

Envy and “corporeal lockdown” in Maracatu de baque solto (Brazil)

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INTRODUCTION

In this short paper, I briefly discuss how music and dance are related to health and emotions in Maracatu de baque solto (free-beat Maracatu), also known as Maracatu rural (rural Maracatu), a Carnival performance staged in Pernambuco state, Northeast Brazil.

Several Maracatu groups, with some founded in the early 20th century, are present in the small cities and rural settlements that dot the Zona da Mata Norte, a region dominated by the sugarcane monoculture. They are highly variable in size (from 20 to 200 performers) but are always composed of several masqueraded dancers, two poets improvising chanted verses (*mestres de apito*), a brass section formed by two to four musicians (*músicos*) playing trumpets and trombones, and a group of five percussionists called *terno*. The men and women performing in these groups are mostly rural workers and sugarcane cutters earning very modest incomes. Every year, they spend an impressive amount of time, effort and money on participating in the Carnival competition taking place in Recife, the state capital[2].

I first approached Maracatu within the scope of the anthropology of the emotions, a topic I explored in my previous research among the Romanian Roma (Bonini Baraldi, 2021a). Working on these matters implies, among other things, seeking to understand which emotions, affects, feelings or, more generally speaking, subjective experiences are involved in musical performances (Wolf, 2001; Becker, 2004). In this regard, it came as no surprise to learn from my hosts, the inhabitants of Condado, that “Carnival brings happiness” (*O Carnaval traz alegria*), an emotion that for Judith Becker (2004) is universally associated to musical performances. However, as my fieldwork progressed and my relationship with the “Leão de Ouro” (*Golden Lion*) Maracatu members became closer, I understood that other feelings are also at stake in Maracatu performances, specifically, envy (*inveja*).

ENVY AND CARNIVAL

We may define envy as a mix of distress, anger, sadness or pain deriving from what another person has and the subject does not have, whether a material object or an intangible quality (Schoeck, 1969/1966; Alberoni, 2000/1991). This is generally portrayed as a negative emotion: in Christian teleology envy classes as one of the seven deadly sins, and Dante Alighieri placed the envious people in Purgatory, with their eyes sewn shut. Indeed, but what does this emotion have to do with Carnival? How and why does envy interrelate with Maracatu dance, movements, sounds, poetry, and costumes?

In the Zona da Mata Norte, Carnival is the occasion for people to publicly show off their magnificent costumes; their abilities in dancing, playing music, or improvising poetical verses; their physical resistance to weight, heat, tiredness. This need and desire to show off one’s material, moral, and artistic qualities generates the effect of exacerbating the glances, thoughts and comments from other performers, both from members of the same group and from other groups. Correspondingly, comments of the following kind are frequent: “Where did he find all that money for his costume?”, or “Why is she dancing in the first line while I’m in the second?”. Carnival is marked by aesthetic profusion, enhanced competition, power relationships, and financial interest. Exaggerated glances toward what others do and have, may therefore awake the malicious, envious eye, locally known as *olho gordo* (“fat eye”), or *olho grande* (“big eye”).

As is the case in many other regions of the world (see Schoeck, 1969), the evil eye is deemed to cause misfortune to the envied person in Pernambuco[3]. During Carnival, such misfortune may manifest itself in various ways: a musical instrument breaks, a poet’s whistle suddenly does not sound, the support bus tyre gets a puncture... However, the most common misfortune striking those targeted by envious feelings is illness. According to the local discourse, illness is due to “something that enters” the body to undermine its normal functioning. Indeed, when a *caboclo de lança* experiences strong

pain in his leg, it is because somebody envies him; when a *baiana* gets sudden stomach pain, it is probably because another woman is envious of her[4].

Just as envious persons may turn to witchcraft (*catimbó*) in order to cast afflictions on their rivals, those thinking “something” has entered their bodies may consult a popular healer of the Umbanda-Jurema worship[5] in order to “take it away” (*tirar*). However, even before reaching this eventuality, the *maracatuzeiros* undertake a large set of preventive measures to avoid any possible health problem caused by envy. These measures all revolve around a fundamental concern: to “close the body” (*fechar o corpo*).

CLOSING THE INDIVIDUAL BODY

The expression *corpo fechado* (locked, closed body), applied commonly all over Brazil, refers to a strong, healthy, protected body, as opposed to an open, exposed, vulnerable one. In the context of Maracatu de baque solto, this prescription becomes very explicit: if you want to perform safely, you need “to close your body” (*fechar o teu corpo*) or, likewise, performing with an “open mouth” (*de boca aberta*) is not recommended.

In Condado, this “corporeal lockdown” takes place across various dimensions: physical-physiological, spiritual-religious, and aesthetic. The physical and physiological closure implies avoiding sexual relations (*resguardo*) and prohibiting menstruating women from performing. A body that is releasing its vital substances outwards is an open, permeable, and unprotected body, where “something” can also “enter”. All permeable points of the body are therefore “closed”: with the eyes of the *caboclo de lança* covered by sunglasses, the mouth with a white clove, the pores of the skin with red dye.

The spiritual closure of the body is undertaken through several rituals, generally performed in the local houses (*terreiros*) of Umbanda-Jurema. The men performing in Maracatu groups as *caboclos de lança* undergo a ritual named *calço*, which literally means “to wear”. The Umbanda-Jurema medium, through sung-spoken sentences enounced while in a state of trance, closes the dancer’s body by “covering” it with an ensemble of invisible entities (*entidades*). This invisible protective shield is “put” (*botado*) onto the dancer on the first day of Carnival and “removed” (*tirado*) on the last day.

