

Rio de Janeiro's Global Bazaar

Syrian, Lebanese, and Chinese Merchants in the Saara

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The Saara, a popular commercial region in Rio de Janeiro, has been largely defined by the presence of the many immigrants who have made it a thriving commercial hub and a center for multi-ethnic residence. While the region was historically a Syrian and Lebanese enclave, the arrival of a new wave of Asian immigration in the 1990s generated important changes and ethnically marked tensions. A social-historical and anthropological analysis of conflict and resolution in the Saara sheds light on different notions of identity and commerce in Rio de Janeiro's bazaar district, often referred to as a "mini United Nations."



Introduction

The Saara is at once Rio de Janeiro's most enduring and most vibrant popular commercial area. It comprises eleven city blocks and 1,250 stores (Ribeiro 2000; Worcman 2000), and is frequented daily by many people from all over the city. According to the president of its principal organization, about 150,000 people a week come to the area. Located in the center of the city, near primary administrative and business centers, and not far from the major seaport, the Saara's customers are attracted by both the wide variety and the low prices of its products. First established by immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, the area quickly became a stronghold for migrants who have imbued it with several layers of distinct character. Besides Portuguese and Spanish

immigrants, there has also been a marked presence of Syrians, Lebanese, and Armenians, as well as Jews of various origins. More recently, the area has become home to Chinese and Korean immigrants as well. All of these groups tended to make their livelihood through commerce.

The Saara derives its name from the organization that represents the local merchants—the "Association of Friends of Alfândega Street and Adjacent Areas." The term "Saara" refers to both the commercial area and the association. In order to differentiate between the two, we will use "Saara" to refer to the place and "SAARA" in all capital letters to refer to the merchants' organization. The fact that "Saara" is pronounced the same way in Portuguese as "Sahara" has stimulated over the years an endless flood of "Arabian Nights" and "Oriental Bazaar" jokes and caricatures. This zone is characterized by buildings that are designed to combine home and workplace. Businesses consist mainly of vending stalls and retail stores, as well as some small tailor shops and bakeries. Its proximity to the Atlantic port in Guanabara Bay also contributes to the area's unique configuration. In the nineteenth century, Rua da Alfândega was the main route around which the city developed and home to one of its principal crossroads. At that time, the area was inhabited mostly by Portuguese merchants. The region as a whole was characterized by the presence of large wholesale companies, as well as warehouses for the storage of goods—primarily drinks, foodstuffs, textiles, and odds and ends. The goods were distributed by merchants or peddlers, who supplied the capitals as well as the smaller cities in the interior of the province (Blyth 1991; Elhajji 2008). With the advent of industrialization in Brazil, during the first decades of the twentieth century, business on Rua da Alfândega began to change. Industries began to distribute their goods directly to storeowners, allowing for retail commerce to develop (Ribeiro 2000; Worcman 2000).

Saara's evolving cultural identity has reflected the shifting diversity of the ethnic groups that make it up. The immigrants that would definitively influence the area began arriving as early as the end of the nineteenth century, and continued to arrive in large numbers until the 1920s. According to the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)'s Demographic Census of 1920, there were 50,246 Syrian-Lebanese immigrants in Brazil at that time. Among the many motivations for this migration were the economic crisis suffered by the silk industry in Lebanon, World War I, and the French and English imperial presence in the Middle East (Pinto 2010). In the case of the Syrians and Lebanese, many migrated because they were expelled from their homelands by Ottoman imperial expansion. Sephardic Jews also began leaving the Middle East for Brazil during this time, as did Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern

