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The Prehistory of Samba: Carnival Dancing in Rio de Janeiro, 1840–1917

JOHN CHARLES CHASTEEN

Abstract. Rio's pre-Lenten carnival and its Afro-Brazilian dance, samba, have been symbols of Brazilian identity since the 1930s. This article explores the choreographical antecedents of samba, before the crystallisation of the modern dance genre with that name, highlighting the importance of earlier social dances in the evolution of the twentieth-century symbol. It traces the development of carnival dancing in Rio de Janeiro from the time when few danced, through the long reign of the polka, to the emergence of generalised carnival street dancing around 1889. A modified view of the roots of samba has interesting implications for on-going debates on the social meaning of Brazilian carnival.

Rio's pre-Lenten carnival and its Afro-Brazilian dance, samba, have been symbols of Brazilian identity since the 1930s. Much recent scholarship has questioned these symbols, particularly the lavish television spectacle staged in the highly commercialised 'Sambadrome', where Rio's principal samba 'schools', or *escolas de samba*, have paraded since the mid-1980s. This negative view foregrounds socially and racially exploitative dimensions of current carnival activities in Rio de Janeiro. Other authors have sprung to the defence of popular carnival, however, finding in it expressions of resistance to the cultural hegemony of the dominant class. The great mystery of Rio's carnival is, of course, this ambivalence concerning the social meaning of the festival. Does it confirm the very social hierarchies that it appears temporarily to alter, or does it offer a space where challenges to hierarchy can grow and develop? Most work in English has tended to reinforce the former, more sceptical interpretation. Meanwhile, the festival's participants are among the staunchest defenders of samba and carnival.¹ The following look at carnival dancing in Rio

¹ Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, *Carnaval brasileiro. O vivido e o mito* (São Paulo, 1992); Daniel Touro Linger, *Dangerous Encounters: Meanings of Violence in a Brazilian City* (Stanford, 1992); Alison Raphael, 'Samba and Social Control: Popular Culture and Racial Democracy in Rio de Janeiro', PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1981; and Rachel Soihet, 'Resistência e circularidade cultural: O carnaval carioca e a relativização da dependência (1890–1945)', in *América: descoberta ou invenção* (Rio de Janeiro, 1992). Soihet's arguments are well substantiated in her unpublished book

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before the First World War will provide some evidence for the positive, as well as the negative, view. It is a 'pre-history' because it explores the period before the musical and choreographical crystallisation of modern samba as a distinct, clearly defined genre in the 1920s.²

Standard accounts of the history of samba tend to elide the dance with the music. The specific musical genre now called samba – in a syncopated 2/4 time, played by strings and percussion, with a well-defined style and repertory of lyrical themes – was crystallised by the 1917 carnival hit, 'Pelo telefone', and histories of samba tend to date its musical origins accordingly. A focus on the dance, on the other hand, provides much greater historical depth for our consideration. The word *samba* was used in Brazil during the nineteenth century to refer rather generically to polyrhythmic dance (with percussive accompaniment) enjoyed by poor Brazilians from Pará to Rio Grande do Sul. It was more an event (as in 'an all-night samba') or a style of body movement than a particular step. In this nineteenth-century sense of the word, samba was already happening at carnival, even on the principal streets of downtown Rio de Janeiro, a full generation before the organisation of the first *escolas de samba* in the 1920s.³

In the elaboration of Brazilian national identity, the difference in timing is significant. The years following the First World War saw the development of a widely endorsed vision of national identity founded on the idea of racial mixing. To many Brazilians, the post-1917 apotheosis of samba, understood as a blend of African and Portuguese musical ideas, stands as one of the most persuasive emblems of a cherished vision of Brazilian identity, linked through carnival to a myth of social levelling which, though confined to the few days of the festival, still forms part of a unifying national spirit.⁴ To sceptics, on the other hand, the glorification of an Afro-Brazilian dance is a kind of theft, an appropriation of black culture out of context. To take it for a triumph of the downtrodden, in

manuscript, 'Subversão pelo riso: reflexões sobre resistência e circularidade cultural no carnaval carioca (1890–1945)' (Niterói, 1993). The attitudes of carnival participants, *vis-à-vis* the reigning academic critique, were described to me by Luís Fernando Vieira of the Associação dos Escritores, Pesquisadores, e Divulgadores da Música Popular Brasileira.

² The musical history of modern samba is traced by Edigar de Alencar, *O carnaval carioca através da música* (Rio de Janeiro, 1965).

³ On the multiple superimposed rhythms (also called polymeter), see David E. Vassberg, 'African Influences in the Music of Brazil', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1976), pp. 37–8.

⁴ This view, very widely held among Brazilians, receives some substantiation from Roberto da Matta, *Carnavais, malandros, e heróis* (Rio de Janeiro, 1979), p. 14, who seeks in carnival the key to 'what makes Brazil, Brazil' [*sic*].

this view, is to mistake appearance for substance. The sceptical version gains persuasiveness from the apparent abruptness of samba's appropriation. The *escolas de samba* began to receive government subsidies – with strings very much attached – in the mid-1930s.⁵ In this way, the powerful rhythms of *batuque* (such as one finds in contemporary Macumba ceremonies) suddenly emerged from the confines of black culture to enter the wider popular culture as a pervasive and misleading symbol of the high esteem in which the nation held Afro-Brazilians. In fact, argue the sceptics, the popular culture of the urban poor was harnessed and coopted, just as the labour movement was harnessed and coopted during these same years of depression and war. There is clearly some truth to this view as well.⁶

It is a mistake, however, to see modern samba as a first-generation child of *batuque*, with its rich communal and religious meanings. Samba, the dance, does have its ultimate origins in seventeenth-century *batuques*, but during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it evolved through several intermediate stages and split into various, mutually influencing, genres. One of these was the black street pageant usually called *Congos*, long agreed to be one of samba's ancestors; but many others were social dances and, above all, opportunities for courtship. The main purpose of this 'prehistory' of samba is to demonstrate the social and choreographical continuity between it and earlier social dances, especially *lundu* and *maxixe* (rhymes with 'she she'). This is a connection that several other students of the topic have already noted. Nei Lopes calls *lundu* the 'fundamental link' between *batuque* and samba, while both Edigar de Alencar and Roberto Moura remark on samba's debt to *maxixe*. Moura even cites an audiotaped conversation in which two co-authors of the definitive 1917 hit 'Pelo telefone' dispute whether that composition was really samba or *maxixe*. Still, the continuity from *lundu* to *maxixe* to samba is not generally recognised, and the authors who remark on it do so without emphasis or elaboration.⁷

Thus, the genealogy of samba has remained a mislaid piece of the larger puzzle of Brazilian popular culture, a piece not really hidden, but rarely put in its proper place. Whereas the people who danced *batuque* were almost exclusively black and enslaved, Brazilians of various racial

⁵ Dulce Tupi, *Carnavais de guerra: o nacionalismo no samba* (Rio de Janeiro, 1985), pp. 96–115.

