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Engaging Musical Sustainability and Resistance Strategies of Music Cultures in Brazil Before and After the 2018 Elections

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Tamo aí na luta, na resistência cotidiana. Sempre rolando aula de música, de dança, senegalesa, guineana, afro-brasileira. O importante é cada vez mais se juntar, se unir. Com o país tendendo a ir pro buraco completo, se a gente não se juntar vai ser mais pesado (André Piruka, December 14, 2021).

> *"We are here, in the daily resistance, promoting Senegalese, Guinean, and Afro-Brazilian music and dance classes. The important thing is to be together, to be united. With the country tending to reach a point of complete disaster, we more than never need to get together, otherwise, the fight will be even more difficult (André Piruka, December 14, 2021).*

Some may think about the Anthropocene as an age of human dominance over the planet, but which groups of humans are actually triumphing, and at whose exploitation? Whose music cultures are thriving as others are silenced? I think that considering musical sustainability in the midst of resistance and migration in this geologic period necessitates listening to how music cultures engage in resistance strategies to continue sounding. How can ethnomusicology students like me engage these strategies in collaborative ways, especially in times of profound political disturbance?

I write this article immediately after the end of the far-right authoritarian government of President Jair Bolsonaro, which means the effects of his governance are still present and felt. Fifty-five percent of the Brazilian voters opted for Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections due to their frustration with the country's history of corruption. The voters strongly believed that this was the way out of a political and economic crisis, especially after the 2013 protests against the increase of public transportation ticket prices. This electoral choice, however, only worsened the crisis. Bolsonaro aggressively cut the budget for culture, education, and science, pushing towards a militarization of public education (Souza and Santos 2022); evangelical proselytism; and a campaign for a heterosexual, patriarchal, white notion of Brazilian national identity. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, his denial of scientific facts and social distancing measures further aggravated and prolonged the official response to the situation in Brazil.

I opened this article with the speech that ended the first performance of Höröya, a São Paulo based Brazilian and West African instrumental group, after they returned to the stages and dance and percussion classes in late 2021. On this occasion, I was sitting in the front row of the half-empty Sesc Jundiai theater, in São Paulo, back to my in-person PhD fieldwork. The long period of social distancing and the death rate in Brazil was still taking its toll, especially in the cultural sector.

Höröya, formed in 2016, mixes guitar, bass, and a brass section, together with atabaque drums from the Afro-Brazilian candomblé religion; sabar drums and dance from Senegal; and the djembe, dunun, and ngoni from Guinea's and Mali's mande music. Glued together by an activist discourse of prizing and promotion of these non-hegemonic music forms in Brazil, the encounter of this diverse body of musicians, cultures, and identities represented the complete opposite side of the current government ideology. By cutting funding in the cultural sector, the source from which groups such as Höröya are able to finance part of their activities, the government was clearly silencing these other discourses and identities.

What really struck me during their 2021 performance was how the group located their works in the boundaries between preservation and transformation to present a clear act of resistance. Their slogan, "África-Brasil em sons e atos anticoloniais" (Africa-Brazil in anti-colonial sounds and acts), which frames their sound as part of "antigas, novas e possíveis tradições" (old, new, and possible traditions),[1] also reinforces this idea. As I learned from them, even music cultures that have been thriving in the recent past could become threatened again, as they were during Bolsonaro's regime. Höröya indicates that fighting together may be the only way to keep these cultures strong by forging new possible traditions out of the resistance effort, while respecting, prizing, and teaching the old ones. The group's emphasis was not into some folklorist musical preservationism but rather into getting different cultures and their holders together by a musical proposal that embraced creativity.

I agree with Höröya: musical sustainability is not about preserving or freezing musical cultures in time and space, but instead supporting their existence in a process of continuous transformation over time. Throughout my ethnographic fieldwork, I have been reflecting about how I could engage and support such processes as an ethnomusicology student, particularly in a time when they are embedded in resistance strategies.

