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## *Talking Pretty and Kicking Up Dust: Modernity and Tradition in Maracatu de Baque Solto of Pernambuco*



**ABSTRACT:** This article looks at the dynamic relationship between modernity and tradition in *maracatu de baque solto*, a regional music associated with sugarcane workers in the Mata Norte region of Pernambuco, Brazil. Changes in the way the poet-singers (*mestres*) view their own practice and the history of their art form reflect transformations in the rural areas, innovation in techniques and approaches, and shifting dynamics between *maracatu* and its interlocutors. The *maracatu* community is currently negotiating complex and dynamic relationships with cultural programmers and entrepreneurs in which singers reconfigure their participatory tradition for presentational settings. Drawing on three years of ethnographic and historical fieldwork, I pose questions about the limits and possibilities of *maracatu's* own strategic and unorthodox uses of the dominant discourses surrounding folklore and popular culture in Northeast Brazil.



keywords: *cultura popular*, traditionalism, improvised poetry, authenticity and cultural revival, modernity, mass culture, Northeast Brazil

**RESUMO:** Este artigo examina a relação dinâmica entre modernidade e tradição no maracatu de baque solto, uma música regional associada aos trabalhadores canavieiros da Zona da Mata Norte de Pernambuco, Brasil. Mudanças na maneira em que os mestres (poetas-cantadores do maracatu) enxergam sua prática e a história da sua arte refletem transformações na zona rural, e mudanças nas dinâmicas entre o maracatu e seus interlocutores. A comunidade do maracatu atualmente negocia relações complexas e dinâmicas com programadores e empresários culturais, onde sua tradição participativa é reconfigurada para ambientes somente de apresentação. Com base em três anos de trabalho de campo etnográfico e histórico, eu questiono os limites e as possibilidades das estratégias forjadas pelo maracatu e seu uso inortodoxo dos discursos dominantes sobre folclore e cultura popular no Nordeste do Brasil.



palavras-chave: cultura popular, tradicionalismo, poesia improvisada, autenticidade e renascimento cultural, modernidade, cultura de massa, Nordeste do Brasil



*Mestre João Paulo:*

Não fiz o vestibular	I never took an entrance exam
Não cursei a faculdade	I never went to college
A minha universidade	My university
Só me ensinou cantar	Was where I learned to sing
Na cultura popular	In <i>cultura popular</i>
Foi onde eu ganhei troféu	Was where I won my prize
Meu professor tá no céu	My professor is in heaven
Me corrige e dá aprovo	He corrects me and gives approval
O diploma é o povo	My diploma is the people
Vale mais do que papel	Worth more than any paper

*Mestre Barachinha:*

Meu estudo é muito pouco	I have little education
Canto porque trouxe o dom	I sing because I have the gift
A voz é fraca de som	My voice is weak in sound
Se for muito fico rouco	If it were louder, I would be hoarse
Mais eu deixo o público louco	But I drive the public crazy
fazendo verso bem feito	with my well-made verses
Se o português der defeito	If my Portuguese is imperfect
Procure me desculpar	Please try to excuse me
Que cultura popular	Because <i>cultura popular</i>
Só tem graça desse jeito	Only works this way

—Verses sung May 2011 at a workshop on *maracatu* improvisation in São Paulo

On a Friday night in May 2011, Barachinha and João Paulo, two of the most respected *mestres* of *maracatu* from the small town of Nazaré da Mata in the sugar-producing region of Pernambuco's Mata Norte, traded verses before a packed theater in São Paulo's upscale Vila Madalena neighborhood. Over the course of two hours, their exchanges simulated a traditional *sambada*, the nightlong contest of improvised, sung poetry that is at the core of *maracatu de baque solto*. Many in the São Paulo audience also had attended workshops in the days leading up to the performance at which the two *mestres* instructed students in some *maracatu* basics. On the night of the public performance, the creation of an active and participatory audience tempered the *sambada's* displacement from the street corners and plazas where it usually takes place and into the stage lights and air-conditioning of a São Paulo theater. The students on the polished dance floor did their part to follow the command *levanta a poeira*, or "kick up some dust"—typically directed by the *mestre* to his audiences in the streets of the interior—in reference to the clouds of dust raised by a large group dancing in the street.

*Baque solto*, sometimes referred to as *maracatu rural*, is a cultural form of *maracatu* that is separate and distinct from its more famous namesake found in Recife, which is known as “nation” *maracatu*. Throughout the remainder of this article the term *maracatu* refers exclusively to *maracatu de baque solto*.<sup>1</sup> With roots in the late nineteenth-century sugar plantations, the carnival pageantry of *baque solto* is a composite of elements borrowed from other regional traditions, such as *cavalo marinho*, *caboclinhos*, and *boi de carnaval*, and its ritual practices and preparation are related to the religious traditions of *catimbó*, *jurema*, and folk Catholicism. The music of *maracatu* is structured around the a cappella singing of a *mestre*, itself punctuated by bursts of frenetic percussion and brass. Since the 1990s, *maracatu de baque solto*, which is almost entirely confined to the area that extends north from Recife to the Paraíba border, has received an enormous amount of attention from urban-based artists, intellectuals, and political figures, such that it has become a ubiquitous symbol of Pernambucan identity.<sup>2</sup> This surge of interest has resulted in incentives to found new *maracatus* at exponential rates, with more numerous and varied performance opportunities, with an acceleration of the trend toward professionalization, and with new types of self-reflexivity about the nature of *maracatu* and its relationship to broader society.

This article draws on analyses of “local” performances in the Mata Norte as well as presentations tailored to “outsiders,” exploring how *maracatu* in the twenty-first century is immersed in complex and shifting relationships with social actors and institutions outside of its traditional audience and context in the Mata Norte of Pernambuco. While keeping in mind that the boundaries of social identities shift and interpenetrate, I largely compare these situations as taking place in either erudite or popular spheres of artistic creation and reception, following the split and division inherited from folklore research, modernist narratives, and early cultural policy in Brazil.

The consequences of the dynamic encounter between erudite and popular in the artistic realm plays out in the daily lives of those who create *cultura popular* and their communities. I define “popular culture,” or *cultura popular*—here using *maracatu* participants’ own understanding of it—as something distinct from both mass-mediated cultural production and the fine arts, and as cultural production strongly linked to local and regional identity. Despite the emergence of more nuanced understandings in recent decades, the erudite-popular dichotomy continues to affect the practice of *maracatu* in ways that are familiar to musicians in other traditional genres in Brazil.<sup>3</sup> Ethnographic analysis lends some insight into *maracatu*’s increase in status among middle-class artists and cultural workers, and its partial professionalization over time. I examine how this partial professionalization can counterintuitively reinforce the

differential prestige and bonds of patronage between erudite and popular artists. To explore these dynamics, I have chosen to focus here on four facets of *maracatu* that reflect some of the transformations in its recent history. First, I look at the strong influence of *cantoria de viola*, performed by duos of guitar-strumming poets. Second, I examine how increased literacy in the region has come to characterize a generational divide. Third, I examine *maracatu* practitioners' creative engagement with contemporary mass culture and how that may productively challenge our understanding of popular or traditional culture in Brazil. Finally, I address how *maracatuzeiros* (as *maracatu* practitioners call themselves) adeptly switch performance frames between participatory and presentational styles, as well as mobilize technology and resources to promote their agendas. All four aspects of *maracatu*'s recent history reveal different ways that the artists' relationships to their local public have changed in tandem with their development of relationships with new audiences.

Clearly, the groups of actors denoted by the terms "popular" and "erudite" have never been rigidly fixed or bounded. But the mobility, or fluidity, between them is structured by certain constraints: it is much easier, and more common, for an institutionally trained, erudite artist to delve into the creative worlds of the so-called popular artist and to broker that artistic expertise through (often self-serving) presentations, exhibits, and performances geared toward an educated, middle-class audience than it is for the popular artist to move in the other direction. Although some individual artists in *maracatu* and related cultural expressions have found ways to circulate in elite artistic circles, they tend to be exceptional cases. The barriers these artists face are considerable, and their efforts are not always validated or even acknowledged by the institutional gatekeepers of cultural production. Moreover, while intellectuals and critics readily concede the artistic liberty needed to transcend artistic genres and economic class to figures like Mário de Andrade or Ariano Suassuna,<sup>4</sup> they largely deny them to the popular artist who has no alliance with any formal movement. Moreover, these artists' engagement with technology and mass culture is an inconvenience to romantic or nostalgic perspectives that require popular artists to play the role of an unspoiled, autochthonous symbol of authenticity.

*Maracatu* has yet to build its own institutions run by and for *maracatuzeiros* that are not dominated by political intermediaries and the patronage system so central to the hierarchical structure of Brazilian society, particularly in the rural Northeast.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, although it is well known that northeastern musical genres have played an important symbolic role in the nationalist discourse of a variety of intellectual, artistic, and political movements, rural *maracatu* seems particularly ill suited to the recontextualizations and appropriations that often accompany urbanites'

interest in song forms belonging to the Northeast, such as *baião* and *coco*.<sup>6</sup> Rather than songs that can be recorded, reproduced, and performed by other artists, *maracatu*'s most important innovations occur in improvised poetic exchanges between singers that unfold during an entire evening of performance, never to be repeated. As this article shows, the nuances of that innovation are often obscured when *maracatu* is abstracted from its local performance context. Unlike *baião* and *farró* in the early twentieth century, *maracatu* has not yet been mobilized by any broader nationalist discourse. But if its fleeting inclusion in the iconography of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio or its growing vogue with middle-class aficionados of Brazilian culture in global cities like New York or Paris are any indication, *maracatu* is clearly transcending its local boundaries. For both erudite artists and their publics, and for the communities in Pernambuco's Mata Norte who have lived with and participated in *maracatu* for generations, its multivalent power as a symbol seems to be in a state of play, subject to dynamic and unpredictable changes.

