Samba and *Brasilidade*

Notions of National Identity
in the Lyrics of Noel Rosa (1910-1937)

In the 1930s, Brazil, and particularly the then capital city, Rio de Janeiro, witnessed the onset of industrialisation and continued attempts to integrate former slaves and their descendants together with white European immigrants, into the emerging working masses. As the culture industry took shape, predominantly in the form of the radio, the record industry and the sound cinema, samba was transformed from a preserve of the Afro-Brazilian descendants of slaves in Rio’s poorer quarters to become a symbol of national self-definition, created and performed for and by a cross-section of the population, and disseminated via the new media. In the late 1920s, Brazil had seen the advent of electrical recordings, which facilitated the reproduction of vocals on disc and led to a boom in the local record industry. The regime of President Getúlio Vargas (1930-45) harnessed the propaganda potential of radio as part of its nation-building strategy and thus, the number of radio stations, transmitters and radio sets multiplied in the early 1930s, within a wider context of urban and industrial growth. Radio stations and record companies in Rio de Janeiro soon began to scour the city for up-and-coming talent, and many of the Afro-Brazilian sambistas from the city’s shantytowns and underprivileged neighbourhoods found themselves composing and performing alongside white middle-class artists, like Noel Rosa (1910-37), in the nascent music industry.

Noel Rosa was the finest lyricist that the samba genre has ever known. He was the first to foreground the lyrics of samba and to break with conventional themes and approaches. The samba rhythm had emerged in the city of Rio in the second decade of the twentieth century, and was thus still something of a novelty when Rosa began his musical career. He was born  

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1. As Stuart Hall has said (1992: 293), « national cultures construct identities by producing meanings about « the nation » with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it ». The Vargas regime in Brazil was certainly no exception, and a sense of « Brazilianness » was instilled by the central government via the press, the radio, and popular music, whilst the nation’s historical memory was preserved in a series of revamped museums, which displayed an incongruous mixture of historical artefacts and contemporary objects associated with the fledgling regime. For more information on the latter, see Daryle Williams, « *Ad perpetuam rei memoriam* : the Vargas Regime and Brazil’s National Historical Patrimony, 1930-1945 », *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 31, 1994 : 45-75.
and brought up in the predominantly white lower-middle- and working-class district of Vila Isabel, in the so-called « Northern Zone » of the city of Rio, a neighbourhood where samba was regularly performed in the street-corner bars or botecins. Rosa was perhaps the first popular composer to suggest that the samba genre was an expression of the Brazilian soul, and his lyrics tap into the contemporary fascination in intellectual and political circles with questions of national character. Against a backdrop of the official nationalist rhetoric of Vargas’s *brasilidade* or Brazilianisation campaign, Rosa’s lyrics display a grass-roots vision of what it meant to be Brazilian in the 1930s. His *brasilidade* is a kind of anti-identity grounded in the often unflattering commonplaces of Brazilian or more specifically *carioca* (Rio) life, such as the gambling, womanising and petty crimes of the *malandro*, a spiv or hustler usually of mixed race. A true champion of popular identity, Rosa was affectionately referred to as « the philosopher of samba » and « the chronicler of everyday life ». He captured the essence of daily existence in Rio’s less glamorous districts with a warts-and-all realism and a liberal dose of humour, but many of his observations display a subtlety which aligns him with the Brazilian Modernist writers and artists, particularly with a group of erudite poets, who, in the same era, were articulating very similar notions of the national spirit. This article will examine a range of Rosa’s lyrics in an attempt to analyse his particular vision of nationhood and how it fitted into wider debates on identity in the 1930s.

The Essence of *Brasilidade*

In his lyrics Rosa highlights the common currency of everyday life, however unflattering, and gives status to the mundane aspects of lower-class existence with which the vast majority of the population of Rio and beyond could identify. Perhaps the most emblematic of his sambas in this respect is « *São coisas nossas* » (« They’re Our Things ») of 1932, inspired by one of the first Brazilian talkies, *Coisas nossas (Our Things)* of the previous year, which featured performances by Rosa and his band, the Bando de Tangará. The lyrics of this samba give status to such unlikely features of daily life as moral degeneration, poverty and the exploitation of the poor. Alongside the street vendors, tram drivers, *malandros*, beautiful mulatto girls, and samba itself, the loan shark is a constant presence in Brazil in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash. The collapse of Brazil’s principal export market, particularly for coffee, the mainstay of the economy, had widespread repercussions.

