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A Perspective on Human Rights Through Art: The Bumba Meu Boi Festival in Maranhão, Brazil.

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Introduction

Approached from the critical perspective of human rights, this research seeks to understand the communal artistic expression of the Bumba Meu Boi from the Maranhão state located in the Northeast region of Brazil, as a powerful tool of resistance and preservation of the cultural traditions of Brazil's quilombolas, which are deeply rooted in African legacy. Quilombolas communities are ethnic groups predominantly made up of a black population, which define themselves on the basis of specific relationships with the land, kinship, territory, ancestry, traditions and cultural practices. This research will discuss how the involvement of social groups such as quilombolas in the cultural manifestations known as Bumba Meu Boi, resists the phenomenon of displacement, which keeps alive the cultural and social connections with African traditions. Even in the face of the process of whitening and the influences of diasporic immigration, these communities maintain solid ties with their cultural roots, preserving and strengthening their Afro-Brazilian identity.

The objective is to illustrate, using a Brazilian movie called *Ôrí*, script and narration by Beatriz Nascimento and directed by Rachel Gerber, that the forced migration of Africans to Brazil and their efforts to overcome enslavement resulted in a geographical displacement, but did not result in the erasure of their cultural identity. The most striking evidence of these values can be observed within the core of the Maranhão quilombola communities. The communities exhibit a pronounced sense of collective living, a resilient leadership structure, and an unwavering dedication to the stewardship of their land and crops. Furthermore, these communities exemplify rich cultural heritage through their musical traditions, dance, and oral traditions, which collectively honor the legacy of African ancestry.

The popular, traditional festival of Bumba Meu Boi is a Brazilian cultural complex, originated in Maranhão, that comprises a variety of styles and a multiplicity of groups. They are divided into accents: *matraca*, *zabumba*, *orchestra*, *costa-de-mão* and *baixada*. Each accent has its own specificities, which can be seen in the rhythms of the music, the choice of instruments, the costumes, the characters and the steps and evolution of the dance, which can form a circle, a semi-circle or symmetrical rows. *Pandeirinhos*, *maracás tantãs* and *zabumbas* (large drums) are instruments that give rhythm to the players. Of all the accents, the *zabumba* is the one that retains the most original African influence in its performances. The costumes include embroidered velvet collars and skirts and hats with colored ribbons, as well as beads and piping. The accent originated in the municipality of Guimarães and it is considered the first Bumba Meu Boi accent. This research will focus on the *zabumba* accent of Bumba Meu Boi from Guimarães. The plot of the Bumba Meu Boi festival recalls a typical story from colonial Brazil, but a recognition of a cultural complex that is the legacy of several diasporic generations.

Context

This research is informed by the political and social movements that have shaped Afrocentric thinking and practices, as well as African epistemologies, which are crucial for understanding the historical significance of the African continent. This understanding is inspired by the famous phrase said by Burkina Faso historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo (2010: 31); "Africa has a history." In this sense, it is crucial to underscore the significance of the African continent for Brazil, particularly for the state of Maranhão. This is based on the historical experiences of the Africans themselves and their diaspora, who have played a pivotal role in shaping our cultural identity.

Mariana Gino, a Brazilian historian, in her research work, entitled *The Rewriting of Black African History in the 20th Century: Orality as a Historical Source for African Renaissance* (2018), put forth the idea that the contributions of Joseph Ki-Zerbo and the Afrocentric movements have led to a significant shift in the way African history is interpreted and analyzed. Gino's research, which was presented as a master's degree at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 2018, argued that these developments have resulted in a more nuanced and complex understanding of the historical experiences of Black Africans.

The possibility of undertaking a historical investigation of the African continent using methods and paradigms that focus on the particularities of the continent and its diasporas is a direct result of the significant efforts made by Black intellectuals to advocate for a renaissance of Afrocentric theoretical and methodological assumptions. Due to the limitations of this research, it is not feasible to provide a comprehensive account of the individuals who have played a pivotal role in this intellectual movement, which has been shaped by the collective efforts of African scholars.

