

## The traditional samba school dance as a performative experience

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The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard criticizes that in ethnological approaches dance is often viewed as an independent activity and is described without reference to its contextual setting in native life (PRITCHARD, 1928). In his analysis of the Zande beer dance, the author emphasizes that dance always requires a stereotyped form, a prescribed mode of performance, concerted activities, recognized leadership and elaborate organization and regulation. Howard Becker talking about music, literature, theatre, dance and all the possible arts lightened not the artist genius but the collective activities and social conventions that composes an art world and operates a social system (BECKER, 1982).

The main objective of this communication is to demonstrate that the Rio samba school carnival, as a collective activity, configures itself as a “popular art world” with specific rules, procedures and evaluation criteria composing his owns aesthetic conventions that are communally made and experienced. In this world, the samba school directory, the school members, the competition jury committee, the critics, the media, the researchers and finally, the audience act together. I will restrict the present analysis to a dance performed by a special couple in the Rio samba school parades - the couple of major-domo or “mestre-sala”<sup>1</sup> and flag-bearer or “porta-bandeira”<sup>2</sup> - as a representative example of an idea of tradition.

### Who are the couple?

The ambiguous character of this couple is defined by its specific dance that is slower than the samba rhythm, by their typical acts, gentle gestures, positions, looks, smiles, improvisation and by their antique customs. Contradicting the idea of the sexuality,

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<sup>1</sup> Ceremonious master who accompanies the lady.

<sup>2</sup> Lady who bears the school’s flag.

freedom and rules suspension, the major-domo and the flag-bearer are an elegant couple dancing a minuet in the parade. Their antique customs contrasts with the little bikinis. Their gentle dance differentiated from the samba must be performed in the samba rhythm. The man supports the lady who carries the flag and is always flirting with her. Like a classical ballet, their dance relies on the romantic conventionalized understanding of the roles of men and women and the eternal attachments between them.

The couples are known for their presence in the carnival since the first carnival associations called *ranchos*<sup>3</sup>. A certain sentiment of traditionalism and permanence is enforced by their antique customs and regulated procedures like the obligation of dancing with a special choreography that looks like a court dance, avoiding the samba dance and being penalized by the jury if they don't follow the rule of only dancing the minuet.

But their activities are not restricted to the parades. They present themselves during all the year in hotels, bars, public presentations and events in and outside the city of Rio de Janeiro. During all the year, these couples represent their schools in diverse contexts: from small events organized in the samba school quarters to official events. Composing an "art world" by their own lessons, projects and competitions, they merge a vast informal network covering the whole city of Rio de Janeiro. This social position is reverted to a distinct place in the parade. It is not a simple reversal of positions that they perform but a collective experience.

They achieve specific ceremonial function in the rehearsals and in the competitive parades in "sambódromo" in carnival days. This centrally organized street carnival where the samba schools parades take place was specially designed and projected to be the official avenue of the competitive carnival parades since 1984. Fourteen guilds called "schools" compose the "special group" of the top ones competing in leagues. It is important to point that the social basis of the major school participants including these dancers comes from the lower social classes.

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<sup>3</sup> The Rio Carnival has always been a many-leveled feast. In the early 1900s until 1950 the *ranchos* were groups and associations of masquerades that included a band and a chorus. They had a markedly slow cadence and a sentimental musical form. They had the local government support, the journalist's mediation and integrated many artists, workers, women. The first samba school was formally constituted in 1928 when the *ranchos* were at evidence. The structural and aesthetical features of the *ranchos* and samba schools were similar.

## Learning to dance

Generally, the person who practices this dance is inserted in the school by family bonds. Most of them have learned the dance by observing people doing it in the school where they used to frequent as a more or less engaged activity. Nowadays, there are some samba schools that organize dancing workshops. And there is a special group of dancers that give lessons to children during all the year in the sambódromo as part of a social project. Some others begin to dance just for fun, to participate in their school activities or more recently can build an effective career as a school samba dancer.

The skills required to play the role of carrying the flag – the most important symbol in the samba school should be more than to learn how to dance, they have to know how to act, how to communicate and how to integrate the diverse audience composed by tourists, samba school members and liberal professionals. They have to share conventions and moral values that are mutually appreciated. Their main role in the competition is evidenced by an exclusive judgment, carried through a jury that evaluates its performance in the parade.

## Judgment

There are many competing leagues. The special league has the top samba schools, which vary, from 14 to 12 schools. The two schools that come in last are relegated to the secondary league, and the two best schools are promoted to the top league. Their stability depends on the judgment that happens every year in the carnival period. Each samba school parade has between 500 and 4500 participants. They are judged for items like the performers who march at the head of the parade; the school's current plot; the lyrics of the samba; the appearance of the school as a whole and the choreography of the ensemble; the tunefulness and musical texture of the samba; the performance of the drummers; the masquerades and the individual floats and the major-domo and flag-bearer performance.

