Maracatu in Recife: Cosmopolitan Musical Engagements with Black Politics[1]

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In the Brazilian city of Recife, the capital of the northeastern state of Pernambuco, local music is greatly influenced by strong Carnival traditions. Although today's Carnival celebrations are largely secular, they nonetheless commemorate a yearly transition into the Catholic period of fasting and penance known as Lent. *Maracatu* is a musical genre that has been central to Recife's Carnival festivities for at least one hundred and fifty years. It is, however, more than a genre. Maracatu is also a form of sociality that was and remains crucial to constructions of Black community.[2] It emerged over the centuries from the practices of free and enslaved African descended people whose musical engagements were interwoven with Afro-Brazilian religious practices known in Pernambuco as *Xangô* but identified as *Candomblé* in most other Brazilian states.

Since the twentieth century, a variety of maracatu known as *maracatu de baque virado* (maracatu of the turned-around beat) has been an important part of Carnival for many *recifenses* (residents of Recife). The densely resonant sound of maracatu de baque virado is produced by an array of different sizes of mostly wooden drums, as well as other percussive instruments like cylindrical metal shakers (*mineiros*) and cowbells. Maracatu de baque virado is performed as part of a procession that includes dancing members of a royal court dressed to resemble 18th century

1 This article synthesizes some of the content of the author's book, *The Costs of the Gig Economy: Musical Entrepreneurs and the Cultural Politics of Inequality in Northeastern Brazil* (2022, University of Illinois Press).

2 (Crook 2009; Guillen 2008; Lima 2006)

European nobles. This assemblage of participants comprises a carnival crew known as a *maracatu nação*, which is commonly understood as the most traditional manifestation of maracatu in Recife.

During the early 2000s, Recife's municipal government—in tandem with state and federal institutions—began to create new policies to amplify the audibility and profitability of Carnival traditions like maracatu. Government institutions, cultural workers, and the public began to understand local music as an expression and conduit of multiculturalism, one that ostensibly fostered an inclusive sense of belonging among citizens. Accordingly, official pre-Lenten celebrations in Recife and across the state began to be marketed under the aegis of "The Multicultural Carnival" (O Carnaval Multicultural). More broadly, Pernambucan and federal institutions prioritized multiculturalism as part of efforts to boost democratic participation among citizens. In part, the shift to multiculturalism in Pernambuco was prompted by a desire to ameliorate growing social inequality. In addition to the historical baseline of social stratification caused by slavery and its legacies, during the early 2000s, Pernambucan people were facing high rates of poverty, pollution, and violence due in part to decades of federal neglect during Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985) and inflation crises during the 1990s.[3]

In Pernambuco, multiculturalism became a set of policies and discourses intended to address various social and economic concerns, including incentivizing entrepreneurship among citizens, branding Pernambuco as a tourist destination, and integrating the state into global markets.[4] Such concerns are outcomes of neoliberalism, a core economic policy and normative

[3] (Hecht 1998; Teles 2012)

[4] This openness does not mean negating or abandoning national identity (Appiah 1997; 1998; Roudometof 2005).

social influence within late capitalism. Beginning in the 1970s in many Global Northern countries and in the 1990s in Brazil, neoliberal policies have transformed the state into an entity whose primary role is to uphold and expand market logics. One of the effects of this transformation has been the formation of socioeconomic norms and pressures that compel people to make themselves into enterprises.[5] This ideal is a requirement of the globally ascendant "new economy" or "gig economy," which consists of precarious project-based work within the service and cultural industries.[6] In addition, since the 1990s, multicultural policies have coalesced with neoliberal economic strategies to redefine culture as a multipurpose, commodifiable resource.[7]

In keeping with multicultural neoliberalism, the Multicultural Carnival in Recife became a vehicle for expanding the city's economy. Each year, numerous musicians and other cultural workers received sponsorship to work during Carnival. Meanwhile, Carnival boosted local tourist and service industries by drawing thousands of local, national, and international visitors to the city over a weeklong period. The economic goals of the Multicultural Carnival went hand in hand with institutional and vernacular efforts to burnish Recife's reputation as a unique place anchored to its traditional roots, but nonetheless in step with modern cosmopolitanism. Carnival and related multicultural policies were meant to show insiders and outsiders alike that Pernambuco is different from and therefore not subordinate to (inter)national forms of cultural hegemony.