⁶ In addition to Pereira de Queiroz and Raphael, already cited, see Ana Maria Rodrigues, *Samba negro, espoliação branca* (São Paulo, 1984).

⁷ Nei Lopes, *O negro no Rio de Janeiro e sua tradição musical: partido-alto, calango, chulas, e outras cantorias* (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), p. 41; Roberto Moura, *Tia Ciata e a pequena África no Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro, 1983), pp. 54, 80; Alencar, *O carnaval carioca*, p. 58.

descriptions danced *lundu* and *maxixe*. In fact, *lundu* and *maxixe* may fairly be said to have flourished in situations involving racial mixing – especially between lighter-skinned men and darker-skinned women. This different view of the social antecedents of modern samba casts a new light on its appropriation as a symbol of national identity. Does the symbol derive part of its persuasiveness from its association with Brazil's powerful myths of origin in racial mixing?⁸ The history of social dance provides some support for an affirmative response. But let us begin with what everybody knows: African traditions form the heart and soul of Brazilian dance.

'African' dance in the Americas

In Brazil, as in so many other regions of the Americas, enslaved people created a dance tradition that drew strongly on their African heritage, a tradition identified most readily and most centrally by its polyrhythmic accompaniment. The same basic characteristics could be found in slave dancing from Buenos Aires to Rio de Janeiro to Havana to New Orleans. The instruments were especially African drums, but also rasping instruments usually believed to be of Amerindian origin, a variety of Iberian stringed instruments (the most common being somewhat like small guitars), and importantly, handclapping by those who gathered to form a circle around the dancers. One of the dancers often sang verses that elicited a refrain from those clapping the rhythm for the dancers. Thus spectators in the surrounding circle – Spanish *rueda* or Portuguese *roda* – doubled as musicians and eventual participants. The dancers themselves were usually one couple, male and female, although the partners varied as one or the other tired and was replaced by a new dancer. The dance emphasised the lateral movements of the hips (called *requebros* or *reboleios*, among many other names) which create the sinuous twists of the body below the torso, but allow the upper body to remain unagitated, imparting to the dancer's movements a sort of gyroscopic glide. As they glided around each other, their eyes locked, the dancers sometimes coming face to face within a couple of feet and moving their lower bodies in a manner suggestive of sexual intercourse. At this point, the woman might turn away to begin the evolutions again, pursued by the man, or instead, the two might leap toward each other and smack their bellies together in the *ombigada* (Spanish) or *umbigada* (Portuguese), a manoeuvre of Bantu origin that typically drove European travellers into paroxysms of fascinated horror. 'From time to time they embrace and whirl a few times, continuing to smack their bellies and kissing without losing the beat', testified a Frenchman in 1814. 'In France, people would be shocked

⁸ Richard G. Parker, 'Myths of Origin', in his *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston, 1991), pp. 7–29.

by such an indecent dance, but it is common to almost all the countries of South America.⁹ These were shared elements in a variegated, evolving tradition, expressed to some degree wherever enslaved Africans and their descendants formed a part of the population. Given the available historical sources (mostly the accounts of travellers lacking expertise in describing dance and powerfully tempted to exoticise), one cannot go with confidence beyond these basic generalisations. For our present purposes, it will be enough to identify specific dances as part of the African American choreographical tradition.

African heritage was clearly dominant in this choreographical matrix, but European elements were not absent. Lyrics in the Spanish and Portuguese languages quickly became standard, and singing and dancing constituted two facets of the same activity. The influence of Iberian *fandango* is also important, contributing the basic choreography of an encounter between one man and one woman, influencing the footwork by giving it more *sapateado* (a foot stamping effect for which the dancer needs shoes), and a tendency to curve and raise the arms – all of which are exemplified as well by contemporary flamenco. Given the clear Moorish and Gypsy influences on flamenco, these ‘European’ influences already had a transcultural history of their own. Indeed, their fecund history of cross-fertilisation is the most interesting aspect of these dances that crossed the Atlantic, back and forth, not one but many times, invariably altered upon their return and often carrying a new name.¹⁰ African American influences seem to have arrived in Spain and Portugal as early as the final quarter of the sixteenth century, and can be detected in the *zarabanda* and the *chacona*, described by Lope de Vega as ‘arrived in Seville by post from the Indies’ and by Miguel de Cervantes as ‘indiana amulatada’. Dancing *zarabanda*, *chacona*, and their transcultural cousins became an activity frequent enough and important enough to give prominence to some men of the popular classes, often gypsies or blacks, who danced particularly well. A handful even attempted to make a living at it, signalling the prestige of such dancing in the plebeian subculture of Iberia’s transatlantic seaports.¹¹

Lisbon and Seville seem to have seen particularly enthusiastic late sixteenth-century ‘dance crazes’. A term connoting the giddy collective embrace of a new choreographical fashion perhaps seems anachronistic, but it surely serves to convey the spirit with which many Iberians, mostly of the popular classes, adopted the new dances born of the African American choreographical matrix. Anyone disposed to find sixteenth-

⁹ Assunção, *Orígenes de los bailes tradicionales* (Montevideo, 1968), p. 92.

¹⁰ Curt Sachs, *World History in Dance* (London, 1933), pp. 344–90.

