

Profile:
 Black Pride Brazilian Style:
 The *5th Encontro de Cinema Negro Brasil
 Africa and Caribe*, Rio de Janeiro from
 24th November – 1st December 2011

Yaba Badoe

Spending time with Zozimo Bulbul at the cafe outside the Odeon Cinema in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, is a bit like taking part in a Brazilian edition of *This is Your Life*. Friends old and new: musicians, photographers, actors, journalists, film directors and choreographers, interrupt our conversation to greet him. They tap his shoulder, embrace him, laugh, and when Zozimo draws their attention to me, I realise that the distinguished old man that I'm sitting with, is introducing me to a *Who's Who* of creative talent in Rio.

Zozimo Bulbul is a black, Brazilian actor and film director. He is also the curator and inspiration behind the *Encontro de Cinema Negro Brasil Africa & Caribe*, a meeting of black film makers from Brazil, Africa and the Caribbean. I was lucky enough to be invited to the 5th of these annual meetings, which are organised by workers and volunteers from the *Centro Afro Carioca de Cinema*. The event is as much a sharing of ideas as it is a festival that celebrates short films, features and documentaries made in Africa and its Diaspora.

On this, my first visit to Brazil, I was struck by the incredible wealth and dynamism of Rio de Janeiro. Every other building is corseted with scaffolding as the country prepares for the World Cup in 2014. Despite the frenetic building work and restoration of classical 19th century edifices, Rio feels like an enchanted city. So much so, that taking in the view from waterfront restaurants at dusk is like stepping into a gilded world of glamour. As the nightscape of high-rise buildings glitters seductively, it's easy to believe that all is well beneath the luminous veneer of this South American country that's recently overtaken the United Kingdom as the world's sixth largest economy. As every traveller knows, it's impossible to come to grips with a new country in seven days. And in a society with 200 million racially diverse inhabitants, to

attempt to make sense of what's going on beneath the surface with a mixture of school girl French and broken Spanish, is deeply perplexing.

Janaina Olivereria, a young Brazilian director and rapper, was one of a group of Brazilian women who helped me see another side of Rio. Her short film, *Virus Africana*, was screened at the festival to tumultuous applause from her friends. The film describes her infectious joy at her first visit to Africa as part of a Brazilian delegation to FESPACO in Burkino Faso earlier this year. Janaina is a member of a women's NGO founded in 2005, *Estimativa*, that works in Rio's schools and favella shanty-towns, to improve the confidence of black children. Despite the image projected to the world, Brazil is 52% black. "Race is invisible here," Janaina explained. "It's everywhere, but no one wants to talk openly about it."

The women of *Estimativa* have put race firmly on the agenda by hosting cultural events that highlight black hair politics. They host these events to generate pride in Afro-Brazilian culture, which has been largely ignored for generations. *Estimativa* believes that only by recognising and appreciating the tremendous contribution of Afro-Brazilian culture, will previously excluded communities feel validated. With their headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, *Estimativa* has branches in several regions of Brazil, which, as well as organising local film and documentary festivals, have been able to establish a presence on the internet.

After showing me excerpts of their slickly produced magazine programmes that they stream online because the internet is cheap, the sisters from *Estimativa* invited me to a runway event that they'd organised at Morro do Formiga, a favella in the hills of Rio.

"Are you happy to use public transport?" Janaina asked me.

"But of course!" I replied, half wondering if the sort of public transport she was suggesting was similar to Ghanaian tro-tros, which I haven't used in years. In fact, to get to our destination we travelled on a spanking clean, new metro system that makes the London underground and Paris metro seem antiquated. A long journey by metro, followed by a short taxi ride to the edge of the favella.

"Taxis often don't want to bring you here," Janaina warned, as we began a steep climb up a hill in a Volkswagen van. Journey's end was a community hall full of excited, yelling children. Many of them had their hair braided in brightly coloured wool. Before I arrived they'd paraded up and down the

runway displaying their new hairstyles. They started screaming and jumping as I was introduced to them as a guest of honour from “Africa.” A small girl scrambled on to the stage and gazed up at me. Overwhelmed, I managed to say a few words about how deeply honoured I was to be with them and how much I was enjoying Rio. Nina, another member of *Estimativa*, valiantly braved the screech of the microphone to translate what I said into Portuguese. The children continued screaming and jumping.

Estimativa is the brain child of Brazilian actress Jana Guinond. Psychologically deflated and extremely frustrated at not getting the sort of roles she wanted, Jana decided that the only way to help herself and other black women made invisible in mainstream Brazilian media, was to create an alternative. With the help of other black media professionals, graphic designers, directors, camera people and editors, *Estimativa* has so far made three magazine programmes aimed at black women. Their latest venture has received over 4,000 hits. In tandem with creating a presence for black Brazilian women on-line, *Estimativa* works with children from kindergarten to secondary school age. The organisation aims to improve self-expression by teaching school children how to make short films, at the same time as raising awareness of the beauty and versatility of black hair in its natural state. Like Zozimo Bulbul, who started making films after he grew tired of being cast perpetually as a slave, black women artists in Brazil are cementing relationships with the continent of Africa as a means of reaffirming their African identities. In doing so, they are prising open a valuable space for themselves in their country’s changing consciousness.