This research will utilize creative and reflective works as a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary field of human rights, specifically focusing on the Afro-Brazilian experience and its impact on the African legacy in Brazil. It will elucidate the multifaceted cultural identities of the Africans who were forcibly brought to Brazil from Africa, thereby underscoring the notion that the Brazilian population is not a homogenous entity, but rather a diverse collective with a rich historical tapestry.

The history of Black movements in Brazil between 1977 and 1988 is narrated in the documentary *Ôri*, directed by the filmmaker and sociologist Raquel Gerber. The work features photography by Hermano Penna, Pedro Farkas, Jorge Bodanzky, and others, as well as musical compositions by Naná Vasconcelos and arrangements by Teese Gohl. The film, which follows the life of the historian and activist Beatriz Nascimento, provides a comprehensive social, political, and cultural overview of Brazil, with a particular focus on the importance of quilombos in shaping the country's national identity. An eminent Brazilian historian, Beatriz Nascimento has produced a substantial corpus of artistic and research output aimed at deepening our understanding of Brazil's formation through the lens of African community relations established in the quilombos. This approach constitutes the fundamental tenet of this research project, as it was within the Maranhão quilombo territories that the popular cultural manifestations of *Bumba Meu Boi* first emerged.

In the documentary "*Ôri*" the central protagonist, Beatriz Nascimento, explores issues of identity. Through her voice, the cultural formation of Brazil is briefly recounted, with a notable shift in approach. The documentary highlights the contribution of African peoples to the construction of the Americas. Images of the Atlantic Ocean, accompanied by maps and coats of arms of Portugal and Africa, interweave with the narration to present a poetic representation of what the film defines as the transatlantic civilization. This displacement is significant because it challenges the conventional view of the African diaspora as merely a forced movement of enslaved people. Instead, it presents a more nuanced perspective that recognizes the emergence of a hybrid and transnational culture resulting from the interaction and fusion of diverse populations. This view of Afro-Brazilian culture, which emphasizes displacement and diaspora, is a distinctive feature of the documentary. When considered in the context of audiovisual production, its conceptual depth lends it a unique quality.

Professor Gilberto Alexandre Sobrinho of the Department of Multimodal Media, Cinema and Communication at the Institute of Arts of the University of Campinas UNICAMP offers a valuable analysis of the film through an understanding of its portrayal of the liberation of Black people in Brazil and the means by which Afro-descendants have organized their territories, from the body to the occupation of physical spaces, with the diaspora serving as a connection between continents and ways of life. This articulation is presented as an assertive movement to rethink Brazil, particularly in relation to prevailing concepts. The film puts forth a radical rethinking of the concept of national formation, proposing a revision of the prevailing point of view and the reclaiming and updating of an Afrocentric perspective. It offers a new narrative for the nation. This process is initiated by a black woman, whose presence represents a historical absence in the national documentary scene until then. This woman's voice is centered in the film, articulating her ideas and creating a tension between the individual and the collective. As a result, new parameters for the nation's identity thinking are established, taking into account the intersecting factors of gender, race, class, memory, and the past.

The term "Ôrí," of Yoruba origin, was selected as a reference to Black Consciousness in its relationship with time, history, and memory. Additionally, it is employed to denote the cranium, which is derived from the aforementioned term. The 2022 IBGE census data indicates that Brazil has 8,441 quilombola communities, with 24% of these located in the state of Maranhão. This indicates that the state of Maranhão has the highest number of quilombola communities, with 2,025 (23.99%). Subsequently, the states of Bahia and Minas Gerais have 1,814 and 979 locations, respectively, representing 21.49% and 11.60% of the total. The term "quilombola locality" is employed to designate locations within the national territory where a fixed settlement of at least 15 individuals identified as quilombolas can be found, with their dwellings situated no more than 200 meters apart. But in this study, quilombola communities refer to more than a specific location; their definition extends to the specific relationships with the land, kinship, territory, ancestry, traditions and cultural practices of their own.