The first time an award committee officially judged a couple of major-domo and flag-bearer was in 1938. Their customs were the principal aspect to be judged until 1957. Their dance became an important item to be evaluated from 1958 until today. Until 1967 the flag itself was awarded points, but subsequently the jury evaluates the couple performance including the flag as accepting that this object integrates the couple.

Historically, the flag used to have another role in the ranchos – firsts carnival groups of the XX century. The flag-bearer placed in the head of the rancho parade used to indicate the directions to follow in downtown Rio so each group of masquerades could be identified in the streets and differentiate from the others. Meanwhile, it could create its own itinerary in the streets.

Many groups came from the suburbs to join the others in the main avenues of the city only on carnival days. Some weeks before the carnival, the rancho leadership used to leave the flag in newspaper's branches to be exposed and their group's names were publicized and commented by journalists. During carnival days the flags were exposed in the streets. All the ranchos moved towards the central streets in downtown. The flags in that social context played the role of opening the ways. They used to mark their presence, prove their formal existence, and valorized these groups or neighborhood associations and the competition between them.

Some groups tried to steal the adversary flag to show their superiority. To avoid this humiliation, there was someone to protect the flag-bearer. Sometimes, that person had a knife to protect the flag from the approximation of the adversary stealer. This kind of attitude caused many problems and conflicts between the various carnival groups, such as fights and deaths.

Journalists in agreement with many groups and government demands created formal regulations and conventions to make a carnival group able to take part of the competitions. One of them was the prohibition of any kind of weapons to insult the others and the social disapproval by their directors and the media. The role of caring for the flag was only socially appreciated when made by a gentleman with kind gestures. That was the role played by the major-domo like a master of ceremonies, a diplomatic mediator.

### Choosing a couple

Each samba school usually counts on three or four couple dancers carrying the biggest symbol of the school – its flag. At every carnival the school presents a different, beautifully, embroidered flag, that is always a new one, showing the emblem of the guild. The main couple carries the flag of the year. The other couples carry a secondary flag of the school or a flag indicating the plot of the year.

There is a hierarchy inside the school that indicates a career. The third, second and first couples are in decrescendo order of importance in the school activities and in the parade. Only the first couple of dancers will be under an official judgment in the parade day. They are supposed to be the best couple in the school. And consequently are the ones who are able to negotiate a formal contract or a special remuneration.

Every year the schools directory choose their couples by internal competitions and more frequently by a subjective evaluation made by special members of the school directory. Many times, they keep the same couple, or only one of them. But if the school directory is not satisfied with their performance, they invite, negotiate and contract new dancers. Then they declare publicly the couple that will perform that year.

Sometimes the samba school invests in their formation and exclusive dedication paying for their participation in the rehearsals and the school activities during all the year. They can be paid monthly to guarantee their exclusive dedication to some school, by special contracts or simply verbal negotiations. It depends on the relation established between the directory and the dancers. It depends if it's a familiar, professional, long duration or a provisory contract.

### Commitment

These dancers are more or less affectively connected to a determined school and this fact implicates different commitments. Some of them circulate between various schools while some others have always belonged to the same school and would not admit to change. The couples should have a different dance style, and must have originality in their choreographies and ceremonial procedures.

All these skills are required because their qualities must convince who watches them that they are self-confident, brave, responsible, and creative. They must show by their performance the emotional intensity felt by who is watching them. They must express the school's feeling. In their own words, they represent their school, their traditionalism or their irreverence.

The special creative dancing styles and the individual efforts should be connected with the general samba school style in this specific popular art system. For example, the most traditional major-domo of Mangueira samba school is committed to her since he was a

child. All his life he has always taken part of the school activities. Nowadays, he is an instructor and teaches the young how to proceed in a traditional dancing style. He carries a small fan or a lace handkerchief in his left hand, avoids brusque jumps and reinforces the male role of conducting the lady, holding her hand or her waist and dancing round her. His ways of participating in the school disapproves the dancers who negotiates contracts and is not sentimentally connected with any school. This dance style is part of his school's style, constructing an idea of a more traditional school in comparison to others.

The dance style or the customs can be more irreverent in some cases. The schools considered as more traditionalists usually don't follow it. They tend to be more conservative in their customs and choreography. In fact, the schools don't have a permanent style to follow; they are always reconstructing their identities in contrast with the others. This system is always in movement. It reaches different streams of cultural traditions, synthesizing the more traditional, irreverent, opened, luxurious, creative or technical schools. The new generation of dancers is inserted in a new system where a "professional attitude" is required and the professionals are disputed by many schools. In general all of them are able to follow the experimentations or instructions to make a good performance and be awarded maximum points.

