

The Coexistence of Folk and Popular Culture as Vehicles of Social and Historical Activism: Transformation of the Bumba-meu-Boi in Northeast Brazil

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Abstract

This paper is part of a long-term study of the Bumba-meu-boi festival in São Luis (Maranhão) and its role in preserving popular identity in northeast Brazil. We find a complex hybrid in the so-called “cultura popular” that consists of two major elements. The first is a traditional folk narrative based on a strong theme of underclass identity and resistance (with origins in the 18th century slave culture); the second is a modernized form of the celebration that has evolved as a prominent medium of regional identity. Of the nearly 300 different groups celebrating the “boi,” there are significant variations in style, resources and identity as they negotiate the terrain between the traditional form and modern entertainment culture. This has produced transformations in style, form, and social narrative, including an attenuation of the inherent social criticism of the festival, the incorporation of modern stage production resources, a major challenge of entrepreneurship, and the emergence of governmental cultural agencies as powerful actors in both preservation and modernization. Though the analysis is based on northeast Brazil, it may provide a model for understanding the transformation and preservation of popular culture elsewhere.

Introduction

The festival known as *Bumba-meu-boi* is less known outside of Brazil than the famous Carnival, but it is just as deeply rooted in the nation’s past. Like the Carnival, the *Bumba-meu-boi* has been subject to considerable popularization, but it has generally maintained deep roots in the past. The result is a celebration that combines elements of traditional folklore and of modern popular/entertainment culture. This hybrid form is referred to as *cultura popular* in the Northeast Brazilian state of Maranhão (Ferretti), and its hundreds of celebrating groups provide a vast natural laboratory for examining the tensions and transformations of folklore and popular entertainment culture.

This festival has received relatively little attention in the English-language literature compared to other aspects of Brazilian popular and folk culture such as the Carnival and the samba (Guillermoprieto), *capoeira* and *candomblé* (Merrell), and popular music culture (Crook, Dunn, McCann). Fortunately there are seminal writings on the *Bumba-meu-boi* by Kazadi (1994, 2000, 2003), and there are a few of translated articles (e.g., Cavalcanti 2001, 2006). However, there is still much to be learned from a festival that is centuries older than the Carnival and is practiced in every federal state of Brazil. From roots in the social structure of colonial Brazil it contains a metaphor for the nation's unique racial composition. Its contemporary variants range from remote settlements to small villages, from urban neighborhoods to the city capital, and even to Carnival-like celebration in the Amazon that packs tens of thousands of people into a specially constructed stadium (Cavalcanti, 2001). Spanning this huge range of Brazilian geography and history, the *Bumba-meu-boi* celebration provides an ideal natural laboratory for examining both the continuity and the transformation of popular culture.

Our research is based on several years of field visits to Northeast Brazil, dozens of hours of videotaped interviews with participants and experts, and the accumulation of an extensive visual record of the festival as it is now practiced in São Luis. Where Kazadi's rich account (2003) draws heavily on his intimate contact with a one rural *Bumba-meu-boi* group in the 1980's, we are concentrating on dozens of groups that perform in the capital city and are thus most response to the influences of global entertainment culture and of public cultural agencies. In this overview of that process we discuss the complex path of maintaining cultural continuity while adapting to the

exigencies of contemporary markets, governmental administration and popular entertainment culture.

A Historically Mixed Cultural Form

Observers of contemporary Latin American will be familiar with *cultura popular*, a term that generally connotes culture of the popular classes. The term “popular” here refers variously to subaltern, ethnic or subcultural groups (Canclini) and often implies a distinction between elite (hegemonic) and traditional (repressed, resistant) culture (Storey). These are important distinctions to keep in mind, but in this paper we give priority to examining how local participants see their cultural space, and how they seek to preserve and transform it.

In Maranhão *cultura popular* refers to a middle ground between folklore and entertainment culture and closely akin to what Canclini has called hybrid culture (1995). Festival groups in the region negotiate their identity in a complex space where many elements meet -- traditional and modern, historical narrative and modern production, ethnic identity and racial reconciliation, neighborhood pride and regional recognition, autonomy and commercial/governmental influence. In this sense, Maranhão provides a laboratory for examining the process of cultural transformation in the region and may also shed light on the nature process in other areas of Latin America.

