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The Songs Improvised by the Poets of the Brazilian Northeast: Tradition, Urbanization, Expansion, and Animation of a Territory

Thierry Rougier

This article is based on an ethnomusicological survey conducted in Brazil by the association CORDAE (Centre Occitan de Recherche, de Documentation et d'Animation Ethnographiques), BP 40, 23 Grand rue de l'Horloge, 81170 Cordes-sur-ciel, France. Tel: (33) 05 56 62 19 17; email: talvera@talvera.org; website: www.talvera.org; director: Daniel Loddo.

As a musician and an ethnologist, I teach at the University of Bordeaux. With a particular interest in Latin America, in 1992 I started to research the popular singers who improvise their songs. That took me to the land of Nordeste, the northeastern region of Brazil. There, I found amateurs involved in improvised poetry: the *cantadores* and their admirers, gathered in nocturnal sessions called *cantorias*.

The passion for the spoken word expressed in accordance with the rules of art is a cultural element shared throughout Latin America. Singing poetry and tournaments among poets are widely appreciated. But in Nordeste, people give supreme importance to the total improvisation of sung verses. That is the art of the *repente* (meaning “sudden”), a local tradition whose vivacity is remarkable. And today, its actors are much more numerous than ever before.

They are called *repentistas*, *cantadores*, or *violeiros*: *repentistas*, because they always renew their verses; *cantadores*, because they are popular artists capable of singing any subject proposed by the public; *violeiros*, because they play a *viola*, a kind of guitar emblematic of their profession.

Urbanization boosted the evolution of the *repente* tradition, which originally appeared in the nineteenth century in Sertão, a semi-arid rural area of inland Nordeste. Droughts caused periodic exoduses from this region and Nordestinos constituted the main contingent of migrant workers throughout Brazil. For the last half century, they have participated in the industrialization and the construction of large cities. This rural exodus has depopulated the Sertão, whose itinerant poets of old were transformed into emigrant poets, following their public toward the cities and adapting their art to the modernity.

Urbanization requires social adjustment and cultural adaptation. In the following chapter, I will explain the tradition of the *repente*, the art of the word, whose ethics is

spontaneity and adaptation; I will then go on to show how improvising poets have conquered new production spaces, diversifying their activities; and finally, I will discuss the reason for the development of a popular expression in cities where cultural diversity and the pressure of modernity are real-life: the improvisers practice a form of animation combining creation and mediation.

Improvisation: A Mobile Tradition

The emergence of improvised verse is stimulated by the encounter between poets and admirers in a night session. A protocol rules traditional singing: two singers play the *viola*, sitting side by side at the foot of some wall, in front of an audience that often asks them for themes or styles. The poems are always produced by two authors alternating the verses. The poetic dialogue, its emulation, and some rules (for example the obligation to retake in the first line the rhyme that the other has left at the end of his verse, a rhyme that cannot be predicted), everything guarantees the authenticity of improvisation. It is the essential value, before any other formal criteria. In this way, the *repentistas* are distinguished from the other Nordeste poets, the *coquistas*. The latter play a *pandeiro* or drum and usually put together a stanza mixing memorized elements and improvised passages. In addition to this genre, known as *coco de embolada*, there are other genres of oral poetry that are more local, such as: the *coco de roda*, which combines dance, percussion, a choir, and poetry in the coastal zones; the *maracatu rural*, from Nazaré da Mata in the State of Pernambuco, in which improvised verses alternate with very fast music; and the *aboio*, linked to the breeding of cattle, whose poets sing without accompaniment, and which has some Arab or Turkish influence. Compared to these very varied genres, the *repente* is reputed to carry the highest degree of poetic improvisation. I will now characterize its music.

The Music

Unlike the verses, the melody that sustains them is not improvised. The singers learn many traditional tunes by ear, and they use one of these when singing, with some personal variation. Thus, the melodies evolve gradually. New tunes are also created by derivation from the old ones. The poet who opens the song chooses from this vast repertoire the air that seems most convenient to sustain the theme to be developed. The poet who responds

to him must repeat this air, demonstrating a particular feeling. This is the constant base of the poem. Certain tunes are always associated with a peculiar poetic form, including a certain refrain. Sometimes, the singer outlines the chosen tune by preludeing it on his *viola*.

The melodies are composed in order to sing a note per syllable, except the last one that can be decorated with vibrato or melisma. They are functional and designed to be sung in a metrical poetry in which the lines measure 7, 10, or 11 syllables. The minor mode is exceptional in melodies that have a strong modal character. The most frequent modes are our major scale and alterations of this (the fourth degree of the scale can be pitched a half up, or the seventh pitched a half down, or a combination of both). The notes are often not sung in a temperate way. That means there is a slight difference of tone between the sung and the corresponding note in the playing of the *viola*, divided into twelve equal halves as in a guitar. That is more noticeable when the singer comes from a rural area, since urbanization tends to normalize the modes. Whatever the case, the modes are very variable, but the structure remains the same: the tunes have to be a good support for the poetic forms, which also suffer constant evolution.

