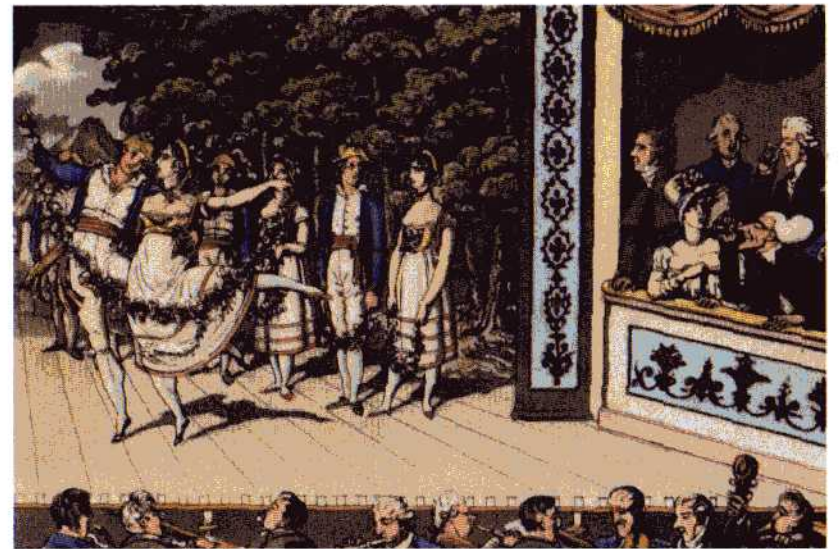


LOGICA

CHOREO

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CHOREOLOGICA The Journal
of European Association of Dance Historians



ISSN 1746-5737
Edizioni Joker

Vol. 7 no. 1 - Winter 2014

CHOREOLOGICA

The Journal of
European Association of Dance Historians

Winter 2014
Volume 7 Number 1

Edizioni Joker

Volume 7 No. 1 Winter 2014
ISSN 1746-5737

European Association of Dance Historians
 41 Talma Gardens
 Twickenham
 Middlesex TW2 7RB
 UK
 eadhcommittee@gmail.com

Editorial Board

Editor: **Madeleine Inglehearn**
 Editorial Adviser: **Maria Claudia Bada**
 Editorial Board: **Ricardo Barros, Maria Claudia Bada,
 Madeleine Inglehearn**

Published by Edizioni Joker
 Via Crosa della Macarina 28/B
 I-15067 Novi Ligure (AL) - ITALY
 Tel/Fax +39 (0)143 322383
 Email: info@edizionijoker.com
 www.edizionijoker.com

Printed by Digital Print Service
 Segrate (MI) - ITALY

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European roots of Brazilian Carnival parade

By Ricardo Barros

Overview of the history of Carnival celebrations in Brazil

The contemporary 'Carnaval' celebrations and parade of the so-called 'Schools of Samba' have been linked to ritualistic freedom of expression and a vivid demonstration of the African roots in Brazilian culture. The competitive parade enthuses audiences and gathers admirers drawn from all over the World for its flamboyancy, panache and debauchery. However, not much research has been done regarding the roots and historic nature of such public events.

This paper does not aim to question the influence of black slave culture in the formation of the socio-cultural phenomenon of contemporary 'Carnaval'. Instead, it aims to explore a rich European cultural heritage that, in my view, contributed to create the intricate fabric of social acceptance, cultural and religious miscegenation witnessed every year in the world-famous street parade all over Brazil.

The *entrudo* in Portugal and in Brazil

In Portugal, Carnival was celebrated in as early as the 15th and 16th centuries by the name of *entrudo* (meaning 'entering' Lent period). The

popular celebration was gradually established in Brazil during the 17th and 18th centuries, being taken across the Ocean by the increasing number of Portuguese migrants to the New Continent. Its crudest main popular manifestation was in the form of street 'battles', with people throwing water, scented wax 'bombs', flour or even mud on each other. This lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. However, new fashions were imported to Brazil throughout the 17th and 18th centuries with more colonisers migrating to that country. This trend culminated in the early 19th century with the establishment of the Portuguese court in the colony. The court and newly arrived Portuguese bourgeoisie set the trends in Brazilian society, importing from Paris and Italy the habit of elegantly parading in adorned chariots and wearing masks and fancy dresses. This promenade was followed by evening balls in sophisticated exclusive clubs attended by the court and the *élite*. Meanwhile, the lower classes – while still pursuing the *entrudo* way of enjoying carnival – were gradually encouraged to attend rather simple balls instead. This way the lower classes gradually got interested in the more lavish celebrations, abandoning altogether the *entrudo* in the early 20th century.

