Abdias Nascimento was Professor Emeritus of the State University of New York, Buffalo, USA, where in 1971 he founded the chair in African Cultures in the New World within the Puerto Rican Studies Program, Department of American Studies. Exiled from his country in 1968, he served as Visiting Lecturer at Yale University’s School of Drama (1969‒70); Visiting Fellow at the Center for Humanities, Wesleyan University, USA (1970‒71); Visiting Professor at the Department of African Languages and Literatures, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria (1976‒77); Visiting Professor at the African American Studies Department, Temple University, Philadelphia, USA (1990‒91). In Brazil, however, until very recently, his scholarly work went largely unrecognized by an academy that attributed little value to black intellectual production.

Born in the town of Franca, State of São Paulo, Brazil, on 14 March 1914, Nascimento was the grandson of enslaved Africans.1 His father was a cobbler and a musician; his mother made and sold sweets and candies. He was the second son of seven; his family was so poor that even though his father was a shoemaker he had no shoes during his childhood; from the age of seven he worked to help support the family. He earned a secondary-level accounting degree in 1929 and graduated in Economics from the University of Rio de Janeiro in 1938. He held post-graduate degrees from the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies (1957) and the Oceanography Institute (1961). Later in life he was granted honorary PhDs from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (1993), the Federal University of Bahia (2000), the University of Brasília (2006), Obafemi Awolowo University (Nigeria, 2007), and the State University of Bahia (2008).

Nascimento participated in Brazil’s early civil rights movement, the Brazilian Black Front (São Paulo, 1929‒30). In 1938, he organized the Afro-Campineiro Congress, in the city of Campinas, São Paulo State. He protested the New State dictatorship and was imprisoned in Rio de Janeiro in 1937. Upon seeing a production of Eugene O’Neill’s play The Emperor Jones in Lima, Peru, in which the lead role was played by a white actor in blackface, Nascimento resolved to create a black theater group in Brazil to fight against racism. However, when he returned to the country after a year with the Teatro del Pueblo in Buenos Aires, Argentina, he was imprisoned for resisting racial discrimination in São Paulo, and spent two years in the Carandiru Penitentiary, where, in 1943, he founded the prisoners’ newspaper and the Convicts’ Theater. Under his leadership, prisoners wrote, created, rehearsed, and produced all aspects of their own stage works.

In 1944, he founded the Black Experimental Theater (TEN – Teatro Experimental do Negro) of Rio de Janeiro. This was the first Afro-Brazilian organization to link the fight for civil and human
rights to the recovery and recognition of African cultural heritage. Denouncing segregation and blackfacing in Brazilian theater, TEN offered basic literacy, general culture, and theater courses to black domestic servants, construction workers, jobless folks, and petty public service employees who signed up to participate. TEN broke the racial barrier, bringing black actors to Brazilian theater. It also prompted the creation of dramatic literature on African culture and the Afro-Brazilian life experience (A. Nascimento 1961; 1966a).

Alongside its theater work, TEN sponsored seminal civil rights events like the National Black Convention (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, 1945‒46) and the First Congress of Brazilian Blacks (Rio de Janeiro, 1950). The National Black Convention formulated antidiscrimination and affirmative antiracist policy measures for presentation to the Constituent Assembly of 1946.

A journalist by profession, Abdias Nascimento founded and edited the newspaper Quilombo. He was a key organizer of the Afro-Brazilian Democratic Committee (1945‒46). Under his leadership, TEN organized important events on African culture, as well as art exhibitions and contests like the Fine Arts Contest on the theme of the Black Christ, held in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro, when the city hosted the 36th World Eucharistic Congress.

At the helm of TEN, Nascimento maintained contact with African liberation movements and the civil rights movement in the United States. He and the artists and intellectuals associated with TEN were the sole supporters in Brazil of the Négritude movement led by Leopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas. Yet in 1966, they were excluded from the official Brazilian delegation to the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Senegal as President Senghor’s international statement of the value of African culture and Négritude. Abdias Nascimento’s “Open Letter” to Dakar, denouncing the process that led to this exclusion, was published in the prestigious journal Présence Africaine (A. Nascimento 1966b). This was the first voice of protest by an African-Brazilian antiracist intellectual to reach a world audience.

From 1950 to 1968, Abdias Nascimento acted as founding curator of the Museum of Black Art, an initiative of the Black Experimental Theater. Its inaugural exhibition was held at the Museum of Image and Sound in Rio de Janeiro, one of several events organized by Abdias Nascimento on the 80th anniversary of the abolition of slavery.

During this period, he was active in the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB), which became the main democratic force opposing the authoritarian regime put in place by the 1964 military coup.

