



**Erasing and Re-Racing the Beat:
Rhythmic Change Meets the Afrobrazilian Paradox in *Maracatu Cearense***

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Two purposes move me to present this paper. First, simply, is to direct some attention to an understudied Carnival tradition from Brazil's Northeast and submit it to conversation. *Maracatu cearense*, "maracatu from Ceará state," is, according to folklorist Lourdes Macena, "virtually unknown outside of Ceará."¹ This would seem unremarkable except for that it is the central performed element of the traditional street Carnival of Fortaleza, Brazil's fifth largest city² and capital of Ceará. But Fortaleza's Carnival, with its 40,000 or so annual attendees (practically all of whom are local), is a modest affair, certainly when compared to Brazil's big-four pre-Lenten spectacles of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador and Recife—or even Fortaleza's own out-of-season Carnival, *Fortal*, which has since its inception eighteen years ago, come to attract well over half a million people.³

¹ Maria de Lourdes Macena, "O negro que vive na cara tsnada do caboclo cearense: uma contribuição para o reconhecimento do maracatu do Ceará" (paper presented at I Congresso Cearense de Folclore, August 2005).

² "Estimativas de População," *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE)*, 2009, <http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/estimativa2009/POP2009_DOU.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2010). Fortaleza's fifth-place population ranking (behind only São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Brasília) reflects the municipal area only; in overall metropolitan area population it ranks lower.

³ In Fortaleza, like many Brazilian cities, the local *micareta*, "out of season carnival," eclipses the traditional street carnival in popularity. These events, modeled after the street carnival of Salvador, are dominated by Bahian-style *trio elétricos* and *axé* music and are considered by many (especially younger, middle-class people) to be their cities' *de facto* carnivals. See Benoit Gaudin and Laurence Hallewell, "The Micareta and Cultural Identity," *Latin American Perspectives* 31(2004): 80-93; and "Fortal," 2009, <<http://www.fortal.com.br/2009/>> (accessed January 24, 2010).

During my fieldwork in Fortaleza in 2008 and 2009, I made a promise to the three maracatu cearense group founders with whom I worked and learned. Fulfilling it will occupy a few minutes, so I hope you'll bear with me while I highlight some of maracatu cearense's local practices, particularly as they distinguish it from the more proliferate and celebrated maracatus of the state of Pernambuco. Doing so will lay track to my second purpose: to examine, critically and ethnographically, the relationship between rhythmic practices and construals of race among maracatu cearense participants. More particularly, I will briefly consider how paths of rhythmic change in the tradition impinge upon particularly Cearense ways of imagining and performing blackness through the carnivalized figure of the AfroBrazilian, whose very evocation in Ceará is readable as something of a paradox. But more on this later.

The term "maracatu"⁴ denotes at least four concepts: (1) a choreographed, outdoor Carnival processional pageant; (2) its accompanying percussion-centered music; (3) a specific rhythm or basic rhythmic aesthetic; and (4) the social and performing organization that executes all of these in competition. Scholars recognize two broad styles,⁵ both originating in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. Mário de Andrade, César Guerra-Peixe, Katarina Real, Tiago de Oliveira Pinto, and others have produced ethnomusicological and folkloric studies of the African-heritage *maracatu-nação*, or "nation-style maracatu," found in and around Pernambuco's capital, Recife. It is this "nation" style that largely inspires Ceará's tradition.

The dramatic aspect of the maracatu nations of both Recife and Fortaleza enacts a royal procession and coronation of the queen and king of an imagined African polity. In attendance are a court of noble dignitaries, a percussion ensemble,

⁴ Mário de Andrade (1958) notes that "maracatu" does not appear in print before the nineteenth century. He argues also for its Amerindian etymology: "maracá" (Amerindian shaker instrument) and "catu" ("beautiful" in Tupí).

