Review | Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse: Popular Music and the Staging of Brazil

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In Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse, ethnomusicologist Daniel Sharp invites us into the musical practices of the hinterlands of northeast Brazil, specifically the small city, Arcoverde, Pernambuco. While the most recognized genre of northeast Brazil is arguably forró, made famous by Luis Gonzaga, Sharp studies the performances of samba de coco, a relatively unknown musical and dance genre with African roots. He contrasts two iterations of samba de coco, the traditional ensemble, Cordel de Arcoverde (Coco Raízes), with the pop iconoclasts, Cordel do Fogo Encantado (Cordel), which can be considered an offshoot of the mangue beat movement of the 1990s in Recife, a city in northern Brazil. Samba de coco musicians are mainly located in the interior of Brazil, but have geographically expanded. In Chapter One, Sharp positions his oeuvre in current debates in ethnomusicology, sociology, and anthropology focusing particularly on localized Afro-Brazilian practice as tourism has increased to the area in post-dictatorship Brazil. The location, in the desert (sertão) of northern Brazil, is associated with economic disparity, violence, and racial tensions. Sharp notes how the group developed in homage to tradition and its history was intertwined with Coco Raízes, ultimately the band disintegrated and moved away from Arcoverde, Pernambuco, repositioning itself in a cosmopolitan pop scene. Conceptions of nationhood are entwined in a preservationist approach to samba de coco in the group, Coco Raízes and its offshoots, which feeds about fame, authorship, and money. Professionalization, authenticity, and ownership are all part of the samba de coco group apart from another.

Using ethnographic narratives and situating his work in ideas of cultural rescue, nostalgia, tourism studies, and folklore, Sharp positions his oeuvre in current debates in ethnomusicology, sociology, and anthropology focusing particularly on localized Afro-Brazilian practice as tourism has increased to the area in post-dictatorship Brazil. The location, in the desert (sertão) of northern Brazil, is associated with economic disparity, violence, and racial tensions. Sharp notes how the group developed in homage to tradition and its history was intertwined with Coco Raízes, ultimately the band disintegrated and moved away from Arcoverde, Pernambuco, repositioning itself in a cosmopolitan pop scene. Conceptions of nationhood are entwined in a preservationist approach to samba de coco in the group, Coco Raízes and its offshoots, which feeds about fame, authorship, and money. Professionalization, authenticity, and ownership are all part of the samba de coco group apart from another.

Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse is organized in two parts. In Part I, Sharp explores themes such as "Museums," "Nostalgia and Apocalypse," and "Television." Part II focuses on how samba de coco became government sponsored and incorporated into the annual São João Festival (also called Festa Junina) in other parts of Brazil that also celebrate the Nativity of John the Baptist.

The first three chapters introduce us to the world of samba de coco and the beginnings of the band, Cordel. In this instance, Sharp sets the stage by describing his initial drive into the northeast interior of Brazil, depicting samba de coco performers and describing the video of Cordel's first performance. The first part of Chapter Four is dedicated to the first part of Chapter Four, Sharp notes how the dislocation of touring and how this creates a sense of nostalgia or longing for home.
In Chapter Six, “Tourism,” Sharp engages Dean McCannell’s writings on tourism and the notion of “staged authenticity.” The acts of performances become “staged” depending on the audience presence.[2] At Sharp’s initial arrival to Arcoverde, the samba de coco musicians were unclear into what category they should place him: should they provide the show of authenticity that they do for tourists that stay only for a few days or a week? Throughout Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse Sharp notes instances of the samba de coco families tap into what Svetlana Boym refers to as “restorative nostalgia” in her binary (2001), capitalizing on emphasizing the local. As samba de coco became a successful tourist attraction, feuds over musical ownership emerged between the various performing families. Both the performances of samba de coco families as well as television portrayals tap into narratives of national cultural origins. As Sharp states, they find ways to “strategically use the past” (2014:xvi). The samba de coco performers must remain rooted in place (geographically and sonically) in order to maintain their “traditional” status whereas Cordel emphasizes a yearning for a home left behind as the band toured Brazil.

Sharp contrasts the so-called traditional music of samba de coco with that of the band, Cordel, noting that it is impossible to form clear lines between tradition and innovation. He describes the band’s initial concern with recognizing the established samba de coco tradition by “calling for permission from the previous generation of popular poets” (2014:14). After some time, Cordel distanced itself from heritage homage to emphasizing innovation and repositioning itself in several overlapping genres.[3] Over time Cordel distanced itself from the folkloric, locating itself in the aesthetics of democratization and examining the true interplay of social class and race in Brazilian-ness.

Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse is a well-organized ethnographic monograph. Published ten years after the initial fieldwork was conducted, the events that inspire the writing are thoroughly analyzed and situated in dialogue with current theories in the field of ethnomusicology. Sharp moves from the particular, analyzing song lyrics and personal fieldwork experiences, to looking at the larger picture at how these musical practices are situated in and reflect Brazilian-ness. As I read this volume, I wondered about the projected audience for this work. Though he does discuss the tresillo rhythm at the root of samba de coco, Sharp mainly focuses on the lyrics when he talks about the music itself. Much of the œuvre revolves around dissecting fieldwork experiences, research and videos, and applying theoretical constructs. It seems as though this book is written with a broad academic audience in mind, not necessarily assuming a preexisting knowledge of music, even though it focuses on a very specific musical genre. Many aspects of the theoretical framework apply to other musical contexts, particularly those involving cultural tourism and projections of nationhood. Overall, it is a well-organized account examining the social, cultural, and political aspects of particular musical practices in post-dictatorship Brazil.

Notes

[1] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-OKJQd0_uE

[2] Sharp finds that the staged aspects of samba de coco indicate a permeability between what Erving Goffman calls front and back regions.

[3] The band drew inspiration from Cinema Novo (“New Cinema”), an intellectual and social movement in Brazilian film during the 1960s that was also a stimulus for Caetano Veloso and the Tropicália movement.

Works Cited


Music Player. A playlist of audio tracks from Arcoverde and elsewhere in Pernambuco, Brazil. More . . . Blog. Posts on Brazilian popular music in general, and the Arcoverde, Pernambuco scene in particular. More . . . Bruno Navarro and Tainá Del Negri ride their bicycles all around Northeast Brazil, stop places, and take high-quality photos and videos under the name Passupreto Imageria. In 2014, they spent two months in Arcoverde, and took several videos. Watch here. Videos of Arcoverde (Passupreto Imageria). Cordel do Fogo Encantado in Fortaleza, 2009. This is a clip from 2009 in Fortaleza playing the Umbanda song Pedrinha. “Between Nostalgia and Apocalypse takes an unvarnished look at the range of human emotions that arise under a unique set of circumstances in which intensely local social dynamics collide with national identity, intangible heritage, and historical revision. Importantly, it moves the discussion of these topics beyond the exhausted hybridity and globalization paradigms.”—Frederick Moehn, author of Contemporary Carioca: Technologies of Mixing in a Brazilian Music Scene. “A valuable resource for those interested ethnomusicology, ethnography, anthropology, or sociology.”—K.W. Mukuna, Choice.