The Festival (*folgado*) as a Hybrid Form

The *Bumba-meu-boi folgado* is a mixed form artistically, historically and ethnically. Though the story has a relatively open structure with many variations (Reis 2004, 2005; M. Carvalho; Cavalcanti 2006), it retains a core of social satire (Kazadi). The narrative is deceptively simply and a touch bucolic: The *boi*, or ox, is at the

metaphorical and dramatic center of the story. In what is generally believed to be the classic narrative of the festival, a slave (Francisco, or Chico) steals a prize ox to satisfy the craving of his pregnant wife (Catirina, or Catarina) for the animal's tongue. The abduction and death of the animal represent a struggle between slave and master, laborer and landowner. Mixed race *caboclos* (*mestiços* of European-indigenous origin) and Amerindian figures also play various parts in the conflict. The resolution of the conflict is brought about by the resurrection of the ox, a magical act that restores harmony. This basic story contains a metaphorical representation of the social and ethnic composition of Brazil itself (Ribeiro 1995). Its most likely origin is as a narrative of slave resistance, and its satire of colonial social structure may be rooted as early as the 1700's (Andrade; M. Carvalho; Cascudo; Kazadi; Reis 2004, 2005).

In the centuries following its largely undocumented origins, the celebration was carried throughout the nation where its loose structure absorbed local traditions, culture, and ethnic structure. By the mid-20th century it began to emerge from underclass and peripheral communities to become a vehicle of local and regional identity.

The Bumba-meu-boi in Maranhão: Migration and Transformation

The term *folgado* signifies a celebration or festival rather than a rigidly specified ritual or simple dance form. Searching for a descriptive term, one classic folklore scholar calls it a "dramatic dance" (Andrade 2002) because it contains dance embedded in a loose narrative structure with sung and often spoken text. Another calls it a "folk story with dance," a popular festival with strong religious and ethnic elements (Cascudo). It has been adapted to local conditions wherever it is practiced, but in Maranhão the *Bumba-*

meu-boi has developed a definable (though not always explicit) narrative structure. The *folgado* also has a normative cycle of presentation according to which the events of the festivity extend over a period of months. How it came to be this way, and to be practiced by hundreds of groups, requires a bit of historical perspective.

In Maranhão the *Bumba-meu-boi* dates at least from the early half of the 19th century, though its origins were much earlier. The first newspaper accounts in Maranhão stem from the mid 1800's (Kazadi), but that is only a partially reliable indicator since the print media only developed after the Portuguese royal family fled the Napoleonic Wars to settle in Brazil in the early 1800's. The *Bumba-meu-boi* is believed to come from the sugar plantations of the northeast coast, in what are now the federal states of Pernambuco and Bahia (with major cities Recife and Salvador). These areas received the earliest importation of slave labor from Africa to support the massive, labor-intensive cultivation and processing of sugar cane.

When the market for sugar later went into decline, African descendants and other workers spread to regions of new economic growth in Brazil. Some migrated willingly after having bought their freedom or having escaped; others were sold by their masters to plantations, ranches and mines further to the west and south. The African descendants were already a complex and diverse group – they not only had origins in different regions and ethnic groups in Africa, but they may have varied by generations in their time in Brazil. Many had been born in Brazil of mixed ethnic parentage, and their linguistic origins had been challenged and often replaced by the Portuguese language. To this diverse group were added new arrivals, mostly from West Africa in the area of the Bight of Benin (called Minas by the Portuguese, referring to the region's rich mines). Thus, by

the end of the 19th century when slavery was officially abolished, the African descendants of Northeast Brazil were astonishingly diverse in their cultural and ethnic origins (Silva). To this complex mix were added other cultural elements, including that of European religion.

Throughout the era of slavery and migration, Catholic proselytizing seems to have played a role. Jesuits were particularly active in converting slave and indigenous peoples. They were withdrawn from Brazil in the mid-18th century because their opposition to slavery annoyed the plantation owners; however, they may have left their mark on some indigenous and slave populations through their use of festivals and celebrations to catechize them. The combination of Catholic teaching and African spiritual practice produced a mixed form known as *syncretism*, in which Catholic saints and African deities are partially superimposed on one another. These overlapping identities persist today and are visible in the *Bumba-meu-boi* celebration.

In Maranhão these diverse cultural elements came together during the period of the “civilization of leather” when cattle ranching emerged as a major economic factor; however, not all slaves and farm workers were engaged in cattle ranching. Many were also engaged in cotton, rice, domestic service, and other occupations. Freed slaves were employed in general labor, trades, small-scale farming, fishing and other work on the docks, and in a variety of other roles. An undetermined number also lived on *quilombos*, settlements of free or escaped slaves in the interior and forests of Maranhão. In the current *Bumba-meu-boi* the ranching motif survives even though the participants are more likely to be small farmers, laborers, workers in docks and fisheries, and a wide variety of urban occupations.