### From Nazaré to São Paulo

How did Barachinha and João Paulo end up at this theater 2,600 kilometers away from Nazaré da Mata, performing in Brazil's largest, most cosmopolitan city? Do these two poets—who in their role as cultural ambassadors to São Paulo were treated like foreign dignitaries from the far-away land of Pernambuco—function as a type of cultural broker in their own communities?<sup>7</sup> How does their experience encapsulate so many of the changes that *maracatu* has undergone in the past few decades, and what can it tell us about where it is going?

On the night after Barachinha and João Paulo's simulated *sambada* in São Paulo, the pair was invited onto the same stage during the ticketed performance of the nationally known recording artist Antônio Nóbrega, whose organization had hosted the workshops. They were asked to briefly demonstrate their art, and they remained on stage for the rest of the evening, as if to bestow cultural legitimacy on the didactic *aula espetáculo* that followed (the *aula espetáculo* is a performance meant to educate the audience utilizing folkloric themes, developed as part of Ariano Suassuna's Movimento Armorial).<sup>8</sup> Nóbrega, as a classically trained musician, actor, and protégé of Suassuna, has built a successful career as a solo artist who reappropriates rural northeastern genres for middle-class, urban consumers. What does it mean to call on traditional or popular artists to perform their authenticity, as Barachinha and João Paulo were called on in this instance, for an erudite audience? What significance should we attach to the mixture of humility and pride expressed in the stanzas at the start of this article, in which the poets depict themselves as embodiments of *cultura popular* in a

way that contrasts with “official” cultural values? Finally, how are *maracatu* practitioners negotiating the risks involved in taking their participatory tradition—in which the performances are fundamentally rooted in social relations—to presentational settings like an urban theater, where it is repackaged into an abstracted commodity for an unfamiliar audience?<sup>9</sup>

A cursory analysis of how the Recife press has recently depicted *maracatu* shows certain tendencies in urban audiences’ reception of the rural groups. In the Olinda suburb of Tabajara during carnival in 2000, newspaper reports remarked on the fact that the audience was composed of “intellectuals, artists, many tourists, and common people that admire the *folgado*, and even local and national political figures.”<sup>10</sup> These dignitaries included writer and political figure Ariano Suassuna; the recording artists Antônio Nóbrega, Siba Veloso, and Renata Rosa; and the Workers’ Party leader and future Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Their presence was framed as recognition of the “anonymous men of the people” who would cut cane, care for livestock, or work at *usinas* for the remainder of the year.<sup>11</sup> A decade later, I accompanied Maracatu Estrela Brillhante in three consecutive carnivals, from 2010 to 2012, as its members gave presentations in both tiny villages and on Recife’s largest carnival stage, backlit by video screens and dramatic lighting, and on one occasion on live national TV. The group also performed in 2012 at an *encontro dos maracatus* in the town of Aliança, attended by then–presidential hopeful Governor Eduardo Campos. Despite this presence, the attendant news coverage in Recife papers still portrayed *maracatuzeiros* as anonymous people without history, rarely naming them as individuals, unlike the long lists of “dignitaries” in attendance.

Nevertheless, this is a significantly different reception for *maracatuzeiros*, as their art form had been belittled as illegitimate by carnival commentators in the early and mid-twentieth century, and their participation in Recife’s official carnival was blocked by the Carnival Federation of Pernambuco until it conformed to certain requirements.<sup>12</sup> From 2009 to 2012 these so-called anonymous men of the Mata Norte had an astounding number of other performance opportunities that were separate from both the ludic spectacle of carnival and the more local expressions of *sambadas* and *ensaios* (improvising contests and open rehearsals). As I traveled from town to town on the carnival bus with Estrela Brillhante, there was a palpable pride among the group’s members that, even though they are not treated with the same deference as pop or *música popular brasileira* (known as MPB) artists who grace the same stages, *maracatu* has come to command the respect and recognition to be valued as cultural heritage. Still, their recognition is incomplete. *Mestres* of the old guard like Dedinha; middle-aged poets at the height of their powers like Barachinha, João Paulo, and Zé Joaquim; young upstarts from the new generation like Mestre

Anderson and Mestre Bi—these figures are legendary in the Mata Norte region, but their names remain unknown to the urbanites who experience *maracatu* just once a year during carnival.

### Talking Pretty in the Countryside

Today's *mestres* of *maracatu* credit *cantoria de viola*, or *repente*, a genre of improvised poetic dueling with rigorous standards performed by two singer-guitarists, as the key influence that has driven the refinement and increased complexity of their art form. The strong presence of these borrowings is worth investigating, as it illuminates the changing role of the wordsmith in a historically illiterate community, new attitudes toward erudition, and the distinction between *mestres* who sing *matuto* (in a “hill-billy” style) and those who perform in a more elaborate, sophisticated style with more “correct” Portuguese: those who can *falar bonito*, or “talk pretty.” Although *maracatu* verse can alternate between these two poles or blend them together in richly textured ways, the increased emphasis on *falando bonito* further distinguishes the *mestre* of *maracatu* as a cultural broker, mediating between rural and urban, erudite and popular, or past and present.

Complementing this refinement is the *maracatu mestres'* talent for cultural pastiche, and the degree to which they draw creatively from points of reference located in mass-mediated culture. In their day-to-day lives, when not singing *maracatu*, many *mestres* may attend sessions of *cantoria* or attentively study the recordings of accomplished singer-guitarists. But most also enjoy more mainstream entertainment—lowbrow comedy, telenovelas, and especially music associated with the urban laboring classes. The most popular genre among *maracatuzeiros* is *brega* music (the genre's name was imposed by critics and denotes something that is low-class or tacky). Some recent social history of this music has analyzed its contributions to a critical counterdiscourse in Brazilian society in the time that its popularity was ascendant during the 1970s, the worst years of the military dictatorship (Araújo 2002). Despite its ubiquity, the genre is overlooked in most histories of Brazilian popular music.<sup>13</sup> It is often considered unworthy of serious consideration, and its popularity is explained by a lack of discrimination and “good taste” on the part of working-class Brazilians.

Both the incorporation of the techniques and stylistic complexity of *cantoria de viola* and the cross-referencing of mass-mediated popular music are examples of the *mestres'* creativity, eclecticism, and continual renovation of their own tradition. Yet when the artistic class champions *maracatu*, the influence of the former might be highlighted as the formative element in their contemporary practice, whereas signs of the pervasive influence of *brega* and other elements of mass culture in the lives of

the *mestres* is occluded. *Maracatuzeiros*, in turn, often strategically frame and present themselves to others as bearers of tradition while eliding their actual consumptive practices. As I show later, this elision is one among many possible ways that *maracatuzeiros* tailor their own identities to accommodate the expectations of gatekeepers in the cultural marketplace.

### **Maracatu Refines Itself: The Influence of Cantoria**

The relationship between the sung verse of *maracatu* and that of the *repentistas* (the duos that originated in the *sertão* backlands playing *violas* and trading verses with origins in Iberian forms like the *décima*, or ten-line stanza) has yet to be systematically explored in the literature.<sup>14</sup> The two styles are completely different in both instrumentation and the social contexts in which they are played, whereas the cadence and rhythms of vocal declamation are often similar. A closer look shows evidence of a long and significant history of cross-fertilization and exchange between artists from the sugarcane lands of the Zona da Mata, the arid cattle ranches of the *sertão*, and the scrublands in between (the *agreste*).

The *violeiros*, traveling in duos to different cities and appearing on live radio, have been extremely popular with *mestres* for many generations.<sup>15</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, several singers who were respected *violeiros* or singers of *embolada de coco* (described later) also began to sing *maracatu*. Mestre Zé Joaquim (b. 1952), a Nazaré poet who sings for Maracatu Pavão Dourado in neighboring Tracunhaém, described avidly listening to a regular broadcast of live *cantoria de viola* on nearby Rádio Carpina when he was young. While working alongside his brother Mestre João Paulo (born 1950) in the sugarcane fields, they would trade verses back and forth, emulating their favorite *violeiros* to help the hours pass more quickly. Whenever a duo came to perform in the city of Nazaré, they would try to go and listen. Mestre Manoel Domingos (b. 1969), from the neighboring Mata Norte town of Buenos Aires, told me that he and his brother would lie awake at night exchanging improvised *violeiro* verses in the same way until their father (who slept in the same room) scolded them, telling them to quiet down and go to sleep.

