

Jair de Almeida Junior (2016) *Aquele Abraço*. Fonte Editorial: São Paulo, 552 pp. (ISBN 978-85-92509-27-9). Paperback.

William Frost

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In this well informed, broad and insightful account of Brazilian culture and its roots, Jair de Almeida Junior brings together quotes and ideas to give an in-depth portrayal of the modern country as a product of its past. The author goes into detail about the components that made up Portuguese culture prior to and during the colonisation of Brazil, such as the central role played by the Catholic Church whose power had risen unchecked, due to a lack of any significant secular movement. The nature of colonisation is also considered, whereby the Portuguese used the Greeks and the Romans as their examples for how to effectively spread their culture. Almeida also points out that Portugal was the first nation in Europe to decentralise their culture into the new world; something that was later emulated by other European nations. Portugal's great skill and ability in the construction of ships and navigation technology is shown as being a central factor as to why they were such effective colonisers.

The author also focuses on the influence of medieval culture that the Portuguese brought intact to their colonies; this influence can be seen in Brazilian interest in superstition, mysticism, folklore and carnival. Some of the fears and belief systems are manifested in the folkloric characters of the "Lobisomem" (the Wolf man), the Curupira and the Saci-Perere, all of which emanate from Portuguese, Indigenous Brazilian and African backgrounds, respectively. These observations give depth and context to discussions of superstitions that are well known; these elements are part of the modern day Brazilian imagination and unearthing their origins is intriguing.

In a similar way Almeida considers the significance of "Carnaval" as a central aspect of Brazilian culture. He traces the evolution of the ancient Portuguese "Entrudo" from which it heralded and goes on to discuss the creation of the first "Escola de Samba" in 1928 in Rio de Janeiro.

Almeida moves on to consider the influence of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger in terms of how Brazilian culture can be interpreted, on the principal of identity being directly linked to memory. He therefore highlights the importance of the

Portuguese contributions to the foundations of Brazilian society, with institutions such as the Catholic Church playing a central role in terms of shaping culture. This fundamental assessment of the nation of Portugal, which of course founded Brazil, is put within the context of the 20th century Western philosophical canon.

Another issue that is addressed by Almeida is the “Caipira” culture, which he describes as an organic part of Brazilian society that has evolved over centuries. Predominantly found in São Paulo state, whilst the geographical region is relatively small, the importance that it has as a component of national culture is much greater. It is at this stage that the author tells stories of his own family and neighbours from typical “Caipira” neighbourhoods, such as Vila Nhocuné. At times these descriptions appear out of context and read more like journalistic accounts or an autobiographical study. This change in tone, as compared to the rest of the book (which is written in a more academic style), leads to a lack of continuity and the narrative at times deviates off course.

However, the text progresses to an engaging and relevant discussion on Brazil’s most iconic landmark, the Christ the Redeemer statue on Corcovado Mountain. The author describes how the statue has become Brazil’s most famous and well recognised image, and how, despite its origins, it has become secularized. Almeida points out the absence of a cross, reducing the idea of suffering and sin to a more open and modern vision of religion and how it can be interpreted. It is these views and opinions on religion that are the most original and engaging as the author provides a modern interpretation of traditional values.

Aquele Abraço is an interesting book that encompasses many topics and themes including history, philosophy, theology and anthropology. This breadth of subject matter means that at times the book loses some focus and tries to address too many issues in one volume. It would therefore be hard to put it into a specific genre. However, this also means that many different readers from varying disciplines will be able to find something relevant in the book. The strength of the work comes from the obvious level of research into prominent issues, which Almeida brings to life with attention to detail and engaging insight.