


Paths taken by the category "Traditional Block of Maranhão" in the Ludovicense carnival

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.007-091>

Euclides Moreira Neto¹

ABSTRACT

This article presents a narrative that describes how the groups of Traditional Blocks of Maranhão (BTMs) emerged on the island of São Luís, which currently covers four municipalities, an area considered the metropolitan region of the capital of Maranhão. An attempt is made to conceptualize this cultural manifestation of the carnival cycle, presenting how it was hybridized and naturalized by the urban and peripheral people of the region, as it arose among the rich and wealthy families of the city. From this perspective, concepts of popular culture, tradition and how the cultural groups of the carnival field were adapted are discussed.

Keywords: Carnival, Traditional Blocks of Maranhão, Popular Culture, São Luís and Invented Tradition.

¹ Master's Degree in Communication (MINTER:UFF-UFMA-UNIVIMA); PhD student in the Graduate Program in Communication, Language and Culture (UNAMA);
E-mail: euclidesbmn@gmail.com
ORCID: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1050807927658848>



INTRODUCTION²

The cultural manifestation "Bloco Tradicional do Maranhão" is the result of cultural effervescence, but with peculiar characteristics. In the past, it was known as "Bloco de Ritmo" or "Bloco de Tambor Grande", constituting a performative practice linked to the carnival festivities of the city of São Luís do Maranhão. Its presentation can be performed in any public or private space, by organized groups of revelers, including, in this cast, dancers, musicians, dancers, actors and other elements, collectively designated as "brincantes".³

The BTMs are groups linked to the carnival cycle of the capital of Maranhão. In November 2015, there were approximately 35 active groups on the island of São Luís – which involves four municipalities: São José de Ribamar, Paço do Lumiar, Raposa and São Luís (the latter, the capital and the largest municipality in the state, with more than one million inhabitants and which brings together more than 90% of the BTM groups). The island is located to the north of Maranhão, on the imaginary line that divides the state in half between east and west, constituting a privileged location, being bathed by the Atlantic Ocean.

The groups can have between 50 and 150 participants who, during the performance, present peculiar choreographies, rocked by a samba with a characteristic theme, marked, above all, by huge percussive drums, having, in the musical cadence, the instruments known as tambores grandes, contratempo and ritinta (or retinta), which give it an original and exclusive sound, at a regional level, constituting a percussive variant of the rhythm and musical genre known as samba. We noticed that the members of the group dance, sing and play, with the exception of the members of the corps de ballet, who do not play, limiting their performance to dancing and singing.

Spontaneous, official performances and rehearsals occur more intensely in the months of January and February, in the period leading up to Carnival, and in the carnival itself, but in São Luís, currently, individual presentations can occur almost all year round, opening new possibilities to raise financial resources for the maintenance and sustainability of the group. as a community and social agent, to meet a growing demand for tourism. According to the discourses of local institutions and the "brincantes" themselves, BTM is today considered one of the most important manifestations of popular culture in the State of Maranhão.

² Paper presented in the discipline NARRATIVES: THE TRADITIONAL AND THE CONTEMPORARY, of the Graduate Program in Communication, Language and Culture of the University of the Amazon (UNAMA), in the first semester of 2022.

³ "Brincantes", in the context of this investigation, designates the practitioner or participant of the BTM manifestation and of the other cultural groups existing in the territory of Maranhão. It is, therefore, an active member of the cultural manifestation.



BTM: UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF PRESENTATIONS

A model presentation of a BTM group, nowadays, can have an average duration of 50 to 60 minutes and includes, in spontaneous presentations, sequential moments: arrival, greeting to the protagonist and farewell. This musical sequence diverges in the presentations in which there is a qualifying competition, such as in the official contests of the carnival season, which present a metric of evolution governed by pre-defined rules. This cultural manifestation is considered a carnival festivity, which is characterized by the junction of the popular and the visual, and has musicality and luxurious visuals as its central elements.

Initially created by members of the middle and upper middle classes of Ludovic, mainly by residents who lived in the central part of the urban area of the city of São Luís, its members had family or friendship ties, so it was considered, at the beginning of its implementation, as a closed cultural manifestation. We found that the BTMs have been transformed, over time, into a naturalized manifestation among the residents of the metropolitan region of São Luís, including the peripheral areas and the various existing cultural groups.