« *São coisas nossas*, 1932, Noel Rosa
Queria ser pandeiro
Pra sentir o dia inteiro
A tua mão na minha pele a batucar
Saúde do violão e da palhaça
Coisa nossa, coisa nossa

« *They’re Our Things*, 1932, Noel Rosa
I would like to be a tambourine
To feel all day long
Your hand beating on my skin
Longing for the guitar and for the shack
Our things, our things

O samba, a prontidão e outras bossas
São nossas coisas, são coisas nossas

Samba, pennilessness and other fashions
They are our things, they are our things

Malandro que não bebe
Que não come, que não abandonou o samba

The *malandro* who does not drink
Who does not eat, who does not quit the samba
Notions of National Identity in the Lyrics of Noel Rosa (1910-1937)

Rosa’s attitude to life and its trials is very much in keeping with the figure of the pragmatic, devil-may-care malandro. His self-styled obituary “Fita Amarela” (“Yellow Ribbon”), written some five years before his premature death in May 1937, confirms his adoption of the lifestyle of malandragem or idleness and roguery, and his own impudent state. In it he states:

No tenho herdeiros
Não possuo um só vintém
Eu vivi devendo a todos
Mas não paguei nada a ninguém

I have no heirs
I don’t possess a single penny
I lived owing everyone
But I didn’t pay anyone

The only solutions to the problems of material scarcity are to be found in the lifestyle of malandragem, namely to gamble and to fail to pay one’s debts, and to lose oneself in casual liaisons with the opposite sex, but more importantly in samba itself. Throughout Rosa’s œuvre, samba is shown to combat hunger by transporting the practitioner far from the banal realities of life. This malandro ethos is epitomised in the opening verse of the following samba:

« Capricho de rapaz solteiro », 1933,
Noel Rosa

O mundo me condena
E ninguém tem pena
Falamdo sempre mal do meu nome

The world condemns me
And nobody takes pity on me
Always speaking ill of me

In the same vein, the samba “Filosofia” (“Philosophy”), written with André Filho in 1933, can be seen as a summing up of Rosa’s whole attitude to life and the society in which he lived, an attitude that owed much to the counter-culture of malandragem. It begins:

O mundo me condena
E ninguém tem pena
Falamdo sempre mal do meu nome

The world condemns me
And nobody takes pity on me
Always speaking ill of me

Since samba kills his hunger
The pretty mulatto girl from the country
They are our things, they are our things
Street traders, newspaper vendors
Tram drivers and passengers
Loan sharks and conmen
And the tram that looks like a cart
Our things, very much ours
The girl courting
On the street corner and in a doorway
A married man with ten children and no money
If her father finds out he’ll use his fists
Our things, very much ours

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O mundo me condena
E ninguém tem pena
Falamdo sempre mal do meu nome

The world condemns me
And nobody takes pity on me
Always speaking ill of me
Deixando de saber  
Se eu vou morrer de sede  
Ou se vou morrer de fome  

Mas a filosofia  
Hoje me auxilia  
A viver indiferente assim  
Nesta prontidão sem fim  
Vou fingindo que sou rico  
Pra ninguém zombar de mim  

But my philosophy  
Today helps me  
To remain indifferent  
In these endless hard times  
I pretend to be rich  
So that nobody mocks me  

Rosa’s depictions of a penniless life are tempered with a liberal helping of comedy, and his use of humour and surreal imagery sets him apart from other *sambistas* of the day, whose evocations of the life of the poor were overwhelmingly prosaic. In the following samba, Rosa pulls no punches when exposing the penury that he saw all around him, but lightens the mood with the humour of the second and third verses, and the inspired simile of the latter:  

« Sem tostão », circa 1932, Noel Rosa and Arthur Costa  
De que maneira  
Eu vou me arranjar  
Pro senhorio não me despejar?  
Pois eu hoje saí do plantão  
Sem tostão! Sem tostão!  
Já perguntei na Prefeitura  
Quanto tenho que pagar  
Pra viver sem almoçar  
Veio um funcionário  
E gritou bem indisposto  
Que pra ser assim tão magro  
Tenho que pagar imposto!  

Já perguntei na Prefeitura  
Quanto tenho que pagar  
Pra viver sem almoçar  
Veio um funcionário  
E gritou bem indisposto  
Que pra ser assim tão magro  
Tenho que pagar imposto!  

E quando eu passo pela praça  
Quase como o chafariz  
Quando a minha fome aperta  
Dou dentadas no nariz  
Ensinei meu cachorrinho  
A passar sem ter comida  
Quando estava acostumado  
Ele disse adeus à vida!  

And when I go across the square  
Almost like the fountain in the middle  
When my hunger pangs strike  
I bite on my nose  
I taught my little dog  
To pass by without seeing food  
When he’d got used to this  
He passed on from this life!  

In spite of his veneration of the *malandro* anti-hero, Rosa’s portrayal of the figure is strikingly out of line with that of his contemporaries for its realistic and human touch. He blows the whistle on the impoverished life that the bohemian spiv really led, and peels away the confident swagger and eternal bravado of this icon of mixed-race sub-culture. In the tellingly entitled samba  

2. Rosa makes a casual dig at bureaucracy in the second verse of this samba, a feature of his lyrics that is explored later in this article.
« Malandro medroso » (« Fearful malandro ») of 1930, for example, the malandro candidly admits to being frightened of a love rival. Rosa writes:

A consciência agora que me doeu  
My conscience hurt me
Eu evito a concorrência  
I avoid competition
Quem gosta de mim sou eu  
I look after myself
Neste momento, eu saudoso me retiro  
Now I miss you but I'll get out of the way
Pois teu velho é ciumento  
'Cos your old man is the jealous type
E pode me dar um tiro  
And might give a shot at me