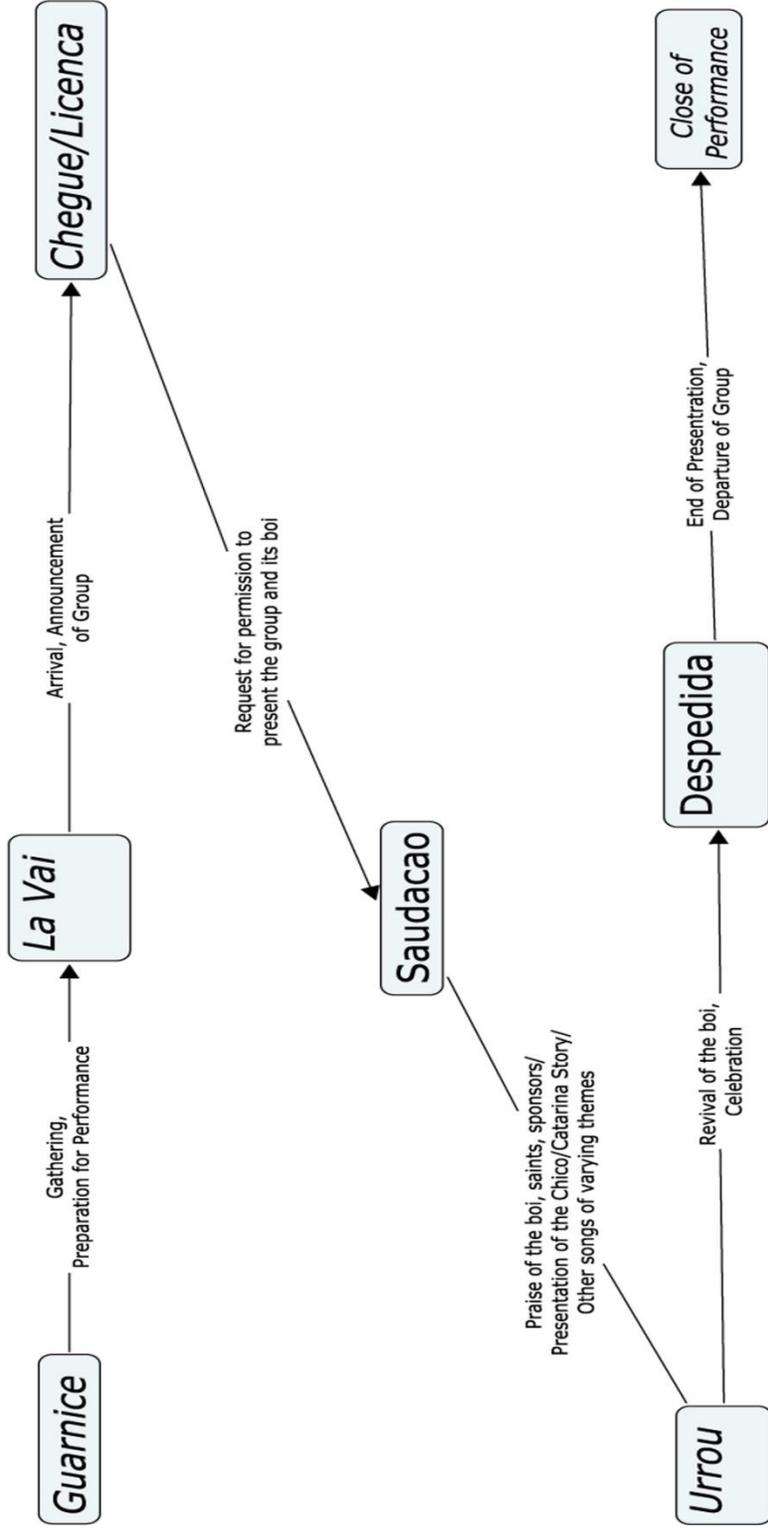
Whatever the specific occupation of the 19th century participants, the elite saw their *folgado* as a form of resistance and disruption. From 1862-1868 the festival was banned outright because it was seen to be a rallying point for slaves (who were not officially freed until 1888). Although the *Bumba-meu-boi* was again allowed after 1868, it was for decades excluded from the capital city of São Luis. Banned from the city center, the celebration continued to evolve in peripheral towns and neighborhoods of the region. This process of repression and geographical marginalization led to the emergence of local styles (called *sotaques*, or accents) that were distinguished by costumes, variations on the basic narrative, and in diversification of melodic and instrumental styles (M. Carvalho; Kazadi 1994).