¹¹ Both are cited in Assunção, *Orígenes de los bailes tradicionales*, pp. 87–91.

century dance crazes an exotic idea might stop to consider that *chaconas* ‘*a lo divino*’ even came to be danced before the altar, and that Europe, after all, was the scene of one of the world’s few dancing epidemics, St Vitus’ Dance, in the fourteenth century. Plebeian Lisboetas and Sevillanos may have been the first Europeans to embrace the imported dances, but they were hardly the last. Imported dance fashions like *zarabanda* and *chacóna* spread widely in western Europe. *Fofa*, a mid-eighteenth-century product of the African American choreographical matrix, became so popular in Portugal that various travellers mistook it for the country’s national dance. Nor is it difficult to locate further examples of choreographical ideas flowing in the other direction, from Europe to America. The European contradance, the waltz, and most especially the polka, profoundly influenced Latin American popular dance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹²

According to virtually all testimony – most of it censorious – sensuality was a marked characteristic of dances such as *zarabanda*, *chacóna*, and their African American counterparts which had never travelled to Europe. Speaking of the *zarabanda*, one alarmed Spanish cleric cited lyrics so lascivious and body movements so ‘ugly’ as to ‘set fire to even quite well-behaved people’. A visitor to Portugal in the 1580s commented in a similar vein concerning the new wave of unbridled couple dances, using tambourines and castanets, which he thought had at least the benefit of stimulating population growth. A couple of centuries later an anonymous Portuguese pamphlet (*Account of the Fofa, Recently Come from Bahia*) noted that the *Fofa* ‘made a lot of people get married’.¹³ European travellers to Latin America rarely failed to provide similar commentaries on the polyrhythmic dances that they witnessed there.¹⁴ Not a few of them believed, with a 1650s informant in Brazil, that ‘the lascivious movement of these black people, in their rude festivities’ posed a threat to the mental health of whites, and an eighteenth-century moralist claimed that a bonfire made from African instruments gave off a smoke whose smell and colour indicated their infernal affiliations. To his dismay, however, he also met a white landowner who considered a *batuque* the sweetest of lullabies.¹⁵ There is no indication that the landowner danced *batuque* himself, and

¹² José Ramos Tinhorão, *Música popular de índios, negros, e mestiços* (Petrópolis, 1972), pp. 117–58.

¹³ Tinhorão, *Música popular*, pp. 124–8.

¹⁴ Travellers’ descriptions are collected in Katrina Hazard-Gordon, *Jookin: The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia, 1990); Samuel Kinser, *Carnival, American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile* (Chicago, 1990).

¹⁵ The first traveller cited is D. Francisco Manuel de Melo, who visited Brazil in 1655–8, and the second is Nuno Marques Pereira, author of *Compêndio narrativo de Peregrino da América* (1608), both quoted in Tinhorão, *A música popular no romance brasileiro* (Belo Horizonte, 1992), pp. 15–18.

according to the conventional wisdom, at least, such a notion appears absurd. Yet in 1717, a delighted Bahian crowd obliged the Portuguese viceroy to wiggle as best he could during a church ceremony to honour São Gonçalo, the saint whose dancing cult became well established in Brazil and spread, at least briefly, as far as Mexico.¹⁶ Three centuries before the construction of the Sambadrome, it seems, some white Brazilians had already become connoisseurs (or at least *aficionados*) of polyrhythm. The further development of their interest is clearly revealed by the widespread enthusiasm for *lundu*, an essential ‘missing link’, so to speak, in the evolution of modern samba.

Lundu reigned for about a century as the most popular social dance of urban Brazil. In 1780, a Portuguese administrator provided the first known reference to *lundu*, calling it a dance of ‘the whites and *pardos*’. Like other products of the African American choreographical matrix before it, *lundu* was transracial as well as transcultural, and logically so. After all, the transculturation of sound and rhythm had happened, in large measure, because the people who made the music and did the dancing were involved in interracial encounters of various kinds. A stylised 1787 description of *lundu* (in verse) depicts it as danced by a mulata, whose gliding movements are strongly African, and a white partner whose snapping fingers and arm gestures (one hand on his hip and one on his forehead) are unmistakably those of Iberian *fandango*.¹⁷ In a caste society like that of eighteenth-century Brazil, of course, interracial encounters often implied approximation between individuals of widely different wealth and status. Typically, it seems, the people most likely to enter such encounters were white men (involved in extra-marital adventures) and women of colour, especially mulatas.

The overlapping power gradients of race, wealth and gender – all tilted in favour of the male partner – made these highly unequal relationships, a fact that no amount of romantic interest could undo. The point is worth emphasising, because samba, as a twentieth-century symbol of Brazilian identity, acquires its aura of racial harmony, at least in part, by glossing over the profoundly asymmetrical nature of these musical meetings between people of different skin colour.

By the nineteenth century, according to abundant evidence, *lundu* had become common at all levels of Brazilian society, though clearly associated

¹⁶ Tinhorão, *Música popular*, p. 53; and José Antonio Robles Cahero, ‘Nadie se engaña si con fe baila. Entre lo santo y lo pecaminoso en el Baile de San Gonzalo, 1816’, in *De la santidad a la perversión: o de por qué no se cumplía la ley de Dios en la sociedad novohispana* (Mexico, 1985), pp. 93–128.