Blocos, societies and foliões

But the latent fire could not be tamed, so in the first few years of the Republic (end of 19th century) Brazilians resorted once again to go out to the streets, this time in a more organised manner in what was called 'carnival societies': they danced and sang, accompanied by wind and percussion instruments. Little 'carnival marches' were chanted to ridicule politicians, and soon tunes were being especially composed for the carnival. By the early 20th century, with street parades being firmly established in Rio and featuring masked *foliões* (revellers) in fancy dress, the lower classes were once again marginalized, and had to restrict their parties to suburban areas of the city. They fought back and got organised in 'Schools of Samba', adopting a structure pretty much similar to what is seen today in Rio: each school would choose a new

theme every year, and this would regulate the whole parade (including music composition, costumes and floats). They gradually acquired recognition from the society, intellectual groups and artists, who in that period developed an increasing interest in popular culture, following political scandals and unequal distribution of funds. It was only in the 1950s that president Getúlio Vargas – yearning for public acceptance and trust following decades of military ruling – officially recognised the parade and provided infra-structure for its development.

This very brief overview paints a scene in which two separate streams of social classes run concurrently, sometimes overlapping each other and some other times taking quite distinct directions. But what is the linking element between popular contemporary celebrations and the noble and elitist parades in bygone eras? As we shall see, this element is the search for form, structure and compliance (in this particular case, of an unprivileged mass aiming to reach for an European elitist standard).

Historic roots

The court of d. João VI

Tracing back to early 19th century we see a turning point in Brazilian history: the establishment of the Portuguese court in Brazil between 1808 and 1821. The Portuguese royal family fled from Napoleonic invasion of Lisbon and set court in the Tropics, in Rio de Janeiro. They brought with them not only a large entourage of between ten and fifteen thousand people (numbers are not precise), but also many European traditions. The family itself was very peculiar, with a mad queen (D. Maria), a weak prince (D. João) and his nymphomaniac, power-hungry wife (Carlota Joaquina).

On a positive note, they loved their celebrations. Balls were very common in Rio, and there is quite detailed information about the

running of these, including some personal letters, bills and ceremonial records at the National Library of Rio de Janeiro.

During this period the quadrilles were the most popular dance form performed in such lavish balls. These quadrilles – like the *Quadrilha Princesa Imperial* (a late example, dated around 1890-1910) by dancing master J.A. Piacentini – adopt the typical French choreographic style of the period with steps such as *demi-ronde les quatre*, *balance et tour*, *grand chaine*, *chaine anglaise*, *moulinet*, *tour des mains*, and others. It is interesting to note that the index to this edition lists over 320 ‘of the most popular’ quadrilles of that period, pointing to the wide dissemination of European formal dances in the tropical Brazilian society of that period – but this will be the subject for a future paper.

Despite this edition being a very late primary source, there is plenty of evidence about dancing in the earlier years of the 19th century confirming the practice of European-style quadrilles in the balls, and some little snippets on that of dance practice during the 17th and 18th centuries. Amongst these it is worth noting the acceptance and gradual insertion of African traits in dances like the *Lundu*, which was danced by noblemen and slaves alike.

The plates by Johann Moritz Rugendas – a German illustrator who visited colonial Brazil in the early 19th century – display the same dance being performed by a group of Negroes, and also by white ‘colonisers’. Of importance is to note the Iberian folk arm stance and use of castanets in the second example, setting an interesting counterpoint to the exaggerated hip movement performed by the ladies (with hands on hips) on both plates. A fascinating insight of the mixed reactions to the *Lundu* reaching the ballrooms (and stage) – denoting a varying degree of acceptance and indeed willingness to foster the social mixing – can be seen in the career of Italian born Marietta Baderna. She migrated to Rio in the late 1840s, where she was well-received after successful performances in the Teatro Alla Scala and Covent Garden. Her colourful character, curiosity and love for freedom of expression

Danse Landu
(IV, fl.17),
in Johann Moritz
Rugendas,
*Voyage pittoresque
dans le Bresil* (1835);
Biblioteca Nacional,
Rio de Janeiro



Danse Landu
(III, fl.18),
in Johann Moritz
Rugendas,
*Voyage pittoresque
dans le Bresil* (1835);
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