These variations are carried into contemporary performance and are now semi-formalized in official programs and in the expectations of audiences. These apparently organic variations on tradition in the periphery have now become official designations in the registry of the government culture agencies. It is difficult to distinguish between tradition and innovation as the two interact over the decades, but some of these changes can be understood by taking a brief look at a central feature of the celebration, the basic narrative cycle that guides each performance.

The Narrative Cycle of Performance: A Negotiation of Tradition

In the common story line (Figure 1), the theft of the prize ox by Francisco (Chico) disrupts the social system of the ranch or plantation. The owner, generally representing European colonial power, discovers the crime and orders the pursuit of Chico by his ranch hands (*vaqueiros*) who were generally *caboclos* or *mestiços* of European-

Figure 1. Narrative Cycle in Bumba-Meu-Boi Performances of Maranhao, Brazil



Amerindian heritage. In many versions, Amerindians or indigenous peoples (called *indios/indias* or *tapuias*) assist the *vaqueiros* in capturing Chico. These groups also reflect Maranhão's turbulent past in which indigenous peoples sometimes allied themselves with slaves and small farmers, and sometimes (as in this story) served the interests of the owners and political authorities (Assunção).

In most versions of the story, the *vaqueiros* are aided by the *indios* in finding Chico who has sacrificed the ox to satisfy the craving of his wife Catirina. He is given a chance for pardon if the ox can be restored to the owner. In a magical resolution, the animal is resurrected and social harmony is restored. A shaman usually achieves this restoration miracle after the failure of European religion. Nor surprisingly, this final theme historically provided an opportunity for criticizing the European masters and led to the enmity of 19th century churchmen.

In public performance, these dramatic events are bracketed by a stylized performance cycle that calls the group together in the *Guarnicê*, and announces its arrival in the *La Vai section*. In songs of the *Chegue/Liçenca* the group asks permission to perform and thus echoes the traditional practice of appearing at a sponsor's house and asking permission to perform. In the *Saudação* the group traditionally honors the *boi*, the sponsors, and the saints; in modern performances this section may also include contemporary stories and topical concerns. Most of all, this central section of the performance presents the story of Chico and the death of the ox. The *Urrou* refers onomatopoeically to the sound of the *boi* as it returns to life, resurrected through medicine and faith. The *Despedida* announces the end of the performance and the departure of the group.

There are variations and elaborations within this cycle (Kazadi, M. Carvalho, 109), but this pattern has evolved as the normative form for all groups participating in the vast June celebrations in São Luis (C. Lima, Reis 2004; 2005). Local audiences are familiar with the format, which also meets the expectation of the culture agencies that oversee and support the festival. It provides a familiar and compact format that is easily communicated within a short performance period.

The performance of the *Saudação* may once have been reserved for the telling of the basic story, but there is so much thematic flexibility that the Chico/Catarina story may be only skeletal. Some researchers even doubt that the classic narrative is much performed by contemporary groups (L. Carvalho, Cavalcanti 2006); however, the basic story line persists in the format of the presentation and in the ritualized pattern of the sung commentary. Thus, while the cycle in Figure 1 is generally normative, it is also telegraphically foreshortened to meet the demands of public scheduling. It both preserves a traditional form of the *folguedo* while streamlining it for public presentation. The groups can remain true to the current definition of tradition by adhering to the format, while varying the content of songs to include contemporary concerns.

Participants, audience, intellectuals and culture agencies comprise a broad culture that ambivalently rewards both tradition and innovation. Groups are honored for adhering to their roots and disparaged if they become too commercial. Yet they are also evaluated according to their innovation and accessibility. Traditionality, performance quality, and entertainment value provide a complex and sliding scale of approval. The governmental agencies that monitor and schedule them expect certain traditional

benchmarks in their presentation, but also expect that tradition be conveyed in performances of less than one hour.