Rosa shuns the rhetoric of nationalism, but nevertheless articulates his own, « popular » version of patriotism, which resides in the coinage of everyday thought and particularly in that most Brazilian of cultural products, the samba. In his lyrics samba is an antidote to poverty and it has the power to transform everyday existence (and nature itself in the samba « Feitiço da Vila » examined in detail later). Those who create samba, as well as their art form itself, become the focus of patriotic pride. For Rosa samba represents the essence of brasileidade and of the national psyche, and it is an innate gift of the Brazilian people. As he writes in the samba « Coração » (« Heart »), of 1931:

Coração de sambista brasileiro  
The heart of the Brazilian sambista
Quando bate no pulmão  
When it beats against the lung
Faz a batida do pandeiro  
Beats the rhythm on tambourine

Rosa appeals to the man in the street’s shared perception of and familiarity with banal aspects of life and the incursions of modernity by incorporating into his lyrics contemporary references, such as brand names, and snippets of local knowledge. In the samba « De Babado » (« With Frills ») of 1936, written with João Mina, he writes, for example, « Vamos comprar o Mossoró! » (« Let’s buy Mossoró! »), in an allusion to the winning horse of the first « Grande Prêmio Brasil » race of 1933. With the advent of both radio and consumerism, the creators of samba and other forms of popular song began to include indirect allusions to products and trade names in exchange for cash payment. Ever with his finger on the pulse, Rosa copied this trend even when there was no commercial interest, and it is said that one night in 1935, in a cabaret bar in the city of Vitória in the state of Espírito Santo, the sambista improvised the following lines, in which he pays homage to a young lady, but also to a famous make of cigarette of the same name made by the Souza Cruz tobacco company:

É você a que comanda  
You are the one that is in control
E o meu coração conduz  
And leads my heart
Salve a dona Yolanda  
Three cheers for lady Yolanda
Rainha da Souza Cruz  
Queen of Souza Cruz

Similarly, the name of a popular brand of cigarettes appears in the second verse of the samba « João Ninguém » (« Joe Nobody »), of 1935, which paints a picture of an everyman figure, a would-be malandro who is destitute and down on his luck:

João Ninguém  
Joe Nobody
Não trabalha e é dos tais  
Doesn’t work and is one of those
Que joga sem ter vintém
E fuma Liberty Ovais
Esse João nunca se expôs ao perigo
Nunca teve um inimigo
Nunca teve opinião

Who gambles without a penny to his name
And smokes Liberty Ovals
This Joe never exposed himself to danger
He never had an enemy
He never had an opinion

The Veneration of the Local Neighbourhood or Bairro

Rosa’s imagined community was that of the down-market districts or bairros of the city of Rio, a microcosm of working-class life throughout urban Brazil. He homed in on the trivial minutiae of everyday existence rather than more grandiose visions of what it meant to be Brazilian in the 1930s. In was not uncommon for sambistas to write eulogies for the areas of the city that they knew as home, but Rosa held his home district of Vila Isabel in particular affection, and wrote many songs in praise of this lower-middle-class area of Rio’s less attractive « Northern Zone ». In « Eu vou pra Vila » (« I’m off to Vila ») of 1930 he writes:

Na Pavuna tem turuna
Na Gamboa gente boa
Eu vou pra Vila
Aonde o samba é da coroa
Já sai da Piedade
Já mudei de Cascadura
Eu vou pra Vila
Pois quem é bom não se mistura

In Pavuna there are big guys
In Gamboa good people
I’m off to Vila
To where the samba is top-class
I left Piedade
I moved away from Cascadura
I’m off to Vila
‘Cos good guys stay faithful’

Rosa is forever at pains to show that Vila Isabel produces samba of the quality of that created in any of its other strongholds in the city, most importantly the Afro-Brazilian neighbourhoods where the rhythm first appeared. As he says in the samba « Palpite Infeliz » (« Unfortunate Suggestion ») of 1935, « a Vila não quer abafar ninguém/ Só quer mostrar que faz samba também » (« Vila doesn’t want to steal the show from anyone/ It only wants to show that it makes samba too »). He stresses that samba from Vila Isabel is a more refined version, which represents Brazil as a whole, not merely the descendants of African slaves. Middle-class sambistas from Vila Isabel, like himself, have elevated the status of samba and transformed it into poetry, a form of high art. He believes that samba is an expression of nationality that needs to be nurtured and renewed. This is clearly revealed in the opening verses of the following samba, in which the associations between the early samba and Afro-Brazilian religious practices are eliminated in Vila’s version, making the music more respectable and a more fitting symbol of the entire population:

Na Pavuna tem turuna
Na Gamboa gente boa
Eu vou pra Vila
Aonde o samba é da coroa
Já sai da Piedade
Já mudei de Cascadura
Eu vou pra Vila
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3. Pavuna, Gamboa, Piedade and Cascadura were all working-class districts in Rio de Janeiro’s « Northern Zone » in the 1930s.
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« Feitiço da Vila », 1934, Noel Rosa and Vadico