⁵ *Maracatu rural*, or *maracatu de baque solto* ("loose-beat maracatu"), is the other category. This is a syncretic music processional form incorporating elements from many festival traditions, including the use of European wind and brass instruments, performed primarily by rural *caboclo* (indigenous *mestiço*) sugarcane workers in Pernambuco's *zona da mata*.

wings of indigenous and folkloric dancers, and recurring and theme-variable headline personages of assorted sacred and secular origins. This typically amounts to a roster of one to several hundred total musicians, dancers, singers and actors in each parading group. Each year, the maracatu nation builds its pageant around a unifying theme, or *loa*, which often expresses some facet of AfroBrazilian experience. This might emerge as a self-contained dramatic focus or play out as an element within a broader dramatized historical event, nationalistic sentiment, social critique, or cultural tribute. Modeled after the competitively performed *enredo*, or “samba theme,” of Rio de Janeiro samba schools, the maracatu loa unfolds through the most impressive display of original music, lyric, choreography, and traditional and Baroque-inspired costume design that a nation can mount given its means.

From their beginning, Fortaleza’s maracatus introduced localisms into the imported “nation” format of Pernambuco. By 1960, Cearenses saw these as desirable divergences reflective of an unmistakable local maracatu style. Today, Fortaleza’s maracatu remains recognizable as a variant to its parent tradition in Recife but is nonetheless sufficiently distinct in musical, aesthetic, and symbolic bearing to prompt many, like anthropologist Ana Cláudia Rodrigues da Silva, to argue for its construal as an independent, third category of maracatu.⁶

The relationship between two of Fortaleza’s local maracatu features will occupy much of the remainder of my talk. You might have noticed these in the video: the use of blackface makeup, known in the tradition as *falso negrume*, or “false blackness,” and Fortaleza’s characteristically solemn, dirge-paced maracatu percussion style, known as the *ritmo cadenciado*, “cadenced rhythm.” I’ll return to these later, but first let me briefly summarize some of maracatu cearense’s other distinguishing performance elements:

Male-to-female cross-dressing. Transvestite games are typical of Carnival throughout Brazil, accepted and celebrated in their season. In maracatu cearense, they constitute praxis, with male participants traditionally enacting Fortaleza’s

⁶ Ana Cláudia Rodrigues da Silva, “Vamos maracatucá!!! Um estudo sobre os maracatus cearenses” (M.A. thesis, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco 2004), 30.

nations' most illustrious and festooned headline female roles. By contrast, Recife's performers typically assume roles of their own sex.

Dramatic and competitive emphasis on the queen. As the main protagonist of the coronation and figure whose performance bears fully one-sixth of the total possible points awarded in Carnival competition, the queen stands as maracatu cearense's most coveted and carefully cast role. Insofar as substantial monetary prizes are at stake in competition, her grace and bearing on the paradeway translate into real economic rewards or consequences for her nation. In this and in overall emblematic importance, she easily outshines the king, who merits no independent category of judging. Lourdes Macena puts it like this: "The queen is like the magnificent, majestic Earth . . . around whom her king orbits, like an inconsequential moon, in a deferential dance."⁷

Resurrection of the local memory of slavery and abolition. In exalting Ceará's past as Brazil's first free-soil territory, maracatu cearense populates Fortaleza's carnival spaces with dramatizations of events, ideas, and individuals that precipitated statewide abolition in 1884, four years before slaves were freed throughout the rest of Brazil. Here, past meets present, and the recurring specter of social activism teaches Cearenses how their state became known as *Terra da Luz*, "Land of Light." In 2009, the maracatu *Vozes da África*, "Voices of Africa" incorporated this moniker into the catchy chorus of its loa:

Terra do sol,
E do amor,
Terra da luz.

Land of sun,
And of love,
Land of light [my translation].

Independence from Afrobrazilian religion. As a practical matter, maracatu cearense is a secular tradition, although its members might be affiliated with any

⁷ Personal interview with Maria de Lourdes Macena, August 13, 2008.

assortment of spiritual practices and places of worship. In performance, the maracatus of both cities are populated with traditional AfroBrazilian religious figures—the *calunga* doll; turbaned Bahian dancers; the *balaeiro*, “basket bearer.” These function, in Fortaleza, as symbols of homage to AfroBrazilian worship rather than indicators of a specific religious practice among its core membership. By contrast, Recife’s nations are typically affiliated to a particular AfroBrazilian religious house, usually of the Xangô sect of Candomblé.⁸