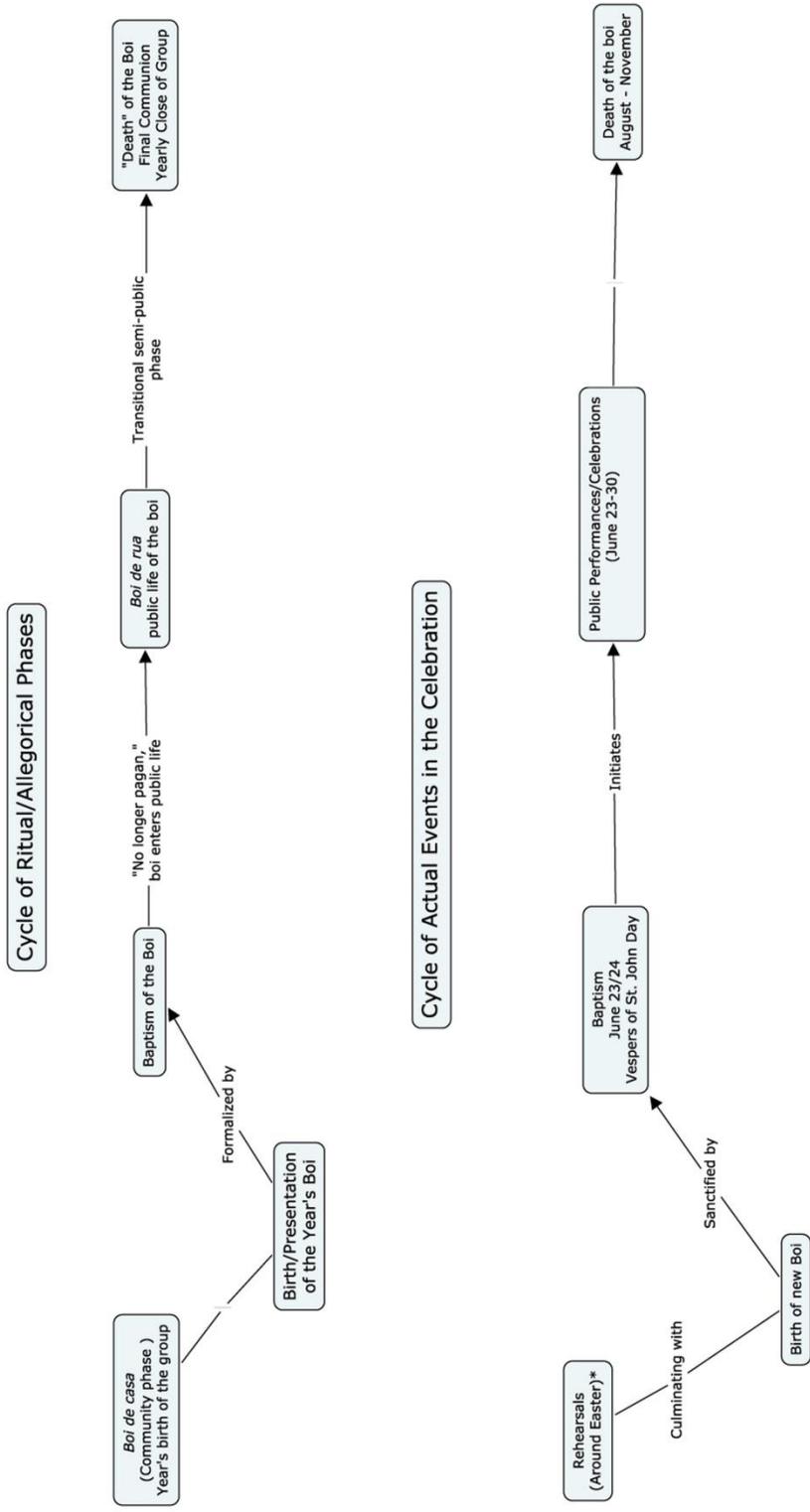
Just as the local culture establishes broad categories of tradition and innovation, it provides a category for those who have innovated too much. At the margins of definition, there is a category for those that abandon the classic format and are no longer considered true carriers of the *Bumba-meu-boi* tradition. Typically, such organizations modify or forsake the classic performance cycle and weave together a wide range of folklore-based elements into their performances. These groups are designated as alternative or street theater groups, and they are designated in the public programs as such (with an A – for Alternative -- next to their names). In this way the regional *cultura popular* maintains a definitional boundary between what is considered traditional and what has moved more decisively toward entertainment production. The performance cycle of Figure 1 thus performs a normative function by loosely defining the boundary between folklore and entertainment culture.

Just as the performance cycle (in Figure 1) establishes a tradition (even though it may be of fairly recent codification), the yearly cycle of celebration seems to have a longer and more organic history in the life of the Northeast.

The Yearly Cycle of the Festival: A Second Negotiation of Tradition

The celebration of *Bumba-meu-boi* occurs in an annual rhythm that reflects the cycles of birth and death, change of seasons, harvest, loss and renewal, and of social disruption and unification. It echoes the narrative cycle embedded in each performance cycle, except that it extends for a period of as much as six months of the year.

Figure 2. Yearly Cycle of the Bumba-Meu-Boi Celebration of Maranhao, Brazil



* Note: Because Northeast Brazil is on the equator, Easter falls in the winter (See text).