*Cantoria* is performed on the *viola*, an instrument tuned to five notes with ten paired strings. The northeastern *viola* is similar to the *viola caipira* (country guitar) found in other parts of Brazil, with a slightly broader body size and typically fitted with a resonating cone and chrome plate to aid projection. Although parts of every performance are framed as a challenge, or *desafio*, between the two singers, their professional partnership keeps the tone congenial. The two players perform seated before an audience, with a basket or a plate for tips on the ground in front of them. The poets routinely create verses about people in the room (*elogios*), whose names



are often supplied to them by an associate who whispers in their ear, after which the honored recipient is expected to tip the singers. The structure of *cantoria* is grounded in the *mote* (theme) and *glosa* (development), which goes through permutations of six-, eight-, and ten-line verses as well as less-common meters. The audience provides either general subjects for improvisation or a specific, formatted *mote*, which is often scribbled on a piece of paper and left in the tip basket.

An audience-supplied theme can take the form of a general subject, a well-known legend or morality tale, or a specific regional event or situation known to the audience. The *violeiros* then transform that idea into the metric refrain that is repeated at the end of every stanza by the singers as they take turns. The verses follow rigid rules regarding number of syllables and rhyme scheme. It is common for an audience member to suggest a *mote* that is already metrically formatted into a refrain of two lines, which in itself demonstrates the immersion of *cantoria* fans in the genre's formal structure.

There is also a direct correlation between *cantoria* patterns and those found in the northeastern *cordel* chapbook or "string" literature that consolidated around the turn of the twentieth century in Brazil.<sup>16</sup> Candace Slater (1982) points out that although a minstrel heritage of verbal dueling exists throughout Latin America (e.g., in the *payador* of Argentina and Chile), only in Brazil was there "a fusion of the verbal dueling with the folktale tradition," specifically in the Northeast, where poet-singers were instrumental in the symbiotic development of *cantoria* and *cordel*. Many famous improvisation *desafios* were also the subjects of *cordel* chapbooks that purported to reproduce the battles (known as *pelejas* in that context) as a dialogue between two narrators, and some of them date to the nineteenth century. In her fieldwork among northeastern *repentistas* during the 1980s, Elizabeth Travassos (2000) identified different modalities that are also found in the older *cordel* chapbooks. These modalities include praise singing (*louvação*), typically for the hosts of the event; rudeness (*malcriação*) or insult trading; and knowledge (*sabedoria*), which is a display of encyclopedic information about any number of often-unconnected subjects. As we will see, all these modalities are also present in *maracatu*, with that of knowledge recently growing in prominence in direct proportion to the influence of *cantoria*. In addition to continuing to play in the traditional setting of someone's home or at a neighborhood bar, large gatherings (*encontros*) of many duos are fairly common events in the Northeast. Many also record and self-release CDs for sale at their own performances or in local shops.

Another genre of improvisational song poetry that has enriched the *maracatu* tradition is *coco de embolada*, with origins in the Northeast but also a conspicuous presence in cities with large populations of northeastern

migrants, like São Paulo. *Embolada* is sung by two individuals who accompany themselves with a *pandeiro*, a tambourine played with the fingers and heel of the hand, often as buskers in a public plaza or on a street corner. The verses are very rapid, with almost no time lapsed between when one *embolador* stops singing and the other picks up. Humor and wordplay infuse the improvisations, and the most ribald imagery or humiliating insult is taken in good fun—this extends not only to one’s singing partner but also to the audience gathered around, who expect to be the subject of jokes made at their expense. As opposed to the complicated structures of *cantoria*, the skill of an *embolador* is displayed in individual style and the ability to maintain a virtually uninterrupted flow of words. It is the regional genre most deserving of a comparison to rap or freestyle hip-hop.

Several prominent *mestres* of *maracatu* have also worked as *emboladores de coco*, such as Mestre Juriti and Mestre Antônio Caju, both equally skilled in the world of *cantoria*. Far more numerous, however, are the *violeiros de cantoria* who were also *mestres* of *maracatu*. Such figures include Barra do Dia, Dedé Ferreira, Biu Caboclo, Heleno Fragoso, and Zé Galdino. Mestre Barachinha, who has recorded several *maracatu* CDs with Galdino, has told me that if he could play the guitar he would actually prefer to be a *violeiro* than a *maracatu* singer. His improvisational style is heavily influenced by the genre, particularly how he executes the ten-line samba form. His colleague Zé Galdino also leads his own group as a singer of *ciranda*, another genre that has cross-pollinated *maracatu*: one of its earliest exponents, Baracho, was from Nazaré da Mata, where he led his own *maracatu* before migrating to Recife.<sup>17</sup> The influence of these other regional genres on *maracatu* is apparent not only among those *mestres* who began their careers within the past thirty years but also among older *mestres* who needed to adapt their singing style in order to stay current. Mestre Zé Duda (b. 1938) of Maracatu Leão de Ouro de Aliança credits a younger Antônio Caju with having taught him how to improvise in rhyme (in Guimarães, Gondim, and Siqueira 2010).

According to Mestre Dedinha of the town of Araçoiaba, in the “old days” *mestres* would sing “any old thing,” whereas today they are held to a different standard of linguistic competence. Dedinha, a retired carpenter with one of the longest careers of any active *mestre*, can still occasionally be heard singing *samba solto* in the less competitive ambiance of an open rehearsal. *Samba solto* was a catchall term for any loose style of singing *maracatu*, dating to a time when *maracatu* did not feature rhymes, or at least did not adhere to the more rigid standards of today. This older style of singing was known to produce verses as long as twenty lines, with a structure that varied from singer to singer. Although the Portuguese spoken in the interior is far from the normative grammar taught in classrooms, today it is fairly common to hear audience members criticize a *mestre* if he

attempts to rhyme two words that clash or fails at the standardized rhyme scheme or meter. If he makes such errors frequently, a critic might say that the singer is too *matuto*—country, or “hillbilly.” Although it happens occasionally to even the most skilled *mestres*, stumbling on a word or breaking the tight rhyme scheme during a competitive *sambada* is cause for the fans of the opposing *maracatu* to burst into jeers and laughter. Proficiency with the formal structure of *maracatu* rhyme is a requirement for present-day *mestres*, prized and prioritized much more highly than a pleasing vocal timbre or intonation.

### *Falando bonito, Talking Pretty*

#### *Conduits of Information and Moral Authority*

As the *mestres* themselves cite the influence of *cantoria* on the formal structure of *maracatu*, it is evident in other ways as well, such as a broader frame of reference, an emphasis on eloquence, and a transposition of the ethics of *cantoria* performance to *maracatu*. Whether the *mestres* engage in bouts of verbal sparring during a friendly *sambada de amizade* or slip into a more adversarial, go-for-the-throat contest of insults and one-upmanship, there is an emphasis on parity—both *mestres* set foot in the ring as equals, their social identities temporarily suspended (Travassos 2000).

An increasing amount of prestige is also being attached to those singers who can tackle subject matter that extends beyond the daily experiences of the Mata Norte. Although there are few recordings of rural *maracatu* verse before the 1980s, anecdotal evidence from conversations and interviews points to changes in the subject matter over time.<sup>18</sup> Mestre Antônio Alves grew up on Engenho São Pedro, began singing *maracatu* at the age of thirteen, and was Cambinda Brasileira’s *mestre* for fifteen years (1970–1985). He recounted hearing Mestre Zé Demésio arriving at Nazaré’s carnival stage in the 1960s and rhyming about the economic output of the Engenho Petribu sugar mill where his *maracatu* was based—the size of the harvest, how many sacks of sugar were produced, the sweat of the laborers. Mestre Baracho of Engenho Santa Fé is said to have been in *sambadas* where he sang about constructing an *usina* (sugar factory), naming all the necessary pieces of equipment. The frames of reference were largely defined by the boundaries of the plantation.

Although audio and video documentation of *maracatu* before the 1990s is sparse, *maracatu* verse today generally broaches more cosmopolitan and global territory than in previous eras. The waves of rural exodus that took place throughout the twentieth century, as the sugar factories forced peasants off their land and into the small towns and urban peripheries of the region, doubtless contributed to the “urbanization” of *maracatu* poetry.<sup>19</sup>

However, the change also relates to the value attached to knowledge in oral-poetry traditions, where it is recognized as a core trait of the “man of words” (Abrahams 1983), and the increasingly diverse contexts in which *maracatu* takes place. Fans often expect contemporary *mestres* to sing convincingly about national and international news. Failure to do so, especially in an audience of mixed class background, is likely to be considered a poor reflection on the community. *Maracatuzeiros* make use of the trope of the rural and the regional as embodying certain values that some feel are threatened by modernity, but they also seek to cast off the stigma of being viewed as *matuto* and ignorant, unable to grapple with broader societal issues.

Not all *mestres* embrace this new sensibility. Mestre Zé Joaquim, for example, prefers to sing about more quotidian subjects from his personal life; in his view a *mestre* should not sing about subjects he does not really know. As a result, Zé Joaquim often sings about his favorite foods, his favorite radio station for listening to soccer, his childhood fear of wolves, or his current fear of hospitals. Other verses assert his identity in terms like these:

Meu signo é escorpião	My sign is Scorpio
E minha cor é escura	My skin color is dark
Trabalho na prefeitura	I work for the city
Na área da construção	In the field of construction
Pedreiro é a profissão	Bricklayer is the profession
Que eu trabalho todo dia	That I work at every day
Com a minha sabedoria	With my knowledge
De cantar improvisado	In improvised singing
Breve eu serei coroado	Soon I will be crowned
O Príncipe da Poesia	The Prince of Poetry <sup>20</sup>

In Zé Joaquim’s view, many *mestres* today are too concerned with showing off, whereas for him the notion of valorizing “our” culture means singing about the humble details of everyday life. The context is urban and proletarian rather than rural and *matuto*, but his style is reminiscent of an older way of singing—described to me by those who still remember it—that is situated in the points of reference of the everyday.