Instrumental format. Assorted snare drums and shaker idiophones are shared across the maracatu traditions of both Recife and Fortaleza. Standard divergences between the traditions occur in the bass drum and bell timeline functions. Instead of Recife’s rope-tuned *alfaia* bass drum, maracatu cearense adopts the *surdo* (popular in the carnival styles of Rio de Janeiro and Bahia), and/or the *zabumba* (the shallow-bodied bass drum associated with the traditional *forró* trio). Marking time, instead of Recife’s *gonguê*, or “iron bell,” is Fortaleza’s *ferro*, or “iron triangle.” In both cities, individual groups typically modify one or more aspects of their respective formats in service of creating a distinctive rhythmic brand.

This brings me to my second purpose: Cearense understandings and articulations of rhythm and race and their intersections in Fortaleza’s maracatus.

Talking about trajectories of rhythmic change and their interplay with blackface performance in maracatu cearense means considering the inventions of both rhythm and race (and not just blackness); indeed, it means considering the invention of tradition itself. Eric Hobsbawm defines the invented tradition, in part, as

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and a ritual of symbolic nature.⁹

⁸ José Jorge de Carvalho, “Aesthetics of Opacity and Transparency: Myth, Music, and Ritual in the Xangô Cult and in the Western Art Tradition,” *Latin American Music Review* 14 (1993): 202-231.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008 [1983]), 1.

To my mind, Hobsbawm's notion is not only fruitful, but vital, in discussing maracatu cearense's production of racial identity in Ceará and how that identity becomes a position in the broader racial identity discourse in Brazil, where race relations have sometimes flourished, sometimes withered, under the enduring vision of a harmonious, white-indigenous-black racial democracy. Since the 1970s, scholars have critiqued this tripartite ideal as a myth that purports to have eliminated racism through *mestiçagem*, "racial mixing"; they claim that it instead bolsters an ideology of racial whitening that seeks to eliminate blackness. Recently, David Lehmann reexamined the bases for this critique, concluding that Brazilianists have largely misinterpreted and misattributed the concept of a reified racial democracy to the oft-maligned sociological writings of Gilberto Freyre.¹⁰ Whether or not justly attributed to Freyre, racial democracy persists in construals of Brazilian identity. Michael Hanchard reminds us that, through the twentieth century, Brazilians have redrawn their nation's racial lines significantly away from blackness. This, he argues,

does not indicate the literal "disappearance" of purely black peoples in Brazil, but shifts in how people identify themselves and lean toward an identification with whiteness . . .¹¹

How does this translate to the local Cearense context? Historical sources and current statistics confirm that in terms of percentages, Ceará's black population is only slightly more than half as visible today as it was prior to statewide abolition in 1884.¹² Cearenses now, as then, overwhelmingly identify as white or *caboclo*—that

¹⁰ David Lehmann, "Gilberto Freyre: The Reassessment Continues," *Latin American Research Review* 43 (2008): 208-218.

¹¹ Michael Hanchard, "Introduction," in *Racial Politics in Contemporary Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press 1999), 9.

¹² According to *Síntese de Indicadores Sociais 2007*, Ceará's self-identifying black population currently stands at 2.4%. Before abolition, the number of black Cearense slaves peaked at 35,000, within a total population of 800,000 (see Farias 2007, 130), rendering a 4.375% black population. While still smaller than the 7.4% percentage of blacks currently in Brazil overall (see *Síntese de Indicadores Sociais 2007*), this indicates that blackness was nearly twice as visible in nineteenth-century Ceará as it is today.

is, rural heritage white-indigenous *mestiço*. Migrations of Afrobrazilians out of Ceará in the wake of abolition, coupled with a population boom in Fortaleza's metropolitan area in the late twentieth century, contributed to the racial logic of a blackless local culture. This percolates through textual sources, popular ideology and, not least of all, maracatu cearense. Testament to the first category, local historian Raimundo Girão remarks in his 1962 *Pequena História do Ceará*, "Little History of Ceará":

[T]he percentage of African blood in the veins of Cearenses is small. Because blacks were so humble and few, they never ascended the social ladder, they remained abject, and lacked the spirit to interfere in the Cearense ethnic mix [my translation].¹³

Twenty-first century sensibilities will recoil at Girão's paternalistic rhetorical style; particularly, propositions that Africans lack spirit and that racial mixing constitutes interference. But his essential point remains: Afrobrazilians are few in Ceará; in this, he reflects local consensus.

