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Before the **Samba** schools

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Rio Carnival began long before the Samba schools, Sapucaí Sambadrome, and the parades that now showcase Rio to diverse audiences. The celebration gradually took shape through street games, music, masks, competition, grassroots organization, Black participation, and successive attempts at taking control.

Around 1600, the first records of Entrudo appear: a game played with water and scented wax balls, which often escalated and could involve stones, waste, and acts of violence.

Between 1604 and 1608, the government attempted to ban the more aggressive Entrudo practices. However, the population continued to find ways to celebrate. In 1641, the city celebrated the acclamation of João IV, king of Portugal, with masks, music, and public festivities. Some historical research considers this event the starting point of official Carnival celebrations in Rio de Janeiro. Later, between 1680 and 1691, new bans attempted to control Entrudo, masks, and hooded revelers in public streets.

In the 18th century, the festival underwent new



transformations. In 1748, the Folias Negras (Black Revelries) and the Coronation of the Kings of Congo appeared—practices that helped pave the way for the future Congos and Cucumbis. Between 1763 and 1786, Carnival took on the contours of a spectacle in celebrations tied to royal births and weddings, featuring allegorical floats called *préstitos*. Antônio Francisco Soares, a designer of allegories during that period, emerges as one of the names associated with this early visual organization of the festival. Between 1790 and 1795, practices such as the *Serração Velha* (Sawing of the Old Woman) and the *Folia do Rei Baltazar* (Revelry of King Balthazar) also brought Black music and dance to the calendar preceding Lent.

In the nineteenth century, Entrudo remained one of the most widespread popular festivities. The streets filled with water, flour, scented wax balls, teasing, and laughter. It was an improvised and spontaneous celebration in which participants engaged physically in the games. Meanwhile, authorities and elites sought to curb this form of play and create a more controlled, organized Carnival, modeled after European traditions.

In 1816, the French Artistic Mission arrived in Rio de Janeiro. Jean-Baptiste Debret, a French artist who depicted scenes of Brazilian urban life, helped document the city's customs, characters, and celebrations. In the following decades, the mask trade flourished on Rua do Ouvidor, balls gained popularity, and salons began embracing rhythms such as polka and schottische. Street celebrations and ballroom events started to coexist, each with their own distinct codes.

In 1848, José Nogueira de Azevedo Paredes, a Portuguese shoemaker, took to the streets with a bass drum and created Zé Pereira. The drum's powerful beat transformed the soundscape of street Carnival and left a refrain that endured across generations: "Long live Zé Pereira, long live Carnival!" A few years later, between 1853 and 1855, authorities imposed stricter controls



on entrudo, while the Congresso de Sumidades Carnavalescas (Congress of Carnival Celebrities) emerged, ushering in the era of the Great Carnival Societies.

The Great Carnival Societies promoted a grand and elegant Carnival inspired by European traditions. Associations such as Clube dos Fenianos (Fenians Club), Tenentes do Diabo (Devil's Lieutenants), and Clube dos Democráticos (Democrats Club) paraded with luxurious floats, sophisticated costumes, marching bands, and satirical critiques of politics and social customs. Their processions passed through important locations in downtown Rio, such as Rua do Ouvidor, Praça Tiradentes, and later Avenida Central, now known as Avenida Rio Branco.

Henrique Fleiuss, a German caricaturist who settled in Brazil, helped popularize the figure of King Momo during the 1860s and 1870s. This



was a time when Carnival began to develop characters, symbols, printed images, competitions, and new forms of presentation to the city.

This Carnival also served as a stage for social conflict. While masked revelers, informal participants known as *sujos*, and popular groups engaged in more spontaneous forms of celebration, the Great Carnival Societies promoted a more disciplined celebration aligned with the project of urban modernization.

Nevertheless, these parades played a significant role in important debates. Maria Clementina Pereira Cunha, historian and author of *Ecos da Folia* (Echoes of the Revelry), explores how nineteenth-century Carnival functioned as a



space for political intervention. During the 1870s and 1880s, amid abolitionist campaigns, floats and satirical performances began addressing themes of freedom, progress, and criticism of slavery.

One episode clearly illustrates the connection between Carnival and abolitionism. In 1864, the Tenentes do Diabo reportedly used funds originally intended for Carnival celebrations to purchase certificates of freedom for enslaved people. Because the processions attracted crowds to the streets of downtown Rio, these messages reached far beyond traditional political spaces. The celebration also brought racial tensions, debates over citizenship, and struggles for freedom into the streets.

In this environment, the cordões also gained prominence. Eneida de Moraes, a writer and researcher of Rio Carnival, notes that the term “cordão” appeared in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias* to describe groups of masked, combative revelers. As competitions between these groups emerged, the city began to experience a pattern of Carnival rivalry that would later also characterize the Samba schools. Among Entrudo, cordões, balls, and the Great Carnival Societies, the Carnival ranchos came to occupy a decisive place. They emerged in the late nineteenth century and grew during the early decades of the twentieth century. Renata de Sá Gonçalves, anthropologist and author of *Os Ranchos Pedem Passagem* (Make Way for the Ranchos), demonstrates that the Rio Carnival of this period brought together many forms of revelry simultaneously: ranchos, cordões, clubs,



associations, Carnival societies, masked revelers, and independent participants all competed for space in the streets.

