

# Music and Dictatorship in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: a Path for the Construction of National Identities

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**Abstract:** In the last century, dictators made large use of music to spread their ideas through the crowd. Music was one of the tools used to build up national identities that were embraced by the mass and even were embraced by other nations. Based on the idea of construction of national identities, the present essay discusses the means and reasons why some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dictators transformed a regional music genre into a national symbol.

**Keywords:** Music. Dictatorship. National identity.

## **Música e ditadura no século XX: um caminho para a construção de identidades nacionais**

**Resumo:** Durante o século XX, alguns ditadores fizeram vasto uso da música como meio de disseminação de suas ideias entre a população. A música foi uma das ferramentas utilizadas para a criação de identidades nacionais aceitas não só pelo próprio povo em questão como também pela comunidade internacional. Baseada na ideia de construção de identidades nacionais, a presente comunicação vem discutir os meios e razões pelas quais alguns dos ditadores do século passado transformaram gêneros musicais regionais em símbolos nacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Música. Ditadura. Identidade nacional.

It is not uncommon for a Brazilian person, when visiting a foreign country, to be asked to dance samba. People around the world assume that all Brazilians know how to dance it and how to sing a samba song. A similar episode occurs with Spanish people and the flamenco. Both samba and flamenco gained a tremendous projection in the national and international media during periods of dictatorship in Brazil and Spain, respectively. Both has been used as a political tool for the construction of national identities, although they belong to a particular place and to a particular people that cannot culturally represent whole countries like Brazil or Spain, where lots of different dialects in the former and languages in the latter coexist, along with many other ways of living. With it in mind, the main question here is the following: how and why was the music from a particular area used in the construction of a national identity in times of dictatorship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

First of all, if, according to Stuart Hall, “identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation” (HALL 1996: 4), they can be constructed so, when some elements are used

...in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unit – an ‘identity’ in its traditional

meaning (that is, in all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation. (HALL 1996: 4).

In a dictatorship as a form of government, the power is concentrated in the hands of few people and it is generally sustained by force and through people's absence of freedom. But those elements are not enough to control people's acts. A dictator should give something to people too, as in the ancient Roma the politicians would give to their people "bread and circuses" to distract them from relevant political issues. In this meaning, music, side by side with the advent of radio and television, has been used by some dictators from the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way to spread their ideas, to distract people from the abuse of power that they were suffering and to give to these same people the sensation of making part of something bigger, something to be proud of: their national identity, recognized and admired by other nations.

Although the concept of nation is understood in different ways, most specialists agree that it is constructed in discourse, as well as the idea of national identity. The discursive homogenisation of some social elements is necessary to bring up a common sense of unity in a country when the final goal is the construction of a national identity.

The process of national identification is promoted by the emphasis on 'national uniqueness'. By raising individuality, which is a prized value in modern societies, to the national level[...], the governing representatives of a political system mostly conceal their forcible act of homogenisation and erasure of differences which is manifested in the epithet 'national'. (WODAK et al. 2009: 27).

But how do some nations have made use of music to promote their national uniqueness? If we hold on into Simon Frith's suggestion that "...music is a metaphor for identity..." (FRITH 1996: 109), the strategic use of music to inflame a feeling of a national identity on people would be more than recommended. As he said, when we experience music, we are "...placing ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives" (FRITH 1996: 124). So, when a political government is promoting a certain kind of music in its country, at the same time it is extolling and/or creating a certain cultural discourse that comes with that kind of musical experience. When the Brazilian government came to promote samba music in the radio in the 1930s, it was promoting an idea of what to be a Brazilian means.

Brazil, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was a country with a multi-ethnic demographic profile and with a need for a national integration (SHAW 1999: 29). It was basically a rural country, the Republic had been proclaimed just in 1889 and the slavery had its end in 1888. The former slaves were trying to build up their place inside the country's society, the country had watched a massive Italian immigration in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

to help in the coffee plantations as slavery wasn't allowed anymore, the country was starting its way to a life without the rules of the Portuguese crown (the Brazilian Proclamation of Independence from Portugal took place in 1822, but between that year and 1889, Brazil was an independent Empire under the rules of Portuguese Emperors) and the Brazilian government was trying to insert itself into the global economic scenario.

In the 1930s, as a Brazilian dictator Getúlio Vargas started a new form of government based in the idea of populism, nationalism, industrialization and, of course, in the centralization of power. He largely made use of media to spread his ideas to the country's population and to ensure their implementation.

Throughout the Vargas era, debates on the issue of identity had a profound impact on policy-making. The regime's immediate response to this concern was to tighten immigration policy. In the long term every effort was made to promote a self-consciously national culture, of which popular culture formed an important part, and to shape a new historical identity for Brazilians. The early 1930s witnessed a perceptible shift in Brazil's self-image. (SHAW 1999: 30).

