

Altered Identities in Brazil: From the Samba Culture to the Sertanejo Culture

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Abstract

Cultural references regarding *Brazilianness* have generally been associated with samba, carnival, colors, and an aesthetic compendium typical of a pre-modernity recreated in cities like Rio de Janeiro or Salvador. A foreign observer would like to see in these lands references that would transport him to Antônio Carlos Jobim's "The Girl from Ipanema" song or to identity traits that would indicate a 'tropical Brazil' related to people dancing in the rhythm of samba and *bossa nova*, and Copacabana beach. However, many socio-cultural changes progressively impacted the consumption of musical and aesthetic styles among Brazilians. Changes concerning musical styles' preferences led to significant cultural changes that would modify the notion of *Brazilianness* imaginary in the first decades of the 21st century. The present paper addresses this eventual cultural and aesthetic references change, showing with decisive force what has been called 'sertanejo culture' in Brazil.

Keywords: Brazilian culture; Cultural identity; Samba culture; *Sertanejo* culture; Musical styles.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Blackness and the mixture of the races, Christ the Redeemer, Copacabana beach, and samba have established an ideal framework to look for an accelerated tropical *Brazilianness* that was able to provide so much vertigo in the eyes of social disciplining and modernization in the first half of the 20th century (Rago, 1997). From early on, black and white images circulated around the world, alluding to a Brazilian national culture limited to these symbols and references, which translated across borders an idea that could hardly incorporate any other aesthetic dimension, cultural traits, or historical characteristics of the country. Therefore, it seems that the old question regarding what *Brazilianness* is – as well as its national and cultural identity – has certainly not lost its questionable nature to this day.

This article does not intend to simply discuss an inexhaustible topic; in fact, it would intend to reformulate and recode here – maybe – an apodictic question: that the identity notion is determined according to what is not equal, that is, in relation to the 'other'. Thus, by referring to the other, it delimitates its own, and by saying 'I', it necessarily implies saying or thinking about the 'other'. These references mentioned as examples of *Brazilianness* continue to maintain their notorious legitimacy, making, for instance, an ethnic-cultural identity visible, once they appeal to a history and a memory constituted around the black cultural heritage, the 'black body', and the blackness that is still social and politically alive to this day. Nevertheless, we can ask ourselves: are these references still associated with a supposed *Brazilianness* nowadays? What significant socio-cultural changes have there been in the recent decades? Discussions regarding the scope of identities and identifications certainly will not provide a conclusive definition; however, it is worth asking: what motivates us to keep thinking and discussing this topic? The answer seems simple: its innumerable variations. This means that the task of reformulating and recodings makes the discussion concerning the identity fruitful and necessary because it expresses our contemporary ways of thinking and its action in the public sphere. Therefore, if talking about identity means talking about otherness, it is necessary to establish which would be the minimum characteristics or what would be the common denominator that delimits these notions in our time. For differentiating identity and alterity, we propose to renounce the traditional binary systems of opposition at first, and, by doing so, we realize that 'the other' (or the stranger) probably would not have to be sought outside, but rather inside (within) a culture sphere that is assuming new formats. In this sense, 'the other' must be sought inside 'us', within a

framework that defines their identities and identifications, no matter how fleeting they may be¹.

The cultural and aesthetic reference of *Brazilianness* is still associated with its music and its appeal to the spontaneity of partying and the carnival, to the colors, and to the corporeality of dancing and playing. This seems to capture the foreign observer who would like to see in these lands a kind of pre-modernity recreated in the middle of the 21st century in the cities like Salvador or Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, we focus on these cultural aspects of Brazil to rethink these identity traits that are increasingly no longer so absolute as it seems to understand the country in the present. Many socio-cultural changes impacted the consumption of musical and aesthetic styles among the population. And the musical styles changes led to significant cultural modifications that reshaped the notion of *Brazilianness* in the first decades of the 21st century.

