Vem Arrasta-pé: Commodifying Forró Culture in Pernambuco, Brazil

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This work is based largely upon field research conducted in Pernambuco, Brazil, in 1992, 1996 and 1998, on current aspects of the urbanization of the rural *zabumba* tradition and represents a small piece of a larger puzzle being assembled to shed light on this compelling topic. Principally I wish to present a case study of the influence of the tourist industry on the local folk tradition of *festas juninas* (June festivals), or São João (Saint John) celebrations, in Pernambuco of which the animated accordion-driven music known generically as forró is of central importance. More specifically the study proposes to reveal aspects of identity performance amidst the influence of global tourism philosophies that commoditize local mestizo cultures. This work focuses on trem do forró (forró train) a recent addition to the annual festivities, as an icon of the interpenetration of global tourism and local culture, the urban and the rural, the traditional and the modern.

Studies examining the confluence of tourism and culture have been ongoing for several decades and have risen and fallen in popularity In regard to music, this mode of inquiry offers a valuable mechanism through which a measurement can be made of the effects, both beneficial and detrimental, and the transformations in the character of the music traditions. Although studies in sociology and anthropology have extensively visited the topic of guest/host interaction, very few works have focused on these effects in relation to musical cultures.

When the Brazilian musicologist Renato Almeida appeared at the Symposium of Folklore and Cultural Tourism in São Paulo in 1970 seeking a fixed national concept of cultural tourism, his attention, like that of those in attendance, was on the development of a strong tourist trade that would attract many foreign visitors wishing to see the “most typical” Brazilian things and places. What I found particularly interesting about his speech was his condemnation of the tourist industry’s apparent disregard for the preservation of tradition. He invoked the moniker of *fakelore* to stand for all alterations, inventions, fabrications, or sophistications of the reality of folk life. His concern obviously was that the alterations would, over time, replace, or at least distort, the authentic character of the tradition (especially in the eyes of the tourists) and would therefore diminish the “reciprocal intellectual exchange" of tourism (Almeida 1970).

Almeida’s concern for the preservation of the “authentic character" or identity of folk traditions is warranted, although a bit over idealized. While concepts of authenticity can still be found at the center of many folk culture studies, we must acknowledge that it is a modern concept of, delimitation that

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implies a superior position in terms of validity and deems all deviations as bastardized outgrowths. The changes that occur within a tradition must be viewed as being congruous with the natural trajectory of the respective society We must be cautious to remember what Richard Middleton points out in his study of popular culture, that folk music is rarely homogeneous but is subject to social and geographical specification, historical change and cultural layering. The term "folk" itself is merely "a construct which had been developed simply as an antithesis to the threat of industrialization" (Middleton 1990:129). More often than not, musical change reflects societal change, and the change brought on by interfacing with the tourist industry provides an accurate reflection of local economics. Admitting of course that tourism and the quest for the financial benefits of a healthy tourist industry can expedite change, it is nonetheless an inevitable part of the natural fluidity of human development in the modern world. It is naive to expect cultures to remain stagnant and conveniently locked in so that when we have the whim to "visit" them, they are still reminiscent of a fading past, or the romantic and exotic Other. I argue that authenticity if the concept can be effectively applied at all, is found in the daily methods through which local culture articulates transformations while maintaining its sense of identity. Studies of this sort should embrace change as the authentic dynamic of cultural development and must strive to understand cultural change regardless of its source, without the unnecessary baggage of "authentic versus altered" tradition. I have therefore attempted to repel the lure of ethnomusicological exoticism and desist from making value judgments about authenticity in Brazilian musical culture. Instead, I have adopted the third of Charles Seeger's three main approaches to the study of the music of "folk cultures," which is characterized by a rejection of all rigid boundaries in order to view concepts of change as varying practices within one single field, that being music. As global interactions will undoubtedly continue to produce change, the argument of authentic versus altered becomes a symptomatic issue, a by-product of transformation. We must also continue to ask ourselves at what point along the time line do we accept an enduring change in a tradition, as the tradition.