According to the researcher Conceição de Maria Lisboa (2008), in the article "An interpretative ethnography of the Traditional Blocks of São Luís", published in the *Cambiassu Magazine* (nº 4), of the Communication Course of UFMA, "the first reports on the Traditional Blocks of São Luís are recorded in the 1930s, by the newspapers of the time, which refer to the "Vira-Latas" blocks, "Pif-Paf" and "The Shoots" (p. 343). Lisbon also states:

At this time, the "Vira-Latas" block is considered the first group of this manifestation when the carnival of São Luís took place in the clubs, with the holding of large carnival balls or in parties promoted by the elite and the intelligentsia, in the townhouses of the city center. These particular events required invitations from the revelers so that they could participate in the meetings of the traditional Ludovic families, generally formed by owners of prosperous businesses located in the Historic Center (Lisboa, 2008, p. 343).

The cultural manifestations considered representative of the poorest strata of the population are classified as part of the field of popular culture. However, the BTM manifestation emerged in a splendid cradle, because its creators did not want to mix with the poor, black and illiterate people, or with the subaltern ghettos of the city, to play the carnival period.

The creators of the BTMs also did not want their children and other family members to mix with the people of the periphery, who developed games classified as Shrovetide, which presented many spontaneous actions considered to be in bad taste and violent, such as the mela-mela, which dirtied the participants in a gross way, in addition to the presence of excessive drinks, swear words and bad music. double meanings, which were not recommended for the most conservative families.

Thus, it can be seen that the BTMs, in their initial period, are inserted in a camp opposite to that of the majority of popular groups. Therefore, this research is interested in identifying the



gestation, the precedents and the entrepreneurial practices and social and cultural innovation of this activity, which may appear "overshadowed" in the *chosen empirical corpus*. According to Hobsbawm (1998), it is not a question of discovering the song of the sirens, but of discovering some records of these songs in order to better understand their performance in contemporary times in the Ludovic social environment.

A good part of the history of popular movements is like a vestige of the ancient plough that prepared the land to be sown. From this perspective, the plough might seem extinct forever, like the men who ploughed the field centuries ago, "but every aerial photogrammetrist knows that, with a certain light and a certain angle of vision, one can still see the shadows of long-forgotten hills and furrows" (Hobsbawm, 1998, p. 224).

It is, therefore, a microscopic task, which does not end with simply "putting lenses" on something and proving that they exist or have existed. It is necessary to fit the thing into a coherent framework and build a kind of model, considering, mainly, that, in São Luís, there is a very great diversity of cultural manifestations in the field of popular culture, which have been interacting over time in different ways and with also enigmatic characteristics, which reinforce hypotheses of chronic or partial dependence. that need to be further studied. Also according to Hobsbawm (1998, pp. 224-225),

Our problem is not so much that of finding a good source. Even the best sources (...) only clarify certain areas of what people have done, felt, and thought. What we really have to do is to gather a wide variety of information that is generally fragmentary: and for this we need, if you will pardon the expression, to construct the puzzle ourselves, that is, to formulate how such information should fit together (...), the historian of popular movements must not be an old-fashioned positivist. You must, in a sense, know whether or not what you have discovered fits your hypothesis; and, if it doesn't fit, try to build another model.

In fact, this is a conflict that is not the object of this investigation, so no space will be given for this more detailed discussion, because those who attack the carnival groups, such as the samba schools of Maranhão, are contributing to their rapid process of disappearance, they do so, according to their empirical discourses, for the "noble cause" of the defense of the roots considered traditional and the cultural originality of Maranhão, As if it were possible to speak of any kind of "purity" in contemporary times.

It is noteworthy that the generations rely on discourses and defenses of what they experienced or observed from the narratives of their ancestors (ancestors), especially those closest to them, and, according to the perception of this researcher, these narratives are those disseminated over time by family members up to the fourth degree or friends/acquaintances who shared private experiences in the various family nuclei with the same metric of temporal spatiality.

According to researcher Vânia Maria Torres Costa (2015), this transmission of knowledge is a discursive line based on discursive formations, which allow us to observe the direction of narrative



productions on popular culture in the Amazon region and its ideological contents, that is, the study of the discourse of coloniality, produced through the notion of knowledge and power when enunciating the subjects of the region. For Costa (2015), in this case, the gaze is built around cultural difference and the classification of the "other", through stereotypes, mythologies and invisibilities active in the social environment.

