

New African and Asian Migrations in Brazil: Issues on Identities and Racism

Marie-Caroline SAGLIO-YATZIMIRSKY
INALCO

During the 2016 Olympics Games in Rio de Janeiro, the competition of a refugee olympic team was a strong symbolic message of solidarity for the world's refugees. Among the ten athletes of this team, two judokas from Congo Kinshasa were granted refugee status in Brazil in 2014. This same year, during the Soccer World Cup in Brazil, several Pakistani citizens came to see the games and took advantage of their presence in Brazil to ask for political asylum.

Since 2010 indeed, Brazil has experienced the arrival of new migrant populations. In addition to traditional border immigration and immigration from Portuguese speaking African countries, migrants and refugees from Haiti, other countries of Black Africa (Senegal, Congo-Kinshasa, Sudan, Guinea Conakry, etc.), Syria and South Asia - especially Bangladesh-, have been applying for asylum. While each is specific in its own ways, these new migrations have three common features that distinguish them from previous migrations: they are political migrations related to violence, they are long distance migrations, and they reveal new South-South flows. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of asylum applications has grown from 566 applications in 2010 to over 10,000 in 2014, mainly in São Paulo. With about 45,000 applications since 2010¹, Haitians largely dominate these migrations, although they are not included in the asylum seeker figures as they obtain humanitarian visas.

Several questions arise – the first being the reasons for these “new migrations”. Due to Brazil's recent international policy during the Lula period (2003-2011), these are also the result of migration strategies, which are different from one community to another. For example, many Muslim newcomers find employment in the halal meat industry in the Southern State of Paraná, which has become a relevant network helping communities to settle. A second question concerns migrants' perception of Brazil and vice versa. Arrival, especially in the major economic city of São Paulo, confronts immigrants with a local reality where racist reactions towards Black people have been increasing.

The present paper aims at giving a broad overview of the social and economic issues raised by the new migrations in Brazil. We will first qualify the context of these migrations, and then we will question the different experiences related to racism and identity that the migrants face

when settling in Brazil. This reflection is organized around two main fieldwork investigations, conducted between 2013 and 2015 in São Paulo among migrants of the *Casa do Migrante*, a major hosting place for the recently arrived, and in Caritas, the main institution for reception and legal and administrative support for migrants.

New migrations in Brazil

Political refugees from Africa and Asia

During the last five years, Brazil has experienced unprecedented migration from populations fleeing political violence and persecutions. These arrivals coincide with the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, the beginning of the 2011 Syrian conflict that caused the exodus of about 5 million citizens, the conflicts in Guinea Conakry and Sudan, the political violence in Congo Kinshasa and in Senegal, the growing religious persecution from Islamists in Nigeria against Christian communities and the advancements of Al-Shabab militias in Somalia. As Europeans have been gradually closing their borders to the massive influx of refugees, migration continues to grow in Brazil where some flows, especially from Senegal or Congo, have found an alternative to the more traditional migratory destination of France.

According to data from the National Committee for Refugees (CONARE)², today in Brazil there are 8400 refugees recognized as such, among which is a large majority of Syrians and Angolans, Colombians and Congolese.³ Some communities have a past tradition of migration in Brazil and benefit from links established decades ago. This is the case of the Syro-Lebanese community which arrived in the early 20th century, even if one should distinguish the first Christian settlements from the present Muslim ones. It is also the case of Portuguese-speaking African communities. Conversely, some communities have no tradition of settling in the Brazilian territory. This is the case of migrants from South Asia who arrived from 2013 onwards, particularly from Bangladesh.⁴

These new migrations, perceived as « political migrations », get listed in the context of migration policy in a globalized world and differ from the massive economic migrations experienced by Brazil between the end of the 18th century and the early 20th century. How should they get qualified and explained?