How Brazil became one of the countries with the largest Afro-descendant population in the world

Reinaldo dos Santos Barroso Junior, a Brazilian historian, in his research work, entitled *On the routes of the equatorial Atlantic: the slave trade of rice farmers from Upper Guinea to Maranhão (1770-1800)*, put forth the relationship between Maranhão and Upper Guinea, a West African territory established through the slave trade during the 1770s and 1780s, an issue that has received little attention in the historiography of the Atlantic slave trade. The African diaspora, regardless of the significant political and ideological implications it entails, established an African-American (or African-American) culture, with the Atlantic Ocean serving as a conduit for this process. The initial and most pervasive representation of the diaspora's dispersal across the Atlantic was the transatlantic slave trade to the region subsequently designated as the "New World." There, they perpetuated the system of colonial exploitation established by European metropolises.

The diaspora, initiated by Africans and commercialized by Europeans in the Americas, resulted in the consumption of approximately fifteen million Africans. The Atlantic slave trade constituted one of the most significant commercial and cultural enterprises in the formation of the modern world and the establishment of a global economic system. African captives were integrated into every cultural, social, economic, and

political aspect of Brazilian life, which was the leading consumer of slaves among the American colonies. Prior to this, Brazil was divided into three states: the State of Brazil, the State of Grão-Pará and Rio Negro, and the State of Maranhão and Piauí. These slaves established an economy driven by black captives, mills, farms, mines, cities, plantations, factories, kitchens, and salons. They and their descendants left an indelible mark on various aspects of the material and spiritual culture of this country, including its agriculture, cuisine, religion, language, music, arts, and architecture.

Also according to the work of Brazilian historian Reinaldo dos Santos Barroso Junior, the recovery of these roots and the highlighting of these origins are generally carried out for ritualistic reasons or ideological interests. According to his research, discourses were initially based on the ideals of African cultural unity and the homogeneity of the peoples who arrived in the New World. More contemporary studies have emphasised regional peculiarities, specific influences and the close relationship between the African continent and Brazil. The state of Bahia was influenced by a Jeje grouping (the people of the Jeje Mahi Nation, from the Benin region, are an example of the resistance of the Vodou cult that remained in Brazil through candomblé), rarely mentioned in other territories. The state of Rio de Janeiro was influenced by the Bantu (the term refers broadly to a series of peoples and cultures in Central Africa. The name comes from the Bantu linguistic group, which includes several African languages with certain common characteristics), given its special relations with the Angolan and Mozambican territorial spaces. The state of Maranhão nurtures a famous Mina or Fanti-Ashanti heritage, brought by slaves from the ports of the Mina Coast and the kingdoms that were located near the coast of the Castle of St George of Mina, located in what is now known as Ghana. In this context, these relationships reinforced the Mina heritage among the Maranhão people.

This heritage is unquestionably evident, primarily through the tangible presence of the renowned Casas das Minas. Notable examples include the Casa de Nago and Casa Fanti-Ashanti, which periodically engage in expressions of Afro-Brazilian rituals within the broader context of Maranhão culture. However, on occasion, isolated manifestations of a relatively obscure heritage, namely that of the Yoruba people from the African regions of Senegambia and Guinea-Bissau, emerge among those associated with Afro-Brazilian rituals and traditional religious practices. It can be observed that a significant Jeje and Nagô heritage was established by many of the slaves from the Mina coast. Additionally, the slaves from a region situated further to the northwest, Alta-Guiné (which was referred to as Baixo-Guiné), participated in the Afro cultural heritage in Maranhão, in a manner similar to the black mines.

This work highlights the importance of Africa, beyond the painful aspect of the slavery process, in the construction of Brazil's cultural identity. And we revive the symbols of this cultural heritage through the largest and one of the most important popular cultural manifestations in Maranhão, as will be described below.