Forró music, rooted in the caboclo (Portuguese and Indian descent) population of the interior of northeastern Brazil, and part of the zabumba tradition, represents a hybrid social phenomenon combining European, Amerindian, and African cultures, European Catholic tradition with local folk Catholicism, rural folklore and legend, tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban. The zabumba tradition, found mostly in the interior of the northeastern states of Bahia, Pernambuco, Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, and Ceará, provides an integral link in the identity construction of the rural mestizo population. Zabumba music serves a central function in rural communities and is closely associated with folk Catholicism and privately organized religious supplication ceremonies in honor of patron saints, known as novenas. The zabumba band, sometimes known as bandas dos pífanos, or simply banda, comprises a zabumba (a shallow bass drum), two pífanos (cane flutes), one or two caixas, or tarois (deep snare—like drums), and a set of pratos (cymbals). Zabumbas traditionally provide the music for the procession and prayer meeting segments of the novena, as well as for secular party time in the late evening. In his exceptional dissertation on the zabumba tradition in Caruaru, Larry Crook fills an enormous void in our understanding of this tradition and reveals the centrality of the zabumba tradition in rural identity construction. The post—World War II years saw the beginning of a very rapid urbanization process in Brazil. In rural Pernambuco, small towns grew into small cities, and being ideally located in the hub of surrounding agricultural settlements, Caruaru emerged as the largest and most important interior city in the state. This confluence of the urban and rural produced interesting results seen in the negotiation of conflicting identities, cultures, and musics. As Crook puts it, "In the Caruaru area most of the population exists socially, culturally and geographically with one foot in the city and the other in the countryside" (Crook 1991: 22). One such manifestation of this interpenetration has been the urbanized form of the zabumba tradition known popularly as forró. The term forró is the collective name given to the multiplicity of rhythmic variations found in the northeast such as baião,

xote, xaxado, maxixe, toada, coco de roda, marcha, mncheim, polca, etc. The origin of the term forró is unclear and as difficult to pin down as the exact origin of the term samba. Much of the literature available on northeastern Brazilian culture traces the term back to the nineteenth-century communal dance celebration known as forróbodo. Conversely individual testimonies tend to support the popular belief that forró is derived from the English term “for all.” This version claims that during the late nineteenth century the English railroad companies that were in northeastern Brazil threw large social parties “for all” to attend. These terms were Brazilianized into forró. Since the double “R” is pronounced like an “H" and the stress is on the last syllable (faw ho), and given Brazil’s history of adapting foreign models, it is easy to see how this has become the popular legend. In either case, it is clear that the term evolved from communal festivities of music and dance, which actually existed concurrently for a period of time. It therefore seems most probable that the term comes from neither one nor the other, but from a combination of the two. Because of a lack of documentation, however, we are forced to speculate on the term’s origin. forró bands, known as trios nordestinos (northeastern trios), or conjuntos regionais (regional bands), generally comprise a sanfona (accordion), a zabumba, and a triangle (Figure 1). Although other instruments such as the reco-reco (scraper) and rabeca (handmade violin) may join in the mix, the basic trio is the staple of northeastern music culture. Named for its geographical location pé de Serra (foot of the sierra), this trio configuration is considered the most traditional style of forró performance.