In the early years of the twentieth century, there were hundreds of Carnival associations. Many changed their names, relocated their headquarters, or quickly disappeared. Carnival was still in the process of becoming organized, with very different groups coexisting within the same city. The so-called *sujos*, revelers with no formal connection to any association, also roamed the streets, preserving the freer, more improvised spirit of the celebration.

The ranchos introduced a new style of parading.

They organized processions with costumes, musical accompaniment, standard-bearers, instruments, choreographed movements, and a theme. This allowed Carnival to develop a more structured narrative. The celebration remained popular, danced, rhythmic, and physical, but it now also featured a storyline, a sequence, and visual organization.

Many ranchos emerged in working-class neighborhoods, port areas, and suburbs inhabited by Black people and workers. Little Africa, which includes areas such as Saúde, Gamboa, Santo Cristo, and Cidade Nova, played a central role in this process. Among the best-known ranchos were Ameno Resedá in Catete neighborhood; Flor do Abacate in Cidade Nova; Rei de Ouros in Saúde; Kananga do Japão in Estácio; and Rosa Branca in Catumbi, connected to Tia Ciata's home.

Hilário Jovino Ferreira, a cultural leader connected with the Carnival ranchos, was a key figure in this turning point. Born in the State of Bahia, who settled in the Saúde and Gamboa neighborhoods, he incorporated influences from processions, Afro-Bahian parades, and popular Black festivals. He founded Flor do Sereno in 1901 and is also associated with Rei de Ouros, a rancho that helped transfer organizational forms from the Epiphany celebration cycle to Carnival.

Hilário Jovino moved in the same circles as Tia Ciata, a religious and cultural leader in Little Africa. She brought together music, spirituality, food, samba circles, drumming, and community gatherings. Her home was one of the principal meeting places for Rio's Black culture. Roberto Moura, researcher and author of *Tia Ciata e a Pequena África no Rio de Janeiro* ("Aunt Ciata

and the Little Africa in Rio de Janeiro’'), describes it as a spacious house with a living room, bedrooms, kitchen, pantry, and a dirt backyard where Samba and drumming sessions, as well as religious ceremonies took place.

Figures such as Donga, a composer associated with the earliest recordings of urban Samba; João da Baiana, a Samba artist and percussionist essential to the formation of Rio’s Samba; Pixinguinha, a musician and composer pivotal to Brazilian music; and Hilário Jovino himself all passed through Tia Ciata’s home. There, music, spirituality, cooking, festivities, and Carnival mingled within the community’s life. In a Rio marked by repression, racism, and urban reforms that displaced Black and poor populations from central areas, these spaces helped preserve Afro-Carioca cultural practices.

Tia Bebiana, a Black Bahian community leader in Rio de Janeiro, also appears in this network. As early as the 1880s, she organized the Lapinha Party at Largo de São Domingos (São Domingos Square), bringing together ranchos, pastoris



(nativity folk pagaent) groups, and popular processions. These women helped preserve forms of gathering, celebration, spirituality, and music that were essential to the development of urban Samba.

The ranchos also maintained relationships characterized by humor, rivalry, and coexistence. Bem de Conta rancho, associated with Hilário Jovino, poked fun at Rosa Branca, which responded with the informal group O Macaco é Outro (That's a Different Story). This kind of provocation shows how the celebration was also marked by playfulness, competition, and public interaction.

While the ranchos expanded popular participation in Carnival, urban elites developed alternative ways to join the festivities. Eneida de Moraes, a writer and researcher of Rio Carnival, identifies 1907 as the symbolic emergence of the *curso* (automobile parade) in Rio de Janeiro. That year, the daughters of Afonso Pena, then president of Brazil, traveled along Avenida Central in open automobiles during Carnival. The scene attracted attention and was soon emulated by high-society groups. Decorated cars began to circulate along the avenue, with revelers singing Carnival marches and tossing streamers, confetti, and perfume sprays.

In 1919, following the Spanish flu pandemic, Carnival took on a new significance for the city. The disease had caused thousands of deaths across the country and claimed the life of Rodrigues Alves, Brazil's president-elect, who was succeeded by Delfim Moreira, then vice president. After a period of mourning and a public health crisis, the celebration marked the return of urban life and collective celebration. It was in this context that Cordão da Bola Preta

emerged, later becoming one of Rio de Janeiro's most traditional Carnival troupes.

All this history predates the Samba schools. Rio Carnival was built by different hands, sounds, and ways of occupying the city: Entrudo, masks, balls, Zé Pereira, Great Carnival Societies, cordões, corsos, ranchos, the homes of aunts from Bahia, circles, drum sessions, and processions. When the Samba schools emerged, they found a city that had already learned how to transform celebration into music, competition, criticism, belonging, and collective creation.



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