Our greatest symbol of popular culture in Maranhão, Brazil



Photography by Jonas Sakamoto/BRASIL (@jonassakamoto)

The Bumba Meu Boi festival, a tradition that has been going on since the 18th century, attracts people from Maranhão and visitors from all over the world in June and July. But the first record of the festival was in a newspaper from Recife, Brazilian city located in the state of Pernambuco in 1840. Far from being a festival created for tourists, the Bumba Meu Boi festival is widespread in the suburbs and in the city center, but it is in the Baixada Maranhense region, in quilombola territories, where they first appear.

As Bumba Meu Boi's original rhythm, the zabumba accent marks the strong African presence in the festival. It has its origins in the municipality of Guimarães. It is possibly the oldest and most authentic representative of the "Bumbas" in Maranhão. Its roots are originally African. Hence the original rhythmic foundations and also the fact that it is performed more on the ground, in which the players organize themselves in a circular fashion, dancing, singing and playing the instruments. The name comes from its basic instrument - the zabumba - a drum half a meter high, carried on a pole by two porters and played with a drumstick. Nei Lopes, a Brazilian writer and scholar of African cultures, on the continent of origin and in its diasporas, launched a valuable work in 2020 titled "Novo Dicionário Banto do Brasil" that represents the effort to integrate studies of African languages that have maintained contact with the Portuguese

language. In this work Nei Lopes dedicates with nostalgia to Beatriz Nascimento, and highlights the African contribution to the Portuguese language. We look at page 260, where the definition of the word "zabumba" is as follows:

n. (1) Pancada. (2) Large drum, bombo. (3) Instrumental ensemble based on zabumba. // n. (4) Zabumbeiro. For Jacques Raymundo (1936 a), it comes from XABUMBA. For Nascentes (1966 b), the origin is onomatopoeic or from "CONGUÊS". Q. v. in Quicongo and Umbundo *mbumba, bater. The meaning of "pancada" is in Caldas Barbosa (1980 c, p. 216), and seems to be the initial one.



Photography by Jonas Sakamoto/BRASIL (@jonassakamoto)

The maracas serve to enhance the rhythm, harmonizing with the zabumba and the tamborinhos. These, in turn, have a high-pitched sound that fills in the pauses of the zabumba. Fire drums, which are crude instruments made from mangrove trunks, hollowed out by fire and covered in raw ox leather, are attached to the frame using wooden tourniquets, called African studs. The onça drums are made from tinfoil, wood or recycled material. They have the shape of a cylinder with one end closed by leather, to which a small stick is attached. It produces a low, hoarse sound. The zabumba is the centerpiece of the Boi's rhythm.