Figure 1. Trio Nordestino

Meaning in forró music is defined by the position of the practitioners in the societal hierarchy which is to say the marginalized, financially challenged, mestizo population of the drought—ravaged rural northeast. Additionally, the musical culture provides a metaphoric account of aspects of gender relations and social structures of rural life. While it is common to see trios in plaid shirts and straw hats, the traditional attire for the trios is that of the cangaceiros (rural northeastern bandits) from whom the famous leader Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, or Lampião, is thought to have originated, or at least disseminated, the xaxado rhythm and dance steps throughout the northeast. The cangaceiros represent a type of social banditry cangaço, that cropped up due to economic underdevelopment, devastating

droughts, extreme dispersion of authority under the Constitution of 1891, and the “fragility of the institutions of law, order and justice” (Chandler 1978:13-15). For forrózeiros (those who perform forró) using the attire, or in many cases just the hat, serves as an affirmation of regional identity in the face of the encroaching cultural influence of a shrinking world. This identity has become standardized over the fifty years since it was made popular by Luiz Gonzaga, and for all northeasterners, urban as well as rural, this expressive musical culture and its connotations have long stood as emotional and aesthetic representatives of regional identity (Penna 1992).

At the 1986 ICTM Colloquium held in Jamaica on the effects of tourism on traditional music, Gerard Béhague stated in regard to Brazil, “The main vehicles through which folk and urban popular manifestations become diffused and commercialized in a large scale throughout the country are mass media and tourism” (Béhague 1986: 57). Both play central roles in the commoditization of forró culture. During the postwar era of urbanization and outward migration, the music of forró and the identity of those who perform it were diffused throughout Brazil via Rio de Janeiro’s Radio Nacional (National Radio). Pernambucano Luiz Gonzaga was the first forrózeiro to have his music commercialized when his 1946 composition “O Baiao" (The Baiao) was broadcast to the far-reaching corners of Brazil (Angelo 1990; Ferretti 1988). Gonzaga’s music was well received and as his success continued to climb, so did national interest in the northeast as a cultural treasure trove. The following year when a pifeiro (pifano player) from Caruaru, (Vitalino Pereira dos Santos), simply known as Mestre Vitalino, took his zabumba band and his ceramic figurines depicting daily life in the northeast to Rio de Janeiro for an exhibition, the northeast, more specifically Caruaru, was finally on the national map. Soon afterward local officials began to capitalize on their notoriety by staging cultural events for the growing number of tourists beginning to seek out the city Caruaru was quickly developed as a folkloric stopover on the tourist circuit, and the music of the zabumba tradition was appropriated as a marker of regional class and ethnicity for presentation to tourists. The zabumbas were extracted from the traditional context of the novenas and placed in organized festivities meant as cultural displays. Cultural displays, for the purposes of this study are organized public events in which performance and artifacts are invested with meaning and values and are put on display It was out of this context that the concept of a collective Sao João celebration in Caruaru was institutionalized, (and the private celebrations yielded to large organized public festivals.

Over the years, the São João festival has reached astronomical proportions with estimates of visitors growing exponentially. In the six years I have been participating in the festival estimates have swollen from around 200,000 to an incredible estimate of over 3,600,000 in 1998. Seasonal traffic provides 6,000 jobs resulting in a 60 percent increase in local commerce and an 80 percent increase in the income of bars, restaurants, and hotels. Revenues from the month—long festival have topped 1.2 million dollars. Official propaganda for the festival still states that it is the most authentic and traditional festival in the northeast. And it may well be. Half a century later, in interviews conducted in rural Pernambuco, I was hard pressed to find any testimonies that alluded to organized communal festivities of São João prior to World War II. This sentiment was exemplified by the comments of one forrózeiro, ‘Antigamente, São João era uma coisa da casa pra familia e vizinhos. Não era da rua organizado como hoje.” (Formerly São João took place in the house for family and neighbors. It wasn’t an organized street event as it is today). As I continued my inquiry I inadvertently aroused suspicion among locals when I suggested that the festival might be a popular invention. Apparently, the festival has shed the original skin of a tourist event and has donned the cloak of tradition.

