

**The songs improvised by the poets of the Brazilian  
Northeast : Tradition, urbanization, expansion,  
animation of a territory**

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## **The songs improvised by the poets of the Brazilian Northeast : Tradition, urbanization, expansion, animation of a territory**

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

The passion for the word expressed in accordance with the rules of art is a cultural element shared throughout Latin America. Singing poetry and the tournament between poets are appreciated. But in Nordeste, people give supreme importance to the total improvisation of the sung verses. That is the art of the *repente* (the word means sudden), a local tradition whose vivacity is remarkable. Its actors are much more numerous than before.

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

Urbanization has boosted the evolution of the tradition of the *repente*. It appeared in the 19th century in a semi-arid and rural area of the interior of Nordeste, called Sertão. Droughts caused periodic exodus and the Nordestinos constituted the main contingent of migrant workers in the country. For half a 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 changed into emigrant poets, following their public towards the cities and adapting their art to the modernity.

The urban project needs social adjustment and cultural adaptation. I will expose the tradition of the *repente*, art of the word whose ethics is spontaneity and adaptation ; then, how improvising poets have conquered new production spaces, diversifying their activities ; finally, the reason for the development of a popular expression in the 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 the improvised verse is stimulated by the encounter between poets and admirers in a night session. A protocol rules traditional singing : two singers play *viola*, sitting side by side at the foot of some wall, in front of the 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, rhyme that can not be predicted), everything guarantees the authenticity of improvisation. It is the essential value, before other formal criteria. In this way, the *repentistas* are distinguished from other poets of the Nordeste, the *coquistas*. These ones play a drum called *pandeiro* and usually mount a stanza mixing memorized elements and improvised passages. In addition to this genre called *coco de embolada*, I mention here other genres of oral poetry that are more local, such as : the *coco de roda*, that unites dance, percussions, choir and poetry in the coastal zones ; the *maracatu rural*, from Nazaré da Mata, State of Pernambuco, where improvised verses alternate with very fast music ; the *aboio*, linked to the breeding of cattle, whose poets sing without accompaniment, with some Arab or Turkish influence.

Compared to these very varied genres, the *repente* is reputed to carry the highest degree of poetic improvisation. Now I will characterize its music.

### **The music**

Unlike the verses, the melody that sustains them is not improvised. The singers learn by ear many traditional tunes, and they use one of these in 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 in this vast repertoire the air that seems more convenient to sustain the theme to be developed. The poet who responds to him must repeat this air bearing a particular feeling. It is the constant support of the poem. Certain tunes are always associated with a peculiar poetic form, including a certain refrain. Sometimes, the singer outlines the chosen tune preluding on his *viola*.

The melodies are composed to sing a note per syllable, except the last one that can be decorated with vibrato or melisma. They are functional to sing a metrical poetry where the lines measure 7, 10 or 11 syllables. The minor mode is exceptional in the melodies, that have a strong modal character. The most frequent modes are our major scale and alterations of this one (the fourth degree of the scale can be pitched a half up, or the seventh pitched a half down, or a combination of both). Often, the notes are not sung in a temperate way, that means there is a slight difference of tone between the sung and the corresponding note in the arm 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. Anyways, the modes are very variable, but the structure remains : 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 can not do without the sound of the strings. They carefully tune the two instruments, which have 7 to 10 strings of metal, some double or triple, grouped in 5 choirs. However, with the exception of some prelude or contrechant, the *viola* music is extremely monotonous. The whole session is accompanied by the swing of the fingers on a single major chord, barely adorned with some 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 the colleague has said, and think about what he is going to say in the next stanza, mounted in a few seconds. The instrument is the poet's tool in 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, usually nostalgic. It will be interpreted by one of the poets who will be accompanied then with diverse harmonies, majors and minors 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 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's the structure that links text to music. They have almost fifty different modalities, in constant evolution : some fall into disuse, new ones emerge, 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 is the *sextilha*, six-lines verse of seven syllables, with rhyme between the even lines. The *décima* is also widely used and considered as a masterpiece in poetic construction. There are two types of *décima* : one has ten lines of seven syllables, one ten lines of ten. To build his verse, the improviser has to find four different rhymes and organize them according to a complex structure, ABBAACCDDC. This is what Spaniards call *décima espinela*, from the name of Vicente Espinel, an Andalusian poet of the sixteenth century. It is still in use in improvised poetry by the Chilean, Argentine and Uruguayan *payadores*, or by Cuban *trovadores*. That means it is one poetic form common to Latin American countries. An important precision :when in Spanish they count 8 syllables in a line, in Portuguese they count 7 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 11 syllables of the Spanish speakers.

Often, the *décima* 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, retake 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 11 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*, the singers can show their virtuosity 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 forwards, inventing new forms, with an objective of excellence. This care of 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 criterion is called *oração*, the others being formal, called *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, aloud or writing it 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 have the obligation 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.