¹⁷ Bruno Kiefer, *A modinha e o lundu: duas raízes da música popular brasileira* (Porto Alegre, 1977), pp. 33–4. For melodies and lyrics collected from oral tradition, see Esther Pedreira, *Lundus e modinhas antigas: Século XIX* (Rio de Janeiro, 1981).

most with the popular classes. According to an English traveller in Brazil during 1802–3, *lundu* ‘is the national dance, and all classes, when they put aside formality, restraint and, I might add, decency, surrender themselves’ to it. A French traveller of 1817 said that Brazilian men ‘imitate the movements of the blacks a good deal’. José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva, one of the architects of Brazilian independence as adviser of Pedro I, is reputed a *lundu* enthusiast, and the image of José Bonifácio delivering an *umbigada* must give us pause. If he did, surely it was not at court but at gatherings where such activities came more naturally (such as the sort of tavern at the edge of Rio de Janeiro where prince Pedro himself could occasionally be found) and probably during the pre-Lenten time when flaunting social convention became virtually mandatory. *Lundu* might even invade the parlour of a respectable family, it seems, ‘when invited in by Saint Entrudo’.¹⁸

From entrudo to ‘Venetian’ carnival

Entrudo, the traditional Iberian carnival activity, was a playful, generalised annual *mêlée* dedicated to the thumbing of noses at social norms, and featuring all sorts of practical jokes and – most of all – water fights. The projectiles of choice, precise antecedents of today’s water balloon, were wax ‘lemons’ (*limões de cheiro*) that ruptured on impact to douse the unlucky targets, but as the spirit of *entrudo* intensified heavier artillery came into play, and entire bucketsful of water rained into the street from second-storey windows. Hard-core *entrudo* players employed syringes the size of small fire-extinguishers to suck none-too-sweet-smelling water from the gutter and then recycle it with deadly aim. Like other carnival activities, *entrudo* refused to recognise limits, so anyone passing in the street was considered fair game – the more pompous, the better. A top hat lasted no time at all on the wearer’s head if he ventured into the street during *entrudo*. Though the stuffer inhabitants of the city cordially loathed *entrudo*, and the authorities almost invariably condemned it, people of all colours and conditions played it passionately. Both emperors played *entrudo*, as did slaves and everybody in between. The smell of hot wax for the fabrication of *limões* permeated bourgeois houses in the weeks beforehand, and poorer people also made them to peddle on the street once the fray got under way. Though foreign visitors often joined in with zest, *entrudo* seems driven mostly by encounters among people who knew each other. Playful battles between men and women (quite out of keeping

¹⁸ On the travellers (Lindley and Tolenare) see Kiefer, *A modinha e o lundu*, pp. 34–5; and Tinhorão, *Música popular*, p. 147. On José Bonifácio and prince Pedro, see Neill Macauley, *Dom Pedro: The Struggle for Liberty in Brazil and Portugal, 1798–1834* (Durham, 1986), esp. p. 112.

with their normal demeanour) were standard during *entrudo*, though they frequently took place within houses rather than in the street. In all probability, people also danced during *entrudo*, but at private parties, not publicly.¹⁹

Not until the 1840s did dancing challenge *entrudo*'s place as the centrepiece of pre-Lenten festivities, and it did so only among the white and near-white. The masked balls that proliferated during that decade were modelled on those of the Parisian carnival. They took place in public theatres after the evening's performance, and the costumed revellers invaded corridors, galleries, boxes, as well as the orchestra, now cleared of chairs for a dance floor. Extravagantly decorated, dimly lit, and crammed with costumed revellers, such structures became mysterious labyrinths that created titillating possibilities for romantic intrigue. The dancing included safe, old-fashioned quadrilles in which partners changed frequently, but also waltzes – a bit more *risqué* because of their closer embrace and intoxicating whirls. Most daring of all, the very symbol of sexual liberation, in fact, was the can-can with its flying skirts. The real fuel for the dancers' zeal, however, was the rollicking polka and its spinoffs, the great international dance fever of the mid-nineteenth century. The synchronised movements of hundreds joining in the 'Great Infernal Gallop' that closed most evenings' proceedings sometimes revealed hidden structural defects in theatres' construction. In 1862, part of the dance floor gave way at the Lyric Theatre's gala ball, and the Zuoave Club had to troop down from its box seats to stand guard around the splintered crater while the dance continued.²⁰

The second new carnival activity, initiated in the 1850s, was parading, at first on horseback and then on wagons that evolved eventually into modern floats. The paraders also danced, though not in the street. Instead, the parading societies became featured participants in the public costume balls, where they made dramatic entrances, sat in reserved sections, and put on droll performances of various kinds. The 'Students of Heidelberg' for example, made speeches 'in all languages, living and dead', while 'Club X' intoned its mock hymn, and the 'Bohemians' narrated comic versions of their supposed national history, and announced their availability to 'all the pretty girls who cared to honour them' during the dance. The parading societies were entirely male in membership and explicitly masculine (and youthful) in orientation. The most successful and

¹⁹ *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 'Repartição da Policia', 7–9 Feb. 1842; 'Rio de Janeiro', *Jornal do comércio*, 9 Feb. 1853. See also Pereira de Queiroz, *Carnaval brasileiro*, pp. 49–51; and for an anthropological discussion of *entrudo*'s relationship to modern carnival, Linger, *Dangerous Encounters*, passim.

²⁰ 'Noticiário', *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, 5–6 Mar. 1862.

durable of these parading societies – especially the Democráticos, Fenianos, and Tenentes do Diabo – acquired large club houses and sponsored their own private dances, attended by invitation only. Here was a carnival that Rio’s poor majority could only view from afar, as spectators of the public revelries of their ‘betters’. The Imperial family tacitly endorsed the new style of carnival by gracing not a few of the earliest parades and balls.²¹

This ‘Venetian’ style of carnival (so-called because of its origin in Venice, though Brazilians copied it from Paris) gained rapid popularity and, well-established by the late 1850s, it dominated Rio’s pre-Lenten festivities for a time. Whereas the whole city had participated in *entrudo* – proverbially liveliest in the plebeian neighbourhoods – the gallant members of the parading societies were inherently bourgeois, at least in aspiration. By the 1860s, *entrudo* seemed to have obediently withered away, leaving the parading societies as masters of street carnival. If poor people of colour danced, it was in their own houses or perhaps occasionally at balls in public theatres. The elaborate costumes worn to balls obviously limited attendance through cost. The costumes had historical or exotic motifs and some – like the *dominó* (a masked figure wearing a hooded robe) – revealed only the wearer’s eyes. In an effort to screen admissions, tickets to the more exclusive dances were not sold at the door, but the atmosphere of the dances themselves seemed designed precisely to facilitate flirting with the possibilities of anonymity. Stories of a gentleman who danced all night with an attractive woman behind a silk mask, only to discover her dusky complexion at the evening’s end, became quite a stock item of the carnival narrative repertoire. Unlike *entrudo*, in which men and women had participated as uninhibited ludic combatants on fairly even – if undignified – terms, the Venetian model of carnival emphasised a stylised, romantic model of gendered behaviour. Imagine these fashionable young blades sweeping through the streets of the city centre, throwing flowers and confections to the women who fill every available window on the parade route. Tonight, those with invitations will follow them to their enchanted grotto and dance.

