

## **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<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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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 *botequins*. 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  
Saudade do violão e da palhoça  
Coisa nossa, coisa nossa*

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

*Malandro que não bebe  
Que não come, que não abandona o samba*

#### « 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

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

The *malandro* who does not drink  
Who does not eat, who does not quit the samba

<i>Pois o samba mata a fome</i>	Since samba kills his hunger
<i>Morena bem bonita lá da roça</i>	The pretty mulatto girl from the country
<i>Coisa nossa, coisa nossa</i>	They are our things, they are our things
<i>Baleiro, jornaleiro</i>	Street traders, newspaper vendors
<i>Motoneiro, condutor e passageiro</i>	Tram drivers and passengers
<i>Prestamista e vigarista</i>	Loan sharks and conmen
<i>E o bonde que parece uma carroça</i>	And the tram that looks like a cart
<i>Coisa nossa, muito nossa</i>	Our things, very much ours
<i>Menina que namora</i>	The girl courting
<i>Na esquina e no portão</i>	On the street corner and in a doorway
<i>Rapaz casado com dez filhos, sem tostão</i>	A married man with ten children and no money
<i>Se o pai descobre o truque dá uma coça</i>	If her father finds out he'll use his fists
<i>Coisa nossa, muito nossa</i>	Our things, very much ours

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 impecunious state. In it he states :

<i>Não tenho herdeiros</i>	I have no heirs
<i>Não possuo um só vintém</i>	I don't possess a single penny
<i>Eu vivi devendo a todos</i>	I lived owing everyone
<i>Mas não paguei nada a ninguém</i>	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 oeuvre, 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 :

<b>«<i>Capricho de rapaz solteiro</i>», 1933, Noel Rosa</b>	<b>«<i>Whim of a Bachelor Boy</i>», 1933, Noel Rosa</b>
<i>Nunca mais esta mulher</i>	Never again will that woman
<i>Me vê trabalhando</i>	See me working
<i>Quem vive sambando</i>	Those who live for samba
<i>Leva a vida para o lado que quer</i>	Do what they want with their life
<i>De fome não se morre</i>	You don't die of hunger
<i>Neste Rio de Janeiro</i>	In this Rio de Janeiro
<i>Ser malandro é um capricho</i>	Being a <i>malandro</i> is a whim
<i>De rapaz solteiro</i>	Of a bachelor boy

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 :

<i>O mundo me condena</i>	The world condemns me
<i>E ninguém tem pena</i>	And nobody takes pity on me
<i>Falando sempre mal do meu nome</i>	(lways speaking ill of me

*Deixando de saber  
Se eu vou morrer de sede  
Ou se vou morrer de fome*

Failing to enquire  
If I'm going to die of thirst  
Of if I'm going to die of hunger

*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<sup>2</sup>.

« **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!*

« **Flat Broke** », circa 1932, Noel Rosa  
and Arthur Costa

What on earth  
Am I going to do  
So that my landlord doesn't throw me out?  
'Cos today I came out of work  
Flat broke! Flat broke!

*Já perguntei na Prefeitura  
Quanto tenho que pagar  
Quero ter uma licença  
Pra viver sem almoço  
Veio um funcionário  
E gritou bem indisposto  
Que pra ser assim tão magro  
Tenho que pagar imposto!*

I've already asked at the Town Hall  
How much I have to pay  
I want to get a licence  
To live without eating lunch  
An employee appeared  
And shouted in a bad temper  
That for being so thin  
I have to pay a tax!

*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 ver 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 :

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

<i>Coração de sambista brasileiro</i>	The heart of the Brazilian <i>sambista</i>
<i>Quando bate no pulmão</i>	When it beats against the lung
<i>Faz a batida do pandeiro</i>	Beats the rhythm on a 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 cigarettes of the same name made by the Souza Cruz tobacco company :

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

<i>João Ninguém</i>	Joe Nobody
<i>Não trabalha e é dos tais</i>	Doesn't work and is one of those

<i>Que joga sem ter vintém</i>	Who gambles without a penny to his name
<i>E fuma Liberty Ovais</i>	And smokes Liberty Ovals
<i>Esse João nunca se expôs ao perigo</i>	This Joe never exposed himself to danger
<i>Nunca teve um inimigo</i>	He never had an enemy
<i>Nunca teve opinião</i>	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. It 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 »<sup>3</sup>. In « *Eu vou pra Vila* » (« I'm off to Vila ») of 1930 he writes :

<i>Na Pavuna tem turuna</i>	In Pavuna there are big guys
<i>Na Gamboa gente boa</i>	In Gamboa good people
<i>Eu vou pra Vila</i>	I'm off to Vila
<i>Aonde o samba é da coroa</i>	To where the samba is top-class
<i>Já saí da Piedade</i>	I left Piedade
<i>Já mudei de Cascadura</i>	I moved away from Cascadura
<i>Eu vou pra Vila</i>	I'm off to Vila
<i>Pois quem é bom não se mistura</i>	'Cos good guys stay faithful <sup>3</sup>

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 :

3. Pavuna, Gamboa, Piedade and Cascadura were all working-class districts in Rio de Janeiro's « Northern Zone » in the 1930s.