This brings me to what I call a compound invented tradition, *trem do forró*. A compound invented tradition is an invention that is built upon a previously invented tradition and has become a tradition in and of itself As a case study trem do forró is reflective or iconic of the clash of rural and urban cultures, of global tourism and local tradition. The train first appeared in 1991 as the conglomerate effort of the national tourist institution Embratur, the state tourism agency Empetur, and Andersen Pacheco of the Serrambi tourist agency in Pernambuco (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Inside Trem do Forró

By 1996, a mere five years after its inception, trem do forró was being referred to by the media as one of São João's greatest traditions. Billed as São João na Trilha (São João on the Tracks), or the arraial móvel (mobile hamlet), trem do forró departs from Recife at 8:00 A.M. every Saturday and Sunday from late May until the end of June and attracts an average of eight thousand visitors worldwide at the rough equivalence of seventy U.S. dollars per passenger. Motivated entirely by economics, trem do forró offers the essence of a traditional rural celebration neatly packaged for the urban tourist who accepts it as "authentic." Along the way the train makes an obligatory stop in the small town of Gravata where the tourist is treated to "authentic" displays of folk culture in the form of lavish street theater and dance (Figures 3 and 4). Local participants and organized troupes combine to act out folkloric aspects of the tradition in the square surrounding the train station. As the trios from the train take a well-deserved break, the forró of a local trio blares over twenty huge speakers atop a truck and animates the quadrilhas (square dancing) (Figure 5).

Folkloric soldiers, *bacamarteiros*, reenacting the Paraguayan War, pack and fire their explosive muskets (Figure 6). As the shot is fired, each one finishes with a signature dance step propelled by the recoil of the musket. The air is a mixture of gunpowder and barbecue as the train moans the announcement for the passengers to board. The festivities are lively and intense, but brief After only twenty minutes, the train is off to its final destination. Once in Caruaru, now known as the Capital of forró, the tourist is greeted by bandas de pifanos, trios nordestinos, bacamarteiros, and theatrical groups. After spending the day enjoying the festivities and local customs, the tourists are whisked back to the comforts of their city life on luxury air-conditioned tour buses. It is a neatly choreographed package that presents the ethnicity and culture of the rural mestizo for consumption by outsiders. The tourists return home convinced they have just experienced an authentic "hillbilly" festival. And in some ways, they have.