Europe. Both groups sought to escape persecution and ethnic discrimination in the hopes of building better lives in the Americas. The presence of different ethnic groups—especially Sephardic Jews, Syrian and Lebanese Maronites, Christian Orthodox, and Catholic Armenians—each of which specialized in different commercial activities gave the Saara the semblance of an oriental market like a *suq* or bazaar. All of these groups coexisted with other ethnic groups as well, such as the Portuguese, Greek, and Spanish. This diversity led the merchants themselves to refer to the marketplace as “Rio de Janeiro’s mini-UN” (Bittencourt 2004). In the 1940s, efforts by the city to clear out and modernize huge swaths of the downtown’s built environment led to the birth of collective action among threatened merchants in the area. The construction of Avenida Presidente Vargas, which was part of the plan to remodel Rio de Janeiro designed by the French urban architect Alfredo Agache, would have countless consequences for the city. It particularly affected the continuity of the urban landscape that characterized the Saara area. Intrusive interventions in urban renewal did not stop with the construction of Avenida Presidente Vargas. The construction of the Avenida Diagonal, which was also part of the original Agache Plan, began to be discussed by the end of the 1950s (Blyth 1991; Elhajji 2008). These violent changes to Rio de Janeiro’s urban space threatened to destroy the Saara’s thriving market.

In this context, the merchants decided to create an organization that would officially represent their collective interests, as well as ensure their continued presence in the region. The Association of Friends of Alfândega Street and Adjacent Areas was created in 1962, at which time its first governing board was formed and the current borders of the commercial area were delineated (Blyth 1991; Worcman 2000). Still in existence today, this organization is a nonprofit with the objective of administering local affairs, such as street cleaning, garbage collection, transportation of goods, advertising, parking, and local security. The organization of these services demonstrated the merchants’ powerful ability to mobilize both politically and socially, and reaffirmed their common interests.

History of Arab and Chinese Communities

Syrian and Lebanese immigrants first arrived at the port Cais Pharoux, situated in the current-day square Praça Quinze in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth (Elhajji 2008; Pinto 2010). The majority of them were Orthodox Christian or Maronite, with a minority of Muslims. As they arrived with Ottoman passports in hand, they were mislabeled *turcos* (Turks). The large-scale migration to Brazil that oc-

curring in the 1920s comprised mostly Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, who initially established themselves on Rua da Alfândega and in the area around the square Praça da República. Jews of diverse origins were the next to arrive, with Sephardic Jews arriving from the Middle East and Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. The Ashkenazi Jews, who generally came from Poland, Russia, and Romania, also arrived mainly in the 1920s. They first established themselves in Praça Onze, and only later in the area around Rua Senhor dos Passos.

When the immigrants first arrived, networks of family relations played a fundamental role for them. Immigrants tended to already have a few relatives established in the area who could serve as mediators for them. These relatives would house the newcomers and facilitate their assimilation into their new life. They would help them find work, sometimes by establishing them in their own trades as tailors, shoemakers, or cobblers, as was common among Jewish immigrants (Elhajji 2008; Pinto 2010). Or they would establish the newcomers as peddlers, providing them with a variety of goods—buttons, ribbons, ties, perfumes, textiles, yarn, needles—which were to be transported in suitcases or trunks and sold door-to-door. It was through these familial networks that newcomers were able to secure goods on credit, paying for them only after they had sold them.

Despite the predominantly economic motivations of this migration, the first generations of these immigrants claimed that they intended to return to their homelands as soon as political circumstances allowed it. Meanwhile, as time went by, they grew accustomed to their new home. As they married and started families in Brazil, returning to the homeland became nothing more than a lost dream (Grün 1992; Truzzi 1992). Immigrants of Arab origin had often been farmers in their homelands. But they did not turn to farming in Brazil, as the nation’s large-scale agricultural system was completely unlike the small-scale subsistence farming that they knew. The plantation-style farming that was the norm in Brazil meant access to the land was no simple matter. Instead, as they toured the countryside with their suitcases and trunks full of wares, these immigrants established themselves as peddlers. They would bring products from the city to the countryside and vice versa, often fulfilling specific requests for products.

Even though Portuguese and Italian merchants had previously filled the role of peddler in Brazil, immigrants of Arab origin introduced new business models to the commercial activity, including higher-quality goods, high product turnover, sales and clearances, and sales made on credit (Ribeiro 2000; Worcman 2000). As their profits increased, peddlers were able to open

stores in bigger cities, and different ethnicities began to specialize in the sales of different goods. As business prospered, the immigrants were able to help bring over relatives from the homeland and to help them the way they had been helped. They would help newcomers acquire goods that they could then hawk. Many of these new immigrants established themselves in the vicinity of Rua da Alfândega, often living in the apartments above their stores.