The yearly cycle (Figure 2) begins with the calling together of the group around Easter for the first rehearsals. In the European calendar this date would correspond to the rebirth and planting of the land in the spring, but transposed to equatorial Maranhão, Easter falls roughly at the end of winter. According to Prado (pp. 45-55) this was a quiet phase in the cultivation cycle preceding harvest – a time of little money, but time to celebrate. It is also the time when the peak of heavy summer rains has passed and the weather becomes a bit drier. In this season the group is convened. Shortly thereafter, the new *boi* -- an ornate symbolic ox of wood and elaborately embroidered velvet – is unveiled.

The next major event is the symbolic baptism of the new *boi*. Though the Church was critical of the *folgado*'s anti-clerical satire a century ago, many groups now have their *boi* figures blessed by a parish priest. In the phrase often used in Maranhão, the *boi* is, after baptism, “no longer pagan” and can dance in public performances. It becomes a public figure and remains until its death at the close of the cycle. Unlike the smaller death/resurrection of the *boi* during an evening's performance cycle, this larger death ends the public life of the ox and of the group. For the most traditional groups, the celebratory season is over until the symbolic ox, and the group itself, come to life again the next Easter.

The yearly cycle follows other key dates in the Catholic calendar. The intense phase of public performance begins on the day of Saint John the Baptist (June 24), the patron saint of the festival. He is usually portrayed as a child with a lamb and appears on promotional brochures, T-shirts and, most of all, on costumes and embroidered *bois*.

Beneath this historical commercialization is a unique blend of popular Catholicism in which Saint John is prized for being the cousin and baptizer of Jesus; he is thus believed to be directly approachable without having to appeal to earthly intermediaries (such as village priests).

In a unique Maranhão legend, Saint John even had a prize ox that assisted in his celebration day. Perhaps unwisely, he loaned the ox to Saint John for his celebration day, who then loaned the ox to Saint Marçal for his commemoration. Saint Marçal carelessly allowed the ox to be slaughtered to feed the celebrants – an act that corresponds roughly to the cycle of the *Bumba-meu-boi*. This story supports the celebration cycle of the *folgado* in Maranhão and is perhaps unique in all of Catholic hagiography

The day of Saint Marçal (June 30) closes the June performance cycle and is celebrated in the mundane tradition of street festivals and in spiritual practices of both popular Catholicism and African-Brazilian tradition. On this date several African-Brazilian spiritual groups celebrate their own version of the *boi* celebration. These groups are known generally as “Minas” and they trace their heritage to a number of Western African peoples who were brought to Brazil as slaves. Although “minas” itself was a generic Portuguese word for West African slaves, it now designates the Afro-Brazilian spiritual groups in Maranhão. They practice what is elsewhere in Northeast Brazil called *candomblé* (Merrell). Its practice is based on African spiritual entities, many of which are “syncretized” with Christian saints. This merging of spiritual practice emphasizes the continuing power of African-Brazilian practice in Maranhão, even when it shares part of its celebration calendar with Catholic saints.

The June 30 celebration ends the public phase of the celebration, but does not close the yearly cycle -- that occurs with the *morte do boi* (death of the ox). Later in the season, generally between August and October, many of the most tradition-oriented groups celebrate a symbolic slaughter of the *boi* in the final event of the season. In the traditional celebration, the celebrants drink wine that symbolizes the blood of the slaughtered ox.

In modern practice, the next year's begins immediately for the leaders. They must prepare for the next season as the organizational work of the groups has become more bureaucratic and embedded in the administrative nexus of the culture agencies. Some less tradition-oriented groups may avoid the *morte* ceremony altogether so that they can continue with performances throughout the year. This reflects both a loosening of tradition and a concession to the increasing economic needs of the groups. Once groups invest heavily in production they need to travel and earn money -- in order to invest still more heavily in production for the following year. By avoiding the symbolic death of the ox, they avoid closing the group's performance cycle but also mark themselves as being less traditional. Whether performing or tending to organizational tasks, some members of the groups are involved in the *Bumba-meu-boi* throughout the year.

The alternative groups provide the definitional boundary of this element of traditionality -- they do not formally celebrate the death of the ox in a community ceremony because they continue their performance life. Some *Bumba-meu-boi* groups may dispense with the *morte*, substituting some form of final public appearance.

However, maintaining some form of its celebration is still a symbolic act that anchors groups in the folkloric tradition.