Figure 3. Waiting for the train

Figure 4. Reenacting the rural myth

Figure 5. The official blessing

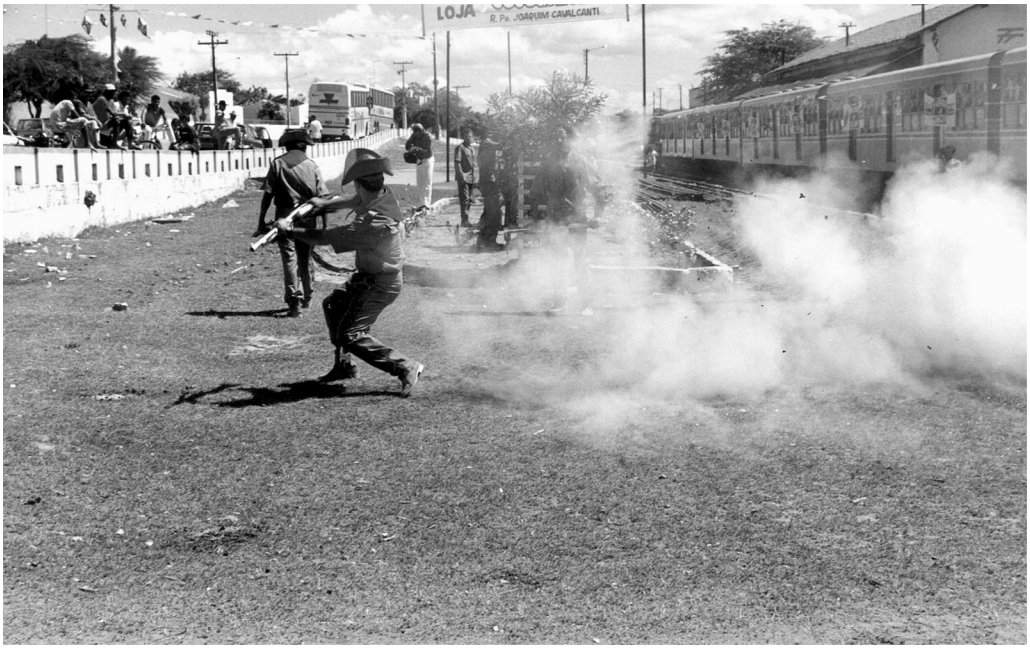

Figure 6. The bacamarteiros

Seeking to better understand this phenomenon, I adopt the concept of commercial folklorization, offered by Krister Malm and Roger Wallis at the 1986 Colloquium in Jamaica, as the extraction of traditional musics and dances from their original contexts and their placement in neatly packaged presentations directed toward the tourist (Malm and Wallis 1986:187). Once again, the forró trios are

taken out of their "traditional" context and placed in each of the twelve cars on the train to animate the tourists along the six-hour journey to Caruaru. An interesting by-product of commercial folklorization is the professionalization of music, musicians, dance, and dancers. In the case of trem do forró this becomes evident in the organized and rehearsed reenactments of rural folklore by urbanites complete with theatrical costumes and makeup, and professionally recorded CDs sold by the trios. Amidst this type identity appropriation, we find a twist on Roberto DaMatta's concept of social class inversion that allows the sophisticated urbanite to become the rural matuto (DaMatta 1991).

This year's first trem do forró departed from Recife the morning of May 29, at 8:00 A.M. and festas juninas '99 are officially under way. The train is sold out through June 23, (the eve of São João, and estimates for this year's traffic to Caruaru have optimistically neared the one million mark. The music performed on the train, and during the festival, is true to the tradition inspired by Luiz Gonzaga; however, the growth in popularity of forró music has led urban professional musicians to incorporate the rhythms into their music adding nontraditional instruments and producing the interesting hybrids of forróck, forró mixed with rock, and what I call foxé, forró mixed with Bahian axé music.
These hybrid forms are most prevalent in the urban context along the coast. Bands such as Mestre Ambrosio, forró com Pimenta, Os Magnificos, Mestruz com Leite, Cia do forró, and others have championed the transformation of rural tradition into urban commodity As technological advancement aids the growth of the tourist industry and helps place the exotic getaway at the fingertips of those who can afford it, people are roaming about the world more now than ever. As tourism becomes an inseparable element of human life, it most certainly will continue its interaction with traditional music. The real interest for future ethnomusicological studies in this area lies not simply in measuring the good effects against the bad, but rather in the documentation and evaluation of transformations brought on by such interaction. One of the weaknesses in our science is our lack of understanding about the origins of music. All known theories on musical origins are formed and reliant upon existing documentation. Therefore, ethnomusicologists, while in the field, must painstakingly document change as it happens. Fieldwork is central to effective ethnomusicology. However, economics dictate that a great percentage of all ethnomusicologists spend the majority of their time in the classrooms and libraries of affiliated institutions. In terms of a thorough understanding, I find our inability to locate exact origins and instances of change in music to be an alarming reminder that the structure of our discipline is inadequate if our intention is to truly understand all musical cultures on earth. Musical cultures reinvent themselves through time, and it should no longer be acceptable to speculate in this area. I believe that some of the gaps in our understandings about musical origins can be traced to: (1) length of time between research documentation of the area; (2) failure to see value in small changes as they were happening, for whatever reason; and (3) dismissal of change as insignificant and/or temporary

While this paper merely grazes the surface of the complicated topics under consideration, it is a preview of a work in progress. As I continue research in this area, I am presented with additional perspectives through which to examine in greater detail the implications of the interaction between local music culture and the tourist industry, an industry that gleans its commodity from local traditions and entices the world to Vem Arrasta-pé em Caruaru.

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