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**Informal dynamics of survival  
in Latin American prisons**

# **‘It was already in the ghetto’: Rap, religion and crime in the prison**

Interview with Djalma Oliveira Rios, aka ‘Cascão’

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On 22/08/2015 I met Djalma Oliveira Rios, also known as Cascão, member of the rap group Trilha Sonora do Gueto (Ghetto Soundtrack). It was in a club, in Osasco city, where the group would play a show. In between the sound check and other arrangements, we got to talk about many subjects. Cascão introduced me to Eliezer and Fininho, two other ex prisoners who also took part in the interview. As we can see below, what excels the most in their speeches is what I believe to be most valuable thing among prisoners and ex prisoners whom I talk to: their reflections.

**Karina: I would like you to tell me a bit of your experience. When were you arrested? When did rap come into your life?**

**Cascão:** I’m son to a north-eastern mother and I grew up in Capão Redondo (São Paulo suburbs) of the 80s. When I turned 14 I began to work as an office-boy. As we did payments in the banks, we started to analyze the entrances with the idea of committing robberies, so we formed a gang. In 1988 I was sent to FEBEM (institution destined to detain underage lawbreakers) for the first time. When I turned 18, I was already a bit known and I kept on robbing banks. After six months I went to prison for two years and ten months, then I went on parole and after six months I got caught again. Those were 8 years in prison, it was when I started writing my poetry. I shared a cell with a guy who used to write lots of lyrics (rap lyrics), and one day I asked him: ‘Do you think that if I wanted I could write like you?’ He made fun of me, so that day, I didn’t go out for association, I stood in the cell and wrote poetry which is my success nowadays. It was when I found out my gift, just like that, because he made fun of me, but only when I got out of prison, in 1999, could I put it in practice.

**Karina: So you discovered your gift in there. Were you already religiously converted at the time?**

**Cascão:** No, I got converted out on the streets, but I learned God’s word in there. For us, who hail from the ghetto, the criminals (by criminals, I don’t mean those who commit the crime, but philosophers and strategists), we first do the time to be converted afterwards. While you are in jail you are part of what’s in there, so, if there’s a rebellion, you must be on the side of crime. So that’s the deal, when I was in, I was a scoundrel, when I got out I’ve stopped, to put my music in practice, to work and build a stable life...then I went to church.

**Karina: What was the reaction from your old mates when you left crime, headed towards rap music and also got religiously converted?**

**Cascão:** That’s an illusion some people have. For example: me and Eliezer were partners in crime, so I say- ‘I’m done with the crime thing’, and he answers — ‘So you’re gonna die’. It’s not like that, it’s about respect.

**Fininho:** But respect must be earned. Everybody already knew Cascão’s history.

**Karina: There is a phrase I’ve always listened during my research, that is: “nobody is obliged to do anything, but everything has consequences”...**

**Cascão:** But that’s it. The consequence is the law of life. Nobody has obligations to nobody, but for example, if someone gets caught with me, gets arrested and I manage to escape, then I am in debt to him, I must support him, with lawyer’s expenses, support his family, providing cigarettes, hygiene stuff, etc, for we are partners. It’s not a mandatory obligation, it’s a sentimental and moral obligation!

**Karina: You talk about the assistance between partners, but there’s also the assistance which comes from the PCC...**

**Fininho:** The assistance from the PCC is the assistance from the prison population itself. So, the comrades support who is in maximum-security prisons, because in the future I can be the one in there. It’s not like we are paying taxes, it’s a moral obligation too. Sentimental and moral! Some people thinks that the PCC gives with one hand and takes away with other hand, but the Command doesn’t extort people or force them to admit crimes they did not commit, the fact is, nobody is forced to do anything.

**Karina: But some people think that the PCC has laws and punishes the ones who disobey them.**

**Fininho:** I am not a brother (PCC member), but I do what’s right. Those who are born in the ghetto already know how it works, and it’s not a PCC thing. If you do what’s wrong, you’ll be labelled wrong.

**Karina: But the prisoners aren’t induced, for example, to admit to a crime they haven’t committed in exchange for money?**

**Fininho:** No way! There’s a kind of prisoner who does it, and he does it because he wants to, not because he is forced to. It’s not something seen with good eyes. It’s a part of crime but it’s not ‘the crime’.

**Karina: Cascão, you waited to get out of prison get religiously converted but a lot of people get converted in there.**

**Cascão:** Yes, many people.

**Karina: Is it viewed badly by other prisoners?**

**Cascão:** No, on the contrary. If there's a class which is respected by the scoundrels, these are the believers. They represent the balance in the world, without them, the world would be dominated by evil. In jail it's the same, the scoundrels want to escape, they want to talk on the phone, they want to make deals to get money, but they also know that on that corner are the church brothers, praying and holding on, got it?

**Fininho:** I can add that in many prisons nothing can be done in the morning before the call. If someone from crime dies, there's a collective prayer and the evangelical guys are the ones in charge of it. Only after the prayer can the inmates start their daily activities.

**Karina: But when a prisoner gets religiously converted, sometimes he may be suspected of 'hiding' behind the bible, so he won't face punishment for some mistake. Recently, some prisoners told me that God must be respected and that's why they can't accept those who use Him to cover up their faults. I was wondering if, what some may see as prejudice can be seen also as an opportunity, because otherwise he would be punished.**

**Cascão:** That's it, opportunity. There's no such thing as prejudice.

**Fininho:** What's more interesting for us? A little brother praying or a potential member of a rival gang?

**Eliezer:** You used the right word: opportunity. Your daily behaviour will show your choices, if you really opted from the heart or by mistake. If it's by mistake it's a repeated mistake, because someone that falters doesn't falter just once. God means transformation, it's not an illusion, God is a miracle, is a providence. Changes happen to those who believe and follow His word. So the day-to-day will prove if the choice is from the heart or if it's a trick to deceive people. A lie can't live forever, you know.