The *viola* playing is the indispensable element to improvisation: the *repentistas* say that their inspiration cannot do without the sound of the strings. They carefully tune the two instruments, which have between 7 and 10 metal strings, some double or triple, grouped into 5 choirs. However, with the exception of some prelude or counterpoint, the *viola* music is extremely monotonous. The whole session is accompanied by the strumming of fingers on a single major chord, barely adorned with any other notes. The constant character of harmony and rhythm is the unifying element; it allows the creation of the unpredictable by the improviser. At the same time, he has to memorize some of what his colleague has said, and think about what he is going to say in the next stanza, put together in a few seconds. The instrument is the poet's tool in the performance, because its music reconciles attention and concentration.

To illustrate that, I will talk about the songs that are not improvised and that mark a pause in the protocol of the improvisation session. At some point, a listener may request a composed song, which is usually nostalgic. It will be interpreted by one of the poets who will then be accompanied with diverse harmonies, as well as major and minor chords (three to six chords for an ordinary song). In short: for a well-known song, the versatility of chords; for the suspense of the poetic tournament, the monolithic character of harmony.

The musical aspects are important for the listeners, who have their preferences according to the vocal, rhythmic, or scenic characteristics of the singer. However, for a singer, these aspects are not criteria determining his professional quality, which depends only on his mastery of poetry and language. Regarding the language, it is the Portuguese in use in Brazil, with high demands on the richness of vocabulary and the sound quality of the rhymes. Poets sing according to the pronunciation of their region of origin and can integrate regionalisms that are often indigenous words. But I am not aware of any improviser producing poetry in any indigenous language of Brazil. Now we must talk about poetry.

The Poetry

The singers perform their oral performances following what they call modalities. That is the structure that links text to music. They have almost fifty different modalities, which are in constant evolution: some fall into disuse, new ones emerge, and they are generally invented in anonymity. The modality determines the metric, the length of the verses, the structure of the rhymes, and sometimes a refrain or a forced melody. The most used modality is the *sextilha*, a six-line verse of seven syllables per line, with a rhyme on the even lines. The *décima* is also widely used and considered a masterpiece in poetic construction. There are two types of *décima*: one has ten lines of seven syllables each line, while the other has ten lines of ten. To build his verse, the improviser has to find four different rhymes and organize them according to a complex structure: ABBAACDDC. This is what Spaniards call the *décima espinela*, from the name of Vicente Espinel, an Andalusian poet of the sixteenth century. It is still in use in improvised poetry by Chilean, Argentine, and Uruguayan *payadores*, and by Cuban *trovadores*. That means it is a poetic form common to Latin American countries. Here it is worth pointing out an important distinction: when in Spanish they count eight syllables in a line, in Portuguese they count seven because the syllables are counted only until the last stressed one (which is necessarily followed by an unstressed one, or a silence). Likewise, the *decasilábicos* lines of Brazil correspond to the lines of eleven syllables of the Spanish speakers.

The *décima* often ends in a *mote*, a refrain of one or two lines that someone proposes to the two poets before they begin to improvise. One must memorize the *mote* to develop its theme, reuse its rhymes in lines 6, 7, and 8, and repeat it at the end of the verse.

Another modality with the same exigency is the *galope*, whose peculiarity is a line of eleven syllables. It is used to sing bucolic themes. Other modalities present different demands, when the two improvisers must alternate the lines instead of the verses. For example, in a modality called *quadrão perguntado*, they must respond in a single line to what was asked in the previous line. In the modalities *o cantador de você* and *gabinete*, meanwhile, the singers can show their virtuosity by repeating a long refrain.

The number of forms that can be heard during a *cantoria* session has no equivalent in other genres of oral poetry. To express themselves, poets undergo a demanding tradition that they move forward, inventing new forms, with the goal of excellence. This care for diversification, in addition to an aesthetic particularity, is a test of flexibility for the *cantador*—a thought capable of moving within any frame is also capable of mobilizing in any circumstance. Thus the critical spirit is trained, which is the *cantador's* ethical requirement.