For Lisboa (2008, p. 344), in her opinion (which, according to her, can be contested), "the traditional blocks date back to or originate from older cultural manifestations, as many of their jokers and leaders think to this day", but, in any case, she sentences that "in any way or another, *this tradition was also invented* as mentioned in the book *The Invention of Traditions*, by authors Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger", two historians for whom, "often, 'traditions' that seem or are considered ancient are quite recent, if not invented".

On this view, Hobsbawm and Ranger state that:

The term "invented tradition" is used in a broad but never indefinite sense. It includes both those "traditions" that are actually invented, constructed, and formally institutionalized, and those that have arisen in a way that is more difficult to locate in a limited and determined period of time—sometimes as little as a few years—and are established with enormous rapidity (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1997, p.

Lisboa (2008), further analysing this aspect of the research, says:

In all these places, the masquerade balls became the main attraction, and, in Brazil, this was reproduced in an exemplary way, so São Luís was also a front line for several reasons, especially the cultural one. As a model of society, the local bourgeoisie sought to copy Europe also in its consumption, so costumes, masks, shoes, perfumes and various other products related to carnival were brought as novelties and sold by merchants. In the capital of the Republic, in the mid-nineteenth century, the first carnival societies were created, bringing together those who attended balls.

This same practice was reproduced in the capital of Maranhão, encouraging the holding of masquerade balls in clubs or other spaces that could be adapted as spaces for holding balls, clearly demarcating the space of the plebs and the bourgeoisie: on the one hand, the former played in public spaces; and on the other hand, the latter played or had fun in private clubs (or in bourgeois residences inspired by Portuguese colonial architecture, very present in the city of São Luís) and newly created carnival societies.

Over time, still in the second half of the nineteenth century, carnival societies gradually began to occupy other spaces in the city — giving rise to closed clubs (structured in the same way: closed) for fun and social entertainment — and also went to the streets and squares developing the practice of



corsos, parading mounted on horses, or carts, or carriages (coaches⁴), inspired by religious processions.

In several investigations on the evolution of the so-called "carnival societies", which are today considered the precursors of spontaneously organized groups or formally constituted with legal support, among them are popular groups, samba schools, study groups of traditional manifestations and/or community blocks that act in various aspects of the cultural cycle. In this way, the constancy of the practice of holding parades in the style of corso – throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – was intensified and created an atmosphere of competition, which aroused even more interest in the festive act that, each year, was awaited with more anxiety by carnival lovers as it was done at that time.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Brazil obtained the Proclamation of the Republic, implanting a climate of Brazilianness in the natives and discontent in a large part of the Portuguese who came here to colonize the country, a fact that also provoked new rebellions and protests in several provinces. Added to this was a new way of socially organizing public space.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND SUITABILITY OF ST. LOUIS IN THE TIMELINE

To understand how the BTMs emerged, it is necessary to clarify some aspects about the city of São Luís and the State of Maranhão, therefore, at first, São Luís is the capital of the State of Maranhão. It is the only Brazilian city founded by the French, on September 8, 1612, however the French rule in the city lasted less than four years, as they were expelled by the Portuguese, who actually began its construction and colonization.

As described by the Maranhão historian Lima (2006, p. 244), in the book *História do Maranhão*, in 1641, the city was invaded by the Dutch, who were also expelled by the Portuguese forces. The city is located on the island of São Luís or Upaon-Açu (Ilha Grande, in indigenous dialect). Lima (2006) also points out that, in 1621, when Brazil was divided into two administrative units — the State of Maranhão and the State of Brazil — São Luís was the capital of the first administrative unit.

In the economic aspect, São Luís stands out, in the North-Northeast region, for its privileged geographical location, which favors intense port activity, as pointed out by the researcher from the University of Aveiro, Padilha (2014), in his thesis "The illusory construction of reality: resignification and recontextualization of the bumba meu boi do Maranhão": "it is what allows fuel savings and

⁴ Until the middle of the fifteenth century, animal-drawn vehicles had the boxes connected directly to the axles of the wheels, but from the Renaissance onwards a new type of transport appeared in Europe, the *carriage* (name derives from the Hungarian city Kotze, where the first model was built), with the box suspended by means of leather straps, No direct contact with the wheels. There are several types of coaches, varying according to what was being transported (goods and/or people) and occasions of use (regular use or special occasions) (Stiel, 2001).



reduction in the delivery time of goods from other Brazilian states, through the Port of Itaqui, which is the second deepest port in the world and one of the busiest, most sophisticated and well-structured for foreign trade in Brazil."