Shortly after opening the Museum of Black Art exhibit in 1968, Nascimento traveled to the United States with a Fairfield Foundation grant to promote exchange between the Afro-Brazilian and African American theater and civil rights movements. Targeted by the military dictatorship, he was unable to return to Brazil because of the 5th Institutional Act promulgated in December of that year, which closed Congress and intensified political persecution. He lived in exile, in the United States and Nigeria, for 13 years.

During this period, Nascimento introduced the African Brazilian population onto the stage of African world history by participating in countless African world events. Until then, African world events had not included South or Central American representation. Nascimento participated in the Preparatory Meetings (Jamaica, 1973) of the 6th Pan-African Congress and in the Congress itself (Dar-es-Salaam, 1974), as well as the Encounter on African World Alternatives/First Congress of the African Writers’ Union (Dakar, 1976), the 2nd World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture (Lagos, 1977) and the 1st Congress of Black Culture in the Americas (Cali, Colombia, 1977). At the 2nd Congress of Black Culture in the Americas (Panama, 1980) he presented his thesis of Quilombismo and was elected Vice-President and Coordinator of the 3rd Congress of Black Culture in the Americas, to be held in Brazil.

In exile he developed his own artwork, which he had begun in Rio de Janeiro in 1968. His painting interprets African Brazilian religious and cultural themes, and African epistemological symbology. He exhibited widely in U.S. galleries, museums, cultural centers, and universities, among them the Studio...
Museum in Harlem, Yale University, Howard University, the Museum of the Afro-American Artists’ Association, Ile-Ife Museum of Philadelphia, and the Los Angeles Inner City Cultural Center.3

In 1978, he returned briefly to Brazil and participated in the creation of the United Black Movement against Racism and Racial Discrimination (MNU). He helped create the Memorial Zumbi, which brought together Afro-Brazilian civil and human rights groups from all over the country; he served as its President from 1989 to 1998.

Returning definitively to Brazil in 1981, he founded IPEAFRO, which organized the 3rd Congress of Black Culture in the Americas (São Paulo, 1982) and, in conjunction with the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) and the United Nations, a national seminar on Namibia’s struggle for independence. IPEAFRO created Sankofa, the first major teachers’ training course for the introduction of African and Afro-Brazilian culture in the school curriculum.

During exile, Nascimento had worked with Leonel Brizola to create what would become the Democratic Labor Party (PDT) – the political heir of the former Brazilian Labor Party (PTB). As a result of Nascimento’s efforts, the party was the first to include the issue of racism and racial discrimination as an official priority on its political platform. Abdias Nascimento also spearheaded the organization of the black movement within the PDT. However, he consistently worked to make the fight for the civil and human rights of African descendants in Brazil transcend party politics.

Running in the first elections in the transition to democracy, Nascimento took office in 1983 as the first African Brazilian Congressman to defend his people’s cause in the Brazilian national legislature. He introduced proposals for effective antidiscrimination legislation and presented the first bills of law proposing affirmative action measures. Nascimento’s approach was unique in defining quotas by race and gender. Based on the official count of the black population at that time as 40%, his bills called for 20% black women and 20% black men in education, employment, and public service positions. Serving on the Foreign Relations Committee, he proposed and articulated anti-Apartheid measures, supporting the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa and the Namibian independence movement led by SWAPO, urging Brazil to break diplomatic relations with the Apartheid regime.

Nascimento was a major force in the creation of the Palmares Cultural Foundation in the Ministry of Culture, and in the institution of National Black Consciousness Day on November 20, anniversary of the death of Zumbi dos Palmares. This date has become an official holiday in many Brazilian states and municipalities and is recognized and celebrated in schools and cultural centers all over the country.

In 1991, Nascimento became the first African Brazilian Senator to dedicate his mandate to the promotion of the African Brazilian people’s civil and human rights. He was appointed head of the Rio de Janeiro State Secretariat for the Defense and Promotion of Afro-Brazilian Peoples. In 1999, he became Rio de Janeiro State Secretary for Human Rights and Citizenship. He continued his Pan-African activity on multiple fronts, such as working with the W.E.B. Du Bois Pan-African Cultural Centre of Accra, serving as UNESCO consultant for theater in Angola and as a keynote speaker at the NGO forum in the 3rd World Conference against Racism (Durban, South Africa, 2001).

Abdias Nascimento’s legacy is unique in the same way as his life and work: they blend arts and culture with political activism in a humanist approach that is firmly grounded in the specific identity and experience of African people. His proposal of Quilombismo takes the history of Africans building life in freedom, in the face of enslavement and discrimination, as a basis not only for political practice but also for a model of the State in multiracial, pluricultural societies built on the enslavement of Africans and its consequences. Quilombismo is a Pan-African reference for political organization and antiracist struggle. It is indivisible from the artistic legacy left by Abdias Nascimento in theater, poetry, and the visual arts, because the arts and humanities are part and parcel of Quilombismo’s model, strategy, and goals.
Elisa Larkin Nascimento

Notes


Bibliography