2. SAMBA AS A CULTURAL IDENTITY

Rio's carnival and its Samba Schools fruitfully fulfilled this task of elaborating a cultural space for export based on stereotypes that ended up occasionally functioning as a mirror in which every Brazilian would look to understand itself and to be understood. However, it is worth noting that the samba is not limited to a musical genre related to the carnival and its production that takes place every year during the parades at the Marquês de Sapucaí Sambadrome, in Rio de Janeiro. It goes back to Rio de Janeiro peripheries and the intimate expressiveness that guided the '*rodas de samba*', a samba get-together, at the beginning of the 20th century among the Afro-Brazilian community. Its origins in the 1920s and 1930s do not hide the legacy of the 'Afro drumming' and the rural dances from the Northeast region of the country, especially in the state of Bahia, when Brazil still maintained the status of a slave country in the 19th century. As a cultural identity, samba emerges as a festive extension of the 'Bahian *terreiros*', a place where the rituals of Afro-Brazilian religions take place, and the Afro-Brazilian religiosity, as well as the migratory movement of the Northeastern blacks to the capital of the Empire, or the new Republic, during the 20th century. Rio de Janeiro was the birthplace of a musical and aesthetic diffusion that would shape the Brazilian cultural identity.

In the 1950s, with Rio de Janeiro increasing urbanization, an interesting movement of style and musical renewal of samba called '*bossa nova*' took place. Tom Jobim, Vinícius de Moraes, and João Gilberto were some of the most cited names in Rio de Janeiro's cultural environment for the later decades. The classic song by Vinícius de Moraes and Tom Jobim entitled "The Girl from Ipanema" (1962) was an example of this fundamental style turn, emerging in the context of a hedonistic youth from Rio de Janeiro's southside region. There would be no doubt about the influence of international musical styles on it, such as jazz, based on the use of wind instruments, the electric guitar, and the drums that allowed greater and varied sound registers for its percussion.

Following these new turns around samba, singers such as Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso, and Gilberto Gil emerged, creating a movement known as 'Tropicalism', who alongside Gal Costa and Tom Zé consolidated the so-called MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) style. 'Tropicalism' highlighted the musical and aesthetic references of international rock and the aesthetic forms of a popular culture increasingly visible through different cultural formats (theater, cinema, painting). Its origins in the mid-1960s, and its strong diffusion in the 1970s, led to its unquestionable association with a generation of young people who would later play a significant role in the political and cultural resistance to the authority and military regime that was in force in Brazil during this period.

This musical trend in Brazil brought up specific characteristics to a process of cultural identity construction that is understood as a clear device of social differentiation (Simmel, 1977) that separates the other from the own. Without a doubt, it is a singular continuity of cultural, aesthetic, and historical elements and references that 'present' a certain cultural identity as a coherent format capable of giving unity to a national project and a sense of belonging to its inhabitants. Thus, the samba, as a culture constituted around musical and aesthetic signs and meanings, is understood as a 'non-essentialist' phenomenon that takes a position within different historical, political, social, and cultural contexts, which in their internal variations nourishes its differentiation and identity strength. In this regard, Hall would help by stating:

Otherness is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positio-ning. (Hall 1990/1994, 395).

3. BUT NOT ONLY SAMBA...

Although samba still represents for every foreign observer a musical and aesthetic style easily associated with Brazil's own cultural identity, it is relevant to take into account a series of cultural transformations that happened

¹ In this sense, we follow the perspective that Julia Kristeva (1998, 9) proposes: *Étrangement, l'étranger nous habite: il est la face cachée de notre identité, l'espace que ruine notre demeure, le temps où s'abîment le l'entente et la sympathie. De le reconnaître en nous, nous nous épargnons de le détester en lui-même. Symptôme que rend précisé-ment le « nous » problématique, peut-être impossible, l'étranger commence lorsque surgit la conscience de ma différence et s'achève lorsque nous nous reconnaissons tous étran-gers, rebelles aux liens et aux communautés.*

in the musical consumption habits and in the recording, concerts, and entertainment market at least in the last 30 years. These transformations lead to relativizing, to a large extent, this historical association of samba as an aesthetic and cultural component, as well as a musical style, that would still express the identity and ‘spirit’ of *Brazilianness* today. The thesis would be that the samba, including its variations, has ceased to be a source of practical elaboration of daily sociability and cultural format for national identification that was sufficient and satisfactory enough among the heterogeneous population of Brazil. The samba has abandoned its visual and auditory hegemony as an input of cultural identification, leaving the place for what is known as the ‘*sertanejo* culture’, the result of a long parallel musical history whose origins go back to the rural life of Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century.