As their businesses prospered and new generations of their families were born in Brazil, the immigrants' intention of returning to the homeland effectively disappeared. This happened as their children and grandchildren embraced a Brazilian identity while still maintaining familiarity with their ethnic origins. The biggest difference and source of conflict between the generations can be found in the process of choosing a successor for the family business. Generally, children were prepared to participate in the family business by older generations, who would socialize them in the various inner workings of the business from an early age. They would normally begin by assisting in general services, then move on to first the gift-wrapping station, then the cash register, then accounting, until they were finally deemed ready to run the store. From the point of view of the older generations, it was necessary for their children to experience these various intermediary stages before gaining full control of the store. However, many of the younger children did not wish to become merchants and instead aspired to professions that would provide them with more social capital.

The Chinese and the Koreans

The 1960s saw the arrival of new groups of immigrants who would change the urban landscape as well as local business. It was during this period that the first Chinese immigrants arrived, followed by the first Korean immigrants, although it is difficult to give precise numbers.

In the mid-1990s, large numbers of Asian immigrants began arriving in the Saara. They were all subsumed under the general category of "Asian." The majority were Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and the south of mainland China, speaking mostly Mandarin and Cantonese. South Koreans and Japanese immigrants also came to the Saara, although in much lower numbers. In 2012, the Chinese consulate in Rio estimated that the Chinese population in Brazil numbered around 150,000 (Shu 2012). Asian immigration happened so rapidly that at the time it was deemed by other local merchants to be an invasion of sorts. Asian immigrants tended to come from São Paulo, where the business sectors in which they specialized—the selling of gifts, stationery, and sweets—

were already too crowded. The majority of them did not speak Portuguese. They had generally entered Brazil through the city of Foz do Iguaçu, having journeyed first from Asia to Ciudad del Este in Paraguay.

The phenomenon of Asian immigration constitutes a diaspora. In the case of the Chinese, they generally left Taiwan and mainland China for a journey that would ultimately bring them to North America or Europe. But there were a number of unique characteristics that distinguished this diaspora from that of the Syrians and the Lebanese. It was marked, for example, by a high degree of mobility. This means that the Chinese tended to immigrate to places temporarily, rather than putting down permanent roots. Their migration was also marked by a constant, strong relationship with their hometowns in China, maintained through a complex system of solidarity between familial and clan networks. Chinese immigration was not entirely composed of cheap labor, either. It also included many entrepreneurs, who arrived with sufficient finances and resources to set up shop in their new nations. This was made possible by their aforementioned familial and clan networks (Liu 2000; Ma and Cartier 2003; Zhang 2001). More than 90 percent of Brazil's Chinese and Korean population had originally established itself in São Paulo, in the area surrounding the commercial street Rua 25 de Maio and in the Liberdade and Bom de Retiro neighborhoods. The rest were scattered throughout Brazil, predominantly in Rio de Janeiro, Paraná, and in areas with international ports.

The Asian presence in the Saara in Rio meant more competition for local merchants. But aside from new commercial practices, the Chinese also brought with them distinct methods of financing and their own culture. They were often perceived by local merchants as closed and as unable to master the Portuguese language. But these immigrants continued to arrive in large numbers, and eventually Asians became the third-largest ethnic group in the Saara—outnumbered only by the Syrio-Lebanese and the Jewish community, according to SAARA's data.

For the Chinese, this quick ascension was made possible by the availability of resources, which allowed them to buy and rent stores, including some of the more historical storefronts. This availability was sustained by a credit system that was based on cooperatives. This system influenced the Chinese and Asian economy in the twentieth century and is considered one of Asia's most successful economic models, even in Japan. The model is based on the formation of networks structured by familial and clan connections, leading to the creation of financial institutions that are similar to banks (Chung 2000). These networks then form relationships with one another, thus multiplying their financial capacity and their labor pool.