The contemporary dramas of globalization, however, also form part of the *maracatu* repertoire, a trait shared with the same *cantoria* tradition that Zé Joaquim grew up admiring on the radio. A number of headlines made their way into *ensaios* and *sambadas* during my fieldwork. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti elicited verses of sympathy and prayers for the victims. When the police laid siege to the Rio de Janeiro favela Complexo do Alemão in November of that same year, *mestres* sang verses condemning

drugs and drug dealers. However, none of the *mestres* I heard criticized the police for their military-style tactics that criminalized and terrorized the poor. A school shooting in Rio de Janeiro in April 2011, the first of its kind in Brazil, drew strong and unequivocal condemnations of the perpetrator.

Apart from these sensational examples, singing out against everyday violence and misfortune in Brazil is common in *maracatu*. The largely prepared verses (or *samba decorado*) that *mestres* bring into recording studios when making a CD provide examples of the blending of old and new approaches. Antônio Paulo Sobrinho, an experienced *mestre* who recorded his first album in 2011, has a seventeen-minute track devoted to local personages who have passed away.<sup>21</sup> The causes of death cited in song include health problems, accidents, and old age, but also the murder of a relative. For nearly all of them, he includes the day, year, and location where the individuals passed, as well as the names of the family members who suffered the loss. These kinds of specificities are unlikely to be of much interest to an audience in Recife or São Paulo, but they are tremendously important in strengthening a bond between the *mestre* and his regular audience. Later on the same CD there is a pair of tracks titled “Violence” and “Nature,” one running seamlessly into the other. The first begins with Antônio Paulo lamenting the lack of safety in Brazil, expressing the sentiment that anyone is subject to a violent assault at any given time, and then denouncing the tragedy of family members killing one another. At the end of “Violence,” he links all the violence in the world, natural disasters and pestilence, and overcrowded hospitals teeming with the sick, concluding that only Jesus can save in the final hour. The next track, “Nature,” continuing with the same melody and rhythm, launches into a lament over river pollution, and he sings about the natural wonders of the earth that God created.

Some of the critiques of violence and social problems found in *maracatu* are oriented toward a possible future rather than an actual present. I asked Manoel Domingos about some verses he sang during his turn at the microphone at an *ensaio* for Leão Mimoso, where he painted a rather graphic image of a young girl reduced to living on the street, addicted to drugs, engaged in prostitution, and suffering from venereal disease before she has even had her first menstruation.<sup>22</sup> He felt the verse did not go over too well with that particular audience. Domingos admitted that, in a city of barely thirteen thousand people, drugs are not a major social problem. Nevertheless, there is a growing problem with drugs in the poorer areas of larger neighboring towns such as Nazaré, and news of drug-related violence enters the awareness of *maracatuzeiros* every day through the media. This *maracatu* verse about the dangers of drugs is a warning about the path the community might take if not vigilant, issued with the moral authority of the *mestre*. Domingos feels that the *mestre* of *maracatu* can provide a positive role model for the youth of the small towns, hoping that what he sings

might reach someone at risk of heading down that path and inspiring that person to do something better with his or her lives, perhaps even become an artist.

The moral critiques voiced by many *mestres* are often at variance with the sensibilities of educated, nominally liberal audiences in cities like Recife or São Paulo. Two examples listed earlier—the militarized occupation of Rio's favelas and the imagery of a hypothetical teenage prostitute—exhibit conservative religious overtones. Chauvinistic double standards regarding sex workers are also common in northeastern cultural expression. *Cordel* literature, for example, has historically portrayed prostitutes in a decidedly negative light (Slater 1982).

Manoel Domingos did not seem particularly worried that the crowd was not receptive to his verses that evening. As he explained, *maracatu* has multiple publics, people who come to hear different things: some come to hear “rudeness,” or *malcriação* (insults between *mestres*), some to hear about the economic crisis, and another to hear about his or her favorite football team. A good *mestre* tries to size up the crowd and satisfy everyone by singing a little about everything. This is a markedly different relationship between artist and audience than that found in erudite art since modernism. Erudite art and poetry emphasize the artist's inventiveness as an autonomous individual who is not beholden to (and indeed is often antagonistic toward) his or her public. Like *cordel* authors and *cantoria* singers, *mestres* are not anonymous but are known artists with specific histories, yet their work is tailored to audience demands and expectations.

Something that elicits a response in local crowds from the Mata Norte sometimes fails with an audience in Recife or São Paulo in ways more mundane than a clash of morality. Colloquial humor or extensive references to local personalities, locations, and events can be lost on a nonlocal audience. Manoel Domingos's notion that an urban, middle-class public expects more proper Portuguese from *mestres* than their own hometown public does is debatable, and perhaps he misreads the role that they play in national conversations about authenticity: cultural appropriations of rural *nordestinos* like those deployed by Antônio Nóbrega are likely to include intentional grammatical errors in efforts to appear folksy. Nevertheless, the awareness of having multiple audiences highlights the characteristic that most clearly differentiates those *mestres* whose careers matured during the 1990s: the increased likelihood that they are cultural brokers between different publics. Barachinha captures this succinctly in an example he is fond of using: a *mestre* must be able to sing about things in a way that pleases both the engineer who designs the house and the worker who builds it.

The classic formulation of the cultural broker was an individual capable of mediating between local and national communities of belonging.

Originating in paradigms concerned with the effects of modernization on traditional authority and the integration of peasants into “complex societies,” this brokering was conceived in largely vertical terms, concerned with the flow of practices and skills between urban elites and the rural poor.<sup>23</sup> At the outset of my fieldwork, this understanding of the cultural broker as a main modality of *maracatu* led me to assume that it developed in direct response to the “more evolved” new audiences that Domingos described. The *sabedoria*, or “knowledge,” mode of poetry is in fact a carry-over from the *violeiro* duels and has much more to do with *mestres* pleasing their “traditional” public than pleasing any outsiders. An example of this mode is found on a studio recording by the *mestres* Barachinha and Zé Galdino (who also has a career as a *violeiro*) made in the *sambada* style. On the track “Answer If You Know,” they sing:

*Barachinha*

Me responda sem moleza	Answer me without hesitation
Quinze poetas, escritores	Fifteen poets and writers
Romancistas, sonhadores	Novelists and dreamers
Das coisas da natureza	Of the things of nature
Mas se não tiver certeza	If you aren't certain
Peça pra alguém lhe ensinar	Ask someone to teach you
Cuidado pra não errar	Be careful to make no mistakes
Senão fica de castigo	Or else you will be punished
Se não responder eu digo	If you don't respond, I will
Pra não lhe desmoralizar	So you aren't demoralized

*Zé Galdino:*

Gênios que deram alegrias	Geniuses that gave joy
Ao Brasil do passado	To the Brazil of the past
Castro Alves, Jorge Amado	Castro Alves, Jorge Amado
Camilo e Romano Elias	Camilo and Romano Elias
Camões e Gonçalves Dias	Camões and Gonçalves Dias
Augusto e Graciliano	Augusto and Graciliano
Castilho e Rogaciano	Castilho and Rogaciano
Souza e Macedo Teixeira	Souza and Macedo Teixeira
Laurindo e Manuel Bandeira	Laurindo and Manuel Bandeira
E Olegário Mariano	And Olegário Mariano <sup>24</sup>

The challenge issued by Barachinha is answered by Zé Galdino with a list that includes both erudite writers and popular *cordel* poets, suggesting that the distinction between the two means very little to *maracatu* audiences. Literacy symbolizes status in *maracatu*'s base community, where formal schooling historically has been minimal. The *mestres*' engagement

with the elite novelists and poets in the lyrics above is mediated through the work of *cordelistas* who have adapted their work for a popular audience, a practice that ranges from Shakespeare plays to twentieth-century Brazilian literature, and often depends on further mediations such as film and telenovela adaptations of the classics.

### *Literacy and the New Harvest*

The narrative in *maracatu* that stresses progress, development, or evolution is very visible around the issue of literacy. The Northeast of Brazil has historically had among the highest rates of illiteracy in the country, along with the far northern and Amazonian regions. In the mid-twentieth century, 72.5 percent of the population of Pernambuco and nearly 83 percent of that of Nazaré da Mata were illiterate (*Enciclopédia* 1958, 174). By 2000 statewide illiteracy had dropped to 18 percent,<sup>25</sup> but illiteracy in Nazaré da Mata (17.3 percent) is more than double that of the Recife metropolitan area (8.6 percent).<sup>26</sup> When broken down into age groups, the decrease becomes more dramatic: at the time of the 2010 census, 5.3 percent of individuals younger than age twenty-five could not read or write, compared to 17.5 percent of those aged twenty-five to fifty-nine and 42.4 percent of those aged sixty and older. To be young and illiterate in the Mata Norte today may be less common than it was a generation or two ago, but it is not impossible.