The Human Development Index (HDI) of the municipality, according to UN data from 2010, was 0.768, high if compared to the HDI of Maranhão, which, in that year, was 0.639 — above the Brazilian average, being the 15th Brazilian state capital with the highest HDI and the 3rd capital of the Northeast region with this development index. second to the cities of Recife, capital of Pernambuco, and Aracaju, capital of Sergipe (IBGE, 2010).

The capital of Maranhão is remembered today for the huge colonial architectural houses of Portuguese origin, with a very great diversity of Lusitanian tiles; in the beginning, it housed only hollows of wood and straw and an almost untouched landscape, where the village of the Upaon-Açu Indians, belonging to the Tupinambá indigenous nation, was located. According to Padilha (2014), French chroniclers of that time report that these Indians lived from subsistence agriculture (small plantations of cassava and sweet potatoes) and from nature's offerings, hunting, fishing, and gathering fruit. On the outskirts of the city of São Luís, the indigenous ethnic group of the Potiguaras lived.

In 1535, the division of Brazil by the Portuguese into hereditary captaincies gave treasurer João de Barros the first opportunity for European colonization of the region. According to Lima (2006), since the end of the seventeenth century, new elements of European civilization had already arrived in São Luís by sea (with emphasis on the Carmelites, Jesuits and Franciscans, who also began to educate the population). This modernization process has increased in the new economic cycle, bringing urban benefits to the city. During the Pombaline period (1755-1777), the water and sewage network was channeled and fountains were built throughout the city.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, many families living in the city of São Luís sent their children to study in Europe, especially in France and Portugal, which later granted the capital of Maranhão a significant number of intellectuals, poets and literati, trained mainly in Portugal by the Academy of Coimbra, which gave the city of São Luís the *status* of better speaking the Portuguese language in Brazil, leading the capital of Maranhão to be known as the "Brazilian Athens". On the other hand, on the outskirts of the city, far from the repression of the police and the elites, the slaves and the poor gave rise to one of the richest and most diverse cultures in the country.

Thus, it can be seen that, in São Luís, the diversities of cultural manifestations have been transformed, over time, into festivals, as a constitutive element of the life of the people of Maranhão, since these manifestations occupy a privileged place in the Brazilian cultural production, as a crystallizing element, capable of ritualizing, diluting and, at the same time, sacralizing the particular



social experience of the groups that carry it out. Thus, the importance of BTMs in the state capital can be seen.

CLARIFYING THE PATHS TAKEN BY POPULAR CULTURE

Returning to the central focus of this investigation, the emergence and naturalization of BTMs, the city of São Luís, in the nineteenth century, was considered one of the main Brazilian cities, with an ascending period of development, mainly due to the cotton culture that fed the textile industry, subsistence agriculture and a prosperous trade that led the wealthier families to send their children to study in Europe. especially in Portugal.

They coexisted with the dichotomy of their population: on the one hand, there was a strong hegemonic elite that tried to absorb the European way of being and, on the other, there was a large portion of the population of blacks, illiterates and workers unprepared for work, who also cultivated cultural and religious values with great dedication. Perhaps this is why almost everything that occurred in the most advanced centers of the country had an almost immediate impact on the region of Maranhão.

Shrovetide, for example, was widely reproduced, in strongly hybridized forms; Cultural manifestations such as bumba meu boi, the Divino Espírito Santo, Christmas, commemorations of religious dates were recurrent practices in the social environment, almost always to fulfill the payment of promises or satisfy the desire of the population eager for moments of leisure and interaction among themselves. Therefore, the festival was the reason for celebration and coexistence in the social field among its residents.

In the central part of the city, there was a city built with colonial townhouses, reproducing the Lusitanian architecture, with a front roof of tiles, which transformed this city into the Brazilian capital of tiles. In these mansions, a population of mainly Portuguese origin lived, however, later, other families of Syrian, Lebanese and other Arab countries arrived. Thus, an elitist clan was created that occupied the center of the city and that, on a social level, had little to do with the periphery, except when there were occasional celebrations such as carnival.

Thus, the Shrovetide made up of members of families considered promising were one of the few manifestations that circulated in the public spaces of urban centers, especially in those spaces located in the central neighborhoods of the city, because the groups of Shrovetide or games of the population of the periphery had restricted displacement, such as, for example, the peripheral Shrovetide — formed by poor and black people — were forbidden to move to the central area.

