

TAMBOR DE CRIOULO: THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRO-BRAZILIAN CULTURE, AN APPROACH IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF SÃO JOÃO DO ARRAIAL, PIAUÍ

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Abstract

This study addresses Tambor de Crioulo as an important manifestation of Afro-Brazilian culture in the municipality of São João do Arraial, in the state of Piauí. The research aims to analyze the relevance of this cultural expression for the preservation of memory, identity, and traditions of African origin present in the local community. Methodologically, the study is based on a bibliographic review and on the analysis of historical, social, and cultural aspects related to Tambor de Crioulo, highlighting its contribution to strengthening community relations and valuing intangible cultural heritage. The results show that this manifestation goes beyond its festive and religious character, constituting an important instrument of cultural resistance, transmission of knowledge, and identity affirmation among Afro-descendant populations. It is concluded that Tambor de Crioulo plays a fundamental role in maintaining local cultural traditions, contributing to the appreciation of cultural diversity and to the recognition of African heritage in the formation of Brazilian society.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian culture, Cultural identity, Intangible heritage, São João do Arraial, Tambor de Crioulo.

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INTRODUCTION

The present project aims to address the need to recover the history of Tambor de Crioulo in the Chapada da Sindá community. Knowing the history of local culture means recovering and preserving its tradition and memory.

The importance of preserving the popular culture of our city lies in the fact that it is a way of valuing our origin or the place where we live. Knowledge of local culture strengthens appreciation, as well as encourages the development of the region through popular manifestations and expressions that embody the regional context as a factor of Afro-Brazilian cultural identity.

Thus, there is a need to disseminate Afro-Brazilian culture through the “Tambor de Crioulo of the Chapada da Sindá community” as a recovery of the local culture of São João do Arraial. It is important to value the history of Tambor de Crioulo and the local culture of the Chapada da Sindá community because, through it, future generations may come to know its importance in their lives, their beliefs, their customs, and their artistic and religious festivities.

The objective of this project is to know and value the history of Tambor de Crioulo in order to recover and disseminate its culture, beliefs, customs, and artistic and religious festivities, by encouraging Afro-Brazilian culture in different places within the municipality and even across the country, as well as by reaching various social strata, making it possible for popular culture to cease being the privilege of a few people and become more accessible to everyone.

It is necessary, above all, to know our history, our cultures, our people, and to value our roots, and from there to begin the search for knowledge, for new histories, cultures, peoples, and worlds.

In this way, the implementation of a History project is necessary, one that seeks to broaden knowledge of Tambor de Crioulo in the Chapada da Sindá community, in addition to providing new instruments of understanding and critical thinking, thereby contributing directly and indirectly to a better learning experience regarding our local culture.

This research seeks to present popular culture and Afro-Brazilian culture through Tambor de Crioulo in the cultural, social, and personal spheres, fostering a new perspective on the local culture of São João do Arraial and the Chapada da Sindá community, with its way of life. For it is necessary, above all, to know and value our own local history so that we may appreciate and understand other histories, peoples, and cultures.

The study was developed through an analytical and descriptive methodology, by means of bibliographic and documentary research, using both printed books and data collection about the Chapada da Sindá community through the internet.

The structure of the work, that is, how it is divided, is as follows: in the first chapter, we will discuss Popular Culture, understood as cultural elements belonging to a society or region, which the population practices constantly and actively through different manifestations such as dance, theater, art, literature, folklore, gastronomy, music, and so forth. In the second chapter, Afro-Brazilian culture will be discussed, defined as the set of cultural manifestations in Brazil that have undergone some degree of influence from African culture from the period of Colonial Brazil to the present day. In the third chapter, Tambor de Crioulo will be addressed as a cultural group that emerged in the 1950s through the families of João Luzia and Sindá, in the Chapada da Sindá community, under a sapucaia tree, as a form of understanding and integration within the community, where they would gather to play.

Valuing culture is not merely showing how it is present in our daily lives, but seeing it as an essential component and participant in the social and educational formation of every individual.

POPULAR CULTURE

Before discussing popular culture, it is important to address what culture is, or what may constitute a culture. As may be seen below, it is composed of various elements developed by a society over time. Thus:

Culture is constituted by the set of knowledge, practices, rules, norms, prohibitions, strategies, beliefs, ideas, values, and myths that are transmitted from generation to generation, reproduced in each individual, control the existence of society, and maintain psychological and social complexity. There is no human society, archaic or modern, devoid of culture, but each culture is unique. Thus, culture always exists within cultures, but culture exists only through cultures. (Morin, 2002, p. 56)

Popular culture, in turn, is a form of cultural manifestation intrinsically related to the anonymous, the collective, the spontaneous, tradition, and orality. In general terms, we may say that popular culture is:

the set of knowledge and practices experienced by the people, although they may also be experienced and instrumentalized by elites. Consider candomblé, carnival, feijoada, folkloric practices, jogo do bicho, and capoeira. (...) Popular culture simply [is] what is spontaneous, free from canons and laws, such as dances, beliefs, and traditional sayings. (...) Everything that happens in the country by tradition and deserves to be maintained and preserved unchanged. (...) Everything that is knowledge of the people, of anonymous or collective production. (Vannucchi, 1999, p. 98).