In other words, the merchants of Chinese origin were not tied to the conventional financial and credit models of Western capitalism. The Chinese system functions under certain rules of conduct, under which cooperation through familial or clan networks reduces competition. It does not eliminate competition altogether, but favors collaboration over the individual development of a group or business. This leads networks to leverage their available resources in order to finance commercial ventures. According to some studies, these networks are behind China's current private businesses and are one of the mainstays of that nation's high productivity rate (Chung 2000).

Conflict and Dispute

The arrival of Asian immigrants in the Saara set off a series of conflicts and disputes between them and other ethnic groups. Local business was affected by the chronological distance between the different groups of immigrants, perceived cultural differences in commercial practices and in more general behaviors, and perceived differences in adaptability and degrees of assimilation, as well as by a general stereotype that Asian immigrants were part of the "Chinese mafia," a representation that was very common in the local press as well as among Saara's merchants, especially after a series of stories about Chinese merchants in São Paulo accused them of selling illegal products (see, for instance, *Isto É Brasil* 2001). For the traditional merchants who had been established in the area since the beginning of the twentieth century, the arrival of the Asian immigrants in the 1990s and 2000s constituted a social drama. It was a particularly difficult time, as local commerce was already feeling the effect of Brazil's economic crisis in the 1990s, high interest rates for financing, and one of the highest tax rates in the world. Although the family ties among the traditional merchants in the Saara meant high employee productivity rates, this proved insufficient to save their businesses from the supposed "invasion" of Asian immigrants. (In 1996, *Jornal do Brasil* published an extensive report about the "sudden" arrival of Chinese and other Asian immigrants at the Saara marketplace, "A invasão chinesa do Saara" [The Chinese Invasion of Saara's Marketplace]. See also Ribeiro 2000.) The new immigrants sold new goods at prices with which others could not compete. This meant that many Arab and Jewish merchants were forced to sell their businesses to Asians, who were almost always willing to pay cash up-front, according to Enio Bittencourt, the SAARA's president, and other merchants (Bittencourt 2004).

One of the business strategies employed by the Asian merchants was the opening of the dollar store. The local merchants from other ethnic groups

reacted strongly to this practice, as they viewed it as a disloyal form of competition. Since they considered the Asian merchants to be a closed group that was unable to master the Portuguese language, they did not form bonds with them. In fact, Asian merchants tended to not establish relations beyond the strictly commercial vendor-client one, thus failing to conform to local social norms that treated the market as a public arena for the performance and definition of identities. The Asian business model, which is also based on family-run businesses, makes use of more extended networks of solidarity and financial support. It was this economic model that permitted the Chinese to arrive in the Saara with financial resources, labor, and a high-productivity business model. Their relationships with suppliers, for example, were also mediated through such networks, and thus allowed them to acquire merchandise at very low costs (Chung 2000). As a result, Asians were able to sell products extremely cheaply and in many cases to even practice dumping (liquidation of products at prices below their value, normally done to kill competition).

Another important factor in the success of Chinese entrepreneurs in the diaspora can be found in the work contracts of their employees. While merchants of Syrian or Lebanese origins tended to have familial or personal relations with their employees, relationships between Asian merchants and their employees were often based on debts, financial or otherwise. This meant that the merchants could expect dedication from their employees (Chung 2000). Many go so far as to consider the relationship one of servitude. The result is that the productivity of an Asian employee tended to be higher than that of one who was protected by Brazilian labor laws. Furthermore, the environment in these workplaces was much stricter, and many employees complained about not being allowed to have conversations during work hours and being expected to be constantly in motion.

The issue of gender also seems to have influenced the productivity of Asian employees, particularly the productive role played by businesswomen and female shopworkers. This visibility of women in Chinese businesses distinguished them from other ethnic groups that were already established in the Saara. We noticed that the role of women in stores run by Arabs was mostly reserved for behind-the-scenes work, with some exceptions, as our ethnographic research showed. In general, the store hierarchy can be said to begin with those responsible for general maintenance and cleaning, followed by the "scouts," vendors, clerks, and cashiers, up to the managers and owners (with this last group responsible for opening and closing the store). In stores run by Arabs, women generally only occupied the top of this pyramid in the absence of available men. But in the case of the Chinese, it has been observed that women

participate actively in the administration of the store. They can be seen at cash registers and helping customers. Meanwhile, men tend to do the heavier work, such as security and the monitoring of the products.