Migration Policies in Brazil

Many reasons explain the massive inflows of new migrants to Brazil since 2010. The first reason is structural and is due to Brazil's traditional role as a country of political asylum. Since 1958 Brazil has been a member of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR and is a signatory of the Geneva Convention of 1951 and of the 1967 Protocol.⁵ In 1997, Brazil enacted a refugee status (Law number 9474) which provided the creation of the CONARE. In May 2002, Brazil ratified the UN Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons. The 2013 CONARE resolution

facilitated the entry of Syrians with a 90-day visa. However, pressure from the population and the new profile of refugees led to a national debate: the COMIGRAR conference (Conferência Nacional sobre Migrações e Refúgio) held in São Paulo in 2014 expressed the need for a new legal nomenclature that would revise the “status of the stranger” as a “migrant”.

The external relations policy implemented by the Lula government (2003-2011) also promoted a policy of rapprochement between West African, Arab and some Asian countries. Relations were strengthened with Africa, to the extent that the government intended to highlight the roots of a part of its population. Besides the opening of a South-South axis, the Brazilian government continued to structure the Mercosur common market of South America established in 1991, in which migration networks from neighboring countries are accommodated. It is noteworthy that Brazil has aimed to develop its international role as a peace actor and has established a humanitarian force in Haiti since 2004.

The conjunction of the strategic positioning of Brazil on the world stage, of political instability in partner countries, and the closing of European borders may explain the recent flows. In addition, the context of economic growth until 2014 and the opened migration laws have reinforced this trend. Upon their arrival, the newcomers are informed of their legal possibilities to access work. More recently, major sporting events such as the Soccer World Cup 2014 and the 2016 Olympic games have greatly increased Brazil’s international visibility.

However, the political context cannot fully explain the sharp rise in asylum applications. Migrants’ perception of Brazil as a secure and dynamic country is a major incentive. Economic opportunities may also favor the new immigration trend.

Labor opportunities and issues on identity

The new migrant, facing hospitality or racism?

São Paulo receives the great majority of the asylum seekers today. In 2014, approximately 43% of applications for asylum were located here, placing São Paulo just after the Amazon, the front door for the Haitians entering Brazil. The economic capital possesses a very old and diversified tradition of receiving migrants. Therefore the hospitality experienced by Haitians and Black Africans in São Paulo is different from the one Syrian refugees benefit from, effectively welcomed by the Muslim Syro-Lebanese community, well settled in the Southern part of São Paulo.⁶

Recent figures show an unprecedented increase of the complaints denouncing acts of xenophobia and an augmentation of 633% of the complaints in 2015 compared with 2014. 330 cases of racist violence were registered in 2015, against 2 in 2013.⁷ These are concentrated in São Paulo. Although hope can be heard in migrants’ discourse, for many, especially Haitian and Black Africans, there is an underlying speech revealing their confrontation with

xenophobic practices mainly in public spaces of sociability and in transports.

Let it be reminded that slavery was abolished in Brazil only in 1888. In other words, Brazil was the last country of the American continent to forbid this practice. For three hundred years, the black population was sent to Brazil by forced migration. After Nigeria, Brazil is the second African largest country of the world in terms of its demographics. The recent Brazilian census classification gathers under the category of “Black” both the Blacks (*Pretos*) and « mixed-blood » (*Pardos*), in other words combining both the part of the population which recognizes itself as “black” representing 54% of the Brazilian population. This category underlines the importance of the sociocultural representations, independent of any biological definition of race. Thus « Blacks » represent more than half of the Brazilian population and suffer from strong practices of social exclusion and racism, as revealed in statistics regarding disparities. According to the last census, the 54% of Blacks share only 17% of the superior income. The new migrants coming from Haiti and Black Africa stir expressions of racism, which are less connected to the ethnic origins of the migrants, but more so to the social and cultural representations of skin color in Brazil.

Two points are to be clarified here, first on the present crisis in Brazil, second on the specificity of São Paulo. Since the beginning of Dilma Rousseff’s second term in 2014, the Brazilian government has entered into a deep crisis, which has revealed both the country’s economic recession and political instability. The context is conducive to identity tensions and intolerance of the “stranger.” The second point is related to the social context of São Paulo, mainly based on old European migrations, compared to other big cities like Rio de Janeiro, where the proportion of black people is higher.