As one can perceive, defining popular culture is not simple, because it is necessary to establish a relationship with the word people. The term “people” has various meanings, as it may be related to ideological, political, social, and economic conceptions.

It must be said that popular culture also involves public space, cultural policy projects, and June festivals, all contributing to local development. According to Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, in her text *Indicadores Culturais para Tempos de Desencanto* [Cultural Indicators for Times of Disenchantment], she states that:

one of the pillars of the notion of public space—its distinction from the private—collapses in this sphere and, behind the new walls, the media replace the public square as a political forum and as a meeting space (Martin Barbero, 2000 apud Gautier; 2003:65)

Culture governs all aspects of the formation of a society, such as behaviors, thoughts, expectations, and even the formal or informal education present in the daily life of every human being. At

the same time that cultures preserve traditions, they also integrate traditions from other cultures and other peoples, forming an exchange of practices, customs, traditions, foods, and so forth.

These ways in which we observe the world generate different representations and valuations of cultures. There is no culture superior to another; however, there are different perspectives and values presented. Societies change, evolve, and undergo crises of values and economics, yet culture remains present in our daily lives. Each people has its identity guided by its local culture, and this does not dissolve either with the evolution of machines or with the evolution of technology, which today is globalized.

According to Benedict (1972, p. 16 apud Laraia, 2009 p. 67), “culture is like a lens through which man sees the world”; thus, different cultures possess different lenses. The way we see the world and react to situations is part of the cultural heritage we receive throughout our lives. We are not born knowing how we will behave; rather, we learn as time passes, and this behavior may generate, through cultural heritage, various types of prejudice toward already existing cultures and practices. “Our cultural heritage, developed over countless generations, has always conditioned us to react depreciatively toward the behavior of those who act outside the standards accepted by the majority of the community.”

Humble people who have had little schooling and who live in communities far from large cities nevertheless contribute to passing down stories across generations, transmitting the beliefs, dances, customs, values, and rituals that belong to their people.

AFRO-BRAZILIAN CULTURE

Afro-Brazilian culture is the set of predominant cultural manifestations in Brazil, formed from the combination of elements of the cultures of African peoples who were brought as enslaved people to the country during the colonial period.

During Colonial Brazil, every type of cultural manifestation of African origin was discouraged and marginalized in society. At that time, the customs and traditions of African peoples were considered primitive and savage by Europeans.

With the end of slavery in Brazil (1888), a slow process of reinterpretation of African culture began. In the mid-twentieth century, the Brazilian elite began to view certain African cultural aspects as legitimate artistic expressions that represented national identity.

In Brazil, African culture was also influenced by European cultures, especially Portuguese culture, and Indigenous cultures, so that characteristics of African origin in Brazilian culture are generally mixed with other cultural references. Strong traces of African culture can be found today in various aspects of Brazilian culture, such as popular music, religion, cuisine, folklore, and popular festivities. The states of Maranhão, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Bahia, Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Rio Grande do Sul were the most influenced by culture of African origin, both because of the number of enslaved people received during the period of the slave trade and because of the internal migration of enslaved people after the end of the sugarcane cycle in the Northeast region.

The website *A Participação dos Negros na Construção do Brasil* [The Participation of Black People in the Construction of Brazil] (2014) adds:

It is necessary to stress that Black people did not come from their place of origin without culture. Upon entering Brazil, they encountered a reality completely different from the one in which they had lived, since, for the European colonizer, they were considered merely labor; however, on the African continent, Black people lived in tribes, and there they were princes. The cultural heterogeneity of African ethnic groups was immense; in other words, there was a differentiated cultural practice depending on the region to which each group belonged. (Black Influence in Brazil, 2014, n.p.)

Once present in the country, among so many other difficulties experienced by Black people, as history tells us, one of them was precisely keeping their culture alive. Many factors interfered, such as distance from their “land,” their “families,” and the “loss” of their culture, imposed by those who held power in their hands: the Empire and the Church.

During slavery, alongside the Empire, the Catholic Church held the reins of power. European culture, considered white, predominated in the country and allowed no room for African customs, which were discriminated against by white society, then the majority. In this regard, Abdias do Nascimento writes:

Among the instruments used by the enslaving power is the Catholic Church, which, absolutely, is not responsible for the persistence of religions of African origin in the so-called Latin America: Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil, among others. This Church owned slaves for profit and constantly persecuted and attacked African religious beliefs for centuries, up to the present day (Nascimento, 1978, p. 101).