It was quite some time into my fieldwork before I realized that a friend of mine, Luiz (a pseudonym), could not read or write. Luiz was a *contramestre*, or respondent to the *mestre*, and his duties involved having a keen ear and sharp memory, accurately repeating back the lines of complex stanzas. Many *contramestres* use breaks during a rehearsal to do their own improvising while the *mestre* recoups his energy, and some *contramestres* go on to eventually become *mestres* in their own right. Having been a *contramestre* for many years by the time I met him, Luiz dreamed of precisely that.

Luiz was always eager to inform me of any nearby *maracatu* events and accompany me to them. He saw them as opportunities to practice and refine his technique in front of an audience. He described the open rehearsals and *sambadas*, where he might get a chance to sing during the middle break, as “his school.”<sup>27</sup> When the *mestre* of his *maracatu* left to join another, Luiz had hoped the directorate would offer him the position of *mestre*, but they didn’t. My conversations with the directors revealed a consensus that Luiz was “not ready” to lead a *maracatu*, and much of the reasoning for their hesitation boiled down to the issue of literacy. They gave examples of scenarios that could cause embarrassment for the group. For example, the *maracatu* arrives in a town for carnival and there are placards dedicating the year’s festivities to one or another respected figure in the community, so the *mestre* would be expected to improvise some verses



about them. Or the *maracatu* is booked to perform in Recife, and the *mestre* is asked to read and sign a contract. In these cases, a *mestre's* deficiency reflects poorly on the whole group. The illiterate *mestre* has become the exception rather than the rule in the space of a few generations. Luiz, though, did eventually go on to be *mestre* of a *maracatu* in another town.

Although on the public stage illiteracy would be a negative reflection on the group, in ordinary social life it was a personal failing of the aspiring *mestre*. Eloquence and knowledge have long been prominent in the internal dynamics of the oral-poetry tradition that includes *maracatu* and *cantoria*. At present particular kinds of knowledge are instilled with prestige, and the ability to articulate that knowledge places certain individuals in more powerful positions.

For example, Ivanildo Ferreira, an older *mestre* who is illiterate, sings:

Não estudei	I didn't study
Pra falar bonito	To speak pretty
Mas meu apito	But my whistle
É meu camarada	Is my companion
Minha jornada	I spent my days
Foi comer pão francês	Eating cheap bread
Porque me criei	Because I was raised
No cabo da enxada	Working in the fields

Não estudei	I had no schooling
Hoje tá fazendo falta	And now it would be useful
Minha voz alta	My loud voice
Hoje tem aprovo	Is now appreciated
Que eu resolvo	Because I can manage
Estou reconhecendo	I recognize that
Assim vou vivendo	This is the way I'll go on living
No meio do povo	Among the people

Mas eu queria	But now
Agora estudar	I would like to study
Para aprender	To learn
E para mim sair	So I could go out
Pra discutir	And discuss things
Com os mestre graúdo	With the important <i>mestres</i>
Acabar com tudo	Show them how it's done,
E depois ir dormir	And then go home to sleep

In this elegant exploration of the issue, Ivanildo acknowledges the new reality of the Mata Norte and wistfully wishes he could have benefited

from them. But there is also a refusal to fade quietly in these verses and an assertion that he is every bit the equal of the new generation. Luiz also affirms the integrity of a “country” identity in a couplet that ends a *samba em dez* of his own creation:

Que aonde tem matutagem	Because where you have a hillbilly
Existe moral sobrando	There is character and confidence

### Poor Taste and Cultural Nutrition

The concerns of *maracatuzeiros* about being judged by their peers are compounded by new worries about the expectations of outsiders, reflected in discussions about the *maracatuzeiros*' own consumption habits and taste in popular culture. In the early stages of my fieldwork, when I would ask younger people about what kind of music they enjoyed when they weren't playing *maracatu*, I would receive an almost formulaic list of “traditional” musical styles: *forró pé de serra*, *ciranda*, *cavalo marinho*, *frevo*, *samba*. But as we got to know one another better, I realized that the music they typically played on their radios, TVs, or cell phones was often quite different—sometimes artists such as Michael Jackson or Beyoncé, but more frequently the contemporary styles and local radio hits by the *trios elétricos* during carnival.<sup>28</sup> These styles are consistently referred to by the educated middle and upper classes in Brazil as low-quality music (*música de baixa qualidade* or *de mau gosto*, “low-quality music” or “music of poor taste”) in contrast to the music consumed by those with more “refined” sensibilities. There is a palpable sense of this, and young *maracatuzeiros* are very aware and know which kinds of music they are expected to like when questioned by a journalist, academic, or foreign researcher—that is, folk music or *cultura popular*, not commercialized low-quality music.

That younger *maracatuzeiros* might be concerned with how outsiders perceive their tastes is intriguing, as changes in popular music since the 1970s have partially eroded the saliency of inherent “quality” among many urban, middle-class consumers. Brazilian appropriations of jazz in the 1960s, soul in the 1970s, rock in the 1980s, and rap and hip-hop in the 1990s have resulted in broader, more inclusive notions of Brazilianness. Why, then, should young people in Nazaré feel the need to disguise their preferences around an outsider like me?<sup>29</sup>

Sean Stroud (2008) has characterized the attitudes of elite intellectuals and critics toward popular music as dominated by a profound anxiety centered on the loss of national identity. This is changing as newer generations with different ideas about Brazilian identity come to occupy official posts, but such conservatism continues to exert some influence, particularly in cultural programming. Moehn (2012) has shown that while

middle-class recording artists from the 1990s onward tend to have more flexible and open approaches to mass culture, cultural critics and intellectuals often articulate familiar and pejorative viewpoints about the “trash” that working-class publics consume. The notion of the artistic class is one in which exclusion is a matter of prejudice but also of policy: those who create works “for the masses” are excluded from the elaborate system of cultural incentives in Brazil, which is reserved for the production of creative works deemed “of little commercial value.” The origins of these categorizations can be traced to the nationalist cultural policy of the military regime during the 1970s, when government policy essentially subsidized the genre of MPB to “protect” their national music industry while ironically encouraging foreign investment that flooded the market with imported music.

The musical styles preferred by both young and older *maracatuzeiros* belong to categories that have been essentially purged by critics from the history of Brazilian popular music, considered unworthy of serious consideration: *brega* music and its offshoots. The lyrics of *brega* are based on themes of love and rejection, and its antecedents are in the broadly popular romantic *samba-canção* and bolero genres, as well as the teenage-oriented *Jovem Guarda* TV show of the 1960s. In interviews and conversations with me, the *maracatu* poets Dedinha, João Paulo, Zé Joaquim, and Barachinha all proclaimed their admiration for Roberto Carlos and other singers more firmly within the *brega* genre, such as Reginaldo Rossi and Amado Batista. As I will demonstrate, references to these artists or allusions to their work often appear in the *mestres*’ improvised poetry for their local audiences.

Perhaps innocuous to the cultural gatekeepers of today, the old guard of *brega* artists were subject to discrimination and neglect during the 1970s and 1980s, and to censorship by the military regime (Araújo 2002). Although dozens of successful *brega* artists had careers spanning the 1970s, journalists and critics ignored the style until the 1980s (Araújo 1988). For middle-class urbanites, this was music played on AM radio stations listened to by their *empregadas*, or domestic workers. One reason older *maracatuzeiros* do not hesitate to express their enthusiasm for *brega* is that they were already *maracatu* veterans before the cultural establishment “discovered” them in the late 1980s, so they were somewhat shielded from the discourse surrounding authenticity and poor taste. They find no contradiction in their appreciation of *brega* and samba, or of more traditional regional styles such as *ciranda* or *farró pé de serra*. In contrast, younger *maracatuzeiros*, particularly those younger than thirty, have come of age in an atmosphere thick with the new patrons of *maracatu*—intellectuals, cultural planners, and producers tied to arts funding who have more calcified notions of what the popular classes should and should not enjoy. This is not to imply that *maracatuzeiros* do not truly enjoy the regional styles;

rather, they see nothing inherently wrong or contradictory in also appreciating newer and/or more commercial styles.<sup>30</sup>

The proclivity of “traditional” peoples to engage creatively with the trappings of consumer society has long been a thorn in the side of folklorists and others inclined to establish an unbroken continuity with the past. The American anthropologist Ruth Landes, for example, was condemned and shunned by traditionalists for her assertion that contemporary *candomblé* involved a fair share of “invented traditions” (Romo 2010). *Maracatuzeiros*, as those who produce the authentic, present a difficulty for some erudite interlocutors when they overtly engage with modernity and consumption, singing about the Internet or the latest popular telenovela. For these interlocutors, these aspects of their artistic praxis must be minimized or erased, much like how wristwatches or gym shoes were cropped out of ethnographic photos from another era, such that “history has been airbrushed out” of the frame (Clifford 1988, 202). As I will describe, the Maracatu Association has discouraged the use of pop-music melodies and movie themes in *sambada* horn arrangements, albeit with little result. Recife’s carnival competitions furnish a stronger example of this type of selective censure: there is a list of off-limits topics for *mestres*, ranging from political figures to soccer teams. *Mestres* who sing about these topics have points deducted from their final score by the judges’ panel, and my conversations with *mestres* point also to a degree of self-censure regarding other content, as they avoid ribald humor or pop culture references in an effort to keep their presentations “classy.” Furthermore, Recife’s carnival commission gives seminars to a volunteer “popular jury” on how to evaluate the large variety of parading groups, which for *maracatu* consists predominantly of checklists of folkloric characteristics pertaining to costumes and choreography, with no consideration of the poetry.<sup>31</sup>