« Vila’s Magic Spell », 1934, Noel Rosa and Vadico

Quem nasce lá na Vila
Those born in Vila

Nem sequer vacila
Don’t even hesitate

Ao abraçar o samba
To embrace samba

Que faz dançar os galhos
Which makes the branches dance

Do arruredo
In the grove

E faz a lua nascer mais cedo
And makes the moon come out earlier

Lá em Vila Isabel
There in Vila Isabel

Quem é bacharel
Those with talent

Não tem medo de bamba
Aren’t afraid of other experts

São Paulo dá café
São Paulo gives us coffee

Minas dá leite
Minas Gerais gives us milk

E a Vila Isabel dá samba
And Vila Isabel gives us samba

A Vila tem
Vila has

Um feitiço sem farofa
A magic spell without manioc flour

Sem vela e sem vintém
Without candles or coins

Que nos faz bem
That does us good

Tendo nome de princesa
Having the name of a princess

Transformou o samba
It transformed samba

Num feitiço decente
Into a decent spell

Que prende a gente
That enthralls us

Via his use of the term « feitiço » or magic spell and the references to manioc flour, candles and coins, items used in the rituals of candomblé or macumba, Afro-Brazilian religious cults common in all areas of Rio but particularly in the shantytowns, Rosa creates an opposition between the traditional bastions of samba and the newcomers, like Vila Isabel, which do not need to resort to « witchcraft » to enchant their audiences. Shortly after writing this samba, Rosa said in interview that it could just as easily have been entitled « Feitiço da Minha Pátria » (« The Spell of My Homeland »), giving a clear indication that his micro vision of what being a Brazilian was all about was intended to have much wider resonance4.

The bourgeois city centre, with its insincere and pretentious population, is drawn in sharp contrast to the welcoming and authentic but poorer northern neighbourhoods and suburbs, where true Brazilian fashions and cultural products thrive and alien, imported ideas are shunned. As Rosa says in the samba « Voltaste (pro subúrbio) » (« You Returned [to the Suburb »]) of 1934 :

Voltaste pra mostrar ao nosso povo
You returned to show our people

Que não há nada de novo
That there’s nothing new

Lá no centro da cidade
Down there in the city centre

Voltaste demonstrando claramente
You returned showing clearly

Que o subúrbio é ambiente
That the suburb is an environment

De completa liberdade
Of total freedom)

In his samba « O X do problema » (« The Crux of the Problem ») of 1936 the cultural clash between middle- and working-class Rio is again underlined, and the inability of the city’s less wealthy residents to sever ties with their home districts is emphasised. In spite of the lure of wealth and the pull of

modernity, the girl in question is incapable of breaking the bond with Estácio de Sá, a down-market neighbourhood in the north of Rio, synonymous with samba and the home of Brazil’s first escola de samba or carnival group:

Já fui convidada
Para ser estrela no nosso cinema
Ser estrela é bem fácil
Sair do Estácio é que é
O X do problema

I’ve been invited
To be a film star
Being a star is really easy
Leaving Estácio is what’s
The crux of the problem

The journalist Pedro Bloch summed up the significance of Rosa’s veneration of his home, stating: « Wanting to sing about his home district, Noel managed to sing about the whole city, Brazil, the world. Vila Isabel is the symbolic name of the home district of every human being on the face of the earth. It is the charm of childhood, of the stone on the ground, of the guava-tree or a tree found in gardens of any latitude. By being dyed-in-the-wool Brazilian, he manages to capture everyone’s heart »5.

Reactions to Alien Cultural Trends and Foreigners

Noel Rosa saw the malandro as the guardian of grass-roots identity in the face of the incursions of imported cultural forms and of bourgeois attitudes and lifestyles. He perceived Brazilianness as being under threat, as a result, in particular, of the invasion of foreigners and their fashions. As Bryan McCann says of Rosa (2001 : 3): « He sought not only to define Brazilian national identity but to achieve it, become worthy of it, and to protect it. He perceived Brazilianness as an endangered quality, threatened by the encroachments of foreigners and squandered by bad Brazilians ». The popularity of Hollywood fashions, such as bottle-blond hair and anglicisms, was a particular source of irritation for Rosa 6. In his samba « Não tem tradução » (« There’s No Translation »), he attacks the talking cinema as a promoter of imported trends and a symbol of homogenised modernity, and clearly sees this medium as a vehicle for disseminating a pervasive alien culture. Here new dance and musical forms, such as the foxtrot almost lead even the malandro astray. Sound cinema had a dramatic impact on popular music in Brazil; Portuguese versions of the hit songs from Hollywood musicals were recorded in Brazil, and some Brazilian singers began to record songs in English. Soon English phrases found their way into everyday vernacular, and typically the smooth-talking malandro incorporated « hello » and « byebye » into his linguistic repertoire. Rosa was not the only popular musician to ridicule this trend. The white composer Lamartine Babo, most famous for his carnival marches or marchinhas, wrote a foxtrot called « Canção para inglês ver » (« A Song To Impress the English ») which brought together a nonsensical mix of Portuguese and English words and phrases: « I love you, abacaxi, uísque de chuchu » (« I love you, pineapple, whiskey of chayote », the latter a kind of vegetable common in Brazil, but also a popular nickname for

6. The French-Swiss poet B. CENDRARS (1987 : 162) commented on the « Hollywood effect » on ladies fashions in Brazil in the late 1920s. During a stay in Brazil he witnessed the impact of the film Platinum Blonde, in that within a week of its premiere mulatto and black women began to show off their freshly dyed blond hair and powdered pink faces in the city centre.
President Vargas, a reflection of his pear-shaped physique). Similarly, Assis Valente wrote another carnival march which went « Não se fala mais boa noite, nem bom dia/ Só se fala good morning, good night » (« We don’t say good evening any more, not even hello/ We only say good morning, good night »).