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5 (Bishop 2012; Foucault 2010; Rose 1998). As David Harvey (2005) argues, late capitalism is structured around the idea that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2).

6 (Bishop 2012; Cuenca 2012; Gershon 2017; McRobbie 2015)

7 (Dávila 1997; 2001; 2012; Hale 2006; Olivieri 2004; Povinelli 2002; Yúdice 2004)

The traditional yet cosmopolitan multiculturalism displayed at the Multicultural Cultural is evident in the variety of musical genres included in the celebration. For example, *caboclinhos* a genre with a distinctive, trotting rhythm represents the state's Indigenous population and maracatu represents Afro-Brazilian people. Meanwhile, the *frevo* music played by energetic brass bands, as well as the forms of contemporary pop music included in Carnival, represent the state's interracial, urban populations. In other words, people in Pernambuco hear multiculturalism in Carnival's various musical "rhythms" (*ritmos*) or genres, each of which are generally understood as indexes of—and even proxies for—specific groups throughout the state.

The Multicultural Carnival is thus a key site where multiple participants co-construct Pernambuco as a place that is traditional *and* modern, locally grounded *and* worldly. I understand these processes as "rooted cosmopolitanisms." Cosmopolitanism is generally understood as a sense of world citizenship that individuals and groups use to describe their literal and figurative movements across cultures while challenging nationalism.[8] Accordingly, the musical cosmopolitanisms I heard in Recife juxtapose different styles and blur categories like local and global to project the city into broader imaginaries. Through articulating their cosmopolitan sounds and practices, however, recifenses also construct a sense of rootedness. For example, in performing traditional genres, musicians in Recife feel connected to their peer groups and to the city's history. Rooted cosmopolitanism serves as a stylistic description of many of these musical practices; but it also helps guide comparisons of how musicians contribute and respond to the cultural politics of music in Pernambuco and to the structural conditions that shape their lives.

[8] (Collins and Gooley 2017; Dent 2009; Nussbaum 1994; Werbner 2018)

They connect their roots to music, people, and ideas from distant places and times, simultaneously strengthening and expanding their affiliations beyond Recife.

Maracatu Nação Cambinda Estrela, a group with whom I spent time in 2011, provides a case study for understanding this rooted cosmopolitanism in more concrete terms. They help us address questions such as: how do the goals and ideologies that shape the Multicultural Carnival affect the lives of Black recifenses that engage with maracatu? What is the role of maracatu in their daily efforts to build a sense of community as they experience racism, violence, and disenfranchisement? As a group first established in 1935, Cambinda Estrela's seniority afforded them a prominent place in the Multicultural Carnival. Nevertheless, they felt abandoned by the state. They lacked consistent support from cultural agencies and most *cambindenses* (members of Cambinda Estrela) live in neighborhoods with high rates of violence and infrastructural deficits. Performing in Carnival, however, gave them a chance to challenge their stigmatization and deprivation. Robson, a veteran member explained that Carnival provides a way for "us to have [a] space. . . [to] be with a microphone in a public place, [a] place with authority." [9]

While attending their rehearsals and performances and through conducting interviews with multiple members, I noticed that Cambinda Estrela stood out among other maracatu *nações* (nations) in Recife because their performances were arguably more rooted *and* cosmopolitan. Unlike their peer groups, Cambinda Estrela used the Multicultural Carnival as a platform to directly challenge the status quo. They performed maracatu in a relatively rustic way, drawing

[9] Except for Ivaldo, who was publicly conspicuous, the names of other members of Cambinda Estrela are pseudonyms.

from anti-Apartheid music, and incorporating lyrics calling for the liberation of Black and other marginalized people across the Global South. They highlighted and celebrated their Blackness while also engaging with Pan-Africanism and leftist Latin American ideas to inform their approach to maracatu and to call attention to the deleterious effects of socioeconomic and racial inequality on their lives. The group's efforts exposed how the supposedly benevolent aims of multiculturalism are grounded in—and undercut by—neoliberal ideologies and policies. Rather than fostering inclusion and equality, neoliberal multiculturalism elevates the commodification of culture over more collectively beneficial aims like increasing the quality and accessibility of public education.