Assuming only Girão's point—not his tenor—José Maria Almeida, founding member and queen of the maracatu *Nação Iracema*, or "Iracema Nation," arrives at the same conclusion, though through arguably more linear logic. A self-identified caboclo, Almeida understands that, compared to elsewhere in Brazil,

Ceará had fewer slaves. They were here, but only in the beginning. They disembarked here but were sold to other states. That is to say . . . they didn't stay . . . We don't really have black characteristics in our state [my translation].¹⁴

Lúcia Simão Pereira, a Fortaleza native, self-identifies as black. She confronts Ceará's racial ideology through her experience of what she calls "awakening." Founder of both Iracema Nation in 2002 and Ceará's first black consciousness movement in 1982, Dona Lúcia and her family have lived in the same Fortaleza

¹³ Raimundo Girão. *Pequena história do Ceará* (Fortaleza: Editora Instituto do Ceará 1962), 100-101.

¹⁴ Personal interview with José Maria de Paula Almeida, February 21, 2009.

neighborhood since the late 1950s. Before this, her mother and maternal grandparents were born and raised not far from Fortaleza in a *quilombo* community originally founded by runaway slaves. As head of the only self-identified black directorship of a maracatu cearense group, Dona Lúcia speaks of blacklessness in Ceará not as a transmitted narrative but a lived problematic:

It's difficult to talk about black issues in Ceará. You were in Bahia and saw the number of blacks in Bahia is immense. . . . Here, blacks are invisible. And if they are in a poor family, nobody worries about suffering because they are black. They worry because they are poor. In Ceará, we never thought otherwise [my translation].¹⁵

Taken together, this “discourse of blacklessness,” as I have come to call it, coexists with the memory of the Cearense’s oft-invoked historical role as Brazil’s first maverick abolitionist. The Cearense—as reformer and defender of principle of liberty—lives in profoundly present ways in twenty-first century Cearense identity consciousness, as we see with the 2009 Carnival performance of *Voices of Africa*. But how do both blacklessness and black consciousness coexist in a single racial identity discourse? That is, how can the received knowledge of black invisibility emerge concurrently with an earlier moment of black emancipation? Where do flesh-and-blood Afrobrazilians of twenty-first century Ceará, like Lúcia Simão, locate themselves within these parallel trajectories? Maracatu cearense, it seems to me, aptly accommodates what I have come to consider a paradox, embodied in the figure of the simultaneously acclaimed and unacknowledged Afrobrazilian in Ceará. In maracatu cearense, this paradoxical emerges synchronically from multiple sources: fragments of historical fact, cultural forgettings, rhythmic practices, racial discourse—all these collapse into a deeply textured origin myth that simultaneously exalts and erases, then, through performance, re-races, the Afrobrazilian.

Ana Cláudia Rodrigues da Silva proposes two essential elements in the maracatu cearense origin myth. First, a factual narrative circulates within Fortaleza’s nations about the founding of the maracatu cearense tradition. In its

¹⁵ Personal interview with Lúcia Simão Pereira, February 20, 2009.