In this samba Rosa fiercely defends Brazil’s linguistic independence from the former colonial power, Portugal, as well as critiquing the influence of English and French, and it is the unschooled morro or hillside shantytown that has produced inventive slang that distinguishes the two variants of Portuguese. Samba is once again glorified as the essence of national identity. It cannot be translated into other languages as it is intrinsically Brazilian, and must remain untainted by the farcical fashion for singing in English. As he implies in the last line, only the affluent, fickle inhabitants of the middle-class districts of the city (the only ones who could afford to own telephones) would pretentiously pepper their speech with anglicisms.

The Portuguese are ridiculed in Rosa’s lyrics, maintaining a tradition of jokes at the expense of this particular immigrant community. In « Vingança de malandro » (« The Malandro’s Revenge ») of 1930, the protagonist of the lyrics has been abandoned by his former lover in favour of a Portuguese, but not surprisingly the latter is soon made to look an utter fool :

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« Não tem tradução », 1933, Noel Rosa
O cinema falado
É o grande culpado
Da transformação
Dessa gente que sente
Que um barracão
Prende mais que um xadrez
Lá no morro, se eu fizer uma falseta
A Risoléta
Desiste logo do francês e do inglês
A gíria que o nosso morro criou
Bem cela a cidade aceitou e assou
Mais tarde o malandro deixou de sambar
Dando pitote
E só querendo dançar o fox-trot
Essa gente hoje em dia
Que tem a mania
Da exibição
Não se lembra que o samba
Não tem tradução
No idioma francês
Tudo aquilo que o malandro pronuncia
Com voz macia
É brasileiro, já passou de português
Amor, lá no morro, é amor pra chuchu
As rimas do samba não são « I love you »
E esse negócio de « állô, állô, boy »
« Allô, Johnny »
Só pode ser conversa de telefone

There’s No Translation », 1933, Noel Rosa
The talking cinema
Is the major cause
Of the transformation
Of those who feel
That a shantytown shack
Holds you more than a prison cell
Up on the hill if I play a dirty trick
Risoleta
Gives up on her French and English
The slang that our shantytowns created
Quickly the city accepted and used
Later the malandro stopped dancing samba
Playing his guitar
And only wanted to dance the foxtrot
Those people today
Who are obsessed
With showing off
Don’t remember that samba
Cannot be translated
Into the French language
Everything that the malandro utters
When smooth talking
Is Brazilian, no longer Portuguese
Love, up on the hill, there’s loads of it
The rhymes of samba are not « I love you »
And that stuff about « hello, hello, boy »
« Hello, Johnny »
Can only be telephone talk

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Today it is more than a month
Since she abandoned me
to live with a Portuguese
Deceiving with affection
She exploited that little angel
She put his house up for auction
And then beat him up
Right in the clown’s face
She came to ask me to forgive her

In the samba « Voltaste (pro subúrbio) » (« You Returned [to the Suburb] »), referred to earlier, the malandro protagonist cheats the local butcher, a profession that commonly was associated with Portuguese immigrants, and thus once again this group is made to look naïve and foolish. Throughout Rosa’s work Brazilian identity is created via the exclusion of the « other », whether it be Hollywood-inspired vogues or members of the nation’s ever-expanding immigrant population. Accusations of xenophobia and particularly of anti-Semitism can easily be levelled at Noel Rosa, but his jibes at immigrants must be seen in the wider context of his assertion of national identity in the face of the encroachment of imported trends and cultural products. His personal experience of penury and of family debt also informs his portrayal of the moneylender or voracious entrepreneur. Vila Isabel attracted travelling salesmen and loan sharks, the latter mostly European immigrants, including some Portuguese, but collectively known as judeus (Jews) or turcos (literally Turks, but, in most cases, Syrio-Lebanese Christians who had been subjects of the Ottoman Empire). Rosa sensed the whole community’s dependence on and fear of these immigrants. In the samba « Quem dá mais? » (« Who’ll Give Me More? »), also known as « Leilão do Brasil » (« The Auction of Brazil ») of 1930, it is no coincidence that one of the lots up for grabs, a guitar which is said to have belonged to Brazil’s emperor Pedro I and to have been pawned by José Bonifácio (1763-1838), the statesman and champion of independence from Portugal, is snapped up by a judeu who will sell it to a museum for double the price7.