The (re)presentation of the school personalized by the performance of two individuals is an important point to comprehend how their aesthetic value depends on the interaction not just of the judges, critics, and school directors. Complementary, the ritual domain of the dance in the parade is the main encounter between who is dancing and who is observing. The setting involves the mutual appreciation of the conventions they share, and the support they mutually afford one another. Their mutual recognition convinces who is dancing and who is observing that what they are sharing is worth doing.

#### The narratives and their multiplicity – The parades

The position of the couple in the parades is not rigid but in general a couple is placed at the head of the parade, not the first characters and not the last ones. The main couple, called the first couple, is the only one evaluated by the jury. It usually comes after the percussion, then there are more one or two couples placed along the line. The couple performs their gentle dance with specific gestures while the samba of the year is played,

sang and performed many times during the one hour when the school is passing through the “sambódromo”. The couples are distributed in the school in such a way that there is always at least a couple passing through the avenue. They are always present.

The linear parade is always reformulated by the multiplicity and fragmentation of the plot. The plot developed each year integrates and disintegrates the narrative in many levels - dramatically, plastically, and musically. All the samba school performance is supposed to dramatically follow the musical narrative. But many parallel narratives work together to construct a unity proposed by the plot. These narrative levels break and transfigure this plot in many pieces. The allegories, for example, like their nomination proposes, are plastic constructions that describe the plot and transform themselves, recreating at the same time many other units of meaning (CAVALCANTI, 2001). We can give another example taking the dance of the couples. The couple’s performance with its gentle dance, antique customs, splendor presentation of the school flag proposes many possibilities of existence. They act in the present but they remember an old life style. They perform an antique dance but they take care of the most important and actualized symbol of the school – its flag.

Turner argued that Brazilian culture has raised a traditional ritual of reversal to the scale of a great industrial nation, in every way equivalent, in its subjunctive mood and at the unconscious and preconscious levels, to the complex modern industrial nation that is Brazil’s indicative mood and conscious reality. (TURNER, 1988: 137). Contradicting the first impression of permanence and stability this couple deals with many social and structural ambiguities. The Brazilian sociologist Pereira de Queiroz argues that the couple expresses the central Brazilian contradictions showed by the contrasts between their skin colour and their fancy customs. Da Matta analyses the Rio carnival as a reversal ritual from which the social structures are evidenced (DAMATTA, 1979). People that are marginalized occupy public spaces. A man can be a woman. A poor can be a rich.

The couple dance performance is about this possibility of experiencing other points of views. This sentiment must be fully experienced by the school parade participants and the audience. Their success depends on the audience response. If people don’t stand up, smile, clap, they have not been well succeeded. Their performance is always uncertain, they and the flag can fall down and they can be “booed”. Turner argues that the performance arts

derive from the subjunctive, liminal, reflexive, exploratory heart of social drama, where the structures of group experience are replicated, dismembered, re-membered, refashioned and made meaningful (TURNER, 1986: 43).

In fact, their unity is always relative. They are the only formal couple in the samba parade. That is why they are framed by their singularity, detached from the collectivity. Different from almost all the others members of the samba school, they are not part of a micro group inside the parade – the aisles. They have their own unity. They are particularized individuals framed by a romantic narrative of the couple. Their harmonic relationship can never be experienced in a supposed dyadic plenitude that is always shared with a third element - the flag between them and the audience as well.

Their romantic vocation is performed by their circle dance shared with the flag. Their first commitment must be to look after the school's flag without touching it and aiming the important achievement of crossing the whole sambódromo's avenue without falling down. When they are crossing it, they work through a tangle of conflicts and disharmonies shared with the people who are looking at them, they transform themselves and the audience transform itself taking part of the school's success. Rio's carnival is the reverse of fiction or fake: it demands validity of feeling, sad or glad (TURNER, 1986: 137). The performance itself is constituted and constitutes different meanings. Participants do not necessarily share a common experience or meaning but their common participation. (BRUNER, 1986). The performance of the couple highlights different dimensions of the relation between experience and expression. The school feelings potentially framed in the triadic unity – man, woman and the school flag are reversed in a collective unity shared and constructed by the audience.

The flag in this contextual setting cannot be tangled or fall down in the floor by action of the couple but it should be ceremonially touched and kissed by the audience. The flag is not a sacred or a dangerous object by itself but it takes part of this triadic unity converted in many pieces by the communication with the audience. The couple performance proves that the carnival art world is not just a collective expression but it is also a collective action.



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