[1] https://trabalhosujo.com.br/as-antigas-novas-e-possiveis-tradicoes-do-horoya/

Figure 1. Höröya preparing to perform at Sesc Jundiaí, in São Paulo. December 14, 2021. Photo by the author.

I started the ethnographic research for my master's thesis in the turmoil of the 2018 elections. As a drummer, I was excited by the fact that the country was becoming a destination for West African migrants, and with that the possibility of learning musical practices from that part of the continent. I was mainly interested in West African musical traditions, and my interlocutors were primarily musicians that came to Brazil after 2010, between the ages of 20 and 25 years old, as part of a new flow of migration to the country. They arrived as members of West African dance companies and decided to stay for work, though not necessarily in music. At that moment, Brazil was thriving for a brief period of time after the 2008 economic crisis;[2] in other words, migrants saw it as a good alternative compared to Europe and the US, destinations with increasingly more restrictive immigration laws (Bohlman 2011).

As I followed performances, volunteered to help in cultural events put together by the newly established West African communities, and participated in percussion and dance classes throughout major cities in the South and Southeast regions of the country (Porto Alegre, São Paulo, and Brasília), I realized how diverse these places and events were. The musicians were from Senegal, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Ivory Coast; they taught and performed West African mande music and sabar percussion and dance from Senegal. Finally, the places where they gathered together and promoted these events were usually cultural and community centers closely related, maintained, and shared by Afro-Brazilian communities and practitioners.

Beyond the challenges of being foreigners in Brazil, I saw up close how my interlocutors faced the same racism and constraints with which Afro-Brazilians struggle, an issue they unexpectedly realized as soon as they arrived. It was not only a kind of ancestral connection that brought

[2] Brazil was also enjoying some international visibility as part of The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTA), and as a host of important international sport events such as the World Cup and the Olympics.

together these two communities and their allies (researchers and musicians like me), but also a resistance strategy for both of them, especially in Bolsonaro's regime. West African newcomer musicians became valuable allies for groups, collectives, and practitioners of Afro-Brazilian musical traditions, which, in return, helped these newcomers to access spaces of cultural diversity. Höröya is representative of these alliances and spaces, which became even more necessary for musical sustainability after the 2018 elections.

For the last twenty years, Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian music traditions were finally starting to be recognized, respected, and promoted along the country's public education system. Brazilianists note that a kind of "epistemicide" informed the notion of culture in Brazil as being disconnected from non-hegemonic, non-European ways of knowing and sounding the world (de Souza Santos and de Meneses 2010). All of that was masked and advanced by discourses of racial democracy and miscegenation that still inform Brazilian culture, along with racist practices that continue without being publicly acknowledged. Furthermore, the legacies of the slave economy that were in place for more than 300 years in Brazil explain the racial formations, inequalities, and violence prevalent in low-income regions, neighborhoods, and favelas of the country. Any musical practice coming from these places and sounding outside the visible borders separating poor and middle classes is immediately framed as sexual, as promotion of violence, or simply as noise (Araújo 2006).

This scenario started to change in Brazil with the implementation of ethnic and racial policies in the last two decades. Part of this included the establishment of economic and racial quotas in public universities, the mandatory teaching of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian history in the primary and secondary education curricula, and culture incentives known as "Pontos de Cultura" (Cultural Points), which are projects financed and institutionally supported by the Ministry of Culture of Brazil (MinC) and implemented by governmental or non-governmental entities aiming to carry out actions with a sociocultural impact on communities. These public policies, demanded for and pressured by social movements in the civil society, not only protected this at-risk body of knowledge but also brought their bearers to occupy spaces where they were underrepresented or even absent, especially in public universities. All these policies, especially the Pontos de Cultura, created and supported some of the spaces, organizations, and collectives that have been central for Afro-Brazilian music traditions and West African migrant musicians to thrive.