The visual aesthetics of the costumes may also be interpreted as a means of closing, and therefore protecting, the performer’s body. The shiny materials applied throughout the costume represent devices for reflecting, and therefore defending the dancers and musicians against the “big eye” of envious rivals. Moreover, the geometrical patterns sewn into the *gola* (the cape worn by *caboclos*) act as mazes in which malicious entities get lost, “bonded” or “glued” (see Gell, 1998). Under the *gola*, the *caboclo de lança* carries a wooden frame (*surrão*) on his shoulders on which hang three or four heavy bells (*chocalhos*): when he walks, jumps, and dances, the *caboclo* disseminate sounds into the environment. Like the highly reflective materials of the *gola*, the metal sounds of the bells act as an “acoustic shield” to close and protect the body of the *caboclo*. Indeed, the sound of rattles and bells have a general apotropaic function in many different societies (Schaeffner, 1978/1936; Ricci, 2012), and commonly employed in various Carnival traditions of rural Europe as protective devices against evil forces[6].

CLOSING THE COLLECTIVE BODY

The same concern over closing and locking the body also exists on another scale, that of the Maracatu group as a whole, as a “collective body”. Indeed, any Maracatu group is locally perceived as something more than the simple addition of separate, discrete members (the participating dancers and musicians). Rather, the group emerges more holistically as a “an “animated being” or even as a “supernatural being”. Local expressions always refer to the Maracatu as a single entity: termed a *brinquedo* (literally meaning toy, puppet or doll) or *bicho* (animal, creature). Its composition also becomes a metaphor for a living being: the internal section is called the *miolo* (core, crumb, kernel) and consisting of the more sensible, fragile, vulnerable members, such as the king, the queen and the women. The *miolo* is protected, “locked in”, by two lines of *caboclos* called *cordões* (“chain sticks”), who are comparable to hard skin protecting the softer core parts. Moreover, the *calunga* (a black puppet carried by the *dama de paço*), strongly associated with spiritual and religious protection, infuses a “soul” into the *brinquedo*.

During Carnival, this decorated, animated “being” moves in the public space, showing off its visual, choreographic, musical, and poetic beauty. As is the case for any individual, the Maracatu as a whole may “activate” the envious eye and therefore requires protection. Once again, the protective strategies are multiple and act across both the spiritual-religious and aesthetic dimensions. Various

rituals are performed in order to “close the yard” (*fechar o terreiro*), protecting the headquarters of the Maracatu and the path it will follow, notably crossroads, “open spaces” where malicious entities may “enter” to undermine the normal flow of the *brinquedo*.

In Zona da Mata Norte, it is commonly said that dancers and musicians should “close the Maracatu”. The complex collective movements (*manobras*, lit. manoeuvres) performed by various dozens of dancers, demand a high level of interpersonal coordination, a concept expressed locally by the term *consonância* (consonance). On achieving consonance, thus when everybody is moving accordingly, the Maracatu is considered to be closed and therefore protected. Conversely, whenever the *manobras* are not well coordinated, there is a great danger of the group “breaking off”, a negative event expressed in the concept of *desmantelo* (dismantle, fracture).

My hypothesis is that the way of conceiving sounds in Maracatu also expresses this struggle to “lock in” the Maracatu. In addition to the “acoustical shield” provided by bells, the nucleus of the five percussionists (*terno*) perform very fast and loud rhythmical patterns (*samba* and *marcha*), which alternate with moments of silence in which the poet intones improvised verses. Interestingly, the expressions applied locally to judge the quality of a *terno* performance reveal an opposition between the concepts of “open” vs. “closed”. Precisely, “to hit the *terno* [in a] closed [way]” (*batendo o terno fechado*)” is synonymous with good coordination among the percussionists, while the “the *terno* is pierced/punctured” (*o terno está furado*) refers to poor ensemble coordination. The recordings of the *terno* in separate tracks (see Davies et al., 2020; Fonseca et al., 2021), will potentially allow us to “translate” these abstract concepts at the level of formal music analysis.

CONCLUSION

My hypothesis supposes that the aesthetic components of Maracatu (dances, collective choreographies, and performed sounds) can be understood as a struggle to build an animated, collective body and protect it from possible threats coming from visible or invisible agents. According to this interpretative line, Maracatu becomes a ritual performed in order to ensure individual and collective health.

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NOTES

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[2] There are only a few anthropological research studies on Maracatu de baque solto, mostly in Portuguese (Chaves, 2008; Garrabé, 2010; Amoras, 2018; Teixeira, 2018; Bonini Baraldi 2021b).

[3] The etymology of the word envy, from the Latin *in-videre* (“to look negatively”), suggests this feeling directly relates to the popular concept of the “evil eye”, “*malocchio*” (“bad-eye”) in Italian, “*mauvais-oeil*” (“bad-eye”) in French.

[4] *Caboclo de lança* and *baiana* are the two principal masqueraded characters of Maracatu de baque solto groups. For a complete description of all the characters composing such Carnival groups, see: http://portal.iphan.gov.br/uploads/ckfinder/arquivos/Dossi%C3%AAA_MARACATU_RURAL.pdf

[5] On Umbanda-Jurema worship, see Guimarães de Salles (2010).

[6] In the rural regions of southern Europe, during carnival or winter festivities, it is still possible to encounter masked and costumed characters similar to the *caboclos* of the rural Maracatu, walking in the village streets with rattles hanging from their waists (see Panopoulos, 2003; Raposo, 2010). Among the varieties of local interpretations of this custom, the most frequent is the magical and propitiatory

function attributed to the sound of rattles, a sound capable of driving away invisible entities considered dangerous for the individual and for the entire community and that, during this period of the year, are deemed to be more active and closer to humans. Similarly, the sound of church bells also served in past times to ward off storms and hail, and thereby protect crops.

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