Immigrants threaten Brazil’s heritage in Rosa’s lyrics, at a time when immigration policy was weighted heavily in favour of white European Christians, and openly discriminated against those who fell outside this group. In the 1930s Brazilians became more self-conscious and questions of identity became highly politicised. The eugenics movement in Brazil reached the height of its influence during the first Vargas years, and as a direct consequence the Constituent Assembly of the mid-1930s passed a number of measures which established immigration quotas on Asians and blacks, and gave the State the power to regulate marriages. The early 1930s thus witnessed a shift in national self-image, as white European immigration was glorified and encouraged as an essential part of the process of branqueamento or whitening. Suddenly the Brazilian State deemed that many of the immigrants who had entered the country prior to 1930 were not now acceptably « white ». Thus Vargas’s policies modified the notion of race to embrace what would now be termed ethnicity and religion. Overnight the

7. The ironic implication here is that Brazil has always been bankrupt and the victim of economic mismanagement, a theme that is explored later in the section on Rosa’s undermining of authority and debunking of official rhetoric.
term « European » came to mean white, and did not apply to Jews or Arabs, who were neither black nor white. Despite the fact that both groups had freely entered Brazil before 1930, they were now portrayed in the press as a threat to the fabric of the Brazilian nation. Whilst Noel flies in the face of the anti-African racism implicit in this new ideology of nation by venerating the figures of the mixed-race malandro and the mulatto girl, he appears once or twice to fall in line with other ethnic prejudices of the day.

Race is of course central to the question of identity in Brazil. Whilst the ruling elite sought to foreground the country’s imagined « white » identity and to develop it further via the policy of branqueamento and selective immigration, popular artists like Noel Rosa, and the Modernist poets in erudite literature, attempted to give value to the nation’s black inheritance in their exploration of what it meant to be Brazilian in the 1930s. The inhabitants of Rio’s poorer quarters, predominantly of mixed race, are for Rosa the true Brazilians. If he places the mulatto malandro spiv on a pedestal, it is perhaps no surprise that in his lyrics the epitome of female sensuality and attractiveness is the archetypal mulata. This mixed-race beauty is the essence of Brazilian identity, a notion propounded most famously by Gilberto Freyre in his seminal work on Brazil’s racial legacy and identity, Casa-grande & senzala (The Masters and the Slaves), first published in 1933. Like Freyre, Rosa argues that Brazil’s history of miscegenation and racial mixture should be embraced as a positive aspect of the nation.

As he writes in « Leite com café » (« Milk with Coffee ») of 1935:

A morena lá do morro
Cheia de beleza e graça
Simboliza a nossa grande raça
É cor de leite com café

And the blonde girl from the city
Was never my type
When I’m near her I catch a cold
Because she’s so icy


09. In practice, when the Vargas regime did acknowledge the cultural contributions of black Brazilians, the desired effect was to co-opt them, whether it be samba, feijoada (the national dish invented in colonial times by slaves using the scraps of meat discarded by their masters) or the candomblé religion, in order to remove their power as ethnic/racial identity markers, and to incorporate them into the nation as a whole, as symbols of national identity.

10. The title of this samba plays with the term « café com leite » (literally « coffee with milk »), which was commonly used to refer to the politics of the first three decades of the twentieth century in Brazil. During this period there was a tacit agreement that the national presidents would be chosen alternately by the state of São Paulo, the country’s major coffee producer, and the state of Minas Gerais, known for its dairy cattle as well as its coffee plantations. Here Noel is again expressing his irreverent attitude towards the nation in comic fashion.
Undermining Authority and Debunking Official Rhetoric

As well as creating his own definition of national consciousness, Rosa takes great pleasure in undermining the narrative of nation, described by Stuart Hall (1992: 293) as « a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation ». In his lyrics, he demolishes the icons and emblems of an official identity with comic irreverence and exposes the rhetoric of nation as a sham. Established cultural representations of civic abstractions, such as the national anthem, the Brazilian flag and the celebrations held on Independence Day, are debunked and replaced by more earthy, bona fide tokens of his imagined community. Since his school days he had been creating musical parodies of Brazil’s national anthem and in 1929 he wrote the samba « Com que roupa? » (« In What Clothes? »), which copied the melody of the first line of the anthem. Although, to avoid censorship, he was obliged subsequently to change the opening bars before the song was recorded on disc or reproduced on sheet music, the melodies of the two songs are strikingly similar. By setting to this tune lyrics which expose the reality of a poverty-stricken population in the wake of the Wall Street Crash and the impact of the latter on the Brazilian economy, Rosa clearly had a profane irony in mind. (The title of the samba refers to the fact that he has no clothes to wear to a samba party, and he describes himself as being covered in rags). The lyrics obviously struck a chord with the local population, since fifteen thousand copies of the record were sold, a figure rarely attained by Rosa’s contemporaries. Benedict Anderson (1993: 145) has emphasised the importance of national songs or anthems, stating: « No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity […] Singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesian Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community ». Ironically, Rosa’s parody of Brazil’s national anthem proved to be a similarly powerful anti-establishment hymn which permitted its audience to form a common bond and fostered a sense of belonging to a shared reality of economic hardship11.