A deliberate intervention is necessary to isolate the “primitive” artist from the incursions of modernity, or at least to create the illusion of that isolation. As Sally Price (1989, 32) writes, “Primitive artists are imagined to express their feelings free from the intrusive overlay of learned behavior and conscious restraints that mold the work of the Civilized artist.” Such an imagining makes primitive art into a repository for and wellspring of ideas for those seeking to craft agendas of cultural nationalism, who draw on folklore to create a “pure” national art. This impulse motivated Mário de Andrade in his vision for a national artistic project in the 1920s, and it also inspired Ariano Suassuna in his Armorial Movement of the 1970s.<sup>32</sup> The idea that primitive, folkloric, or popular artists also consciously push their work in new directions and also are influenced by artistic production outside of their own point of origin is inconvenient to this schema. An actual, concrete history of the circulation of ideas and people among communities lumped together as *cultura popular*, such as that between *cantoria*

poet-singers and *maracatu mestres*, would run counter to the modernist narrative of redemption.

Middle-class observers rarely view *maracatu* poets' admiration for singers of so-called low-quality music—like the romantic pop songs of *brega*—as their intrinsic right, and instead explain it away in classist terms as a reflection of the “poor cultural nutrition” of the people who are paradoxically assumed to be spiritual embodiments of authenticity.<sup>33</sup> An Armorial *aula espetáculo* is unlikely to applaud *mestres'* frequent name-dropping of popular singers or lifting of melodies from hit songs as examples of their creativity or innovation, and more likely to frame these things as pollution by the mass media. Similarly, throughout the course of a night's *sambada*, the brass musicians will begin changing up the refrains to include melodies from pop radio and songs from popular telenovelas and famous films or even cartoons. Melodies evoking victory or triumph are natural choices to show support for a *maracatu*: during my fieldwork, some of the most frequent were themes from popular Hollywood films like *Superman*, *Chariots of Fire*, and *Popeye*. An organizer with the Maracatu Association told me that they want to put a stop to these kinds of pop-culture references, because they “are not traditional.” My research with privately held cassette recordings of *sambadas* dating to the 1980s demonstrates that the practice of such pop-culture appropriations goes back at least a quarter century, and very likely much farther. At what point do these appropriations become tradition?

This engagement with mass culture that so troubles the traditionalists is not simply rote, unreflective consumption. It demonstrates appreciation for pop culture alongside sentiments of regionalism, but not necessarily the same regionalism espoused by self-appointed guardians of tradition like Gilberto Freyre, Suassuna, or Nóbrega. One example of this is a 2014 rehearsal in which Barachinha and Zé Galdino sang together as invited guests:<sup>34</sup>

*Zé Galdino:*

Mandela morreu lutando	Mandela died fighting
Pelo seu povo africano	For his African people
E Waldick Soriano	And Waldick Soriano
Morreu ainda cantando	Died still singing
Senna morreu pilotando	Senna died driving
Seu carro na Fórmula Um	His car in Formula One
Zacarias e Mussum	Zacarias and Mussum
Morreram fazendo graça	Died making us laugh
Que ninguém levanta a taça	Proving nobody takes the trophy
Sem sacrifício nenhum	Without some sacrifice

*Barachinha:*

Elvis Presley com seu grito	Elvis Presley with his yell
Conquistou fama e respaldo	Won fame and adoration
Nelson Ned, Reginaldo	Nelson Ned, Reginaldo
Rossi, cantava bonito	Rossi, sang beautifully
Gonzaga foi nosso mito	Gonzaga was our legend
No forró, xote e baião	In <i>forró</i> , <i>xote</i> , and <i>baião</i>
Mas na nossa região	But in our region
Quem esconder seu talento	He who hides his talent
Fica no esquecimento	Stays in obscurity
Sem crescer na profissão	Without growing in his profession

In Zé Galdino's verse, he places the recently deceased father of modern South Africa alongside notable deceased Brazilians: a *brega* singer, a famous race-car driver, and two famous comedians from the group Os Trapalhões. Barachinha's verse mixes Elvis Presley with two *brega* singers who died in the previous year and the greatest icon of northeastern music, Luiz Gonzaga, with an admonition that creative artists need to assert themselves in order to succeed. The Brazilian personalities listed in this mash-up are from various regions, but they are all popular and familiar to the working-class public of *maracatu*. A still-older example of this engagement with popular culture that historicizes and contextualizes regional figures is found on a 1973 *ciranda* recording made by Baracho, the Nazareno *maracatuzeiro* who emigrated to Recife and helped popularize the *ciranda* style there. On one track, "Roberto Carlos," he sings:

Roberto Carlos	Roberto Carlos
É o rei do iê-iê-iê	Is the king of "yeah-yeah-yeah" <sup>35</sup>
Jamelão cantando samba	Jamelão singing samba
Faz o morro estremecer	Makes the slums tremble and shake
Lia na ciranda	Lia singing <i>ciranda</i>
Também é de primeira	Is also top-notch
No baião Luiz Gonzaga	So is the <i>baião</i> of Luiz Gonzaga
No frevo Nelson Ferreira	And the <i>frevo</i> of Nelson Ferreira

In these verses, Baracho juxtaposes two extremely popular singers from Rio de Janeiro to regional treasures: the *ciranda* singer Lia de Itamaracá, who was part of his group and became better known in the late 1990s; the king of *forró* and *baião* music Luiz Gonzaga; and *frevo* composer and arranger Nelson Ferreira. Baracho does not appear to indicate that these Rio stars are no good; to the contrary, he seems to think they are just fine but

that Pernambuco also has talents worthy of praise. These are sentiments of regional identity and pride, but ones that seek inclusion in the national narrative of progress rather than its rejection. It is these transgressive aspects of *cultura popular*—an indifference to elite preoccupations with art versus mass culture, and a questioning of the terms of both regional and national identity—that seem to have generated an affinity between rural popular artists and the cadre of urban artists in Recife that coalesced in the 1990s, known as the *manguebeat* movement. As has happened repeatedly in Pernambuco's history, popular culture again became contested terrain, with different ideological factions struggling over interpretation of the popular in art.<sup>36</sup>

### New Technologies, Old Strategies

The *maracatus* embrace and appropriate new technologies in unique ways, and creatively mobilize patronage and favors, all while attempting to stay rooted in a tradition. A manifestation of this is the recent phenomenon of *mestres* recording CDs to promote their careers and raise money for their *maracatus*. Ironically, the paucity of documentation on *maracatu* may have allowed it to resist standardization imposed by outsiders and also aided its own self-directed development. *Maracatu*, as a music and poetry genre that unfolds over the course of an entire night and whose performances are not intended to ever be repeated, would never have fit comfortably into the three-minute song format imposed on blues musicians in the early twentieth century. By the 1980s, *maracatu* enthusiasts used portable cassette recorders to document the all-night rehearsals and *sambadas* on tapes that circulated in the community. By the time I began my fieldwork in 2010, handheld digital recording devices had begun to proliferate, and fans of a poet-singer would frequently crowd around, thrusting their gadgets toward him. Thus, when *maracatu* singers began to enter studios and make their own CDs at the turn of the twenty-first century, there was neither commercial pressure nor technological necessity to fundamentally transform their approach to performance. A single track on a *maracatu* CD is rarely shorter than ten minutes, and the first recording made by veteran Mestre Dedinha was released as one continuous, hour-long piece of music without any effort toward naming individual tracks.

In contrast, many *maracatu* poets take a more formal approach to composition, carefully working out separate pieces and writing down lyrics before entering the studio. The *mestres* avail themselves of contemporary recording and editing techniques, such as using multiple takes to get a performance they like and cutting and pasting in digital editing software. There is debate among *maracatu* performers regarding the composition

of verses (*samba decorado*) before a *sambada* contest, as I have discussed elsewhere (Estrada 2015). However, in the context of a recording studio, preparation is the accepted norm. I attended several such sessions, and in January 2015 I was recruited as the engineer for one that had an especially traditional-modern dialectic. Frequent singing partners Mestre Barachinha and Mestre Zé Galdino, who had already recorded a CD together a decade earlier, wished to make a new recording to promote themselves and their respective *maracatus* during the upcoming carnival performances. They settled on a way to record a CD as cheaply and “authentically” as possible, bypassing recording studios altogether: performing new, composed material in a “live” setting.