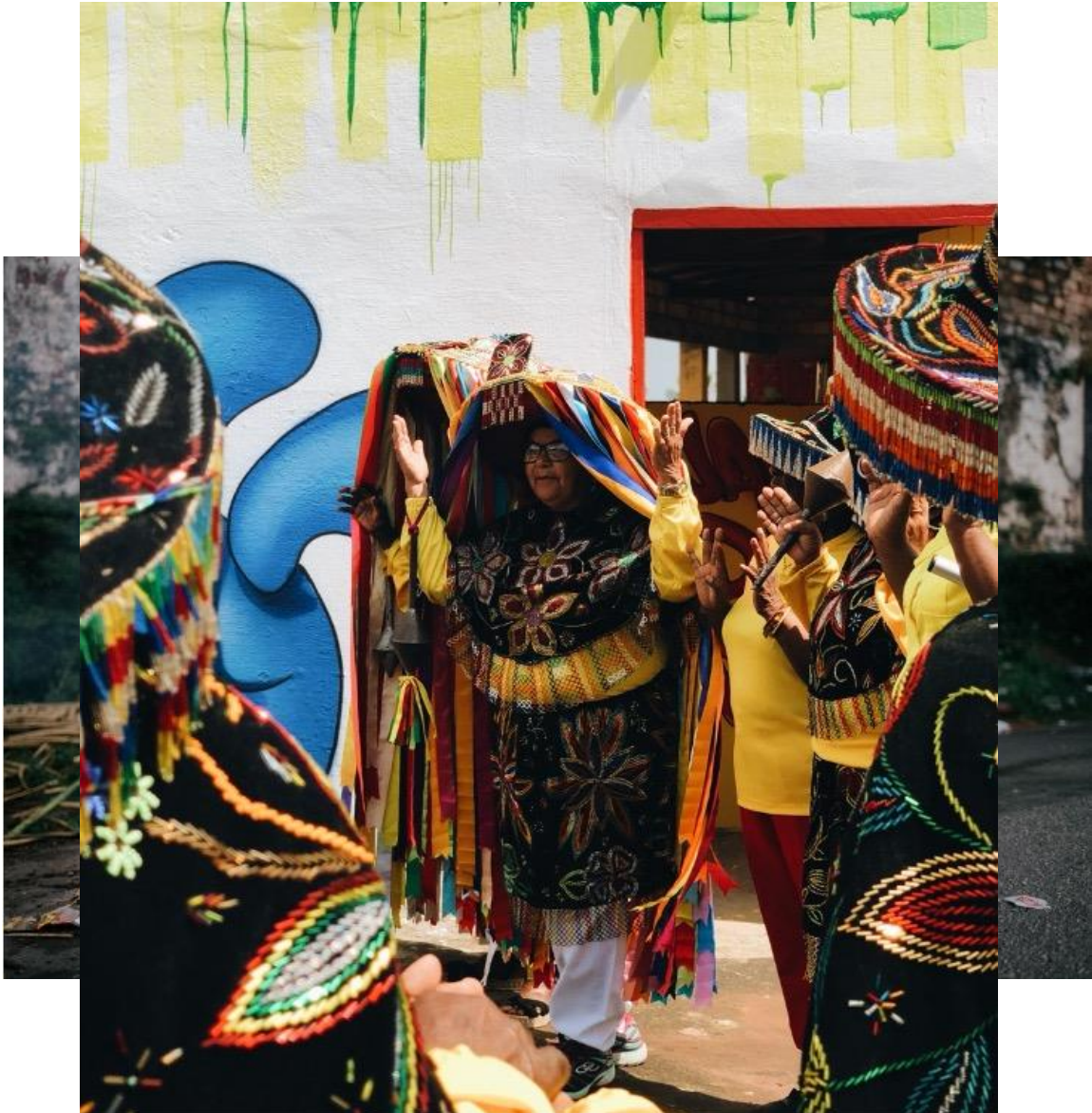
Photography by Jonas Sakamoto/BRASIL (@jonassakamoto)

The percussive instruments utilized to create the rhythmic foundation of this genre include the zabumba, maraca, and fire drums. The zabumbas are crafted from hand-made, mangrove wood and tuned to a specific pitch under the influence of the moon. The pandeiritos are crafted from jenipapo, which is a fruit harvested from a tree native to South and Central America, and covered with leather. The garments feature intricate embroidery with seed beads and seed pearls. This particular Bumba Meu Boi exhibits a distinctive approach to instrument tuning and playing. Both the way the instruments are played and the way they and the other artistic elements are made are knowledge passed down from generation to generation that Marcelino and the others learned from their ancestors.

Bumba Meu Boi has a strong link with handcrafts, as it requires a lot of skills and knowledge to produce the ox, the costumes, the hats, the props for the various characters, as well as the musical instruments. Embroidery, carving, different types of assembly, sewing and ornamentation are the most common techniques, which mobilize many artisans and community work, as it is not always a paid activity. In the Bumba Meu Boi from Guimarães, floral motifs predominate and there is a different way of applying the canutilho, the glass tubes used in clothing, jewelry, decorative objects and handicrafts. Designers often use them to make fluted bangs on clothes, shoes and accessories, giving life and movement to their creations.. The town has a number of high quality embroiderers who can be found in Guimarães town center and in the villages. One of them is Evarista Avelar, better known as Nhá Bá,

widow of Mestre Marcelino, who was the founder of the Bumba Meu Boi from Guimarães. She has taken part from the beginning, strengthening her community and becoming a reference in the Baixada and Maranhão for practitioners of this beautiful cultural manifestation.

