

# This so-and-so samba

Academic world tries to understand how a genre was transformed into the most important one of the Brazilian music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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hey announced and warranted that samba was going to end. That was what Assis Valente (1911-1958) used to say, in a modern parody of his famous composition about the end of the world, sung by Carmen Miranda back in the 1930s. They even said that the genre had been killed by the *bossa nova*, and, later on, by tropicalism. Decades afterwards, in the 1990s, the executioner was said to be the romantic studio *pagode* (less traditional samba) done with synthesizers. Although it has faced the competition of several crazes in the last twenty years and appears little in the

media today, samba is the most popular and long-lasting Brazilian musical rhythm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, besides being one of the most remarkable cultural manifestations of the country – indissociable from Carnival.

Just like jazz and blues in America, samba traversed a century with mutations, fusions, adhesions and experiments. A rhythm that rekindles itself every year in the merrymaking of Carnival and in the disks of its most vigorous representatives today: Paulinho da Viola, Zeca Pagodinho, Dudu Nobre or Luis Carlos da Vila, amongst others. How to explain so many announced deaths and rebirths and understanding such popularity that it still enjoys? Or why samba imposed itself, in the primordial days of the phonographic and radioindus-

try, or was adopted by Getúlio Vargas to establish a cultural identity?

These and other themes are discussed in three doctoral theses of the most important, because they help to redimension the historical and cultural role of samba. The odd thing is that the authors are all citizens of São Paulo, a fact that seems to have helped to provide a useful distancing for coincidentally complementary and revealing readings to be made of a music so marked for being *carioca* (from Rio de Janeiro), although it came from Bahia and has installed itself in São Paulo as well.

In *Abençoado e danado do samba* [Blessed so-and-so samba] Ricardo José Duff Azevedo resorted to an extensive collection of 7,000 sambas to show values of the Brazilian oral tradition,



Elegant samba: popular culture despised by the elite, but a source of erudite creation

He explains why songs of the genre are part of the popular imagery. Presented to the Postgraduate Program in Literary Theory and Compared Literature of USP's College of Philosophy, Literature and Human Sciences (FFLCH), the dissertation set off from the principle that samba lyrics represent an extraordinary collection of something that could be called "popular discourse".

Azevedo points out that popular cultures and their manifestations tend to evolve by means of "long duration patterns". The phenomenon is opposite to the modern, mass and erudite cultures, which follow "short duration patterns" – almost mechanically in search of the "new", of the "new form". Accordingly, in sambas, for being connected with long duration processes, the pro-

cedures with language and many themes are recurrent throughout the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until today. Some of them are the family, work, parties, growing old, death, religiosity, the "us", amongst other subjects linked to concrete day to day life.

**Rascal** - Azevedo's lengthy thesis – still without an editor – brings together about 500 samba lyrics, gathered from a universe of over 7,000 pieces of music, of which he did a pre-selection of 4,800 thousand. Instead of snipping out historical periods, he tried to demonstrate recurrences in a broad spectrum, which made possible another comprehension of the importance of samba. The author regards as a mistake, for example, the fact that many studies lo-

cate the "bad guy" in the 1930s and 1940s and talk of his "disappearance". What may have disappeared, he explains, is a certain version of the rascal. "Samba talks about rascality and has adopted a 'rascally tone' since the first recorded samba until now. In actual fact, the bad guy never existed in a more cultured discourse, also present in the lyrics of Brazilian popular music.

At the same time that popular cultures are usually solemnly despised by the cultural elites, they have marked and been sources for a significant part of Brazilian erudite culture, through every kind of appropriation. "I defend the idea that samba lyrics can only be understood and evaluated when seen as an expression of a certain model of conscience. In the ambit of Brazilian

popular music, I see tropicalism as the best finished and clear representation of a model I called 'official.' The author used several tropicalist lyrics in a comparative way to highlight the characteristics of samba lyrics.

While the tropicalist compositions tend to presuppose a reading, rereading and interpretation of the reality seen by their authors, samba lyrics are usually created for sharing, immediate communication and memorization, always by means of broad themes, capable of generating great identification amongst people. Hence its popularity and massification. Following this logic, it is a production for which the music invites the community to take part, "since its function as a spectator is not to accept its work passively, but to repeat it once again for itself".

In the case of tropicalism, for example, these themes tend to disappear from the schooled and official discourse, which opted for more specific themes, in a way that was often distanced, analytic and impersonal, as if it were proposing a theory. "I do not intend to criticize tropicalism, to say that samba is better or worse, but rather to stress that the lyrics of tropicalism were created from a constructive model with ethical and esthetic standards different from those used by the majority of samba composers, whether they are literate or not."

**Industry** - Samba more and more ceased to be, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a traditional music, to become a product of the so-called entertainment industry. The possibility of professionalizing popular music, the arrival of commercial radio – in search of novelties – and the nationalist project of the Getúlio Vargas government showed the involvement of a good part of Brazilian society in the creation of the "national samba", a mixture of tradition and modernity. This is the essence of the thesis by José Adriano Fenerick, *Nem do morro, nem da cidade: as transformações do samba e a indústria cultural - 1920-1945* [Neither from the hill, nor from the city: the transformations of samba and the cultural in-

dustry - 1920-1945] – also defended at USP's FFLCH.