They will dance polka, waltz, quadrille – but they will not dance *lundu*. By the 1870s, *lundu* had been relegated to the dance floors of rural gatherings heedless of European fashions, and to the unpretentious parties of the urban poor. Then a mysterious alchemy occurred. In Rio’s north-side Cidade Nova, rapidly filling with poor, dark-skinned newcomers in the last decades of the nineteenth century, people with *lundu* in their sinews shook a leg to polka – and the result was *maxixe*, yet another miscegenated tendril of the same twirling choreographical vine. Almost forgotten

²¹ ‘Teatro Lyrico’, *Jornal do comércio*, 7 Feb. 1864.

today, *maxixe* quickly replaced *lundu* as the most popular social dance of urban Brazil and it remained so into the 1920s. It forms a second missing link in the prehistory of samba.

Maxixe and the rise of street dancing

One could *maxixe* to various kinds of music, including polkas, *lundus*, Argentine *tangos*, and ultimately, sambas. *Maxixe* was not a specific rhythm, it was a way of moving one's body and also a way of syncopating and accenting the performance of the music. The *chocalho*, a percussion instrument similar to the maraca, eventually characterised the sound called *maxixe*.²² Our interest here, however, is dance, and *maxixe* was characterised choreographically by its *requebros* and *reboleios*, the same sinuous movements of the torso, hips, and legs that animated *lundu* and its cousins. As a couple dance, which is apparently how it started during the 1870s, *maxixe* also involved very close contact between the bodies of the dancers, who sometimes pressed their foreheads together, their legs interlaced as in *lambada*, with full body contact at all points in between. *Maxixe* was not danced in the houses of 'decent' people. In the dichotomous division of the social world into 'house' and 'street', *maxixe* belonged strictly to the street (which included most public places). Often danced in small clubs – narrow single-storey houses with a couple of windows and a small sign on the door, especially concentrated in the Cidade Nova – *maxixe* was frequently a means of approximation between white, middle-class or elite males and women of darker complexion, especially when the dance entered the annual festival where 'anything goes', as it began to do in the 1880s.²³

In Rio de Janeiro, carnival provided a figurative 'space' where strangers of different social groups met and danced. The clubs of the Cidade Nova offered a year-round venue for similar activities, but only during carnival did *maxixe*, with its alluring air of subversive wickedness, become a general diversion of middle-class males. A newspaper chronicler put it this way: some kids might elude the measles, some grown-ups avoid playing the animal game (a popular lottery), but *maxixe* was 'a fever that no one of the masculine sex escapes' in Rio de Janeiro. The women who appear in illustrations and habitual phrases as the proverbial partners of these feverish young men were inevitably 'mulatas' or 'morenas'. A 1901 Recife newspaper (for *maxixe* became popular throughout urban Brazil) perhaps requires no translation when it specifies that for the 'maxixe requebrado a mulata vale tudo'. Not only as a product of interracial

²² Jota Efegê (João Ferreira Gomes), *A dança excomungada* (Rio de Janeiro, 1974), p. 43.

²³ On the Cidade Nova, see Moura, *Tia Ciata e a pequena África no Rio de Janeiro*, pp. 34–49; and Jota Efegê, *A dança excomungada*, pp. 103–28.

transculturation, but also as symbol of racial mixing – in close association with the emergence of the woman of mixed race as an emblem of Brazilian sensuality – *maxixe* showed itself the true successor of *lundu*, and predecessor of samba.²⁴

The first known use of the word *maxixe* in Rio newspapers (1880) occurs in a form designating female dancers, '*maxixeiras*', and thereafter the advertisements for public carnival dances, such as that offered at the Recreio Dramático in 1891, frequently featured a *maxixe* presentation: 'at ten o'clock, the triumphal entry of the Grupo dos Maxixeiras, made up of 450 damsels who will execute 69 choreographical evolutions'. The clear implication was that these women would stay and mingle after their act. An 1895 dance at Rio's Phoenix Dramático promised '300 espléndidas mulatas maxixeiras'.²⁵ Here are clear echoes of the incubation of Argentine tango in the brothels of Buenos Aires, and, interestingly, *maxixe* was sometimes called *tanguinho* or – when it reached Europe along with its Argentine cousin in the early twentieth century – Brazilian tango. Especially after it made a hit in Paris and thereby gained new respectability at home, *maxixe* became the central attraction of all but the most strait-laced carnival balls, even those given by the Venetian-style parading societies like the Democráticos or Fenianos. Moralists found it 'pornographic', statesmen condemned it as 'barbaric', but like it or not, everyone knew that the phrase 'national dance' referred to *maxixe*. A theatrical review of 1903 proclaimed Brazilian cultural chauvinism with familiar insouciance: 'So tasty is maxixe / That if he only knew / The Holy Father'd come from Rome / To dance maxixe, too'.²⁶ Not as a couple dance, but as a style of body movement to accompany polyrhythmic percussion, *maxixe* eventually became a main attraction of street carnival and in that sense, as well, the antecedent of modern samba.

Maxixe moved from the dance hall to the street so quickly because of an important choreographical confluence in the 1880s, as black dancers carrying drums, tambourines, and assorted other percussion instruments initiated a new kind of carnival parading in Rio de Janeiro. These dancers, many of whom seem to have been migrants from Bahia,²⁷ were both male and female (some of the latter carrying babes in arms), they wore feathered costumes variously called 'African' or 'Indian', and their parading took the form of a mobile pageant traditionally performed in the Brazilian northeast. Known most widely as *Congos*, they were called in Rio by the Bahian name, *Cucumbys*. Such groups had not been seen in Rio since before

²⁴ Jota Efege, *A dança excomungada*, pp. 52–60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 104–6.