telling, Raimundo Alves Feitosa, a Fortaleza native, lived and worked in Recife in the early 1930s, where he followed the activities of Pernambuco's maracatu nations and *cambindas* (another processional tradition). Enchanted by Recife's rich African heritage, Feitosa returned in 1936 to Fortaleza and founded its first maracatu, *Az de Ouro*, "Ace of Diamonds," which paraded in Fortaleza's municipal carnival for the first time the following year. As other maracatus soon appeared, Feitosa became a local celebrity for having founded the tradition that would soon quintessentially embody the unmistakable look and sound of Ceará's traditional carnival. In his lifetime, journalists and researchers frequently asked Feitosa why and how Cearenses started painting their faces black. His response, well-practiced by his later years, became weaved into the myth. In short, when Feitosa transplanted to Fortaleza what Larry Crook calls "the most Africanized element of Recife's carnival,"¹⁶ Fortaleza's white- and brown-skinned performers required a practical performative aid to bridge the visual disparity in race between the performer and the performed. Beyond this, Feitosa frequently offered, maracatu cearense began as a male-only tradition; accordingly, men in female dress needed blackface to disguise their identities in public so not to suffer stigma, or worse, violence. Maracatu cearense participants today are quick to point out that their practice has no shared values or affinity with the racial parody now associated with the historical minstrelsy of the Anglophone West. Indeed, they insist that false blackness on their faces stands as an aesthetic homage to the AfroBrazilian personages of maracatu and the memory of the AfroBrazilian slave who built the Brazilian nation.

So what in this constitutes myth? On the surface, nothing. But Silva argues that in emphasizing maracatu cearense's origin as a tradition originating in Recife, there occurs the erasure of an entire heritage of Cearense African music processions that predated the invention of maracatu cearense tradition by at least fifty years. Accounts as early as 1898 confirm that black Cearenses organized themselves into performing musical processions called maracatus and paraded

¹⁶ Larry Crook, *Brazilian Music: Northeastern Traditions and the Heartbeat of a Modern Nation* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 145.

publicly in traditional AfroBrazilian garb. Like black cultural forms everywhere in Brazil prior to the nationalization of samba in the early 1930s, most white elites in Fortaleza reviled these manifestations. In 1917, Cearense writer Gustavo Barroso professed his childhood fascination with and fear of these groups, remarking on their “sinister character,” and

barbaric instrumentation, . . . sadness and inscrutability, limp dancing and singing in cavernous voices short verses with no meaning or verses whose meanings have been lost with time, almost all infected with corrupted African words once used on the plantations . . . [my translation].¹⁷

Historian and maracatu participant João Militão believes that Feitosa knew of these early processions and that they provided the unconscious raw material (though not the principal impetus) for Feitosa’s moment of tradition-making in 1936.¹⁸ To Silva, repressing Ceará’s African heritage both justifies the use blackface makeup and advances a “discourse of racial whitening that dominates the minds of Cearenses.”¹⁹

My interpretation of all this supposes a generalizable dynamic of erasure and reinscription of racial identity. In mythologizing maracatu cearense as the importation of Recife’s African heritage, Cearenses evacuate an actual African heritage of their own—one deemed alien to their predominantly white-indigenous racial logic, which I have argued elsewhere is rooted largely in the Romantic nationalism of the Indianist writings of Cearense author José de Alencar. Framed as an expression of invented blackness, maracatu cearense is readable as the strategic erasure of *actual* blackness. Participants negotiate the resulting paradox—blacklessness naturalized within an AfroBrazilian tradition—through blackface performance. In short (as if theorizing about race ever is), reinscribing false

¹⁷ Silva 2004, 67-68, citing Barroso 1917.

¹⁸ João Militão [aka Pingo de Fortaleza], *Maracatu Az de Ouro: 70 anos de memórias, loas e batuques* (Fortaleza: Omni Editora 2007), 26.

¹⁹ Silva 2004, 64.

blackness over invented blacklessness immediately utters the latter—itsself achieved through erasure of Ceará’s actual black heritage—to be, at least seemingly, a legitimate identity default. George Lipsitz theorizes such cultural appropriation-as-disguise to be something he calls strategic anti-essentialism—that is,

identifying with a group to which you do *not* belong, presenting yourself as someone else to express more effectively you are actually are.²⁰

So—if false blackness strategically anti-essentializes maracatu cearense’s visual domain, what happens in its domain of sound?