The differences between Cambinda Estrela and other maracatu groups became most obvious to me in 2011 when I attended the Champion's Parade for the winners of the Contest of Carnivalesque Groups. The parade included various Carnival genres. While many groups were receiving awards for maracatu, others were enhancing their reputations as one of the best caboclinhos groups or frevo ensembles. At the parade, I focused on the maracatu nações and was impressed by those competing in the Special Group, the highest competitive tier.[10] Their songs had catchy lyrics that poetically described Carnival and alluded to elements of Xangô.[11] This thematic range reflects how nações involve dance, religious rituals, and material culture. [12] These groups also had intricately coordinated, high energy drumming and singing, which were

[10] As in professional soccer, the Carnival competition places groups in four categories. In ascending order these include: Grupo de Acesso, Grupo Dois, Grupo Um, and Grupo Especial. Each category includes a Champion and Vice-Champion that win cash prizes.

[11] Many maracatu songs include words and phrases in Yoruba, but since these are often part of Xangô/Candomblé rituals, they are not necessarily recognized as foreign.

[12] Nações depend on volunteers—including parents of young group members—to help sew costumes, take photographs, provide rides to performers, and so on.

complemented by the sparkling sequined costumes worn by members of the royal court. Although most of the groups are headquartered in racialized, marginalized communities, their performances did not dwell on such realities, opting instead to amplify the celebratory tone of Carnival, a city-wide party.

In contrast, Cambinda Estrela highlighted the structural inequalities faced by Black recifenses, which they presented as a microcosm of the global injustices experienced by a broader, international Black community. They did not compete as part of the Special Group; instead, they were one tier below in Group 1. Nevertheless, they were given a prominent role in the festivities, performing at midnight as they received their first-place award. From the metal bleachers placed alongside a temporarily closed-off downtown street, I began to see some Cambinda Estrela performers begin their procession. In keeping with what I had observed at rehearsals, the approximately one hundred performers ranged in age from children to senior citizens who marched and danced down the street. Ivaldo, their main spokesperson at the time, announced over a microphone that tonight "the Black community [*o povo negro*] will be surrounded by applause, [but] tomorrow we will return to the *favelas* without healthcare, without education." He then introduced "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" as the anthem of the African National Congress, describing it as a "song of the struggle of the Black community, a struggle against apartheid throughout the world. . . Let's join in the international struggle of the Black community."[13]

[13] The song is also the national anthem of South Africa, Zambia, and Tanzania.

Cambinda Estrela's performance of "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" highlighted their ideological commitment to Pan-Africanism and anti-racism.[14] They sang the anthem slowly, in unison, and in its original language, Xhosa. The only instrumental accompaniment included drummers marking the 4/4 beat by hitting their sticks against each other. During this long introduction, Ivaldo sought to include as many performers as possible. He put the microphone up close to several group members, including young children. This threw off the rhythm, but it made it possible for the audience to hear individual voices within the collective. Then the group recalibrated the anthem, making it fit more closely to traditional maracatu: the massive alfaia drums kicked in, awkwardly shifting from the anthem's meter to the staggered, 2/4 rhythm that powers maracatu's baque virado.[15]

The group's inclusion of this foreign, anti-racist anthem clashed with the event's traditional, festive tone and the crowd's response was lackluster. Perhaps most were only there to cheer for Special Group nações, which receive significant attention from government agencies, scholars, and the press. Most of my middle-class friends could name at least one Special Group maracatu, but they had never heard of Cambinda Estrela. Special Group nações are generally regarded as the most authentic, but they also have more resources to appeal to middle-class audiences that expect spectacular productions. Cambinda Estrela, however, stood out to middle-class spectators like my friend, Thiago. Upon attending a Cambinda Estrela rehearsal, he realized:

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[14] As Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman (1992) argue, generic intertextual practices reflect and produce power dynamics. Rather than seamlessly blending the intertextual gaps between the anthem and traditional maracatu, Cambinda Estrela maximize them to call attention to their counterhegemonic political stance (see also Enriquez 2012).