²⁶ For a judicious introduction to the large literature on tango, see Oscar Natale, *Buenos Aires, negros, y tango* (Buenos Aires, 1984), esp. pp. 185–206; quotation: Jota Efege, *A dança excomungada*, pp. 80–1.

²⁷ Moura, *A tia Ciata*, pp. 27–9.

1830, when they had occasionally danced at the funerals of African princes who died in slavery. The *Cucumbys* enacted a drama involving gestures towards both African royalty and Christian iconography, and though they had sometimes danced during *entrudo* in the past, the *Cucumbys*' strongest association was with the feast of the Epiphany on 6 January. Their reappearance on the streets of Rio at this moment seems clearly associated with the momentum of the abolition movement.²⁸

Thus, two separate strands of Afro-Brazilian choreographical tradition came together, and then joined with a third, much less African element, to create the first true forerunners of the modern *escola de samba*. This third element was composed of groups called Zé Pereiras – supposedly after a Portuguese immigrant by that name who initiated this activity – that had taken to marching around the city during carnival to the thump-thump-thump and staccato clatter of massed bass and snare drums. Zé Pereiras made a lot of racket but did not dance.²⁹ Then, in the early 1890s, there seems to have occurred a confluence of the polyrhythmic dancing of the *Cucumbys* and the thunderous drumming of the Zé Pereiras. Black people who might previously have paraded as *Cucumbys* now adopted 'maxixesque' moves and a variety of costumes, though a few 'Indians' usually headed the column and used 'capoeira-style' pirouettes to open a path as the group moved through the crowded streets of downtown Rio, and they incorporated new percussion instruments, such as those used by the Zé Pereiras. By the mid-1890s newspaper writers had stopped talking about 'African' street dancing at carnival and had started talking about *maxixe* or, much less frequently, *samba*.³⁰ Even when these labels do not appear, the whimsical vocabulary used to describe the dancing gives unmistakable indications of the style of movement associated with *lundu*, *maxixe*, and modern *samba*. Adjective forms like '*desgoaçado*', '*gingado*', '*remexado*', '*voluptuoso*', '*dengoso*', '*tremebundo*', '*com bamboleios*', are clear giveaways, as is the observation that a 'young devil seemed to be made of rubber'. One group of such young devils – called a *cordão* – 'went sliding down the street in a trembling, furious *maxixe*'. Another *cordão* exhibited 'highly electrifying *maxixesque* undulations'.³¹ The journalists got a good look because the *cordões* made a point of visiting their newspaper offices to strut

²⁸ *O Paiz*: 'O Carnaval', 8 Mar. 1886 and 13–14 Feb. 1888; 'Mascaras avulsos', 5–6 Mar. 1889 and 17 Feb. 1890. Also 'Os Cucumbys', *Gazeta de Notícias*, 13 Feb. 1888.

²⁹ Eneida Morais, *História do carnaval carioca*, 2nd ed. (Rio de Janeiro, 1987), pp. 39–43. The Zé Pereiras were clearly on the scene already in the 1870s: Luis D. Gardel, *Escolas de Samba: An Affectionate Account of the Carnival Guilds of Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro, 1967).

³⁰ *O Paiz*: 'Os grupos', 18 Feb. 1896, and 'As passeatas', 23 Feb. 1898.

³¹ 'Os grupos', *O Paiz*, 26 Feb. 1895; and especially *Jornal do Brasil*: 'Grupos carnavalescos', 19 Feb. 1901, and *passim*.

their stuff in the street out front. In this way, writers and street dancers began a relationship of no small importance in the construction of Brazilian national identity.

At the turn of the century, Rio's downtown streets were choked with crowds – and with *cordões* that crisscrossed their way through them – and the sound of carnival had become an unremitting polyrhythmic roar. *Sujos* ('dirty ones'), poor males whose costumes consisted (and still consist) mostly of an outlandish raggedness or garishness, were already on the scene – 'more than you could shake a stick at' in 1893 – and the newspapers warned 'families' (meaning middle-class people) to take all precautions if they wished to see the festivities in the main downtown street, Rua do Ouvidor. The authorities were doing their best, according to *O Jornal do Brasil*, but who could police that crowd?³² Different styles of parading groups had proliferated in the 1890s – besides *Cucumbys* and Zé Pereiras, there were Salamanca-style student *tunas* with massed guitars and voices and no dancing. In 1903 there was a *Bumba meu boi* (based on the northeastern folk pageant) with a cow that danced *maxixe*. According to one chronicler, all carnival revellers now left home with a spring in their step, ready to dance. In his description of a streetcar heading toward the centre of town, feet begin to tap and the passengers start to bounce uncontrollably in their seats as they approach the revelling. Suddenly, a Zé Pereira passes close by, and leaping down to follow it, off go the passengers!³³ Rio's *Gazeta de Notícias* became a particularly energetic booster of street carnival, printing large front-page illustrations of the festival, some of which clearly indicate the close contact in street crowds among people of different skin colour, as well as the participation of women in the parading.³⁴ The 'Great Societies', with their floats and private balls, had not ceased their activities, but the Venetian model no longer dominated the street carnival of Rio de Janeiro.

In 1906, the *Gazeta de Notícias* organised a contest to celebrate the efforts of the street dancers. For weeks before the festival, reporters from the paper visited the modest clubhouses of dozens of parading groups to observe their preparations. (The addresses of the groups' clubhouses indicate that the street dancers came from all quadrants of the city, though most frequently from the poor neighbourhoods of the Cidade Nova.) Each practice session began when the group's *pancadaria*, or rhythm section, sputtered to life, attracting neighbours from the surrounding houses with a steady and intricate babel of percussive voices: drums,

³² *Gazeta de Notícias*: 'Carnaval', 11 Feb. 1902, and 'Nas ruas', 5 Mar. 1905. Also 'Grupos carnavalescos', *Jornal do Brasil*, 24 Feb. 1903.

³³ 'Carnaval', *Gazeta de Notícias*, 11 Feb. 1902.