Fenerick saw in the modernization of Rio de Janeiro in the early days of last century, in tune with the emergence of new means of communication, a propitious scenario for samba to undergo countless transformations. Accordingly, from the 1920s, with the dissemination of the phonographic industry, the rhythm began to transform and modernize itself. It ceased to be just a party held in houses of sorceresses, to gain other meanings. At a first moment, it became a musical genre, identified with the black population of Rio de Janeiro. Soon afterwards, it became a mixture of music and dance, identified with Brazil. "Samba turned carioca and took the lead for the fact that Rio was thought of, those days, as a sort of 'picture postcard' of the country", the researcher explains.



he recording industry had a great influence on the emergence of this new kind of music, which Fenerick calls "modern samba". *Samba-pagode*, practiced as *partido-alto*, which used to be made up of improvisations following a theme, could last a whole day. With its recording on a disk, there could

no longer be improvisation, in the lyrics at least, since a definitive version was established, registered in acetate, and which came to be disseminated by society as well, through the radio, to the whole country. Furthermore, the samba composer gained the status of a professional musician, particularly the singers, since the composers had countless problems to establish themselves.

In this aspect, one of the topics dealt with by Fenerick was the still little investigated sale of sambas – almost always addressed as folklore by biographers and historians of popular music. "The need to show music in a meager market created the *jabá* (the practice of paying a radio for airing a song), or, worse still, the 'purchase and sale' of samba." The sociological aspect of samba was also investigated. If in the popular imagination there remained the recollection of Francisco Alves and Carmen Miranda, amongst others, that of the hill was associated with something bad – re-

presented as the place of blacks, rascals, loafing and violence. All in a very pejorative way. This image was to perpetuate itself since the end of slavery at least.

The radio was seen by the government, and by a good part of the intellectuals, as a "noble" means of "educating the people". According to the researcher, the discourse was potentialized, emphasizing the ideological profile that the intellectuals, and even the Vargas government, wanted to accomplish. Not by chance, the invention of samba-exaltation came from this period, the greatest symbol of which was *Aquarela do Brasil*, by Ary Barroso (1903-1964). A mythology was created that "pure samba" came from the slums of the city of Rio de Janeiro, but Fenerick concluded that both samba from the slums and samba from the middle class were, and still are, interlinked. "The samba musician on the radio would go to the slum to buy a samba to record, in the same way that the samba musician from the school would go down to the city to parade in Carnival."

**Varquism** - The political aspect highlighted by Fenerick appears in a more in-depth way in the study by musician and historian Magno Bissoli, the author of *Caixa preta: samba e identidade nacional na era Vargas - impacto do samba na formação da identidade na sociedade industrial: 1916-1945* [Black box: samba and national identity in the Vargas era - impact of samba on the formation of identity in the industrial society: 1916-1945], another thesis defended at USP's FFLCH. Bissoli claims that Getúlio Vargas, while he was in power, hitched a ride on the popular acceptance of this musical genre and gave a considerable impulse to its dissemination and affirmation as an icon of the country. "The process of popularizing samba was imminent, but certainly Vargas's policy contributed towards its consolidation in the national panorama", he explains.

Like the fascist doctrines of Europe, the post-1930 government was always characterized by its exaltation of nationalism. But how to disseminate, the researcher asks, a national identity in a Brazil with only four centuries of history and where the major part of the population was made up of descen-



Dancing samba under the gaze of President Getúlio Vargas: using artifices similar to Mussolini



Pure emotion: music that invites the community to take an active part

dents of slaves and marginalized persons, particularly blacks and half-breeds? Vargasism then tried to forge it on the foundations of culture, by resorting to artifices similar to those used by Benito Mussolini in Italy. Its methods ranged from the projection of films on the walls of houses and the installation of loudspeakers in squares in the interior and in shantytowns to the nationalization of vehicles of communication and censorship of the press.

The New State, set off by a coup in 1937, invested in this proposition by controlling culture and media. In actual fact, back in 1931, President Vargas created the Official Propaganda Department, which was later to be transformed into the Press and Propaganda Department (DIP), in 1939, which became responsible for the censorship of the press and the jingoistic propaganda of the dictatorship. With its growing and promising power of influence, radio became fundamental in this process. In 1940, Rádio Nacional passed to state control and started presenting music programs with a popular content.

One highlight in this wave of jingoism that took hold of the country was the composer and broadcaster Henrique Foréis Domingues (1908-1980), the Admiral. Known as the “highest rank in Brazilian radio”, he became “an important figure for the propagation, by radio, of the idea of a nationality”. In the same period, the Brazilian Orchestra was created, with maestro Radamés Gnattali (1906-1988), who, on the wave of nationalism, would interpret Brazilian music with the same treatment afforded foreign music. In those days, Bissoli reports, various compositions arose, some from famous samba composers who supported Vargas and the New State. Names like Ataulfo Alves, João de Barro (Braguinha) and Moreira da Silva composed and interpreted some of these compositions, in a clear example that samba was more and more reaching the great masses.

Another point raised by the research was the one that, to be accepted by society, particularly by the elite, samba had to “whiten” – by being adopted by white singers and composers. Like Noel Rosa, whose work left the certainty that samba would never die. More than that, it would be eternal. •