The positivist philosophy of the French mathematician Auguste Comte (1798-1857) adopted by the Republican regime in Brazil, provides the basis for the satirical samba « Positivismo » (« Positivism ») of 1933, written by Rosa and the popular poet Orestes Barbosa. The motto of the philosophy, « ordem e progresso » (« order and progress »), which appears on the Brazilian national flag, is transplanted to the sphere of romantic love:

1. The Modernist poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade was later to write a poem entitled « Hino Nacional » (« National Anthem », Brejo das almas, 1934) in which he calls into question the very existence of Brazil. The Modernists, like Rosa, considered the problem of Brazil’s existence as a nation and reflected the constant uncertainty about what it meant to be Brazilian in an era of dramatic social change. Their work demonstrates many of the same concerns and approaches as found in Rosa’s lyrics. For the poets, like Rosa, language itself, more specifically the vernacular of the street, was a source of national identity and pride (see Oswald’s « Pronominais », Pau-Brasil, 1925), and the reality of Brazil in the late 1920s and 1930s was one of both tradition and change, underdevelopment and modernity (see Oswald’s « Pobre alma mária », Pau-Brasil, 1925). They, like the sambista, attacked ready-made, cliché representations of nationhood (as seen in Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s « Também já fui brasileiro », Alguma Poesia, 1930), and acknowledged the erosion of their identity as a consequence of mass immigration (see Mário de Andrade’s « Improviso do mal da América », Remate de males, 1928).
O amor vem por princípio, a ordem por base
O progresso é que deve vir por fim
Desprezaste esta lei de Augusto Comte
E foste ser feliz longe de mim

Love comes on principle, order as a basis
Progress must come last
You ignored this law of Augusto Comte
And went off to be happy far from me)

The undermining of establishment patriotism is similarly seen in « Cordiais saudações » (« Cordial Greetings ») of 1931, in which Rosa pokes fun at the military celebrations held every year on Brazilian Independence day, 7 September. Written in the form of a letter asking for repayment of a loan, this samba humorously refers to the protagonist’s impecunious state (« Espero que notes bem/ Estou agora sem um vintém » [« I hope that you take note/ That now I’m broke »]) and is signed « Rio, 7 September 1931 ». With this facetious, almost throw-away reference to the « Day of the Fatherland », when the military must symbolically express their allegiance and respect for authority and national emblems like the Brazilian flag and the Republic’s arms, Rosa derides all the pomp and ceremony of the elite’s event of the year.

Rosa equally enjoys poking fun at the inadequacies of Brazil’s institutions and its lumbering, bureaucratic civil service as a constant source of amusement. In the samba « Picilone » (« The Letter Y ») of 1931, for example, he jokes about the spelling changes introduced to the Portuguese language as a result of the controversial orthographical agreement signed in that same year by Brazil and Portugal. Rosa picks out one aspect of this accord, namely the substitution of the letter « i » for « y » in the Portuguese alphabet. The lyrics are deliberately farcical and the tone derisory :

Yvone ! Yvone !
Eu ando roxo pra te dizer um picilone !
Já reparai outro dia
Que o teu nome, ó Yvone
Na nova ortografia
Já perdeu o picilone

Yvone ! Yvone !
I’m dying to say a letter « y » to you !
I noticed the other day
That your name, oh Yvone
In the new orthography
Has lost its « y »

The senseless concerns of red tape are drawn in opposition to serious issues like economic hardship, and as Rosa says in the final verse :

Causei de andar só de tanga
Já perdi a paciência

I’m tired of going aroundin a loin cloth
I’m out of patience

In the same vein, he wrote two sambas about the decision made by the Vargas regime in 1931 to move all the clocks forward in Brazil by one hour, both of which contrast the triviality of the government’s preoccupations with the dire realities of life for the poor. The nonsensical gibberish which characterises both sets of lyrics forms part of Rosa’s insistent mockery and sceptical attitude towards the pompous obscurantism of the ruling elite. « Por causa da hora » (« Because of the Hour ») of 1931 ends on a suitably ironic note :

Como vou pagar agora
Tudo o que comprei a prazo
Se ando com um mês de atraso?

How am I going to pay for now
Everything that I bought on tick
If I’m a month behind?

12. Rosa chooses to use the word picilone, the colloquial and infantilised form of epsilon or hipsilo (the letter « y »), thus adding to the mockery and further undermining officialdom.
Eu que sempre dormi durante o dia
Ganhei mais uma hora pra descanso
Agradeço ao avanço
De uma hora no ponteiro
Viva o dia brasileiro!

I’ve always slept during the day
So I’ve gained another hour’s rest
I’m grateful for the putting forward
Of the clock’s hand by one hour
Long live the Brazilian day!

And in « O pulo da hora » (« The Leap of the Hour ») Rosa writes :

O carioca
Perdeu a calma e a paz
A hora pulou pra frente
E a nota pulou pra trás

The inhabitant of Rio
Has lost his cool
The hour leaped forward
And the banknote leaped back

For Rosa the economic crisis of the early 1930s became a source of comedy and an excuse to ridicule authority with the characteristic wit and disrespect of the malandro. He stated at the end of 1932 : « Antes, a palavra samba tinha um único sinônimo : mulher. Agora já não é assim. Há também o dinheiro, a crise. O nosso pensamento se desvia também para esses gravíssimos temas ». (« Previously, the word samba had only one synonym : woman. It’s not like that any more. There’s also money, the crisis. Our thoughts stray also to those very serious topics »)13

Rosa frequently mimics the empty appeals to patriotism of President Vargas himself, incorporating and comically undermining well-known government campaign slogans such as in « Samba da boa vontade » (« Good-will Samba ») of 1931, written with João de Barro, the title and opening line of which satirise Vargas’s calls for sacrifice and optimism from his people :