One of the most vehement proofs can be seen with the cultural manifestations bumba meu boi and tambor de crioula, currently intangible cultural heritage of Brazil, which were forbidden to perform after a certain neighborhood — delimiting the geographical space to which the cultural



practice of these manifestations could take place, which were not well regarded by the city's elites — as can be seen in the text below:

The government had banned the fireworks and deployed forces so that the traditional bands of *bumba meu boi* did not go beyond the sand of João Paulo. In spite of these strict orders, on the night of June 23, 1823, armed with dangerous foot-searchers of tinsplate leaves and fiery reels, groups of boys, fierce enemies of the *puças*, confronted the soldiers to Largo do Carmo, where they danced and sang insulting verses against the Portuguese, through a veritable combat of stones, planks and shots of all kinds. Francisco Coelho de Rezende's house, recently built, was badly damaged and the doors were broken into, and numerous and fine goods were thrown into the street" (Abranches *cited in* Assunção, 2003, p. 46, written according to the orthographic norm of the time).

Until the mid-1950s, in the city of São Luís, multiple written testimonies report prohibitions on the presence of "*bumba meu boi*" groups in Maranhão in certain public areas of the city. This prohibition was extended to other forms of groups considered popular whose members were considered poor and black, who could endanger the groups of the wealthiest families in the city, such as the Shrovetide groups. In general, the central region of the urban center of the capital of Maranhão, considered privileged in the mid-twentieth century, did not exceed a radius of 5 kilometers. The rest of the territory of the island of São Luís was considered a rural area.

According to Padilha (2012, p. 9), "from them we can infer that this performative practice had a troubled past, marked by prohibitions from political and religious instances". According to this researcher, in the case of "*bumba meu boi*", the manifestation "was silenced, its performance was modified with the introduction of new instruments – such as the *matraca*⁵ in 1861 – and its event was fundamentally relegated to the outskirts of the city of São Luís".

These facts related to prohibitions verified in the cultural and social field of Ludovicense can be seen as Stuart Hall (200, p. 112) tells us when he states that "representation is always constructed along a 'lack', along a division, from the 'other' and that, therefore, they can never be adjusted — identical — to the processes of subject that are invested in them", This fact is interpreted by Costa (2015) as a type of conflict that deals with historical fragments, as the whole story is never told, nor the whole life, a phenomenon interpreted as not having the full dimension of the "other" in its greatness.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As reported throughout this article, the BTM manifestation, despite having been born among the wealthy families of the urban center of the capital of Maranhão, can be considered a manifestation that arose as a reflection of the practices apprehended by colonial customs, having undergone profound adaptations over time, especially with significant hybridization with cultural

⁵ A percussive instrument made up of two pieces of wood, which are played by hitting each other.



elements of the European white man and the sonority of the African people. Because his unique and peculiar batucada is one of the main elements of his cultural practice in the region where he developed, not to mention the heritage of the indigenous peoples symbolically expressed in the characters of some themes chosen for development in each season.

In this context of hybridization and cultural naturalization, the BTM manifestation is already considered an element of regional popular culture in Maranhão and, considering its performative practice, it had a troubled past, perhaps less than other manifestations considered more purist (or rooted) in relation to the customs of Afro-descendant influence, which suffered prejudiced and prohibitive practices from political and religious instances.

However, when trying to understand this adequacy, currently classified as an invented tradition, we realize that this understanding is also a microscopic task that does not end with the simple "placing of lenses" on a given phenomenon to prove that it exists or existed. The customs of coloniality and the batucada from the African diaspora are still intensely observed, where they coexist harmoniously, cohabiting a geopolitical spatiality that seeks cultural, social and financial recognition and appreciation.

Thus, as much as we can prove the evidence and facts reported in the context studied, even if based on empirical perceptions, the sociocultural construction was marked by traumatic dynamics for some to the detriment of another more privileged population portion. Although there has been a transfer of social practice today, this phenomenon characterizes very well the dynamics of BTM groups in the metropolitan region of the capital of Maranhão, especially among groups in the local cultural field.

Based on this narrative about the paths taken by the BTM groups in the carnival of São Luís, it is opportune to remember what Luiz Gonzaga Motta (2013) says, when he states that "the man narrates. Narrating is a universal, trans-historical, pancultural human practice", because, according to this author, "our life is a web of narratives in which we are entangled", a statement pointed out by professors Paulo Nunes, Vania Torres Costa and Alda Cristina Costa as a "web", which, for them, has a polysemy of meanings "that can point to the magic of electronic media, as for the base of an embroidery weave." In addition, this narrative can reveal how popular culture is the result of a multicultural ethnic experience.



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