Employment, identity and Islam of the refugees

Besides the revival of expressions of racism against black people, the possible expression of a “melted” Islam of the Muslim refugees seems to emerge, all the more that they are meeting job opportunities linked to their community practices.

The discourse of the asylum seekers reveals their wish to strive for a new life in a country seen as modern and free. The Haitians sent to remote lands of the « interior », like in the state of Mato Grosso, to work on construction sites, do activate this imaginary. Most Brazilians are reluctant to accept such physical and remote jobs. The same phenomenon explains that Bangladeshis and other Muslim communities are employed in the cold halal meat processing storage plants in southern states, such as Paraná. These jobs are badly tolerated by the Brazilians due to the difficult working conditions.

This job network is community based. New Muslim migrations have been nurturing a huge halal chicken and bovine meat market. Let it be reminded that Brazil is ranked as the first country for external avicultural sales. Export sales of halal meat are developed with Muslim

countries. Halal slaughter necessitates specialized Muslim workers and a control by the Islamic religious authority on the halal slaughtering methods and the meat. The presence of a sudden increasing population of Muslim refugees in Brazil has an important impact on this market. In terms of the origin of the labor force, besides the Brazilians converted to Islam and Syro-Lebanese descendants, the recent migrants represent a major incentive. In addition to Afro-Islamic migrants, the main workforce is from Middle East and South Asia (i.e., Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Bangladesh, and Pakistan). The halal job market is particularly interesting: thousands of new migrants are employed today in the 25 main halal certified slaughterhouses in Paraná⁸. The Muslim Beneficent Society (SBM) of Londrina, a big city of Paraná, has helped the implantation of Muslim migrants in the region, as the society has been actively fostering social support and religious expression. Today, different religious congregations are orchestrating the cult and religious life of the communities, locally more numerous and organized.

It is of course much too early to provide any conclusions about the social impact of the new Muslim migration. Many Syrians interviewed express their doubts about a “melted Islam” in Brazil. They also face misunderstandings concerning their strict practices and veil wearing from part of the Brazilians, but not to a critical point.

Conclusion

Recent migrations in Brazil are still too new to allow conclusions on their sociological impact in redefining identities. However, the initially welcoming context has become much grimmer since 2014 and has favored political reactions and crumpled identities. Haitians, who have been welcomed according to Brazil’s open international politics, are confronted with hostile reactions of racism on behalf of the Brazilian society, itself vulnerable. The Syrians are able to depend upon former migratory networks, but are confronted with settlement difficulties especially when their status is too downgraded and the market job does not always correspond to their expectations. Finally, newer migrations, as those of South Asian refugees, find unexpected development paths in halal production.

In a country like Brazil, where there is a constant re-negotiation of cultural diversity and the social construction of race, these new migrations certainly tend to stir issues of identity and race.

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Notes

1. See data from the UNHCR and the National Committee for refugees (CONARE):
<http://www.acnur.org/portugues/recursos/estatisticas/dados-sobre-refugio-no-brasil/>
2. The Comitê para Refugiados (CONARE) is an interministerial body chaired by the Ministry of Justice and responsible for delivering the asylum documents.
3. All these figures should be considered cautiously as (i) many political migrants have not registered asylum applications (ii) any economic migrants may apply for asylum documents.
4. In 2013, about 5,256 applications were registered and among them 1837 were from Bangladesh.
5. <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>
6. In the early twentieth century, the Syro-Lebanese migration concerned mainly Christians. Today, it is a Muslim migration. The Muslim charitable organization of Santo Amaro (Sociedade Beneficente Muçulmana de Santo Amaro, SOBEM) is linked to the local mosque and organizes actions in favor of Syrian refugees.
7. See. http://www.brasilpost.com.br/2016/06/20/xenofobia-brasil-justica_n_10558742.html
8. See <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2015/09/1683855-conheca-a-trajetoria-de-refugiados-no-brasil.shtml>.