In order to preserve their culture and beliefs, Black people were forced to seek two paths: the “acceptance” of what was imposed by the Catholic Church, mixing it with what was compatible with their own culture, and also, for those who managed to flee, the maintenance of their rites in clandestine societies formed by them, known as quilombos.

In the quilombos, in a hidden manner and on the margins of power, Black people possessed a certain freedom to express themselves, especially in accordance with the customs of their homelands.

In short, despite all the difficulties encountered and despite the fact that much was lost, the contribution of African peoples to Brazilian formation was essential both in the physical composition of the population and in the shaping of what would become culture. This includes several dimensions, such as cuisine, language, music, religion, aesthetics, social values, and mental structures.

TAMBOR DE CRIOULA AND ITS MANIFESTATION IN SÃO JOÃO DO ARRAIAL

Tambor de Crioula is a form of Afro-Brazilian expression involving circular dance, singing, and drum percussion. Brought to Brazil between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by enslaved people from various regions of Africa, Tambor de Crioula is a form of entertainment or of fulfilling a vow to

Saint Benedict (a Black saint), as well as to other saints associated with traditional Catholicism and to entities worshipped in terreiros.

Tambor de Crioula groups are formed by the coreiras, the name given to the female dancers, by the drummers, and by the singers, guided by the uninterrupted rhythm of the drums and by the influence of the singing, culminating in the punga or umbigada. The punga or umbigada, the main part of the dance, is a choreographic movement in which the coreiras, in a gesture understood as both greeting and invitation, touch one another's abdomen. Its place of origin and occurrence is the state of Maranhão, in the Northeast region of Brazil, with groups existing in municipalities along the coast and in the interior.

According to Ferretti (2002), the oldest known information about Tambor de Crioula is that these dances were used to conceal fighting exercises. After the end of slavery, since the use of force was no longer necessary, this practice began to be performed as a dance in which women could now participate in the circle, displaying all their sensuality.

The oldest information I have about Tambor de Crioula is that it was performed to conceal fighting exercises: while farther south this was done hidden under the sound of the berimbau, in Maranhão it was done under the sound of drums. Thus, the leg movements—according to the oldest information I gathered—were practiced to the sound of drums; it was not exactly dance; it was like capoeira in Bahia. Américo deduces that with the abolition of slavery, since Black people no longer needed to train for combat against the white oppressor, “the custom remained, and little by little it was transformed into a dance.” For him, therefore, the introduction of women into Tambor de Crioula occurred after Abolition, that is, when its basic connotation as combat gave way to a typically festive choreography (Ferreti, apud Azevedo, 2002, p. 51).

Tambor de Crioula is performed with three drums, played by hand by men who position themselves alongside a group of singers. The participants organize themselves in a circle, and the dance is performed by women, each entering the circle in her own time to develop the choreography, whose high point is the punga. The three drums that make up the instrumental ensemble are made of wood, tapered and hollowed out, and covered with leather at one end, fastened with pegs and tied with rope or leather. The singing begins with a soloist who improvises words that are repeated for hours on end. The

melody is built upon the words, pronounced with a distinctive accent full of regionalisms and old terms, often difficult for outsiders to understand.

Another assertion is that Tambor de Crioula was also a way of training blows in preparation for confrontation. The anthropologist Sergio Ferretti, based on a statement by playwright Américo Azevedo Neto, in his book *Tambor de Crioula – ritual and spectacle*, tells us that:

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Its recognition as an important cultural expression began in the 1960s, leading the groups to become more organized. Today, Tambor de Crioula groups must have legal registration and a headquarters, which usually operates in the home of the “owner” of the tambor.

The Tambor de Crioula of São João do Arraial, in Piauí, emerged in the 1960s through the João Luzia and Sindá families, in the Chapada da Sindá community, under a sapucaia tree, where they gathered to play the drum. At that time, the families used the drum to signal when a group that had gone hunting in the woods had arrived back in the community, and the other group used the sound of the drum to give notice. The dance is marked by rhythmic movements, the accelerated beating of the drums, and the strong stamping of feet. According to the documentary produced by the group *Oppressed Cultures of Chapada da Sindá* (2007), directed by Erinaldo Carvalho, we observe this fact:

The Tambor de Crioula of the Chapada da Sindá Community Settlement in São João do Arraial, Piauí, began around the 1950s as a form of entertainment and integration for the local community. Women and men, adults, adolescents, and children dance in strong rhythmic movements, marked by the beating of the drums and the strong stamping of feet. (Carvalho, 2007, n.p.)