I would like to echo here Huib Schippers' and Catherine Grant's (2016) arguments about the challenges involved in building and securing sustainable futures for music cultures. It is not just natural disasters, economic problems, conflicts, displacements, or health crises that threaten music cultures in the Anthropocene; the rise of authoritarian governments adds an epistemicidic logic to them because any acknowledgement of diversity becomes a serious threat that must be subdued or erased to secure power. That was what happened in Brazil in 2018, where ideals of a conservative, homogenized society were advanced under the colors of the national flag (green and yellow), now appropriated as a far-right party flag and not as a symbol of a nation that comes together in its diversity. During Bolsonaro's government, the Ministry of Culture in Brazil was extinguished and several of the policies previously mentioned ended or weakened. What I have learned from this situation in Brazil is that during threatening times, people also come up with

creative resistance strategies. In the field, I tried not to be a mere observer but an ally, engaging in these strategies as well.

Ethnomusicology in Brazil has long operated this way. A kind of "ecologia de saberes" [ecology of knowledges] (Santos 2019), fostering reparations to those who have been systematically deprived in Brazil, was a founding principle of the first ethnomusicology graduate courses and programs implemented during the 1990s. These programs led to a Brazilian ethnomusicology with particular ethnographic methods that embody activist practices, public policies, and social mobilization, especially in those contexts of urban violence or in the struggles of Indigenous communities to secure and protect their territories (Lucas 2013; Lühning and Tugny 2016). It was this spirit of "praxis," which bridged academic discourses and social action in the Brazilian ethnomusicology practices and methods (Araújo 2013), that drove me to the discipline and to my research.

As a fifth generation descendent of Italian migrants that did well in south of Brazil, a migration sponsored by Brazilian Empire in the late 19th century as a whitening policy to dominate the country's territory after abolition, I feel particularly driven to be an ally to the Afro-descendent and Indigenous cultures, traditions, and communities. Although they were here before the Portuguese, or were brought here by force from Africa long before my ancestors arrived, their future continues to be threatened and their epistemologies dismissed.

My engagement with Höröya's resistance strategies started when I met one of their musicians, a young Senegalese that was offering online sabar classes during the pandemic lockdown. In a period when the group was already struggling with Bolsonaro's budget cuts in the cultural sector, the pandemic context represented a final blow. To teach online was the last resource for the Höröya's musicians to keep their musical project existing.

Moustapha arrived to Brazil in 2014, at age 23, accompanying a Senegalese dance company on tour throughout Latin America. He decided to stay in the country for better opportunities; however, financial necessities led him to economic activities outside of music. At the same time, his networks and proficiency at the sabar drum brought him to collaborate with the Höröya group. To the group, Moustapha was an important ally in the struggle to sustain West African and Afro-Brazilian musics. To Moustapha, the group represented a more receptive path to his music and culture in Brazilian society. It was a partnership that brought him back to the stages and to teach the sabar drum. With social distancing measures being constantly postponed, he was alienated again from his music practice.

I strove to not just be his online student but to collaborate with him in his endeavors. To teach sabar online was not an easy task. Moustapha needed to find solutions, transforming his way of teaching in order to overcome the latency that prevented us from playing simultaneously through online platforms of video chat. To find people willing to learn this way was also a challenge. One of my roles became to promote his classes on my social media, sharing photos and videos from our time together. Although this was a small contribution, at that moment, it became a meaningful mutual collaboration that resulted later in a long-standing partnership. To support and help Moustapha in his online classes meant also supporting Höröya's sustainable project for

music cultures in Brazil, a project based on togetherness, difference, and creativity as acts of resistance.

Figure 2. Post of Moustapha's classes on Instagram. May 16, 2021.

A new government is now in place in Brazil. Although it is more sympathetic to social policies and environmental issues, the alliances it made during the campaign shows a strong commitment to the neoliberal push that we have been seeing happen in Brazil through a series of privatizations and precarization of public services. Many of my interlocutors have already left Brazil due to the worsening of its economy in the last three years. Nevertheless, I keep listening to Höröya's "possible traditions" and Moustapha's sabar classes as resistance strategies. We, ethnomusicology students, can collaboratively engage toward a more sustainable future for music cultures in the Anthropocene, a future that I want to contribute to as a Brazilian ethnomusicologist.

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