In order to promote the popular culture to have the support of the nascent working masses society and to build up a Brazilian identity, samba was targeted as the true Brazilian music. Between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, samba evolved from a marginal musical genre performed almost exclusively in a few, predominantly poor and Afro-Brazilian neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro into the mainstay of a burgeoning industry and a widely recognized symbol of Brazilian national identity. (MCCANN 2004: 41).

Samba, as it is worldwide known, has its roots in the Afro-Brazilian people from Rio de Janeiro city and it had its development after the end of the slavery, in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As it is a kind of music that comes from the mass, and from a slice of the mass that was trying to find its place inside the Brazilian society – the afro-descendants and the former slaves, samba, with its simple melodies, rapidly made his way to people's house through the radio with great acceptance.

It was in 1916 when the samba was first recorded ('Pelo telephone' or 'On the telephone') (SHAW 1999: 4) and despite of the widespread of the radio in Brazil in the 1920s, it was in the 1930s that the samba turned into "the official music" of Brazil through Getúlio Vargas's guidance. His pals and him were "...well aware of the importance of the music as a way of inculcating ideas and reaching individuals on an emotional level" (SHAW 1999: 36), so the radio and the music together were largely used for political purposes in the

Vargas era, who introduced commercial advertisements in the radio – having samba songs as soundtracks, turning it into a source of popular entertainment in the 1930s.

As the commercialization of samba was starting to reach a high-level, white composers started to be attracted by the genre and “these white musicians transformed the samba in order to appeal to a more middle-class audience, making its rhythm less syncopated, and its lyrics and melody more sophisticated and more easily performed by dance hall bands” (SHAW 1999: 52). At the same time the samba black musicians realized that composing lyrics to attend Vargas ideologies would help them to ascend in the social hierarchy (SHAW 1999: 52). So the path to spread samba-music through the country was created.

Another important step to settle down samba as the official music of Brazil was its internationalization. A specific artist had greatly contributed for that in the 1930s and 1940s: Carmen Miranda. As a Brazilian samba singer born in Portugal, she used to perform making use of clothes and accessories that reminded characters of Brazilian culture, as the *baianas* – typical black women from the state of Bahia in Brazil that use long white dresses with very round skirts and white turban-hats.

Carmen easily made her way to Hollywood after performing in Broadway, brought to New York City by an American entrepreneur that had watched her performance in a night club in Rio de Janeiro City. In the film industry, she gained fame and disseminated the samba in the world, singing Brazilian songs translated to English and bringing this music from black Brazilian background up to the world. And her samba came accompanied by some other “turned into Brazilian” elements as sensuality, exoticism and fun due the character of her performances. Being accused of “Americanized”, in Brazil she became

...a symbol alternately accepted and rejected as a part of Brazilian national identity. Miranda’s image influenced the formation of Brazil’s multiracial self-identity as it was reconceptualized in the 1930s, inclusive of the large, disempowered African-Brazilian population, which asserted its presence partially through the acceptance of the music and dance traditions of samba (ROBERTS Spring 93: 12).

In the paragraph below, Shari Roberts summarizes very well the importance of Carmen Miranda in the construction of a Brazilian national identity “made to export”:

While Miranda played a role in shaping a Brazilian national identity, she also affected U.S. war-time national identity negatively by aiding in popular conceptions of the United States and its role in international politics and its relationship to other countries. Miranda’s star text, concomitant with the fad of samba in the United States, influenced the way Brazilian culture came to be understood and identified in the States. For instance, Orson Welles, in his “Hello Americans” broadcast [*Hello Americans*, tape recording available at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York], conflates Brazil with its musical tradition: “The music ... is rich,

deep, Brazilian. It comes rolling down to Rio from the hills, throbs in the streets, everybody dances to it. It's called samba. If you scramble the two words 'music' and 'Brazil' and then unscramble them again you end up with the word 'samba.' Also if you scramble a moderate number of Brazilians together and then unscramble them, you find out they've been dancing the samba...Brazilian babies can beat out a samba rhythm before they can talk, and dance to samba before they can walk." (ROBERTS Spring 93: 14).

The idea of samba as a musical practice that can be found in every Brazilian corner, and not as a *carioca* (from Rio de Janeiro City) musical genre, leads to comments as those above. It is not surprising that Brazilian people are often asked to dance or sing samba, does not matter whether the person is from Northern, Central or Southern Brazil, when actually Brazilians that have “samba in their veins” are the *carioca* ones. This kind of social pressure is sometimes found among Brazilians as well, as those that don't know how to dance samba are often questioned by their compatriots about their Brazilianness, a fact that can be understood as a consequence of nationalist policies that still remains and as a result of manipulation of national and international media towards Brazil's self-image.

