

More than just a  
dance: what samba  
means to brazil essay



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I have been watching the FIFA World Cup ever since and I cannot help but be fascinated every time I see the rowdy and festive fans dancing and cheering for Brazil (see fig. 1). I recognized their moves – those hip swinging, feet stomping, very quick body movements – it was samba. I wondered why the country is synonymous to the said dance that when one talks about Brazil, samba is always immediately mentioned or vice versa. Hence, I aim to find out why this dance is special to the said nation. What makes it so meaningful to them that they get up and dance every time?

Intricate, crisp, rapid, and bouncy – these words describe the footwork of Brazil's most famous dance, samba. The basic three-step with leg up on three, coupled with graceful swaying of the arms characterizes this lively and majestic dance. Watching the demonstration from dance instructor Fransini Giraldo (Samba Body), the seemingly difficult movements that samba is well known for can be easily learned in just one, two, and three counts. The basic samba though is danced without moving the head, arms, and shoulders while hopping lightly on one foot, brushing the other foot across the floor, and swinging the hips back and forth very rapidly (Hollander). Nonetheless, samba is more than just these basic and easy steps. Beyond the rhythmic footwork and the rapid movements lie a history and meaningful stories that have ultimately changed Brazil and its people.

### Historical Background

Samba became popular in Rio de Janeiro in the early twentieth century. The word samba comes from the Kimbundu word *semba*, which means “invitation to dance” (McGowan & Pessanha 22). Kimbundu is of Angolan

descent, hence it is believed that samba was first introduced and danced by African forefathers (see fig. 2). Theories about the real origin of the dance abound nonetheless. Some said that it has Afro-Brazilian beginnings; some theorized that it came from *lundu* in Brazil in the eighteenth century; and others claimed that the samba that arrived in Rio more than 100 years ago was from Bahia (McGowan & Pessanha 22). Nevertheless, wherever samba may have originated, it has remained to be an important force in Brazilians' life, whites and blacks alike, since the time it became popular.

### Meaning

Samba is not merely a dance or music to early and even present inhabitants of Brazil. To them, the dance is so much more and the meaning they attach to the dance is as many and complex as its roots. One of these meanings was notably defined by Barbara Browning as “ the body articulate.” According to her, samba is the language of the body where not only the feet speak. The dance is in fact a dialogue wherein different parts of the body communicate at the same time in seemingly unlike languages. “ The feet keep up a rapid patter, while the hips beat out a heavy staccato and the shoulders roll a slow drawl” (qtd. in Goellner & Murphy 39).

These movements can thus be attributed to the blacks, who put all their emotion in their arms, legs, and feet thereby reflecting their very souls. Therefore, samba is a memory that black forefathers left Brazilians, enhanced only by samba dance schools. In a sense, samba represents a significant part of Brazilian's very being (qtd. in Pravaz 84). Hence, when samba dancers or sambistas dance very engagingly into the music, they are

then expressing themselves the best way they know. Consequently, the more expressive and engaged they are, the more meaningful their dance is to them and the more effective their dance routine.

Moreover, according to Browning, samba illustrates the sacred rhythms and dances of Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion, whereby the energy innate in the dance is the energy from the spirits. Therefore, the energetic dancing of sambistas only exudes their fire to affirm their identities (qtd. in Ireland).

Furthermore, Browning called samba as a “resistance in motion.” Beneath the nation’s so-called racial democracy, in which blacks and whites alike have equal footing after a long history of slavery, lie silenced stories of political and cultural repression of blacks and indigenous people. This is what samba voices out as it relays racial contacts synchronically (Goellner & Murphy 47). Hence, when one moves to the samba, he is rejecting the oppressions and inequalities of the past (Ireland).

Sodre seconded this belief saying that samba is characterized by a suspension of the strong accent in its musical form, which calls for the body to fill in the gaps. This movement depicts Afro-Brazilian’s resistance to cultural assimilation. Hence, with high value for originality, divine energy, and mystery, blacks seek to resist the univocal patterns enforced by the Westerners (qtd. in Pravaz 84). Therefore, the stronger and more powerful the dance is, the greater the expression of resistance.

Another popular meaning attached to samba is its significance in achieving multiracial heterogeneity and racial democracy. As Brazil is known to be a nation of various colors and races, the struggle to achieve freedom and  
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equality is inevitable. Samba was therefore regarded as an instrument to celebrate the making of a true nation. This meaning came in the 1930s when Brazilians no longer dance to show their resistance but to depict their happiness in the creation of a harmonious Brazilian society. Hence, samba during this time was their racial democracy in dance (Ireland).

Moreover, Gilberto Freyre sought to advance this meaning of samba as he narrated images and visions of a shared national community in his written works, with samba as the focal point. Then President Getulio Vargas supported him by implementing policies to further racial democracy through the creation of samba schools and samba-based carnivals (see fig. 3). As a result, samba came to be known as the national dance, which helped build Brazil into a racially democratic nation (Ireland).

However, the once strong hold of samba as a national dance started to weaken in the 1980s with the influence of social scientists who claimed that racial democracy was merely a myth to cover up the realities of racial prejudice, segregation, and oppression. Additionally, the influx and importation of various musical influences transformed the traditional samba dance and music (Ireland).

## Conclusion

Indeed, samba is not just a simple kind of dance that Brazilians dance to. For them, it is so much more than just swinging their hips, stomping their feet, and swinging their arms. It is the language of their bodies, the reflection of their souls, the memory of their ancestors, the sacred beats of their religion, their resistance in motion, their struggle for identity, and their celebration to  
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racial democracy. While the traditional samba might have weakened its grasp on the people, it persists up to this very day as a reminder of the culture, influence, and lifestyle that has changed Brazil and its people.

Looking back at the image of cheering and samba-dancing football fans in FIFA, it is now clear what samba means to Brazilians.