In this case, a place for the recording was arranged, the mill house of a sugar plantation outside of the town of Buenos Aires. They rented a sound car for their “traditional” amplification and self-monitoring, hired brass musicians, arranged for a volunteer recording and mixing engineer (me), and obtained financial support from a local city councilwoman who was rumored to be preparing a campaign for mayor. Barachinha and Zé Galdino prepared new material in a few all-night meetings of binge composing, the brass arrangements were done on-site the same morning as the session, and they recorded seven tracks in four hours. Siba Veloso, who has worked with both artists, volunteered his time as a producer overseeing the session.<sup>37</sup> The recorded horn parts were unsatisfactory because of the poor acoustics, and so I rerecorded them a few days later with supervision from Mestre Barachinha. A *maracatu* aficionado from São Paulo offered to provide cover artwork, I did rough mixing and editing on my laptop, and the following week the town’s resident videographer manufactured four hundred copies using his own duplication equipment.

None of this would have been conceivable if *cultura popular* existed in the restraints of static, eternal categories that are still imposed on it in some quarters. Nor would it have been possible without the skill of the *maracatus* in taking advantage of the existing systems of patronage, which allowed them to enlist producers, engineers, designers, and local political figures. Perhaps this suggests that the “traditional” artist remains subordinate and dependent, yet subordination has its limits. In the middle of the recording session, the city councilwoman showed up with a small entourage and made a grand display of shaking hands, nearly interrupting a live take by walking into the mill to greet the *mestres*. She had asked them to compose and record a few verses singing her praises in exchange for the money she had donated. They never did.<sup>38</sup>

As *maracatu* has grown more visible at the state, national, and international levels, the people who create it—often sugarcane cutters, but also taxi or truck drivers, construction workers, and even civil servants—remain strangely invisible, the textures of their rich and storied lives smoothed



into anonymous archetypes and folkloric figures. This frequent caricature of *maracatuzeiros* does real damage, as it constitutes an erasure of the personal and collective struggles involved in developing the art form. Furthermore, refusing to see these artists as complex individuals with their own agency—for example, as people who can enjoy mass culture and also engage with it critically—plays into the troubling historical tendencies of Brazilian elites to place the traditional performer outside of modernity.

### Defending the *Popular* in *Cultura popular*

The complexity of how Barachinha and his peers view the role of the *mestre* and the place of *maracatu* in their community defies the easy categorization of erudite and popular realms of creativity, a point emphasized in their verses that open this article. In contrast to cultural-nationalist narratives of Brazilian elites framing the influence of mass culture as an urgent threat, one of the challenges currently facing *maracatu* is the tendency of cultural programmers to erode its *participatory* elements and place it in a presentational format, which Turino (2000, 2008) has characterized as a type of musical experience that creates and maintains sharp distinctions between audience and performer through a series of distancing practices. In the Mata Norte, *mestres* often resist such attempts to separate artists from the participatory tradition by placing them in an elevated social space. In his role as a leader in the *maracatu* community, Barachinha defends the popular as essential to and inseparable from *cultura popular*, staving off concessions to middle-class preconceptions of how his art should be presented to a public.

*Maracatuzeiros* are able to comfortably function at festivals or in studios, as well as in rehearsals or *sambadas* on the street, where the audience is integral to the performance. The genre does not neatly fit into any one of Turino's (2008) "four fields" of musical modalities, but it deploys both the techniques and the social values associated with three of them (participatory, presentational, and high fidelity), depending on the context. Nevertheless, *maracatuzeiros* often have prohibitions against the indiscriminate mixing of different modes. When approached by city officials about holding a city-sponsored *sambada* in the main plaza, Barachinha rejected the use of professional elevated staging and sound systems that would separate the singer-poets from their supporters and prevent musicians from other groups from joining in and relieving his band members during the long night. He insisted on performing on the ground and using the noisy sound cars (*carros de som*) for amplification. Likewise, a change in the day or time of *sambada* performance to accommodate tourists rather than *maracatuzeiros* is frowned upon as antithetical to their values.

The membership of *maracatu* groups is in a semifluid state until the months leading up to carnival, when informal contract agreements are made with musicians, dancers (male *caboclos* and female *baianas*), and ceremonial figures (king, queen, standard-bearers). For rehearsal and *sambada* performances anchored in and intended for their own communities, participatory values predominate: musicians play collectively, with no soloing or emphasis on virtuosity, and people of various skill levels are able to join in. The *mestres* are in a sense virtuosos, but here the emphasis is on their poetic improvisation rather than their singing ability, and anyone so inclined can stand near his or her chosen *mestre* and belt out the sung “response” or sections of repeated stanzas in the various rhyme schemes. Alternately, *maracatus* have no objections to taking part in presentational performances to which these participatory criteria do not apply, such as festivals or the theatrical context in São Paulo described earlier. *Maracatuzeiros* tailor their presentational performances to the expectations of an outsider audience, and group leaders choose the best or most reliable musicians to appear. Cultural programmers encourage groups to assume neoliberal attitudes toward discipline and professionalization in order to compete for presentational performance opportunities (e.g., assembling promotional portfolios, opening bank accounts in the group’s name). The adherence to a complex, internal ethos of performance values combined with context-dependent flexibility is one way *maracatu* has resisted various types of appropriation by elites.

Although the degree of involvement and leadership of Barachinha and João Paulo are somewhat atypical, the *mestre* is generally regarded as embodying the values of the *maracatu* community. These values often mirror the values and expectations of the hegemonic class. For example, in their emphasis on personal humility, discipline, and knowledge, the *mestres* emphasize how *maracatu* is integrated into Brazilian civil society and how it has “evolved” from a rural past characterized by ignorance, intergroup rivalries, and violence. When local police in the interior began enforcing “public security” curfew laws designed to limit large gatherings in state capitals, thus jeopardizing *maracatu*’s centenarian traditions, only a coalition of allied urban artists and activists was able to convince figures in the *maracatu* community to stand up and fight for the continuance of their group practices.<sup>39</sup> Verses that praise police actions in Rio de Janeiro or condemn sex workers also reflect the hegemony. However, hegemonic values are articulated in different registers and in frameworks specific to the Mata Norte. *Maracatuzeiros* deploy standards of authenticity differently, according to the context. The position of the popular artist in Brazil, whose work is not fully integrated into the capitalist market but is dependent on systems of patronage, creates an ambiguous variety of cultural broker who

moves comfortably in both popular and elite circles—but always within circumscribed limits.

### Conclusion: Grassroots Revitalization

The most important innovations in rural *maracatu* have been generated from dynamics and processes within the community itself, not by outsiders, even when considering the influence of broader societal pressures and changes. *Maracatu's* borrowings from *cantoria de viola* indicate an internal drive to refine and deepen the genre's poetic complexity and also reflect an increase in literacy. *Maracatuzeiros'* creative engagement with mass culture highlights their agency, distinct from the more static, folkloric values that Brazil's artistic elite would prefer them to embody. They adeptly draw on patronage networks and new technologies to advance their own agendas while also negotiating the nuances of reframing their participatory art for presentational contexts.

The elaboration of their expressive forms, and a more inclusive and egalitarian ethos, has been driven by *maracatu's* own social actors rather than by changes imposed on a passive, complacent mass.<sup>40</sup> This elaboration is the product of debates and contentious struggles over meaning within *maracatu*. Conversely, the interest of elites in *maracatu* has tended to serve their own agendas and narratives—modernist and regionalist, cultural nationalist and vanguardist—about which *maracatuzeiros* are often indifferent. The imbalance of power in the politics of representation is a problem that this writer, engaged in an anthropological and historical analysis, thinks is of critical importance. Some *maracatuzeiros* sometimes share that concern. But *maracatuzeiros* are also adept at bracketing their experience. When an opportunity to advance the interests of one's group or singing career presents itself, the politics of representation are sometimes pushed to the edge of the frame.

When framing *maracatu* for the tightly controlled and scripted performances of elite theaters, pushing groups further into the bureaucracy and machinery of social control that is “official” carnival, or complying with politically manipulated and implemented curfew laws in order to maintain their image as law-abiding citizens, *maracatuzeiros* potentially compromise many of the things that make rural *maracatu* unique. When this occurs at the organizational level, it is obviously not a simple hegemonic imposition but something manipulated by the *maracatu*—perfecting “tailored” performances to be more competitive in the cultural marketplace of shows, festivals, and carnival prizes. When the reframing is done at a more personal, interactional level, it can involve concealing elements of *maracatuzeiros'* identities as people who like “low-quality music,” watch telenovelas along with the rest of Brazil, and laugh at off-color jokes. This

negation of key facets of the self is one instance in which the art form risks undergoing a more permanent transformation from a participatory to a presentational form. In the former context (as *maracatu* is normally practiced in the Mata Norte), the audience's lifestyle, consumption practices, and expectations or demands of their favorite *mestre* are all part of the show. In the latter context, such as festivals and theaters, *mestres* tailor their performance to a clearly delineated audience that is not necessarily part of their own cultural cohort. On the one hand, consenting to this negation can be considered classic alienation, yet on the other hand, it embodies a strategy, a creative appropriation of master narratives, and a way to negotiate more sociopolitical leverage in the available system. Whether or not strategies useful for short-term gains can also yield long-term advantages is an evolving question that *maracatuzeiros* can answer only for themselves.