There is yet another characteristic that distinguishes the Asian merchants from those of other ethnicities: they are always in transit (Ma and Cartier 2003). In other words, they are enmeshed in a system of mobility and circulation. This does not mean that some of them did not establish themselves in the Saara on a more permanent basis. However, the fact is that the supposed Chinese "invasion" has all but disappeared today. The Asian presence in the Saara dissipated almost as rapidly as it emerged. As was discussed earlier, the ultimate objective of this migratory flux was often to gain access to markets in developed nations in North America and Europe. Moreover, the choice of Brazil seems to have been related to the facilities offered them by the local authorities, which allowed them access to the most prestigious ports. As restrictions on immigration and on both licit and illicit business have tightened since 2000, these groups changed routes in favor of less restrictive nations (Ma and Cartier 2003).

Previous waves of immigrants had arrived in the Saara with the idea of eventually returning to their homeland, but had ended up establishing themselves in Brazil and assimilating themselves into its culture instead. Asian immigrants, on the other hand, were constantly in motion. They were distinguished by their mobility and constant circulation, which enormously affected their perspective on assimilation to the local culture. Immigrants of Syrian and Lebanese origin sought to establish themselves in local commerce, and maintain the family business by preparing their children to succeed them and maintaining the expectation that they would continue the family legacy. But Chinese immigrants did not seek to establish themselves in local business, and instead pushed their children to seek positions in multinational businesses run by Asians but not in Japanese or Chinese enterprises run by more assimilated Asians who had migrated to Brazil in earlier waves a century before. Such enormous differences in perspective no doubt played a role in the animosity that other groups harbored toward the Asian immigrants. Even today, when there is no longer such a marked presence of Asians in the Saara, local merchants continue to refer to the Chinese as "them." The president of the SAARA association sums up local perceptions of the Chinese best when he says: "They are extremely closed. They came and opened their stores here but without trusting anybody" (Bittencourt 2004).

In some ways, the later arrival of Chinese immigrants in the Saara brought the issue of integration to the forefront. Already in their second and third

generation, immigrants from other ethnic groups were mostly assimilated into the local culture and had firmly established themselves in the prevailing social order. But the presence of the Asians inaugurated a new succession process that seems to repeat the cycle of ethnic relations suggested by Ezra Park (Park [1916] 1967). Furthermore, the Chinese did not share the local memories of assimilation and mobilization. For example, they did not share the memory of mobilizing against the construction of Avenida Diagonal in the 1960s. These shared collective memories are an important component of the identities of the local merchants. The arrival of the Chinese and the Koreans led to changes in the social fabric as well as the cultural forms of the Saara. New forms of relations and social interactions were subsequently introduced in the region.

The SAARA

While the Saara has neither gained the cultural relevance of a Middle Eastern bazaar nor become the city's Chinatown, it has important ramifications for Rio de Janeiro. It is simultaneously an economic enclave and an arena of dispute and definition of identities. The Saara can be said to be the site of the construction of shared values that result in a prevalent sense of belonging. This sense of belonging gains in significance when considered alongside the diversity of diasporas that have brought merchants to the area. It is thus possible to consider it a type of *moral region* (Park [1916] 1967), one that is built upon a work ethic and that is distinguished by the different processes of succession adopted by distinct ethnic groups.

In this context, it is easy to see why the SAARA (the merchant association) was attributed such importance. The organization was directly linked to the possibility of permanence and continuity of the economic activities that the immigrants had developed in that marketplace. However, the significance of the Saara seems to transcend economics. The Saara has necessitated the development of particular social relations, as evidenced by the solidarity and mutual assistance between merchants of diverse origins that have come to characterize the network of local relations. The interactions between different ethnic groups that share the space thus became a fundamental element in the construction and reconstruction of the Saara's identity.