The narrative from Rio de Janeiro and the Northeast region of the country understood as ‘tropical Brazil’ was losing space as a gravitational axis in the construction and elaboration of cultural components considering the tastes in regards to musical habits, aesthetics, and behavioral references among Brazilians was rising. The ‘tropicalism’ over the years became a ‘cultural interstice’, an intermediate space that can be defined in the words of Bhabha (1994, 23) as a cultural space ‘in-between’, in which through repetition produces the ‘difference of the same’, that is, a dimension in which a ‘difference’ is elaborated within a meaning¹. This is how, as in the *pagode* music style, the samba could have found a somewhat simplified survival and a possibility of mass consumption, when the generation of samba dancers of the 1980s and 1990s created this new variation and spread it out. However, a musical – style and aesthetic movement – would erupt with great force, including through the media influence. The ‘*sertanejo* culture’ was gradually gaining a place in the Brazilians’ daily lives, fatally wounding the hegemonic space occupied by the samba. Based on these changes and displacements of uses and tastes, a redefinition and updating of what *Brazilianness* music (and culture) would become starts to be insinuated. It is a negotiation process of cultural difference, that is, a sociocultural process that in no way represents the ‘denial of the other’, since its objective implies taking decisions of pendulum-type within a determined period of time that on some occasions will favor one type and on others it will probably favor the opposite, without this implying the arrival of a new transcendent stage of separation in the case of musical styles and aesthetic forms. Like the samba, this cultural transformation is characterized by its *performance*, whose position is based on recreating and reinventing through the recode of cultural elements and heritage. In the best anthropophagic sense, it would be possible to reaffirm what Oswald de Andrade had already stated last century:

Only Anthropophagy unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically. The only law in the world. Masked expression of all individualisms, of all collectivisms. Of all religions. Of all the peace treaties ([1928], 1990, 47)².

4. THE COUNTRYSIDE AIR

The Brazilian country music, known as ‘*sertanejo* music’, emerged in the late 1920s in several states of Brazil, in the countryside of São Paulo, in the south of Minas Gerais, southeast of Goiás, west of Paraná, and also Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul. In those days, this genre was known as the ‘*caipira* music’, alluding to themes related to the countryman’s life, the bucolic and romantic beauty of the rural landscape, the daily adversities and dramas that played a role in many migrants who abandoned their lands to move to the big cities. This music style was born appealing to a simple life, to a modesty typical of the hardworking and laborious world involving the country people who wake up early and are honored by the complacent gaze of a God to whom they did not forget to pray.

It is the music from the Brazilian countryside, from the plains and mountains landscapes of the central-west side of the country, which takes its name from the Portuguese colonial times when referring to those arid regions, the ‘*desertão*’, the dry desert, the austere and warm desert of the current states of Pernambuco, Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Paraíba, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe. The ‘*caipira* music’, as it was known in its beginnings, had its origin in the ‘*bandeirismo*’ movement, in the journeys conducted to new territories by the ‘*bandeirantes paulistas*’, who after settling around cattle raising and agricultural activities embodied the ‘*caipira* culture’ and its music, which would really become known in the first three decades of the 20th century (Alonso, 2015).

The ‘*sertanejo* culture’ is the result of a series of changes in the musical genre that its name came from. If in its initial stage, from the late 1920s to the 1950s, it was characterized by producing songs and lyrics about country life customs, from the 1950s onwards it would expand its repertoire with the incorporation of themes related to the novels and unrequited love stories, in tune with the melodic genre so present in other Latin American countries. The songs portrayed love songs that narrated the life of the composer, singer, or their acquaintances, regarding their adventures and misadventures. Artists such as Tônico & Tinoco, Pena Branca &

¹ In the original: “[...] a crisis of identification is initiated in the textual performance that displays a certain ‘difference’ within the signification [...]” (Bhabha 1994, 23).

² In the original: “Só a Antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Economicamente. Filosoficamente. Única lei do mundo. Expressão mascarada de todos os individualismos, de todos os coletivismos. De todas as religiões. De todos os tratados de paz.” ([1928], 1990, 47).