Forms of Transformation: Contemporary Negotiations

The previous sections dealt primarily with features of the *Bumba-meu-boi* that are used in the local culture to distinguish what is considered traditional. All these factors are historical markers rooted in the *cultura popular* of the region. In this section we discuss transformative factors that are the result of changes in the support structure and survival needs of the groups. They do not result from the intrinsic nature of the traditional culture, but from the influence of the administrative nexus – the governmental cultural agencies that have come increasingly to define the environment of the groups.

It is easy to imagine that the earliest *Bumba-meu-boi* groups were the primary consumers their own cultural activity – celebrating and performing for themselves. But whether this romantic reconstruction ever existed, by the mid-twentieth century it was normal for *Bumba-meu-boi* groups to perform for audiences in other communities on a contractual basis (Prado). This was a cultural exchange, bringing the *folgado* to communities that had none; it was also a commercial venture that provided funds to support the groups and began the systematic creation of audiences.

This early stage of modest commercialization development began the process of forming a network of performers, sponsors, and public consumers. Decades later, most groups seem to retain a community base, but a wider network of contracts, public audiences, and sponsorship has developed. This self-commercialization already had a strong internal logic in the groups by the 1960's when the government has emerged as an important consumer and supporter of *cultura popular*.

Structure of Groups: Transformation of the Administrative Nexus

Groups were traditionally led by a person who acted as organizer of the group's activities. Sometimes this person was also the financial sponsor of the group, but a division of labor is now common and different individuals often perform the roles. Leadership was highly personalized and often passed from through kinship or close personal ties. Management of the group's daily activities might be led by a set of leaders with responsibilities for logistics and performance. These relationships were gradually formalized with the creation of a board of directors or formal leadership structure – corporate entities that were required for interaction with governmental agencies of culture and tourism. Inevitably, this created an administrative nexus that competes with the religious values that were once so important.

Local politicians and civic leaders may now promote groups in order to raise the profile of their communities and qualify for government cultural funds. In other cases, a community organization or civic action coalition grew into a *boi* group. More recently, some new groups have begun as youth projects that provide performance outlets and other benefits for young people; these groups try to carry on the *Bumba-meu-boi* tradition, but often they combine various folkloric and performance elements into an “alternative” form. Such origins are generally more modern in the sense that they are motivated by community service or the exigencies of public funding, rather than by religious or ethnic identification. Older religious motivations, such as the fulfillment of an obligation to Saint John for some special favor or grace, still play a role; however, the

economic needs of the groups orient them increasingly toward public funding and the relationship with cultural agencies.

The diversity of motivations at the group level is echoed at the individual level where traditional and modern incentives intersect. Direct benefits of food and drink often play a role, especially in times of scarcity in the more modest villages and neighborhoods (L. Carvalho, Prado). In some cases, participants may be directly paid, but when this occurs it is usually for those in leading roles such as Chico, or the animator (*miolo*) who dances inside the symbolic ox.

Other motivations are highly personal – many are involved because of a relationship with another member of the group. These personal and social ties may be so intense that the individual experiences a year-long immersion in an intense social network focused on the *boi* celebration – in essence, a subcultural world of its own. (L. Carvalho). Yet, even as these traditional and personalized motivations continue to be important, a new layer of obligations has produced changes in leadership and structure of groups.

Transitions in Motivation and Skills

The hundreds of *Bumba-meu-boi* groups have developed a variety of ways to negotiate these older and newer motivational factors, but it is clear from the respondents we interviewed that the growing administrative nexus has shifted the balance. Older participants and leaders hint that the *promessa* is now of lesser influence, but they generally agree that community identity remains a strong motivating force. There is an ambiguous tendency toward direct material benefits, but even the best supported groups

report that they channel most of their funds into maintaining the ability to produce a public show.

Embroiderers, suppliers of food and transportation, and others necessary for logistical support usually must be paid directly. Many of the organizers can give a specific account of the food budget for rehearsals, for example. It can be measured in the number of pigs, chickens, kilos of flour, bottles of cachaça (cane liquor) and kilos of rice needed to feed those present. In the largest groups the participants may be proudly numbered in military fashion – a battalion (*batalhão*), or most proudly, a “heavy battalion” (*batalão pesado*). A *batalão pesado* of 400-600 persons literally does require something like a military operation, but even a smaller group of 100 or so requires a large investment in food, drink and transportation.