But this common misunderstood happens not just with Brazilians and samba. Something similar happens with Argentinians and tango, Spanish and flamenco too, mainly as remain of policies from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as national integration, centralization of power, populism and industrialization.

Lisa Shaw already made a link between samba and tango according to their development in the beginning of last century:

The similarities between the evolution of Brazilian samba and the Argentinian tango from the 1920s to the 1940s are striking. Up until 1917 tango had been the marginalized song and dance form of the suburbs of Buenos Aires, where the rural population settled, its lyrics centred on the denunciation of social conditions. However, when it migrated to the city, these social themes were replaced with a more personal, emotional content[...]As in Brazil, the new media, chiefly radio and cinema in Argentina, brought this form of popular music into mass culture. Like samba, tango became popular in the three main senses of the word, that is, quantitatively by reaching a mass audience, qualitatively by still retaining some of its oppositional elements *vis-à-vis* the dominant elite culture, and yet also becoming a populist form, part of the process of popular mobilization. Peron, like Vargas, although some years later, sought to coopt support for a capitalist path of development among the poor, and under his rule the cultural production of the lower classes, such as tango, was given increased exposure on a national stage. (1999:6).

The first reports about tango are from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was in the 1910s that it became a fever in Europe, brought by young Argentinians from the upper-classes that were sent to European Universities by their families. Although tango wasn't seem as a respectable art by the Argentinian middle and upper-classes, their youngsters used to learn tango in secret as an entertainment. When it arrived in Europe as a couple dance involving improvisation, it turned into a very popular dance in the European ballrooms.

Carlos Gardel, the famous Argentinian singer, invented the *tango-canción* (tango-song) in 1917, achieving great popularity in the Americas and Europe. Tango singers then started to emerge with the advent of the radio, overshadowing tango dancers. In 1935 Juan D'Arienzo's Orchestra created "...the kind of tango music that people wanted to dance to." (DENNISTON 2003). "The period between D'Arienzo's recording contract in 1935 and the military coup that changed everything in Argentina in 1955 is generally considered to be the Golden Age of the Tango" (DENNISTON 2003), and Peron's contribution for tango's golden age during his first term as an Argentinian president (1946-1955) is undeniable: his populist and nationalist policy saw on tango a way to achieve the mass through radio and cinema, thanks to its strong popular appeal.

Through Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain (1936-1975), flamenco could path its way to nationalization and internationalization as well. This kind of music and dance had been used by him as a symbol of Spanish identity and to attract the tourism industry to the country.

Flamenco has its origins in Andalucía, South of Spain, as a result of the contact of Andalucians with gypsies and moors communities. Spain, before Franco's coup, was a country where other languages than Castilian was allowed to be spoken and autonomous provinces as Catalonia and Basque Country started to represent a menace to Spain's sovereignty when Franco arose to power. Franco, as well as Vargas and Peron, was a dictator with nationalist ideas, so the importance of centralization of power and the construction of a Spanish identity to secure the country's consolidation. Under Franco's dictatorship, flamenco, side by side with bullfights and football, were promoted to a national level to instill on people's mind the idea of Spain as an indivisible unity; and as an "exotic" art, flamenco was sold to other countries as the representative of the soul of Spain, attracting tourists from around the world until nowadays.

In the late 1950s Franco sought to elevate the impoverished national economy by opening Spain to tourism. Since this time flamenco has experienced an "unprecedented vogue" in its popularity (Manuel 1989: 47). The experimentation and growth in flamenco has risen to such a national and international degree as to inspire the term 'a new flamenco era' (Caballero 1995). (MALEFYT Apr 98: 65).

As well as samba and tango in South America, flamenco was used by a dictator in the construction of a national identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Samba was promoted inside and

outside Brazil during Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship; tango was first well projected in the international scene and later projected inside Argentina, achieving its apogee during Juan Peron's government; flamenco attracted to Spain tourists from all the world during Francisco Franco's dictatorship. With the advent of the electronic media, those musical genres could achieve national and international projection as representatives of the countries where they came from. They came from marginalized communities, a good reason for populist dictators from Latin-America to turn samba and tango into national expressions, making large use of radio and cinema to spread them in the countries where they belong to. Eager to construct a national identity, so necessary to achieve their political and/or territorial sovereignty, dictatorial governments have shadowed other artistic expressions that coexisted in their countries; they disclosed to the world one single type of music as to frame it as the true expression of a whole nation.

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