Xavantinho, Irmãs Galvão and Sulino & Marreiro were part of this process. As Alonso (2015, 32) states, until the 1950s the terms ‘*caipira*’ and ‘*sertanejo*’ were still seen as synonymous, with no distinction whatsoever regarding the musical and aesthetic characteristics between the two of them. However, from the mid-1950s onwards, “with the increase of external influences in the Brazilian culture and the strengthening of the national-popular discourse, the distinction between *caipira* music and *sertanejo* music gradually emerged” (*Ibid.*).

The youth rhythm would arrive in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the incorporation of the electric guitar, sometimes violins, and even trumpets. This was preceded by a relevant process of musical genres ‘imported’ such as the American jazz and the Caribbean genres such as mambo and bolero, as well as the famous Paraguayan *guarania*, the Mexican *rasqueado*, and the Argentine *chamaé*. In particular, the Mexican mariachi music presented a great influence. This whole movement was made possible, especially by the popularization of the radio and the growing record industry around new artists such as Sergio Reis and the duo Milionário & José Rico. It is at this moment, precisely marked by the success of Milionário & José Rico in the 1970s, that a noticeable difference begins to be established between what was considered ‘*caipira* music’ and ‘*sertanejo* music’, being the former as the most ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ related to the Brazilian peasant (*ibid.*, 39). The ‘rural world’ would be recreated differently in ‘*sertanejo* music’, and this process of differentiation is certainly linked to the urbanization and typical modernization of the 1980s. It would no longer be strictly related to the ‘rural world’ since it became more urban and danceable, without losing its musical characteristics of simple and melancholic melodies, lacking elaborate metaphors in its lyrics.

However, in fact, the current ‘*sertanejo* culture’ is a hybrid of musical styles that englobes rhythms from the ‘*caipira* music’, electronic music, *carioca* funk, the Bahian *axé*, and the *gaucho* songs, to variations of international styles such as the bolero and rock. Its hybrid character can be understood as a process of cultural phenomena and as a moment of recoding and innovation between what was formerly understood as the particular and the foreigner. At the origins of this process are duos such as Chitãozinho & Xororó, Leandro & Leonardo, Zezé Di Camargo & Luciano, João Mineiro & Marciano, Rick & Renner. It is also the moment for a more incisive female appearance on the TV and radio, as will be the case of Roberta Miranda. The recent media successes of the composer and singer Marília Mendonça, who sadly died recently in a plane crash, and the duos Maiara & Maraisa and Simone & Simaria are clear examples of an important female achievement in the predominantly male scenario of the ‘*sertanejo* music’.

There is no doubt about the decisive role played by the media and some TV talk shows in this process too since they invited many different artists, who brought to the viewer aesthetic references to the already urbanized ‘Brazilian cowboy’. It is also worth noting the great influence of the American country, its culture, and aesthetic codes that sometimes were an essential re-semanticized reference. This reaffirms a recognizable cultural identification, independently of unnecessary essentialisms; it is a question of cultural difference that is affirmed as its own and that is decidedly and consciously chosen in relation to its historical significance¹.

It is noteworthy that this growing presence of artists from the ‘*sertanejo*’ style disturbed groups and artists already consolidated in the cultural scene. If at first the rise of the *sertanejo* would threaten only the *caipiras*, later it would be the MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) and the national rock styles that were put in check at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s (*Ibid.*, 15).

That was when the sertanejos managed to play shows in the capitals of the Southeast region, they won over part of the upper-middle-class audience and played in famous nightclubs and stages such as Canecão, in Rio de Janeiro, Olympia, in São Paulo, and Teatro Guaíra, in Curitiba. At that time, there were hits such as “Entre tapas e beijos”, “Pense em mim”, “Sonho por sonho”, “Evidências”, “Nuvem de lágrimas”, “É o amor” and so many other songs that were about lost loves. In the midst of countless love songs there was “Cowboy do asfalto”, written by Joel Marques, sung by Chitãozinho & Xororó. (Ibid., 15).

5. NEW CULTURAL CODES

The definitive *sertanejo* cultural explosion would come from its latest stylistic format, the so-called “university *sertanejo*”, spread in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Artists such as Michel Teló, Bruno & Marrone, Gustavo Lima, Cristiano Araújo, Jorge & Matheus, Munhoz & Mariano, and João Bosco & Vinícius began to play at university parties across the country presenting songs and lyrics to a younger audience. Great shows and performances, with huge audiences, were offered in festive and cultural contexts of different characteristics.