The subject field is very wide. It embraces : poetic art itself, singing the value of poets and the grief of the disappeared ; fun themes, the most appreciated being a challenge among singers ; love, happy or unhappy ; bucolic subjects ; existential or philosophical themes ; those that we can call ethical, moralistic or edifying ; lastly, social and political issues. A *repentista* must know how to sing any subject. That is possible by the preparation of improvisers. They refrain from using verses from memory, but learn many words to fecundate their imagination. They read books, dictionaries, newspapers or the Internet, listen to radio and television, and especially attend the performances of other *repentistas*. Of necessity, they learn of the social, political and newsworthy currentness, because they have to comment it. 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 theatre of rivalry. From a moral point of view, they have complete freedom of speech to speak of power and denounce its abuses and imperfections, in harsh words. The listeners take advantage of that to propose the most palpitating subjects, that the singers will treat with critical spirit. Several times I heard this opinion: "The singers say what the people would say if it 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 meeting said *pé de parede* (at the foot of a wall), as they usually organize in private house for some party, or in bar or restaurant with sharing of benefits between patron and singers. It would be very incomplete without mentioning the new production spaces. Since 1950, contests are organized by cultural associations where poets and apologists 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 are standing on the stage for a

thirty minutes presentation, the *viola* slung over shoulders, next to a jury that imposes the issues and notes the duo, only according to the three criteria *rima*, *métrica* and *oração*. In front of the scene, the spectators encourage their favorites. The winners win trophies, a good cachet and increased fame in the *repente* community, which is highly competitive. The contests are very successful, every week happens at least one in some city of Brazil. Thus, opportunities to put the titles into play are frequent. These competitions, invented by the singers, contributed to the promotion of their art and to professionalize them – now the cachet payment tends to replace the collection on the tray, contracts are substituted for oral commitments. Tradition evolves in this way, thanks to the rivalry between poets who invent unprecedented circumstances to improvise.

This occurs on radio programs devoted to improvisation, produced and animated by poets. During the broadcast, they promote the upcoming events and improvise, despite the physical absence of the public that sends the 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 last years of the last century and the development of tourism on the coast, beaches are a new space for more humble poets. Without request, 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 demands. In these circumstances, in contrast to traditional sessions, there is little interaction, because on the beach they merely beg for money. But the said « beach poets » implanted an unprecedented form of improvisation in inauspicious spaces. These « *poetas de praia* » contribute to the expansion and visibility of their practice.

It is also worth mentioning the recent festivals in public square, in a context of amplified music scene and eclectic programming. There the singers have the opportunity to sing for thousands of people.

The diversification of the actors appears after an opening opportunity. About forty years ago, female poets have emerged in an exclusively male professional environment. The evolution towards the mix of social practices in Brazil was used by these women to speak up in assembly. They equate men in terms of artistic ability and critical spirit, and conform to their vocation as a popular poet saying everything. But it was not easy to emancipate themselves from the reserved attitude traditionally assigned to women. That may explain the small number of active women poets. On the other hand, the audience of singers is mixed ; there are women passionate about poetry who accompany the poets on their tours or do not miss a contest. However, during the research I have met only two female poets : they were witnessing to the difficulty that exists to overcome 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 C.D. like a card to look for contracts. What is recorded is an oral work of a different nature, because it is difficult to improvise in a studio, without inspiration stimulated by requests of listeners. Then, it is not *repente*, but elaborate poems. Instead of writing the poems, the authors repeat them until they reach the best expression. Topics are chosen by the constituted duo and alternate with composite songs. Like a written and published poem, a C.D. 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.

Hence, today's singers estimate that they are thousands and well more numerous than their predecessors. The dynamism of the tradition accompanies a remarkable qualitative evolution : the majority of the *cantadores* of old were illiterate, lived in precarious conditions and cared little for musical, scenic or corporate criteria – that does not reduce anything their quality of great poets whose memory is alive in the tradition. The epigones work to rise socially, studying, promoting good shows, 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 where they take the floor to mobilize the consciences.

**Mobility, urbanization and expansion: animation of a territory**

Without stopping, the *cantadores* go to meet new audiences, who are also very mobile by the characteristic emigration of the northeastern region. The climate of the semiarid Sertão, alternating a dry season and another favorable to the crop, causes seasonal migrations. There are also exoduses due to exceptional droughts. There are other demographic, economic and political reasons : the Nordeste has the worst social indexes in the country, and a negative migration balance with all other regions. A crowd of Nordestinos 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 São Paulo, the largest city in South America. They followed the general urbanization, 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, birthplace of the tradition.

The *cantadores* always moved a lot, on foot or mounted in case of the oldest ones that I have interviewed, born during the first world war. Nowadays, the mobility of the present ones is increasing, due to sociodemographic mutations. By necessity, followed their public, and for the most part urbanized. They took advantage of the modern means of transport, of communication, of information ; conquered the new spaces of expression already mentioned ; raised their school level and their knowledge of the world ; had to attend to more diversified requests from listeners confronting modernity. These new conditions of production stimulated the *cantadores*, since the capacity of adaptation is the spring of an improviser.

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

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

In my research I became interested in other categories of popular poets. For example to allow comparison, the *coquistas* testify that their number is declining, with the opportunities to sing being diminished. Yet, they sing *coco*, a funnier genre than the *repente*, characterized by fast tempo, catchy choruses and entertaining street shows. In their duels, *coquistas* use a very appreciated coarse language and in the *embolada*, they exchange insults... But they improvise partially, memorizing picaresque verses that skillfully arm according to the context and the reactions. Often, they act animating open spaces (streets, squares, fairs), which are not conducive to talk sense. The listeners do not participate in the subject, because *coquistas* do not take orders. They deliver little informative or critical content, unlike what is heard in *cantorias*.

The two genres have similarities : it is a poetry sung in a popular context. But they differ in terms of meaning. When there is more improvisation, a space can be created where free and deep 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* have, wanting to be a spokesman for his Brazilian people.

In conclusion, the songs improvisers animate a territory in which they divulge cultural elements typical of the region where their art appeared. However, this territory where they update the tradition is without limit, due to the expansion of the *repente* by the roads of the 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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