These communities represent opportunities for political experiences of resistance, where there is an exchange of knowledge, and the potential to become important focal points for identifying demands that can be met by community philanthropy. Because of the craft work and the music too, they have become references throughout the country and a large part of the production of these handicrafts and the Bumba Meu Boi presentation shows contribute to generating income for families.



Photography by Jonas Sakamoto/BRASIL (@jonassakamoto)

The human rights from a cultural perspective: The resistance of the Bumba Meu Boi from Guimarães

To develop a theoretical framework that articulates the understanding of human rights as processes of collective struggle for the preservation of traditions of quilombola communities in Maranhão, we have the contribution of Helio Gallardo's work entitled "Human rights as a social movement: towards a popular understanding of the struggle for human rights" (2019), that assumes the main challenge of human rights is the distance between what is thought, said and done. Seen as unfulfilled and barbarously cut off and violated, human rights are permanently experiences of contrast with popular political value. A socio-historical understanding of human rights, one that roots its foundation in social struggle, takes this foundation to all its phases. The struggle not only expresses needs, claims and demands, but also its testimonial character, which generates the conditions for its cultural impact and legitimacy, removes and summons sensitivities.

In their work entitled "The re-signification of Human Rights: Decolonizing art, empowering imaginaries", researchers Maysa Carvalhal dos Reis Novais, Roberta Laena Costa Jucá and Vanessa Oliveira Batista Berner introduces the idea that an alternative decolonization of art based on human rights stems from the connection between art and law, which, as a rule, is absent from the predominantly dogmatic Brazilian academic legal debate. We want to think about art and law starting from the concept of culture and cultural processes developed by Joaquin Herrera Flores, a Spanish critical theorist who has dedicated himself to studying the theory of culture and the critical theory of human rights.

According to the authors cited above, the connection between art and human rights is one of the possibilities for critical intervention in society and for transforming reality. Based on the perceptions of culture and cultural processes developed by Herrera Flores, we understand that, in the struggle for a more dignified life, artistic expressions are forms of action and reaction to hegemonic power that can give visibility to the violation of human rights, destabilizing oppression and modifying colonial relations. Thus, the art of the streets, the favelas, peasant women, the peripheries and other subjugated places like quilombos are a form of cultural reaction with emancipatory and transformative potential for subjugated realities.

O Bumba Meu Boi is not merely a means of preserving historical traditions, it also serves as a mode of resistance and cultural expression for Afro-Brazilian communities. Following a period of persecution, it is a celebration of the country's identity, diversity, and cultural wealth. It is not coincidental that it was designated as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019, becoming the sixth Brazilian asset to be included on the international register. The celebration was unanimously and enthusiastically acknowledged by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Its inclusion on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity serves to reinforce the community's existing initiatives and to encourage further educational activities, the production of new documentation, and the expansion of research and the appreciation of the cultural asset in question. However, Bumba Meu Boi, like a centuries-old cultural practice in Maranhão, has been stigmatized and banned from being performed for some years. Many state actions take away the visibility of art produced in peripheral spaces or devalue it, as is the case with the cultural production of quilombola communities, because they are based on a notion of culture marked by valuing only cultural expressions that come from outside, based on Eurocentric standards of knowledge for the non-European world, naturalizing them as universal and building a hierarchy that inferiorizes or disregards other knowledge: our Afro-Brazilians from Maranhão.