The cadenced rhythm of maracatu cearense—with its trademark heave of 50 or so cut-time beats per minute and its markedly funereal aesthetic—stands as Fortaleza’s characteristic traditional Carnival sound. During my interviews with maracatu cearense participants, I found that many, like Almeida, understand the cadenced rhythm to have been already installed at the moment of maracatu cearense’s invention. Without exception, all who spoke to me ascribed the affective content of the cadenced rhythm to the experience of slavery so often dramatized in Fortaleza’s maracatus. Almeida offers that

[i]n the beginning, our maracatu percussion was very slow, so slow that we called it the “rhythm of sorrow,” that is to say, a rhythm of suffering. This rhythm, this solemn, cadenced rhythm, expressed the suffering of the slaves [my translation].²¹

The cadenced rhythm dominates maracatu cearense as, if no longer its most widespread, then at least its most orthodox musical practice. *Voices of Africa* reflects a more recent trend, which began in 1980, of accelerating Fortaleza’s rhythms to infuse musical joy in performance and downplay the cadenced rhythm’s expression of slave misery and grievance. All maracatus that have formed in Ceará since *Voices of Africa* have followed this new aesthetic of acceleration. Still,

²⁰ George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2007), 204.

²¹ Almeida 2009.

Fortaleza's two old guard groups—Ace of Diamonds (founded, as mentioned, in 1936) and *Rei de Paus*, “King of Clubs” (founded in 1960)—play only the cadenced rhythm at Carnival. In 2009, they scored first and third place in Fortaleza's municipal Carnival judging, indicating the esteem with which Cearenses hold the cadenced rhythm as an vital bearer of their traditional Carnival identity. Through this specific musical practice, all sound innovation within maracatu cearense is filtered, formulated, debated and deployed. In the mid 1970s, the cadenced rhythm even landed in the broader national consciousness when MPB star Ednardo incorporated it into his song “Pavão Misterioso,” “Mysterious Peacock,” a radio hit in 1974 that became the opening theme for the popular TV Globo telenovela, *Saramandaia*. With this, the cadenced rhythm snatched, if only for a moment, the nation's ear and turned it toward Ceará, styling Cearenses as bearers of their own identifiable sound, one that—most importantly—is not generalizable to the rest of Brazil's Northeast.

I argued earlier that blacklessness, as an assumed identity default, emerges in maracatu cearense's visual sphere through erasure and reinscription. I argue now that so too do ideas about originality, authenticity and quintessence regarding sound. Contrary to the popular understanding, the cadenced rhythm did not accompany the invention of the maracatu cearense tradition. The rhythm itself was invented in 1950, marking it as the second of at least three distinct rhythmic styles that have until now emerged as full-fledged musical periods in Fortaleza's maracatus. I briefly discussed the recent, accelerated style, but what was the cadenced rhythm's predecessor? More importantly, why did Cearenses erase it?

Recordings made in 1943 by Luís Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo for the U.S. Library of Congress's Endangered Music Project preserve this early maracatu cearense rhythm. Corrêa de Azevedo shows it to be not only dramatically different in rhythmic figuration (and even somewhat different in its instrumentation), he provides us a record of Ace of Diamonds's sound only seven years after its founding, with Feitosa singing, to boot. From this recording session, Feitosa was also left a song to Xangô, the AfroBrazilian deity to whose Candomblé sect Feitosa was

apparently exposed while living in Recife. I wonder—and this is wondering, not asserting—whether Candomblé worship was more intimately affiliated to maracatu’s early existence in Fortaleza than today, and, if so, whether the erasure of the first maracatu cearense rhythm was, in some way, the erasure of an undersired element of AfroBrazilian heritage. If so, this erasure subjects not only embodied blackness, but music, to a blacklessness-generating process that brings Cearenses’ treatment of rhythm into a striking dialogue with their use of blackface makeup. The cadenced rhythm, then, serves not merely as the sonic accompaniment to Cearenses’ homage to the AfroBrazilian slave; it functions also as an “othering” mechanism—one that, through sound, simultaneously paints the AfroBrazilian black and the Cearense performer blackless.

Both blackface and the cadenced rhythm provide means for making mutually legible the otherwise disjoint identities of Ceará’s dual-race *mestiçagem* and Brazil’s tripartite AfroCultural nationalism. As two entangled elements in a performative continuum of erasing and re-racing identity, both performance practices stand as affective investments in the world of maracatu cearense and its culture-bearers. Through them, Cearenses negotiate ideals about what it means to be, have been, or desire to be, AfroBrazilian in a discursively blackless region of Brazil.

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