The Topics

That ethic is revealed by listening to what is sung in the sessions. What is said before the public and how to say it is the major criterion for judging an improvisation. This is termed *oração*, while the other formal criteria are *rima* and *métrica*: a poet has to produce regular lines, without breaking the rhythm; he also has to find many good rhymes. In a session, the listeners propose a subject, suggesting it aloud or by writing it down on a piece of paper deposited on a tray that also collects their contribution. In the same way, a fan of poetry can propose a versified topic that will be the *mote* ending the stanzas. The singers are then obliged to satisfy the requests. They fulfill their role as popular artists by staging the listeners' lives. Each session is an exchange time: ideas circulate and feelings are shared. There is a permanent dialogue between the poets, and between them and their listeners. Thus, the topics are always renewed, through the public in the varied places that singers travel to.

The subject field is very wide. It embraces: the poetic art itself, singing about the value of poets and the grief of those who have left us; fun themes, with the most appreciated being that of a challenge among singers; love, whether happy or unhappy; bucolic subjects; existential or philosophical themes; those that we can term ethical, moralistic, or edifying; and, lastly, social and political issues. A *repentista* must know how to sing about any subject. That is possible by the preparation of improvisers. They refrain from

using verses from memory, but learn many words to enrich their imagination. They read books, dictionaries, newspapers, and the Internet, listen to radio and watch television, and especially attend the performances of other *repentistas*. Of necessity, they learn about current social, political, and newsworthy events because they have to comment such matters. They are the scholars of popular culture.

Their knowledge legitimizes their satirical role. At a playful level, they can exchange insults in the *cantoria*, which is a theater of rivalry. From a moral point of view, they have complete freedom of speech to speak about power and denounce its abuses and imperfections, in harsh words. The listeners take advantage of that to propose the most pulsating subjects that the singers will treat with critical spirit. On several occasions I came across the opinion that, "the singers say what the people would say if they could." Many poets consider themselves defenders of the people, at the forefront of social concerns. Many conceive of their art as a popular education movement and *cantorias* as a moment of emancipation of the spirits.

A Conquering Movement: New Production Spaces, New Actors

This description of the *cantoria* was based on a traditional encounter performed *pé de parede* (at the foot of a wall), because they are usually organized in a private house for some party, or in bar or restaurant so as to share the benefits between patron and singers. However, any description would be very incomplete without mentioning new production spaces. Since 1950, contests have been organized by cultural associations in which poets and fans act to promote their art. These events take place in prestigious places of culture such as theatres, welcoming hundreds of people—a larger audience than in family, private, or country sessions. Contests are competitions between duos: two collaborating singers stand on the stage for a thirty-minute presentation, the viola slung over their shoulders, next to a jury that sets the issues and grades the duo, only according to the three criteria of *rima*, *métrica*, and *oração*. Facing the stage, spectators encourage their favorites. The winners win trophies, cachet, and increased fame in the *repente* community, which is highly competitive. The contests are very successful, with at least one taking place every week in some Brazilian city. Thus, there are frequent opportunities to bring different titles into play. These competitions, invented by the singers, contribute to promoting their art and professionalizing them—nowadays, cachet payment tends to replace the collection on the

tray, and contracts are substituted for oral commitments. Tradition evolves in this way, thanks to the rivalry between poets who invent unprecedented circumstances to improvise in.

This occurs on radio programs devoted to improvisation, produced and animated by the poets. During the broadcast, they promote upcoming events and improvise, despite the physical absence of the public, which instead sends in requests by phone or mail. In the areas most affected by the rural exodus, broadcasting is a regular occasion to listen to *repentistas*. Several have learned the basics of their art in this way, before frequenting their first sessions.

Since the late twentieth century and the development of tourism on the coast, beaches are a new space for more humble poets. Without any specific requests, they sing a few stanzas addressing the tourists. They are criticized by their more famous colleagues for walking away from tradition: they sing by day and do not satisfy any specific public demands. In these circumstances, in contrast to traditional sessions, there is little interaction because on the beach they merely beg for money. But what are known as “beach poets” have introduced an unprecedented form of improvisation in new and inauspicious spaces. And in that way, these *poetas de praia* contribute to the expansion and visibility of their practice. It is also worth mentioning recent festivals in public squares, which take place in a context of amplified music and eclectic programming. There, the singers have the opportunity to sing to thousands of people.

Such diversification on the part of the actors typically appears after an opening opportunity. About forty years ago, female poets emerged in an exclusively male professional environment. The evolution toward the mix of social practices in Brazil was used by these women to speak up in common. They equal their male counterparts in terms of artistic ability and critical spirit, and conform to their vocation as a popular poet commenting on any topic. But it has not been easy for these women to emancipate themselves from the reserved attitude traditionally assigned to them. That may explain the small number of active women poets today. On the other hand, the audiences are fully mixed; there are women passionate about the poetry that accompany the poets on their tours or do not miss a contest. However, during my research I have met only two female poets: they were witness to the difficulty that exists in overcoming the prejudices, and were proud of the current evolution.