The article by the authors Wagner de S. Silva, Sandra Antonielle G. Moreno and Fabíola M. da C. da L. Monteiro, in which they discuss the history of the resistance of Bumba Meu Boi in the city of São Luís, from 1890 to 1920, written in 2010, to be presented at . In the view of the local elites, bumba-meu-boi was seen as synonymous with the colonial slave-owning past, since the players, being black or of black descent, were already the target of double persecution by the government and police authorities, both because they lived in marginalised areas and because they came from the popular milieu. The bumba-boi games were restricted to areas far from the city centre and even in these places, they had to carry documents showing the licences to which they were subject. In a way, the fight for progress, aiming for civilisation, also meant a conflict against 'darkness', considered synonymous with popular culture, analysed from the perspective of erudite culture, from which biased concepts emerged. From this perspective, popular manifestations, seen as a hindrance to the beautification of the 'centre', should be kept out of the urban perimeter, as the authorities of this historical moment did, through the Ordinances of the Chief of Police, published in the Official Gazette of Maranhão in 1920: 'It is expressly forbidden to play bombs in the urban perimeter, to play Bumba Meu Boi, as well as to play box music.' As a way of protecting the "civilized center", preventing the invasion of "uncultured" and "savage" people, stigmatized as "barbarians".

The Bumba players lived with this persecution on a daily basis. They were one of the main targets of the elite from São Luís city, who repudiated them to the point of not allowing their performances even in areas far from the center, wishing for their elimination for the sake of the "good customs" and decency of the city's people, who saw this folklore as a "barbaric" dance that should be passed on to society. The bumba-meu-boi denounced backwardness, because it showed our colonial slave-owning past, which was considered old at the time.

Understanding the political nature of Bumba Meu Boi and its potential to make us reflect on our capacity for action, reaction, transformation and indignation in the face of violence and oppression is one of the proposed contributions of this work. We have already experienced times when Brazilian public officials themselves have promoted actions that go against the most democratic notions of culture, such as the one we are proposing.

This is because of the socio-cultural context of Bumba Meu Boi origin, given the emergence of rural quilombos in Brazil, which were refuge points during the enslavement process. Between 1876 and 1913, those responsible for the Bumbas had to apply for police authorization to rehearse the game and go out on the days of the June festivities. The license, however, was only granted for places far from the urban area. In this sense, the resistance of its practice, as well as the maintenance of the elements that bring authenticity to this cultural manifestation, have made its continuity a work of community strengthening and preservation of Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage.

The Bumba Meu Boi from Guimarães group, which currently has 116 members, was formed by individuals from the Quilombos of Damásio, Cumum, the Cumã settlements, Santa Luzia, Vura, Puca, and other rural communities in the municipality of Guimarães, located in the Baixada region, approximately 660 kilometers from the state capital of Maranhão. These individuals are farmers, fishermen, and rural people who participate in the ritual with sincerity and devotion, maintaining a tradition with roots in African-Brazilian culture that serves as a defining feature of this segment of the Brazilian population. The tradition was conceived by Marcelino Azevedo, who was duly acknowledged by the Ministry of Culture through the conferral of the Mestre da Cultura Popular award. It inherited the tradition of the Bumba Meu Boi of Zabumba, recording the practice that had been carried out for centuries through the generations in the year 1971.

Although it was once persecuted, nowadays the interest of civil society and the recognition by academic communities of the ancestral knowledge contained in Bumba Meu Boi is so great that an initiative by the Cultural Studies Group in

Maranhão (Gecult-MA), of the Federal University of Maranhão, presented in a report by Luciano Nascimento for Agência Brasil (2024), aims to map the particularities of the Bumba Meu Boi groups in order to help disseminate part of this rich history. The survey uses digital technologies such as georeferencing to map the cultural manifestations. Research professor Leticia Cardoso, who is coordinating the initiative, says that the project, called Caminhos da Boiada, also aims to help strengthen the Bumba Meu Boi production chain by providing an opportunity to expand the traditional practices of this cultural manifestation in the media, economic, tourist and heritage dimensions.

Bumba Meu Boi draws crowds of people during its performances not only in Maranhão, but also in other cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, as well as attracting tourists from all over the world who flock to São Luís (the capital of Maranhão) to watch the dances and performances that take place during the months of June and July. Art from a cultural perspective develops the human potential for creation and transgression and stimulates human activity to challenge the established order and seek better living conditions. Like Herrera Flores, this work is guided by the understanding that art as a consumer spectacle should be replaced by art as a struggle for dignity, the masters of Bumba Meu Boi are recognized as guardians of our culture.

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