³⁴ *Gazeta de Notícias*: 'Scenas da vida carioca no carnaval', 23 Feb. 1903; 'Un cordão carnavalesco na atualidade', 6 Mar. 1905.

tambourines, *chocalhos*, and rasping instruments in various combinations. When carnival week came, the polyrhythmic thunder would begin on Saturday afternoon and fall silent only as the sun cleared the horizon on Wednesday. These groups also sang as they paraded, and the cult of the 'morena' (not yet the 'mulata') ranked among their most important lyrical themes.³⁵ 'During the whole year she presides, like a tenth muse, over the composition of hundreds and hundreds of those poems', rhapsodised one columnist. One black male group called itself, with carnivalesque immodesty, 'Pleasure of the Morenas'. The *Gazeta's* visiting reporters also described the groups' costumes. Like the modern *escolas de samba*, most groups had a cast of characters, often with allegorical intentions, unified by a signature colour-scheme. In contrast to the modern *escolas de samba*, however, the Brazilian national colours of green and yellow were here among the most popular combinations, and not by accident. The coverage of carnival street dancing in the *Gazeta de Notícias* makes clear that reporters and paraders alike considered themselves exponents of a Brazilian national culture. Where earlier histories of carnival appearing in Rio newspapers had dwelled on the festival's European roots, journalistic accounts now lavished attention on carnival's development in Brazil.³⁶ Whether black like the 'Sons of the Night' (who dressed in green and yellow) or more recent Italian arrivals like the 'Sons of Vesuvius' (who came out with their own 'madly shaking maxixe') Rio's turn-of-the-century street dancers felt themselves the centre of something distinctively and attractively Brazilian.³⁷

The popular impetus of street carnival seems to have ebbed a bit as the first decade of the twentieth century came to a close. One reason may be the advent of large numbers of automobiles which gave middle and upper class people a new way to parade. The processions of family cars overflowing with stylish occupants became, rather understandably, the centre of attention in the early years of motoring in Brazil, and they necessarily reduced the street dancers' freedom of movement. At the same time, the widespread introduction of confetti (with an enticing European cachet and presenting no danger to expensive clothing) reinvigorated the spirit of *entrudo* among the better off, who fought mock confetti battles at especially appointed places, sometimes to musical accompaniment.³⁸ Even the free-form street revelling formerly dominated by the *cordões* saw the rise of a different sort of group, the *bloco*, described as a novelty imparting a 'chic note' to the street carnival of 1915. *Blocos* did not feature their own

³⁵ *Gazeta de Notícias*: for example 'Carnaval de 1906', 14 Feb. and 16 Feb. 1906.

³⁶ *Gazeta de Notícias*: 'A arte nos cordões: a poesia', 20 Feb. 1906; 'O carnaval fluminense: Nas priscas eras antes de 1840', 6 Mar. 1905. See also, 'Crônica do carnaval', *O País*, 25 Feb. 1906.

³⁷ 'Filhos da noite', *Gazeta de Notícias*, 16 Feb. 1906; 'Os grupos', *O País*, 11 Feb. 1902.

³⁸ 'Carnaval', *Jornal do Brasil*, 9 Feb. 1920.

pancadarias and were, overall, looser and less ambitious parading groups. They appear to represent a general widening of participation in street dancing, and some were very clearly composed of well-off youth:³⁹ ‘Young people of both sexes practically wrestling in the middle of the street, without modesty or shame’, according to one strait-laced witness, ‘in the most scandalous contact, without distinction of race, colour or education.’⁴⁰ The popular classes by no means disappeared from the streets, but they recaptured the centre stage of Rio’s carnival from the automotive parades only with the rise of the *escolas de samba*.

Epilogue and conclusions

The history of samba after the creation of the *escolas* has been much more studied than the prehistory of the dance, and the broad outlines of post-1917 developments can be summarised by way of epilogue. The *escolas de samba* were originally composed exclusively of dark-skinned people from a specific part of the city, the *favelas*, the almost vertical shanty towns that had scaled the steep hillsides around the older part of the city during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The first *escolas de samba* were formed in the late 1920s, and during the 1930s these groups became the prime exponents of the specific music and dance now called samba as it rose rapidly to become the universally recognised cultural symbol of Brazilian identity. A theoretically informed treatment of ‘the discovery of samba’ as a national emblem has recently been provided by Brazilian anthropologist Hermano Paes Vianna Júnior. Vianna shows that the elevation of samba to its currently exalted symbolic position involved scholars, politicians, gypsies, and folklorists, as well as the black musicians and dancers themselves. In fact, Vianna argues that the gap between popular and elite culture in early twentieth-century Brazil was never so unbreachable as is sometimes portrayed.⁴¹ The foregoing look at the prehistory of the dance appears to confirm his point, both by pointing out that, although obviously of plebeian origin, *lundu* and *maxixe* attracted dancers from the upper class, and by confirming that rich and poor alike participated, dancing in the streets of downtown Rio at the turn of the century, something doubted by a number of recent studies.⁴²

³⁹ ‘Echos do carnaval’, *O País*, 17 Feb. 1915.

⁴⁰ ‘Ideas de carnaval’, *O País*, 3 Feb. 1913.

⁴¹ Hermano Paes Vianna Júnior, ‘A descoberta do samba: música popular e identidade nacional’, PhD diss., Museu Nacional da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 1994, pp. 24–49 and 215.

⁴² For example, Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz, ‘Escolas de samba do Rio de Janeiro, ou a domesticação da massa urbana’, *Ciência e cultura*, vol. 36 (1984), pp. 893–909, and Alison Raphael, ‘Samba Schools in Brazil’, *International Journal of Oral History*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1989), pp. 256–67. Queiroz has muted, but not substantially revised, this point in her more recent *Carnaval brasileiro* (1992).