Record production is an important aspect of the activity of today's singers, who use their CDs like a business card to look for contracts. The recorded material is oral work of a different nature because it is difficult to improvise in a studio, without any inspiration stimulated by requests of listeners. This is, then, not *repente*, but rather an elaborate form of sung poetry. Instead of writing the poems, the authors repeat them until they reach what they feel is the best expression. Topics are chosen by the constituted duo and alternate with composite songs. Like a written published poem, a CD leaves a trail, unlike the evanescence of an authentically improvised verse. Fans use this medium to hear sung poetry and compensate for the scarcity of events where they live.

As a result, it is estimated nowadays that there are thousands of these singers and that they far outnumber their predecessors. The dynamism of the tradition accompanies a remarkable qualitative evolution: most *cantadores* of old were illiterate, lived in precarious conditions, and cared little for musical, scenic, or corporate criteria—a fact that does not minimize in any way their quality as great poets whose memory remains alive in the tradition. The epigones work to rise socially, studying, promoting good quality shows, and organizing their profession through associations, hand in hand with other defenders of popular culture.

The activism of the *cantadores* and their admirers, associated in the coproduction of contexts in order to fulfill and perpetuate the *repente*, leads to an appropriation of the spaces in which they take the floor to mobilize consciences.

Mobility, Urbanization, and Expansion: Animation of a Territory

Without stopping, the *cantadores* go to meet new audiences that are also very mobile due to the characteristic emigration of the northeastern region. The climate of the semiarid Sertão, alternating a dry barren season and another favorable to crops, causes seasonal migrations. There are also exoduses due to exceptional droughts. There are other demographic, economic, and political reasons for this exodus: the Nordeste has the worst social indexes in the country, and a negative migration balance compared to all other regions. Groups of Nordestinos have participated in the exploitation of rubber trees in Amazonia, in the industrialization of the south of the country, and in the construction of its capitals, particularly in São Paulo, the largest city in South America. They followed the general patterns of urbanization, a major phenomenon of the last half century: in 1960,

when the new futuristic capital Brasilia was built, for one Brazilian living in the city, four were living in the countryside. A few years ago the proportion was reversed. That led to a huge rural exodus in the Sertão, the birthplace of the tradition.

The *cantadores* always moved a lot, on foot or even horseback in the case of the oldest ones that I have interviewed, who were born during World War I. Nowadays, the mobility of the present ones is increasing due to sociodemographic transformations. By necessity, they have followed their public, and for the most part have become urbanized. They have taken advantage of modern means of transport, communication, and information; they have conquered the new spaces of expression already mentioned; raised their educational level and their knowledge of the world; and have had to attend to more diversified requests from listeners confronting the reality of modernity. These new conditions of production have stimulated the *cantadores*, since the capacity to adapt is the source of an improviser's ability.

In a favorable context of rapid transformations, the poets say that they are experiencing a wonderful evolution, being more educated and organized than before. Thousands of poets today live from their popular art within the confines of the vast space of Brazil, wherever they can magnify the Portuguese language in their poems, and wherever emigrants feel the need to organize a session in which the culture of the northeastern terroir will be sung.

The social dynamics shown by the poets have no equivalent in other genres of oral poetry in Brazil. According to my hypothesis, these genres do not give as much importance to improvisation, that is, its actors reiterate the forms instead of recreating them, and therefore do not encourage the necessary adaptations to the tradition.

In my research I became interested in other categories of popular poets. For example, by way of comparison, the *coquistas* testify that their number is declining, with less and less opportunities to sing. Yet they sing *coco*, a funnier genre than the *repente*, and one characterized by a fast tempo, catchy choruses, and entertaining street shows. In their duels, *coquistas* use a coarse language that is much appreciated and in the *embolada*, they exchange insults. But they improvise only partially, memorizing picaresque verses that skillfully adapt to the context and the reactions of the public. Often, they act as a way of animating open spaces (streets, squares, fairs), which are not conducive to commenting on

serious topics. The listeners do not participate in the subject because *coquistas* do not take orders. They deliver little informative or critical content, unlike that heard in *cantorias*.

The two genres share some similarities: in both cases, it is poetry sung in a popular context. But they differ in terms of meaning. When there is more improvisation, a space can be created in which free and profound words can be exchanged. That is typical of the *repentistas*. I have shown that mobility of thinking is related to spatial mobility. It is also related to the desire for social transformation that a *repentista* possesses, wanting to be a spokesman for his Brazilian people.

In conclusion, the songs improvisers animate with represent a territory in which they divulge cultural elements typical of the region in which their art appeared. However, this territory in which today they are updating the tradition is limitless, due to the expansion of the *repente* by following the roads of northeastern emigration. Improvisers are mediators who promote adaptation strategies. They constantly produce and transform the elements of the culture of the people who listen to them.

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