Campanha da boa vontade!
Viver alegre hoje é preciso
Conserva sempre o teu sorriso
Mesmo que a vida esteja feia
E que vives na pinimba
Passando a pirão de areia

The good-will campaign!
It’s necessary to live happily today
Always keep smiling
Even if life is ugly
And you’re living in a right state
Making your porridge with sand

Official rhetoric is always sharply contrasted with the grim realities of life for the majority, albeit in comic fashion. In the samba « No baile da Flor-de-Lis » (« In the Flor-de-Lis Dance ») for example, the trite establishment discourse voiced, perhaps, over the airwaves or by an official in person, forms a humorous contrast with the uncouth behaviour of those at whom it is directed, who simply want to get drunk :

Acabando o que era doce
Uma voz manifestou-se
E a sala fez tremer
« Esperamos por dinheiro
E que cada brasileiro
Cumpra com seu dever! »
Encontrei muito funil
A chorar junto ao barril
Quando o chope se esgotou
 Houve a tal pancadaria

Putting an end to the good times
A voice was heard
And the room shook
« We are hoping for money
And that all Brazilians
Will do their duty! »
I found lots of blokes
Crying by the barrel
When the beer ran out
There was a punch-up

Com a qual se anuncia
Que o baile terminou
Which announced
That the dance was over

In place of the hollow symbols of a sanctioned nationhood, Rosa venerates the anti-hero or malandro, and unofficial, informal institutions, such as the concept of jeito or jeitinho, a way of subverting authority, evading the law, or using one’s contacts for personal advantage, which is an accepted constant in Brazilian life. Although similar mechanisms exist throughout the world, what is unique about the Brazilian case is that it has become a recognised institution and a central element in the social construction of national identity. The jeitinho brasileiro is a way of defining brasilidade, since it eliminates hierarchies of ethnicity, gender or class, and unites all Brazilians on an equalised, homogeneous footing. The malandro is often described as jeitinho incarnate, and his hero status in the lyrics of samba serves to underline the importance of this ethos to the national psyche. As Lívia Neves de H. Barbosa says (1995: 46), jeitinho is an emphasis of the human and natural aspects of social reality, rather than on political, bureaucratic or institutional aspects. Rosa too, therefore, can be seen as jeitinho incarnate. He mocks Brazil’s political leaders, the deficiencies of the civil service and time-wasting petty bureaucracy, whilst glorifying the figures of the mixed-race spiv and the alluring mulatto girl, the cultural products of the lower classes, in particular the samba, and the banalities of everyday existence in the most humble of urban areas. He does not deny the existence of an imagined community, but he redefines it and locates its heart in the local neighbourhood with which people are intimately familiar, rather than in some wider, abstract concept of the nation.

In his samba lyrics Noel Rosa considers notions of community and identity, but looks not to what he perceives as phoney symbols imposed from above, but rather to the self-styled icons and cultural products of the ordinary people, however mundane, such as samba, the counter-culture of malandragem, and everyday life in the shantytown or down-market district. His lyrics mirror changing theoretical perspectives on Brazil’s mixed-race legacy among the intelligentsia in that they celebrate miscegenation and assert Brazil’s cultural independence, yet his criticism of immigrants and alien cultural influences equally reflects the Vargas regime’s use of xenophobia and racism as political tools. Like the Brazilian Modernists, Rosa wanted to elevate the status of popular culture, more specifically samba itself, and was preoccupied with the question of identity in the face of the incursions of modernity. In tune with the politicians and intellectuals of the day, he asked himself what Brazil’s citizens had in common, what bound them together, and what could be defined as truly Brazilian in such a vast and disparate country. As Bryan McCann writes, «Rosa’s formulations were particularly well suited to the early and mid-1930s, when a variety of intellectual and popular cultural producers pursued nationalist inquiries along several different lines. The Vargas government had not yet developed the capability to direct those inquiries, nor to censor critical expressions, leaving the field open for a relatively wide range of formulations of national identity (McCann 2001: 13).

As Benedict Anderson affirms in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1993: 113-114), popular nationalism can differ greatly from the official version, endorsed by the elite, which relies on
emblems of national definition. Rosa’s prosaic vision of brasilidade does not just contradict the formal rhetoric of nationhood, but actually mocks and comically calls it into question. The Brazilian cultural historian, Nicolau Sevcenko (1998 : 592) has described the impact of the radio and the cinema on the urban population’s sense of community in the 1930s, explaining how with the disintegration of the extended family as a consequence of urbanisation and migration from rural areas, familial and neighbourhood links were replaced by media icons, whose omnipresence created a sense of familiarity. Thus photographic or celluloid images, and voices on gramophone records or on the radio, were easier for ordinary people to assimilate than their fellow city-dwellers, with their idiosyncrasies and foibles. Throughout the twentieth century popular music has helped to construct and to articulate changes in community and identity in Brazil, but in the 1930s in particular the radio and record industry were instrumental in conjuring up imagined communities for Brazil’s predominantly illiterate lower classes, and the lyrics of popular song articulated and helped to foster a sense of belonging.

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