However, the above-cited statement made by the president of the SAARA about the supposedly closed nature of the Chinese also demonstrates that the discourse of unity and consensus in Rio de Janeiro's so-called mini-UN is not without its conflicts and daily disputes. The organization prides itself on an efficient security system with about forty agents that can be found sprinkled

throughout the consumer public. These private security guards are police officers who work the Saara during their days off, but remain directly linked to the local station. This security structure has contributed to the Saara's low level of violence. The most common crimes are pickpocketing and shoplifting, according to Bittencourt (2004), citing SAARA's data. The security structure has also prevented the accumulation of street vendors, beggars, and street children in the area. The SAARA is also active in regulating the conduct of the merchants, and this has no doubt minimized the impact of cultural differences between the Asian and the Syrian and Lebanese immigrants. If a merchant breaks one of the organization's rules, he risks having a security guard physically prevent him from working. It is rare but not unheard-of for the private guards to block the entrance of a store so that customers cannot enter in retaliation for the breaking of such a rule. This means that, to a certain extent, all ethnic groups have had to conform to local rules and business models.

However, this does not prevent the SAARA from turning a blind eye to certain behaviors that contradict the local laws, such as displaying merchandise outside of the stores and even selling pirated goods. (However, according to Bittencourt [2004], the responsibility to follow such laws falls on the owners, and the SAARA does not get involved in cases where the police seizes goods or punishes merchants.) The SAARA thus plays a fundamental role in the area, as on the one hand it imposes certain rules upon the merchants, and on the other hand it defends the interests of those same merchants against external actors such as tax collectors, police officers, competing street vendors, and mafia groups. The organization also acts as mediator of internal conflicts that result from cultural differences. It even mediates external conflicts at times, as in the episode in which its security guards were involved in the arrest of two members of the tongs¹ who had come to the Saara to extort Chinese merchants (Bittencourt 2004). Nevertheless, there are also other groups to which the merchants belong that will defend their interests, such as the networks so common to the Asian merchants. These organizations can be based on ethnicity, religion, affinity, or familial bonds.

All of this points to the complexity of the structure and social organization of business in the Saara, which is governed by webs of affiliation and belonging that crisscross and often overlap. The Saara's merchants thus have various organs at their disposal when it comes to negotiating their interests and settling their disputes. In such cases, the SAARA plays a fundamental but not exclusive role. It cannot stop new alliances from being made or broken as a result of conflicts. Networks of alliances formed in this way may establish their own parameters or morals that may or may not coincide with the Saara's norms.

The Muslim *hisba*, which establishes moral norms that regulate the markets of the Middle East, and the Chinese *guanxi*, which maintains relations based on trust, are examples of the distinct values that govern these groups' business practices and are part of the Saara's daily reality.

Notes

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1. Tongs are Chinese gangs that have an armed branch that resembles a mafia group. According to the local police, all five Taiwanese mafia families—14k, Sun Yee On, Bamboo Union, Fuchien, and Flying Dragon—have a strong presence in Brazil.

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Muslim Identities in Brazil

Engaging Local and Transnational Spheres

Paulo Gabriel Hilu da Rocha Pinto

Pinto presents case studies of Muslim communities in Rio de Janeiro and the Tri-Border Region in order to explore how the process of identity formation in these communities intersects with local as well as transnational imaginaries of Arabness and Muslimness. He demonstrates that despite their homogeneous representation in the media, Muslims in Brazil are a decidedly heterogeneous group whose identities play out differently in the many cultural arenas in which they participate.



Brazil has one of the largest Muslim communities of the Americas,¹ which has been formed by diverse waves of migration from the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine) since the nineteenth century and by the conversion of non-Arab Brazilians. The Muslim community is mostly urban, with large concentrations in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguaçu. The majority of Muslims in Brazil are Middle Eastern Arabic-speaking immigrants and their descendants. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of non-Arab Brazilians who convert to Islam.

The first Islamic institutions in Brazil started to appear in the 1920s, but they only gained strength in relation to "Syrian-Lebanese" or Palestinian ethnic and/or national associations in the 1980s.² As most Muslim immigrants to Brazil came from the Arab Middle East—mainly Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine—they were identified with the large Arab community that exists in Brazil (Karam 2007, 10–13). The Arabic-speaking immigrants who came to Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century were mostly Christians, and they managed to overcome or minimize the effects of the widespread racism and discrimina-