[15] The double-headed, wooden-bodied alfaias come in three sizes: large (*trovador*), medium (*rompinor*), and small (*melê*) (Crook 2009). Drummers also have different roles: the *marcador* (marker) maintains the basic beat and the *virador* improvises over it.

"I was used to middle-class maracatus . . . that one is *raíz* [roots], from the community. The difference is brutal." For him, Cambinda Estrela's sound and style is "roots" because it is less theatrical and more rustic than those of the Special Groups.

For cambindenses, Special Group nações are part of the problem; they qualify as what political theorist, Michael Hanchard (1999) would call 'culturalist.' Culturalist groups reinforce hegemonic Brazilian ideas that conditionally accept Blackness. The public tends to accept Blackness when it is performed as a cultural and artistic expression, but not when it is employed as a political stance.[16] These attitudes are characteristic of multicultural regimes. In order for the state to recognize them as legitimate actors, minoritized groups must exhibit their ethnicities, cultures, and racial identities in ways that are "nonconflictual."[17] However, Cambinda Estrela's performance at the Champion's Parade chafed against this legibility.

In Brazil and around the world, Carnival has long been understood as a liminal time when traditional power structures are temporarily inverted or suspended; it is therefore an opportunity for marginalized people to expose social injustices.[18] Cambindenses readapt this opportunity in the neoliberal era. In performing songs that call attention to racism and homophobia, for example, they seek to politicize maracatu and distance themselves from its commodification. They cite anti-Apartheid leaders like Steve Biko and leftist activists like Che Guevara to position themselves and, by extension, Recife within a Global Southern "imagined community." Like other working-class and marginalized people, they create a kind of

16 (Hanchard 1999)
17 (Hooker 2005; Povinelli 2002, 6)
18 (Liverpool 2001; Matta 1991; Pinto 1994; Scheper-Hughes 1993)

cosmopolitanism that challenges the stratification between North and South, metropole and periphery.[19]

Cambinda Estrela's general approach and their efforts to circumvent the commodification of maracatu makes them an outlier within the domain of maracatu in Recife. In contrast, other maracatus have embraced the commodification of maracatu, in part because their survival depends on it. Some leaders of maracatu groups, for example, tour around the world teaching workshops to foreigners interested in learning how to perform the genre. These tactics are part of a global popularization of maracatu. Since the 2000s, maracatu groups have been forming throughout Brazil and abroad, including the US and Canada.[20]

The globalization of maracatu is, in part, due to its transformation from a processional street genre to a more theatrical spectacle. During the late-1980s, popular interest in maracatu began to grow due to a musical renaissance in Recife that coincided with Brazil's democratization.[21] Since then, maracatu has become standardized and reimagined for stage performances and audiovisual recordings. These changes have influenced how vernacular and institutional audiences expect maracatu to look and sound; they have resulted in the creation of different aesthetic standards that often require more money to achieve. The use of natural ropes on the wooden drums, for example, is a sign of "authenticity," but as members of Cambinda Estrela explained, such ropes are also more expensive than their nylon alternatives. Meanwhile, the most successful maracatu nações have built stronger brands and reputations that make them more recognizable and popular among middle-class audiences and prospective

19 (Brennan 1997; Lionnet and Shih 2005; Melo 2013; Shih 2005)
20 (Cruz 2012; Galinsky 2002)
21 (Lima 2006; 2010; Teles 2012)

performers. However, even the most successful nações cope with financial instability. Therefore, many also rely on additional strategies to increase revenue. Like samba schools in Rio de Janeiro, some nações charge local and international tourists to parade with them during Carnival, thus providing these outsiders with a "traditional" Carnival experience and extra revenue for the nação.[22]

