge and rituals. Following abolition and into the 20th century, these dance forms began to gain recognition as important cultural expressions, moving from hidden quarters into public spaces.



**Figure 1.** The 5th Annual African Diaspora Dance

In modern times, the global spread of Brazilian culture, facilitated by media and migration, has further influenced these dance forms, leading to new variations that blend traditional elements with contemporary dance styles. This ongoing evolution reflects changes in societal attitudes, urbanization, and global cultural exchanges, ensuring that Afro-Brazilian dance remains a living, breathing aspect of Salvador's cultural identity. By continuously incorporating new influences while honoring traditional roots, these dances not only narrate the history of a people but also adapt to and reflect the current social and cultural landscape.

## 3. Capoeira: More Than a Dance

Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian practice that intricately weaves martial arts, dance, and music, embodies more than just rhythmic movement—it represents a powerful symbol of cultural identity and resistance. Originating during the era of slavery, Capoeira was developed by African slaves in Brazil as a means of self-defense disguised as dance. This camouflage was necessary to hide the fighting techniques from their oppressors, as practicing martial arts was forbidden to slaves. Over time, Capoeira has evolved, integrating fluid dance movements with powerful martial art strikes and acrobatics, all set to the compelling rhythms of traditional music, which plays an integral role in its practice.



**Figure 2.** Capoeira

The symbolic meanings and rituals embedded in Capoeira go deep into the roots of African spiritual traditions and community bonding. Each movement and musical element used in Capoeira is laden with historical significance and spiritual depth. The 'roda,' the circle within which Capoeira is performed, symbolizes the world with all its challenges and opportunities, while the music, played on traditional instruments like the 'berimbau,' guides the flow and intensity of the game. The rituals, including the call-and-response singing, create a dialogue between the players and musicians, reflecting the communal aspect of African traditions.

Capoeira's journey from a covert form of resistance to a celebrated cultural practice marks a significant transformation in its social standing. Once marginalized and criminalized, Capoeira began to be openly practiced and taught after Brazil's slavery abolition in 1888. The 20th century saw a major shift as masters of Capoeira, such as Mestre Bimba and Mestre Pastinha, worked tirelessly to legitimize and refine the art, promoting it not just as a martial art but also as a cultural heritage. This led to its recognition and appreciation as a symbol of Brazilian culture and resilience, gaining international acclaim and being practiced worldwide.

Today, Capoeira is not only a sport and an art form but also an educational tool that fosters physical, emotional, and social development, embodying a rich cultural legacy that continues to inspire and empower communities across the globe.

#### **4. Dance and Community Identity**

Dance holds a pivotal role in shaping and expressing the identity of Afro-Brazilian

communities in Salvador, serving as a vibrant thread that weaves through the fabric of daily life and communal identity. In Salvador, where the echoes of Africa are palpable in every beat and step, dance is not merely an art form but a living archive of the community's history, struggles, and celebrations.

The identity of Afro-Brazilian communities is intrinsically linked to their dance forms, which act as powerful expressions of their cultural heritage and historical journey. These dances, often performed during festivals, religious ceremonies, and community gatherings, are a reflection of the community's resilience and creativity. They provide a space for individuals to connect with their ancestors and their cultural stories through embodied expression. This connection reinforces a sense of pride and belonging among community members, strengthening their collective identity.

Furthermore, dance serves as a crucial tool for social cohesion and cultural affirmation in Afro-Brazilian communities. Through dance, individuals from different generations and backgrounds come together, fostering a sense of unity and mutual respect. The communal nature of these dance practices encourages participation and collaboration, helping to bridge social gaps and resolve conflicts. Dance events create inclusive spaces where community members can gather to celebrate their cultural identity and affirm their place within the broader social fabric of Salvador.

In this way, dance not only enriches the cultural life of Afro-Brazilian communities but also plays a strategic role in maintaining social bonds and affirming cultural values. As such, it is not just a performance but a vital act of cultural preservation and a declaration of community strength.

#### **5. Cultural Resistance Through Movement**

Dance as a form of resistance against cultural assimilation and oppression has a rich and potent history in Afro-Brazilian communities, particularly in Salvador. Here, dance acts not only as a celebration of cultural identity but also as a subtle, yet powerful, form of socio-political expression. It serves as a conduit for communicating resistance, preserving cultural uniqueness, and challenging dominant narratives.

Historically, Afro-Brazilian dance forms have been used to covertly resist and subvert the



harsh realities of slavery and colonial oppression. These dances provided a space for slaves to secretly communicate, maintain their cultural practices, and even prepare physically and mentally for resistance. The movements often incorporated elements that could be used for self-defense, disguised within the rhythms and routines of dance, making it a hidden language of rebellion.