Some support comes through contributions and barter, but there is no way of avoiding direct financial payments. More than one group we interviewed expressed a desire, most of all, for a bus or two. Facing these needs makes the groups more open to offers of support from sponsors and governmental agencies. Paradoxically, the income opportunity provided by public sponsorship helps the groups survive and continue their tradition, but it also creates greater needs for modernization; the opportunity for paid performance both satisfies group needs and creates new ones. For most, this process has intensified the organizational transformation of the groups from the personalized entrepreneurship of several decades ago (Prado) to elected presidents, boards of directors and even staff support for grant writing, accountancy, and legal advice. This intensified the connection between the groups and the cultural agencies – so much so that governmental organizations and non-profit cultural agencies must now be considered

primary culture consumers (rivaling the local community, public audiences and traditional sponsors).

From a perhaps imaginary past when the groups were both producers and consumers of their own culture, the new cultural market is now densely populated with producers, intermediaries, professionals, intellectuals, and consumers of all sorts. Not surprisingly, this has tended to draw the attention of groups from their neighborhoods of origin into the capital city of São Luis. Many now maintain offices in the capital, and some have moved their headquarters to São Luis even while keeping the name of their village of origin in the official title of the group.

Confronting this changed environment requires new skills, and some groups resist either by inability or by principle. Complete rejection of agency support is a difficult course; yet, once a group seeks to negotiate with official consumers they increasingly need professional skills and middle-class contacts. This is a long way from the romantic view that portrayed folklore as spontaneous expression of the people (Lima). While this romantic view was probably never entirely accurate and spontaneous expression always required some degree of organization, contemporary logistics and entrepreneurship require increasingly complex organization management and communication. It now takes a considerable amount of modernization to maintain tradition.

This transformation extends to the roles some groups play in their communities. Many groups began life as vehicles of popular (folkloric) expression in the most romantic sense of the word, but they also provided an expressive outlet and created economic benefit for participants and their communities. More recently, some administer community programs of youth development, food and snack programs, workshops in

costume making, and sometimes direct benefits. These community programs require a certain level of organization capacity, leadership, and the ability to attract outside funds. This signals a transition for some groups from a folkloric vehicle to a social service organization, maintaining elements of both. In this emerging identity, a centuries-old celebration of slave resistance has taken on, historically, a unique form of popular Catholicism, syncretism with African-Brazilian spiritual practice, partnership with governmental agencies, and a variety of formal and informal social service functions.

In this transformation, structures and procedures are formalized and bureaucratized. The personalized individual leader must become a “juridical person” with corporate status. Taking this legal step normally means a constitution, bylaws, and an elected president and board. It requires a telephone, visits to the culture bureaucracies, ability to produce applications and reports, and skill in dealing with authorities. The groups also need access to computers and Internet communications, since the use of media has become more central in the government’s contact with them. Spontaneity still plays a role, but infrastructure and organization are necessary to cultivate the administrative nexus that has become a precondition for cultural production.

Conclusion

This mix of old and new raises the question whether folklore must hold to ancient themes (e.g., slave relations on the colonial sugar plantation), and whether it becomes popular entertainment culture when it incorporates new themes from the mass media. The practical answer in Maranhão is to call it *cultura popular*, a term that is arguably a contemporary alternative to the concept of folklore. While it may appear to be a perversion of tradition, it may be the only practical way tradition can survive.

It is clear that the dynamism of this hybrid form has kept the *folguedo* from being museumized, and may be an important ingredient of its historical continuity. Yet audiences, tourists, intellectuals, and government cultural agencies constantly evaluate the groups: Are they accessible (e.g., do they have strong performance values)? Are they traditional (e.g., do they contain the old values and story)? These questions are part of a persistent collective introspection about transformations in Maranhão culture, subjecting groups to continual scrutiny and criticism in the wider community.

The boundary between traditional and modern (however they are understood in the local culture) is partly maintained in the distinction between the private and public activities of the groups. The more traditional groups celebrate activities and rituals (such as the *morte*/death of the *boi*) that are based in the neighborhoods. However, the boundaries are constantly shifting between private and public, between traditional and modern, and between personalized and bureaucratic. These two aspects of *cultura popular* support each other, even in the face of strong challenges from economic modernization and popular entertainment culture. This dynamic penetrates both the artistic and the administrative levels of the groups. At present the process seems to be an unstable dynamic in which the groups must each navigate between their sense of tradition and the challenges of bureaucratic and entertainment cultures. The large number of *folguedo* groups engaged in this process ensures that this spectrum from traditional to modern will continue to be represented, even though the aggregate shift seems to be in the direction of economic and bureaucratic transformation. The central question to be examined further is whether this new hybrid culture is a viable model for viewing Latin

American cultural transformation (Canclini), and how the gains and losses of this process are combining to create a new form of popular culture.

Forthcoming

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