There is no doubt that the relevance and expansion of these new cultural codes are associated with the advance of agribusiness as a preponderant economic activity in the country in recent decades. In the rural exhibitions and fairs organized around this activity, a parallel cultural market was built in the countryside that would allow this rhythm diffusion throughout the country. The states of Goiás, Mato Grosso, and Mato Grosso

¹ Regarding cultural differentiation, Bhabha (1994, 34) notes that “[...] cultural difference is the process of the enunciation of culture as ‘knowledgeable’, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification”.

do Sul saw the proliferation of skilled music producers who were discovering new talents, at the same time as studios and record companies were being set up. This environment was favorable for this musical genre to continue and to create a cultural diffusion in an accelerated way.

A survey carried out in 2018 by Datafolha listened to thousands of people and drew a profile on the musical habits of Brazilians. The survey asked the three musical genres the respondents liked the best. The result showed that the *sertanejo* music would be the most popular style, cited by 37% of the respondents. In second place would be the funk genre, mentioned by 28% of the respondents. In the same year, another survey carried out by Ibope showed that 58% of Brazilians listened to *sertanejo* music at least once a week, and its main consumers were people aged 25 to 34. More recently, in information released by the music streaming service Spotify, *sertanejo* music came to occupy the first place in reproductions, reaching more than 4.3 billion in 2020. The second place would be occupied by funk, with 2.5 billion in 2020¹.

In addition to the role of the cultural industry and the music market in general, it should be understood that the '*sertanejo* culture' has become a leading aesthetic and cultural compendium in Brazil today. This is seen especially based on the incessant variability and adaptation that it has shown in face of economic and social changes in the country, as well as on its openness to other native and foreign genres and cultural codes. It closely followed the changes in the Brazilians' values over the last fifty years and their daily problems, in particular regarding those millions of people who for decades did not stop migrating from rural areas or small towns in the countryside to large cities in search of better conditions of life and economic opportunities. Thus, it accompanied the new ways of sociability and affective codes, incorporating without prejudice typical marketing and consumption codes of cultural globalization. A supposed identity that was stable or immutable seemed to be constituting and redefining itself in a 'hybrid identity', including its previous forms without repressing or hiding them. It is a hybrid cultural state whose changed form maintains the ability to manifest visible characteristics of all the cultural forms that were / and are constituting it.

While the samba maintained its local energies around its cultural signs and references, finding legitimacy in its ability to remain unchanged (or with few transformations) as a symptom of validity and a desired 'authenticity', the '*sertanejo* culture' followed an opposite direction, finding in constant change its way of remain visible and accepted by the heterogeneous Brazilian population. This cultural recoding was the result of a hybridization process of different musical elements, whose product celebrates its previous forms ('the *caipira*') recontextualizing them into a new *hic et nunc*, and characterized mainly by reintegrating and transforming (i.e., hybridizing) the poetics of the past in the present production. Its hybrid redefinition is neither essentialist nor purist, but rather recognizes and integrates heterogeneity and diversity, creating a cultural phenomenon that accepts and recognizes the difference, incorporating it into itself as a constitutive and free element, which allows it to oscillate between different musical trends and aesthetic styles.

For this reason, at the present, it is questionable to reduce the signs of *Brazilianness* to the samba musical culture, to the colors, urban rhythms, and forms of sociability of the coastal areas of the country, like the Bahian cadence and the vertigo of Rio de Janeiro. There has been a clear change that is no longer possible to hide, and which resulted in the country's cultural movement in its search for new cultural identifications and aesthetic consumption habits. Samba definitely does not seem to be transmitting the current Brazilian identity transparently, although any visitor that arrives in the country may insist on witnessing cultural aspects inherited from "The Girl from Ipanema". But it will not be a surprise if instead, these visitors find a different *Brazilianness*, dressed in leather boots and cowboy hats, while on their way to the hotel listening to the radio a song that reminds a Brazil from the 'countryside'.

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¹ See: <https://www.zonasuburbana.com.br/funk-foi-o-2o-genero-musical-mais-ouvido-do-brasil-em-2020/> (Verified on April 2nd, 2022).