In contrast, in 2011, many cambindenses were focused on finding alternative paths to the commercialization of maracatu, which they see as a process that reinforces structural inequality. Jéssika explained "we don't want to be global, nor do we create celebrations [just] for tourists to see." For her, the notion of tradition normalizes the unethical practices in which other nações supposedly engage to monetize maracatu. With anger in her voice, she elaborated: "We don't participate in the legitimizing discourse of tradition; we make tradition." Cambindenses musically expand maracatu through incorporating non-traditional elements, like the African anthem. But Jéssika's claim is also about how cambindenses make political critique part of maracatu. Part of this approach included prioritizing teaching maracatu to neighborhood children to offer them a safe place to socialize and holding workshops and movie screenings about local and international Black history for community members. Robson claimed that Cambinda Estrela's activism and politicized music earned them a reputation as a "boring maracatu." But being 'boring' and not aiming to stylize maracatu like other groups was part of the groups goal to shed light on injustice: "Some people want to cover up the city's wounds, [but] we expose [them]." Maintaining this project, though, is financially difficult; performing in Carnival is one of the group's only sources

22 (Carvalho 2007)

of funding. Despite receiving a cash prize that year, at the end of Carnival in 2011, the group was still thousands of Reais in debt.

In addition to serving as an example of how politics and aesthetics are jointly constructed, Cambinda Estrela offers an entry point for understanding acts of Black cosmopolitanism within the context of state sponsored neoliberal multiculturalism. One might conclude that the Multicultural Carnival and other Pernambucan multicultural programs shield musicians from the demands of the market economy because they provide sponsorship in the form of grants and infrastructural support. Most musicians, however, cannot make a living from state sponsorship alone. And in fact, fully subsidizing cultural production is not the state's goal. Rather, and in keeping with gig economy principles, bureaucratic programs are supposed to jump-start musicians' income so that they—as opposed to government institutions—can take on the risks of strengthening Pernambuco's relatively weak private musical markets. These conditions transform citizens, including maracatu groups, into the state's commercial partners.

Cambinda Estrela benefits from government sponsorship, but they use their platform to critique multicultural policies and discourses. Cambindenses refract multiculturalism, bending it back towards the politicians, institutions, and individuals who are complicit in reducing maracatu to a spectacle that reinforces the hierarchical status quo. The group thus shows how marginalized people create a kind of cosmopolitanism that belies its reputation as an elitist practice.[23] Cambindenses also reveal that the neoliberal incentivization of entrepreneurialism and more specifically, the commodification of maracatu, penalizes those who cannot—or do not want to—embrace the role of citizen-as-enterprise. Seen in this light, Cambinda Estrela illustrates that

[23] (Robbins and Horta 2017; Werbner 2006; 2018).

although multiculturalism is in theory inclusive and widely beneficial, it also overlaps with—and helps perpetuate—the kinds of structural inequalities it is supposed to redress. At the same time, Cambinda Estrela's musical and political efforts are multicultural and cosmopolitan. They reposition maracatu from a relatively narrow expression of recifense and Pernambucan identity to a broader, politicized sense of connection to the African diaspora and the Global South.

Since the mid-2010s multicultural policies have largely been abandoned in Pernambuco and Brazil, more generally. Efforts to use multiculturalism to democratize the cultural industry and Brazilian society were limited by the economic recession that began around 2013-14, the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and the subsequent rise of Bolsonarismo, which entailed a backlash against multiculturalism and adjacent endorsements of cultural diversity. Meanwhile, as the focus on multiculturalism has weakened, the governmental incentivization of entrepreneurship I observed in the 2010s has become more pronounced and widespread. However, the need to address racial and other forms of stratification in Brazil has seemingly grown as declining economic conditions have exacerbated existing inequalities. Moreover, activism around *Vidas Negras Importam* (Black Lives Matter); the 2018 assassination of Rio de Janeiro's city councilor, Marielle Franco; and the legitimization of anti-Blackness leading up to and during Bolsonaro's presidency, have made the kinds of politicized forms of Blackness that Cambinda Estrela exhibited in 2011 more urgent.[24] Cambinda Estrela's activities also show that even during a time when institutional and vernacular calls for inclusion and democratization were normative, they and other Black Brazilians still faced conditions of inequality that were largely ignored and unaddressed. *A luta continua* (the struggle continues).

[24] (Silva and Larkins 2019)

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