#### Notes

1. The sharing of a name with the considerably better-known (and much more studied and documented) *maracatu de baque virado*, or *nação* (nation) *maracatu*, is a source of mild irritation in the *baque solto* community. The two art forms do not share historical trajectories and also differ enormously in their aesthetic, musical-poetic, religious, and social composition. *Nação maracatu*, which is more clearly Afro-Brazilian and strongly tied to the *xangô* temples of Recife, was long considered authentic, whereas the traditions practiced by groups of rural migrants to the city were denigrated as illegitimate and inferior bastardizations. The classification *maracatu rural* was itself imposed by an American anthropologist (Real 1967), and the term has endured despite challenges by one of Brazil's foremost musical authorities (see Guerra-Peixe 1980). The practitioners and enthusiasts of the tradition found in the Mata Norte region normally refer to what they do simply as *maracatu*, with no qualifiers. Throughout the remainder of this article, the term *maracatu* refers to *maracatu de baque solto* exclusively. For the most comprehensive treatment of *nação*-style *maracatu*, see Lima (2008).

2. There are many factors contributing to the increase in attention since the 1990s, but one of the largest is Recife's *manguebeat* artistic movement. For background on this, see Galinsky (2002); Murphy (2001); and Crook (2001).

3. See Sandroni (2011) for the most succinct and penetrating analysis of the historical transformations of the terms "popular" and "folkloric" in the context of music, as well as the difficulty of translating these categories across languages.

4. Mário de Andrade, author of *Macunaíma*, is a member of the iconic first wave of Brazilian modernists, who repeatedly turned to folklore for inspiration, and his later work leaned toward cultural nationalism. Suassuna, who gained regional fame for his dramatic works like *O Pedro do Reino*, wished with his Movimento Armorial to create an autochthonous northeastern erudite art rooted in popular folklore. He was involved in *teatro popular* projects before the military coup, and in the 1980s and 1990s he came to wield considerable influence as Pernambuco's secretary of culture.

5. The problematic and partial exception is the Maracatu Association of Pernambuco, co-opted early on by powerful figures in the official cultural programming infrastructure. The association receives an array of official patronage, which it then redistributes through its members' ranks (see Murphy 1994; Estrada 2015).

6. See McCann (2004, 96–128) for a treatment of the Northeast's musical contributions to nationalist discourse between 1930 and 1950. See Dunn (2001) for the region's importance to the protest music of the early to mid-1960s and the Tropicalista *vanguarda* that followed. See Sharp (2011) for the tensions between folkloric music and middle-class "roots" rock in Pernambuco since the 1990s. See Dinneen (1996) for an astute analysis of the uneven relationship between popular and erudite literature in the Northeast. For a broader historical treatment of the discursive construction of the Northeast in the national imaginary, see Albuquerque (2012).

7. There is a massive population of migrants from the Northeast living in São Paulo; they are predominantly manual laborers but also include many artists and musicians.

8. See Suassuna (1974) for the movement's manifesto. For a description and critique of this approach in English, see Dinneen (1996).

9. Throughout this article I draw on Turino's (2000, 2008) flexible categories of "participatory" and "presentational" styles of creating and experiencing music. As I explain in the conclusion, rural *maracatu* is not a perfect fit for either of these ideal types.

10. *Folgado* lacks a precise English translation, referring to organized, group pastimes, associated more with carnival than with leisure. Quote from "Maracatus honram tradição na Cidade Tabajara," *Jornal do Commercio*, March 7, 2000.

11. "Maracatu rural: Tradição em Olinda," *O Globo*, March 7, 2000.

12. Most famously, the *baque solto maracatus* were forced to include a king and queen in their carnival processions to be able to participate in the capital's official carnival. See Real (1967); Arruda de Assis (1996); and Benjamin and Amorim (2002).

13. *Brega* is absent from Tinhorão's syntheses (1998, 2013) of musical history, although related genres such as the *lambada* of Pará receive their own chapters. Of the edited volumes by Perrone and Dunn (2001) and Avelar and Dunn (2011), only Vianna's (2011) essay on *technobrega* in the latter discusses the genre at any length.

14. Some studies that have noted the similarities and relationships are found in Pimentel and Corrêa (2008) and Amorim (2008). For a detailed description of *cantoria* in English, see Travassos (2000).

15. This style of northeastern "folk" music is probably the most widely known in the rest of Brazil, where its performers are typically known as *repentistas*. The designation *violeiros* is much more common in the Mata Norte region of Pernambuco.

16. So named because the pamphlet-sized books were pinned and hung from coarse string or cord in vendors' ambulatory stalls at the *feiras*, or market-day plazas, of the interior.

17. Baracho made at least three *ciranda* albums in the 1970s: two for the Rozenblit label in Recife and one for the Esquema imprint in Caruaru. It should

be noted that *ciranda* in Pernambuco bears no relation to the style of children's songs in southern Brazil.

18. The earliest known recording is on Discos Marcus Pereira's *Música do Nordeste* from 1973. I have personally digitized dozens of amateur cassette recordings from the 1980s to mid-2000s made by enthusiasts of *sambadas* and *ensaios*. As I discuss later, professionally made recordings did not begin to appear until the beginning of this century.

19. For background on the rural exodus, see Eisenberg (1974); Rocha (1974); Lopes (1976); Andrade (1980, 2001); Peres (1991); Pereira (1997); and Rogers (2010). For an exploration of the socioeconomic shifts in the specific context of *maracatu*, see Estrada (2015, 54–72).

20. Note that the rhyme scheme of this *samba em dez* is ABBAACDDC. This verse can be heard at the website Baque Solto, <https://wp.me/P7QDT7-8A>.

21. "Homenagem a quem se foi," on the album *A força da poesia*, self-released 2011.

22. Video from this performance can be viewed at the Baque Solto website, <https://wp.me/P7QDT7-8A>.

23. See, e.g., Wolf (1956); Geertz (1960); and Press (1969).

24. An excerpt of this audio can heard at the website Baque Solto, <https://wp.me/P7QDT7-8A>.

25. See the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística's (IBGE) information for Pernambuco at the Estados@ portal, [http://www.ibge.gov.br/estadosat/temas.php?sigla=pe&tema=indicsoc\\_mun\\_censo2010](http://www.ibge.gov.br/estadosat/temas.php?sigla=pe&tema=indicsoc_mun_censo2010).

26. Data from the Brazilian Ministry of Health's Portal de Saúde, <http://tabnet.datasus.gov.br>.

27. This is in contrast to the early training of one of today's most talked-about young talents, Mestre Anderson, who benefited from an after-school poetry workshop taught by Mestre Antônio Roberto (now retired) and sponsored by the city government.

28. For a discussion of the *trios elétricos* and the polemic surrounding their presence in Pernambucan carnival, see Estrada (2015, 321–325).

29. A variety of recent work has drawn attention to the processes and social actors that sought to define a rather narrow demarcation of what qualifies as a musical "national tradition" in such a heterogeneous society and how those definitions have begun to fragment and expand (Stroud 2008; Vianna 1997; Moehn 2012).

30. Somewhat counterintuitively, given the similarities in style and execution, *maracatuzeiros* are largely not tuned in to the world of rap or hip-hop music, except insofar as mainstream pop music has incorporated those genres. The vibrant hip-hop subculture in São Paulo, for example, has made no inroads into the small towns of Pernambuco's Mata Norte.

31. In Recife I attended three days of these workshops, taught by a history professor with the difficult task of condensing information about many types of carnival groups into segments. The volunteer popular jury's scores are combined with those of the panel of judges for a final score for each group.

32. On the former, see Gouveia (2013) and Williams (2001); on the latter, see Dinneen (1996).

33. “Poor cultural nutrition” was a phrase revivalist Antônio Nóbrega used to explain why the popular classes gravitate toward low-quality music. I further discuss Nóbrega’s didactic approach to cultural appropriation in my doctoral dissertation (Estrada 2015, 212–216). The classist opinion that people in the interior like such musical styles only because they are too uneducated and unsophisticated to know any better is extremely common among university students and some intellectuals in Recife, who expressed this to me countless times.

34. The audio of this can be listened to at the Baque Solto website, <https://wp.me/P7QDT7-8A>.

35. “Iê-iê-iê” was the name given to Brazil’s national rock artists in the early 1960s, derived from the Beatles’ song “She Loves You.”

36. Rural *maracatu* lent visual and lyrical material to the most famous *manguebeat* representatives, Chico Science and Nação Zumbi, whose musical influence is felt most strongly in the group Mestre Ambrosio. *Manguebeat* artists challenged the dominance of the Armorialist perspective on *cultura popular*, drawing on critiques that developed on the political left since the 1970s.

37. Siba has produced several recordings featuring both artists, all of which are currently out of print. They include several volumes of his six-CD *Poetas da mata norte* (2005), as well as *Os campeões da sambada* (2006) and *No baque solto somente* (2003) on which he performs alongside Barachinha.

38. It is common for the artwork of these self-produced CDs to have commercial logos or advertisements for the local businesses that contributed financially to their production. Verbal shout-outs to patrons are rarer, usually reserved for community figures who have shown consistent support for *maracatu* over the years.

39. The events surrounding the persecution of the rural *maracatus* by the police and the Ministério Público is described in several articles I wrote for the organization Latin American Bureau and my blog, *Baque Solto* (<http://baquesolto.org>). The pertinent articles can be found at <https://wp.me/p7QDT7-k> and <https://wp.me/p7QDT7-5G>.

40. Poetic improvisation is highlighted here, but similar arguments can be made for costume design and artisanal work, dance, or musical accompaniment.

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