**Karina: Now changing the subject a bit. You went to college after leaving prison, right?**

**Cascão:** Yes. I graduated in law and studied theology too.

**Karina: You've been through prison, went to college, and have been successful with Trilha Sonora do Gueto. And at the same time you also maintain your commitment to life in suburbs and prisons, you give voice to them. No success or graduation could make you lose your humility...**

**Cascão:** Listen, I was once debating with a guy about realities. He argued using theories from books, you know,

from law school, and I replied: 'Man, I agree with you. Everything you've just said I had to swallow in college, I ate it and drank it like food or water, but your words are a load of crap, let's discuss reality!'

**Karina: Are you saying that the realities of life aren't compatible with theories from books?**

**Cascão:** That's right. And if you're not humble your conceptions will change, you will get away from the truth.

**Eliezer:** Cascão lives in truth and stood humble. He knows it deeply.

**Cascão:** It's because I've lived it.

**Fininho:** Only who lived it can talk about it.

**Karina: I've been following your interviews, speeches, videos, posts and I identify a lot what I say and write with the things you say, but you know, I see a lot of the PCC in your words...**

**Eliezer:** Cascão has the authority to say everything he says, because he lived it, so do I, I've been in prison for eighteen years and I'm back on the streets for one, so I can speak, we live it nowadays. Just like in the book you brought (he was holding a copy of a book written by me),<sup>1</sup> 'We live it — while pointing his finger to the abbreviation PCC on the cover, — It's not a fashion to be followed, it's a fact!'

**Cascão:** It's a fact!

**Eliezer:** Born and raised against the oppression that has always existed! Tell me, who kills the most in Brazil? It's the military police! Last week the cops killed 18 around here. The PCC did what no government, anthropologist or even the pope could do, it humanised the crime.

**Cascão:** Humanised crime! Let's not say 'crime' because the 'lawists'<sup>2</sup> will say that crime means the ones who commit the transgressions, let's say it humanised the ghetto.

**Fininho:** But it all began in prison. Before the Comando, the prisoners used to rape visitors, abuse them, they extorted the comrades, after the birth of the PCC these things don't happen anymore. Nowadays you can't even slap a guy in prison, so killing is unthinkable, in prison or in ghetto.

**Eliezer:** They value life. Nowadays life is valuable in the ghetto.

**Cascão:** Won't die.

**Eliezer:** There are two sides of the coin, because dead can't speak, so, before the attitude, both sides must be listened to. It was vital to turn things into what they are today, to raise this banner. Life is priority, always.

**Karina: You posted a video on facebook about tickets for a concert. You said something like: 'You'd better buy in advance, because if you leave it for the last moment and the tickets are sold out, you won't be able to enter, no matter who you are, because everybody is equal'. When you mentioned 'equal' I**

1. Biondi, Karina. *Junto e Misturado: uma etnografia do PCC*. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome; *Running Side by Side: an ethnography of prison life in Brazil* (forthcoming). North Carolina University Press.

2. In Portuguese language the words 'lawist' and 'rightist' are the same: 'direitista', so there is a double meaning for the Cascão's speech, referring not only to those who embrace the right wing politics but also those who state their thoughts in the terms of law.

**thought how many times I'd heard this in the prison system. I'd like to know if this idea of equality has reached prisons and ghettos after being used by the PCC in their slogan.**

**Cascão:** No, it was already in the ghetto, it's kid street slang. I'll give you an example... We're playing football and Eliezer says, 'If you play against me I'll kick you down', then I say, 'I shall get payback, 'cause we're equal'. So, it's an old thing that became bigger after, like Eliezer said, crime got humanised. It began to be said: 'If you wanna kill someone, your equal, if you kill with no explanation, with no reason, you're gonna die too'.

**Eliezer:** In fact, it began back in 2002: Peace, Justice, Freedom and Equality.<sup>3</sup>

**Karina: Things have changed since then, right?**

**Eliezer:** Correct: Because, unfortunately, in the beginning it was like that: 'I'm part of the team, so I'm the man!' But now, if someone comes up with that attitude, he will hear: 'What? So you're the man? No dude, Equality! Because you've got to listen to the other side, there's no democracy without participation. The government speaks and you keep your mouth shut? No, you must have your voice listened to, that's why 'i' stands for Igualdade (equality). There's no more of the old ways saying that only

the big ones have their say, everyone has rights, everyone has a say, a voice and a point of view.

**Cascão:** That's right.

**Karina: The governor accredits to his police force the reduced number of homicides in São Paulo...**

**Fininho:** Even parrots can speak. The reality is different.

**Cascão:** It's the Command... everyone knows it. Society is hypocritical.

**Eliezer:** There's no way of hiding, only liars do. And this reduction in death did not take a decade, it was quicker, there was a general call saying: 'It's equality, life gets paid with life, let's listen to both sides', and the deaths stopped.

**Karina: To close our interview, do you think your views about the PCC may cause you to be accused of apologising for crime?**

**Cascão:** I have the following opinion, if you have something to say, say it. It doesn't matter what others think. But if you want to be a conventional person, you don't have to say anything, you just sit and wait for everyone around to speak for you. So, who was born to speak has to speak, without fear of being labelled apologist. No matter what the others think. They can think whatever they want.

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3. The PCC's motto.