Vianna emphasises the political and ideological components that explain the timing of the symbol's 'discovery' in the 1920s and populist appropriation in the 1930s. The centralising thrust of the authoritarian Estado Novo, in the same period, converted samba from one among many regional traditions into *the* national tradition. In a parallel ideological development, the 1933 publication of Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters and the Slaves* contributed persuasive pseudo-scientific underpinnings to the idea of a *mestiço* Brazilian culture, while celebration of things Afro-Brazilian gained many artistic and intellectual exponents, and, in 1935, a populist mayor of Rio de Janeiro began an official sponsorship of carnival that grew steadily in importance thereafter. The patriotic spirit so tirelessly promoted by the official media became a standard feature of samba school performances during Brazil's involvement in the Second World War, and it has largely remained so ever since.⁴³

Intellectual rationalisation, artistic elaboration, government promotion, and exuberant popular endorsement rapidly boosted samba to the status of national symbol. In the 1960s, Rio's carnival rose to new heights of hype as an international tourist attraction, while the 1970s brought markedly greater participation from well-off white Brazilians from the opulent south side of the city.⁴⁴ In the 1980s, the major parades were removed from the street altogether and enclosed in the telemedia-saturated sambadrome, built on the location of one of the neighbourhoods where the early *escolas de samba* had developed half a century earlier.

What does all this imply about samba as a national symbol? In the final analysis, does it represent a boisterous triumph or a subtle subversion of racial equality in Brazil? Does the ostensible celebration of Afro-Brazilian culture actually undermine the struggle for equity by suggesting that it already exists, as many have argued? Michael George Hanchard suggests that the appropriation of cultural forms out of context turns them into instruments of racial hegemony by 'divorcing them from their histories and the attendant modes of consciousness that brought them into being', and samba, as a national symbol, would certainly appear to offer the perfect example.⁴⁵

But does it, really? Some aspects of the rigidly controlled sambadrome spectacle, now the national centrepiece of carnival, seem quite aptly characterised by Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz as a 'domestication of the urban masses'.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the street dancers described by

⁴³ Tupi, *Carnavais de guerra*, p. 96.

⁴⁴ See Rodrigues, *Samba negro, espoliação branca*, passim.

⁴⁵ Michael George Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power: The Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, 1945-1988* (Princeton, 1994), p. 21.

⁴⁶ Queiroz, *Carnaval brasileiro*, pp. 71-116.

historian Rachel Soihet were clearly contesting their ‘domestication’ when they chose the name ‘Macaco é o outro’ (‘Monkey is the other’) for their *bloco*. Monkey being a name that some Brazilian whites gave to blacks, during carnival this group gave the name back.⁴⁷ Partly through samba and carnival, black Brazilians began to gain a voice in the national discourse of collective identity. Queiroz is describing the 1970s and Soihet the 1910s, but their contrasting emphases are not reducible to differences of period. Soihet sees cultural resistance where Queiroz sees cultural hegemony, and vice versa.

To what degree has modern samba been separated from the mode of consciousness that brought it into being? If samba could be said to spring directly from the *batuque* – with its profound, complex, and multiplicitous cultural meanings, and its almost exclusive association with slaves and free blacks – then the pessimists would gain a powerful argument. The most frequently heard formulation of the lineage of modern samba, in fact, could be expressed as BATUQUE > SAMBA, suggesting that within a few years in the 1910s and 1920s, a dance with sacred associations – the last hidden treasure of the dispossessed, the ritual key to their community life – had been converted into a commodity that its creators no longer owned and whose spirit they would hardly recognise.

On the other hand, consider the implications of the more complex (yet still schematic) genealogy offered in Fig. 1. *Batuque* is still the ultimate key

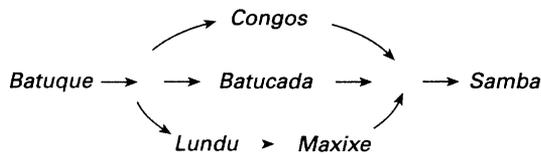


Fig. 1. *Alternative genealogy of samba.*

to what I have called the African American choreographical matrix, especially in the colonial period, and its influence (described by the name *batucada*, referring to vigorous drumming) clearly lingered in 1900, but over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, two other lineage streams diverged from it (once more to converge in the 1890s). The street pageants like *Congos* were also strongly African in inspiration, even though they were most often performed for events of the Catholic calendar. The stream representing the social dances is more transcultural, however. Because *lundu* and *maxixe* became popular throughout Brazil among people of mixed race, as well as among black people, and because

⁴⁷ Soihet, ‘Subersão pelo riso’, p. 1.

social dancing was a far more frequent activity than *Congos*, this stream probably represents more dancers – and more dancing – than any other. It must be, by far, the most voluminous current in the choreographical confluence that occurred in the streets of Rio de Janeiro during the surging carnival celebrations of the turn of the twentieth century.

This fact has important implications. Tentatively, it may help explain the enduring popularity of samba as a sign of shared identity, since social dancing – a shared activity, by definition – resonates pleasurably in the personal experience of so many. Of course, the most powerful meaning of samba as a national symbol is its implied bridging of a racial divide, as white and black Brazilians come together in mutual appreciation of Afro-Brazilian culture. Here again, the prehistory of samba suggests insistent continuities between the root and bloom of carnival's showy flower, bringing its European forebears – *fandango* and polka – into better view, requiring that we contemplate transculturative processes already well under way in the eighteenth century, and demonstrating that samba and its progenitors really have been at the centre of racial mixing for at least 200 years.

And there is the rub, because invocation of this history of racial mixing brings negative associations, too. As we have seen, the sexual encounters that *lundu* and *maxixe* facilitated (and celebrated) were not exempt from the asymmetries of power – white over black, male over female – affecting all of Brazilian society. To the contrary, the dancing facilitated relationships inescapably loaded with the potential for exploitation.⁴⁸ Thus, a sustained look at the prehistory of samba necessarily belies facile implications of racial harmony even as it confirms the appropriateness of the dance as an emblem of Brazilian experience. Perhaps this is something like a tragic flaw. Can Brazil absorb a recasting of its national symbol to include a tragic flaw? One suspects so. Is this not, after all, the country that has embraced the metaphor of anthropophagi as a model of cultural nationalism?

⁴⁸ Soihet demonstrates that the carnivalesque ethos of 'anything goes' did, nevertheless, offer some opportunities for women, especially middle-class women, to escape and redefine social norms: 'Subversão pelo riso', pp. 171–98.