### 5.1 Case Studies Highlighting Resistance Themes

#### 5.1.1 Ilê Aiyê



**Figure 3.** Ilê Ayê: The Afro-Brazilian Street Band that Shook Carnival in Bahia, Brazil

Founded in 1974, Ilê Aiyê is one of the most prominent Afro-Brazilian cultural groups based in Salvador, known for its role in the Black Pride movement in Brazil. Ilê Aiyê uses music and dance, particularly during Carnival, to celebrate African heritage and challenge racial discrimination. Their performances are infused with themes of empowerment, racial pride, and historical awareness, making a profound statement against cultural assimilation and for the affirmation of Afro-Brazilian identity.

#### 5.1.2 Balé Folclórico da Bahia



**Figure 4.** Balé Folclórico da Bahia: ode à cultura africana

As one of Brazil's most celebrated dance companies, Balé Folclórico da Bahia showcases traditional Afro-Brazilian dances, often reinterpreted to reflect themes of historical resistance and cultural pride. Their performances are vibrant displays that not only entertain but also educate and provoke thought about the oppressive historical contexts from which these dance forms emerged. Their work serves as a reminder of the endurance and resilience of Afro-Brazilian culture.

These groups and their performances have played a crucial role in redefining Afro-Brazilian dance as more than just an artistic expression—they are powerful acts of cultural assertion and resistance. Through their artistic endeavors, these groups challenge ongoing issues of racial inequality and cultural homogenization, promoting a broader respect and recognition of Afro-Brazilian culture both nationally and internationally. This resistance through movement continues to inspire new generations, fueling a dynamic dialogue between tradition and contemporary socio-cultural realities.

## 6. Contemporary Practices and Global Influence

Contemporary Afro-Brazilian dance groups in Salvador are at the forefront of both preserving traditional dance forms and innovating them to reflect modern sensibilities and global influences. These groups are deeply rooted in the historical and cultural narratives of their community, yet they actively engage with contemporary dance practices to keep their traditions vibrant and relevant.

### 6.1 Innovating and Preserving Afro-Brazilian Dance Traditions

Modern dance groups in Salvador are blending traditional Afro-Brazilian movements with elements from contemporary dance genres such as hip-hop, jazz, and even ballet. This fusion not only attracts younger audiences but also allows for the dances to speak to universal themes of freedom, identity, and resilience, making them more accessible to a broader audience. Moreover, these groups invest in community dance schools and workshops that serve as cultural hubs where the youth can learn about their heritage, thus ensuring the transmission of these traditional dances to future generations. Through these schools, the rich tapestry of Salvador's dance culture is meticulously taught,

discussed, and celebrated, preserving its core elements while allowing for creative expression and adaptation.

### 6.2 Global Influence of Salvador's Dance Culture

The dance culture of Salvador has extended its influence well beyond the borders of Brazil, impacting Afro-diasporic communities across the globe. This international spread has been facilitated by the increasing visibility of Afro-Brazilian dance at global festivals, in academic settings, and through online platforms. As practitioners from different parts of the world seek to connect with their African roots or simply embrace the rich cultural expressions of Afro-Brazilian dance, Salvador has become a focal point for cultural exchange and learning.

Afro-Brazilian dance ensembles from Salvador frequently tour internationally, showcasing their artistry and sharing their cultural stories through performances and workshops. These interactions foster a sense of global community among people of African descent, providing a medium through which shared histories and experiences can be celebrated and understood. Furthermore, the universal themes of resistance, resilience, and celebration, inherent in these dance forms, resonate with many across the Afro-diaspora, reinforcing ties and encouraging a collective identity centered on cultural pride and mutual respect.

Through these ongoing practices and global interactions, Salvador's contemporary dance groups play a crucial role in both preserving the legacy of Afro-Brazilian dance and ensuring its relevance and vitality in the global cultural landscape.

## 7. Conclusion

The rich tapestry of Afro-Brazilian dance in Salvador exemplifies a profound narrative of cultural resilience, identity, and communal unity. Through historical epochs of oppression and resistance, these dance forms have not only survived but have thrived, evolving into vibrant expressions of the city's soul. They continue to play a critical role in shaping the social and cultural fabric of Afro-Brazilian communities, serving as both a bridge to the past and a beacon for the future.

The dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation within Salvador's dance practices highlights the community's commitment to preserving their heritage while adapting to

contemporary influences. This balance ensures that the dances remain relevant and engaging for new generations, fostering a continuous renewal of interest and participation. Furthermore, the global impact of these dance forms underscores their universal appeal and significance, connecting Salvador with Afro-diasporic communities worldwide and promoting a global appreciation for Afro-Brazilian culture.

Ultimately, the ongoing evolution and celebration of Afro-Brazilian dance in Salvador are testament to the enduring spirit and creativity of its people. These dance forms not only offer a means of cultural expression but also provide a powerful platform for advocacy, education, and social change. As Salvador continues to innovate and share its rich dance heritage with the world, it reaffirms the transformative power of art in bridging cultural divides and strengthening community bonds.

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