Master João Luzia, as he is known, lives in the Chapada da Sindá community, in the municipality of São João do Arraial, located in the northern region of Piauí. He leads the Tambor de Crioula group, which brings together different generations. The farmer João Luzia, seventy years old, who did not have the opportunity to attend school, composes the lyrics of the songs of an amusement that he learned from his father and passes on to his children and grandchildren. The hard labor of the fields is accompanied by the music of Master João Luzia. Married and the father of seven children, João Luzia has danced Tambor de Crioula since childhood. While still young, he took charge of the group, becoming responsible for the tunes, rhythms, and lyrics that portray, in a simple way, the daily life of the rural worker.

The group is composed of approximately forty-five people, divided among drummers, singers, chorus members, and coreiras (women, men, and children who dance and sing in the tambor). It is coordinated by Master João Luzia, a self-taught farmer who composes songs, rhythms, and tunes drawn from the sounds of the environment in which he lives and works.

According to Ferretti (1995),

as in samba de roda, Tambor de Crioula is generally danced outdoors; its choreography, free and varied, is developed within a circle formed by the dancers, singers, drummers, and participants. [...] The circle forms naturally. The drummers arrive, place the drums, and begin to play (testing whether they are properly tuned); then the singers arrive, as do the dancers, coreiras, crioulas, or “baianas,” who, positioning themselves side by side, form the circle and begin the dance. [...] One dancer at a time enters the circle, while the others continue exchanging small steps to the right and left or making small movements while waiting for the *punga* in order to enter. [...] Each dancer defines her individual way of dancing; nevertheless, a choreographic unity can be observed in the ensemble as a whole. Normally, there is no break in rhythm, and all the dancers follow the same beat as the drummers. (Ferretti, 1995a, p. 65–66).

The rhythm is dictated by three drums. The songs address stories from everyday life. The dance has no defined steps. Each person participates in the way they prefer. It is an action implemented in São João do Arraial to encourage art and culture.

The municipality recovered local culture through the dance of the traditional cultural group Tambor de Crioula of the Chapada da Sindá community. Ten years ago, the group became organized. They created costumes, recorded a CD, and participated in several festivals in other states. It is during the June festival period that they perform most often, recovering an important cultural manifestation of the people of the Northeast. According to Carvalho (2007):

In January of this year, they managed—with the support of the Municipal Government, the State Government, and private initiative—to record their first CD with ten tracks, the last of which is a compilation of images from the group's performances. (Carvalho, 2007, n.p.)

For the Chapada da Sindá community, Tambor de Crioula underwent adaptations and became an expression of the creative capacity of a population that suffered from poverty, oppression, and hunger. Dancing Tambor de Crioula was a way of driving away sadness and bringing joy to their lives.

“I could not fail to honor João Luzia at this very important moment of recognition. Recognition of the farmer, of the municipality's culture, and of the Tambor group, which has been carrying forward this typical dance as a true treasure. This is proof of yet another achievement by the people of São João do Arraial and by Piauí culture,” stated the current state deputy and former mayor Francisco Limma, who attended the event.

CONCLUSION

Popular culture generally refers to the traditions and material culture of a particular society. In the modern West, pop culture refers to cultural products such as music, art, literature, fashion, dance, cinema, cyberculture, television, and radio consumed by the majority of society's population. In other words, the manifestations of a people, such as Tambor de Crioulo, are a strong example of the culture of a people that has been built and transformed over time according to the environment in which these peoples live, which has also undergone transformations.

“Brazil is the country that, for the longest time and in the greatest number, received enslaved people from Africa” (Lima, Mônica apud Figueiredo, Luciano, 2009, p. 12). Thus, it is undeniable that one cannot ignore the magnitude of the contribution of Black culture to Brazilian popular culture. The Tambor de Crioula presented in this work is an example of how a dance underwent changes according to the way it was introduced into Brazilian culture.

Tambor de Crioula is considered a ritual dance of São João do Arraial. Tambor de Crioula, Bumba-meu-boi, and reisado have become cultural expressions of the population of Chapada and the region. It became an instrument for bringing the community together and for confronting poverty, as well as for strengthening its organization and its struggle for land.

Based on the research, it can be observed that the dissemination of this dance in the municipality of São João do Arraial has led to certain changes and to the loss of its ritualistic character, transforming the ritual into a mere spectacle, especially when performed outside the context in which it is normally produced, thereby causing it to lose some of its character as a cultural manifestation.

The discussion of the theme of Tambor de Crioula is broad and has considerable potential to be explored in future works, particularly regarding the dissemination of this ritual in other states, beyond São João do Arraial in Piauí, as well as regarding the issue of its spectacularization, which has been occurring alongside this dissemination.

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