« *Feitiço da Vila* », 1934, Noel Rosa and Vadico

*Quem nasce lá na Vila  
Nem sequer vacila  
Ao abraçar o samba  
Que faz dançar os galhos  
Do arvoredo  
E faz a lua nascer mais cedo  
Lá em Vila Isabel  
Quem é bacharel  
Não tem medo de bamba  
São Paulo dá café  
Minas dá leite  
E a Vila Isabel dá samba*

*A Vila tem  
Um feitiço sem farofa  
Sem vela e sem vintém  
Que nos faz bem  
Tendo nome de princesa  
Transformou o samba  
Num feitiço decente  
Que prende a gente*

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

Those born in Vila  
Don't even hesitate  
To embrace samba  
Which makes the branches dance  
In the grove  
And makes the moon come out earlier  
There in Vila Isabel  
Those with talent  
Aren't afraid of other experts  
São Paulo gives us coffee  
Minas Gerais gives us milk  
And Vila Isabel gives us samba

Vila has  
A magic spell without manioc flour  
Without candles or coins  
That does us good  
Having the name of a princess  
It transformed samba  
Into a decent spell  
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 resonance<sup>4</sup>.

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  
Que não há nada de novo  
Lá no centro da cidade  
Voltaste demonstrando claramente  
Que o subúrbio é ambiente  
De completa liberdade*

You returned to show our people  
That there's nothing new  
Down there in the city centre  
You returned showing clearly  
That the suburb is an environment  
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

4. Interview with *A Voz do Rádio*, Belo Horizonte, 1934, as cited by Sérgio Cabral, in notes on « *Feitiço da Vila* » in CHEDIAK (1991 : 59).

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 :

<i>Já fui convidada</i>	I've been invited
<i>Para ser estrela no nosso cinema</i>	To be a film star
<i>Ser estrela é bem fácil</i>	Being a star is really easy
<i>Sair do Estácio é que é</i>	Leaving Estácio is what's
<i>O X do problema</i>	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 »<sup>5</sup>.

### 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<sup>6</sup>. 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 « goodbye » 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* of *chuchu* » (« I love you, pineapple, whiskey of chayote », the latter a kind of vegetable common in Brazil, but also a popular nickname for

5. « O Rio de Noel », *Manchete*, 10 April 1965 : 114-117.

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 »).

<p>« <i>Não tem tradução</i> », 1933, Noel Rosa</p> <p><i>O cinema falado</i>  <i>É o grande culpado</i>  <i>Da transformação</i>  <i>Dessa gente que sente</i>  <i>Que um barracão</i>  <i>Prende mais que um xadrez</i>  <i>Lá no morro, se eu fizer uma falseta</i>  <i>A Risoleta</i>  <i>Desiste logo do francês e do inglês</i></p> <p><i>A gíria que o nosso morro criou</i>  <i>Bem cedo a cidade aceitou e usou</i>  <i>Mais tarde o malandro deixou de sambar</i>  <i>Dando pinote</i>  <i>E só querendo dançar o fox-trot</i></p> <p><i>Essa gente hoje em dia</i>  <i>Que tem a mania</i>  <i>Da exibição</i>  <i>Não se lembra que o samba</i>  <i>Não tem tradução</i>  <i>No idioma francês</i>  <i>Tudo aquilo que o malandro pronuncia</i>  <i>Com voz macia</i>  <i>É brasileiro, já passou de português</i></p> <p><i>Amor, lá no morro, é amor pra chuchu</i>  <i>As rimas do samba não são « I love you »</i>  <i>E esse negócio de « alô, alô, boy »</i>  <i>« Alô, Johnny »</i>  <i>Só pode ser conversa de telefone</i></p>	<p>“<i>There’s No Translation</i> », 1933, Noel Rosa</p> <p>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</p> <p>The slang that our shantytowns created  Quickly the city accepted and used  Later the <i>malandro</i> stopped dancing samba  Playing his guitar  And only wanted to dance the foxtrot</p> <p>Those people today  Who are obsessed  With showing off  Don’t remember that samba  Cannot be translated  Into the French language  Everything that the <i>malandro</i> utters  When smooth talking  Is Brazilian, no longer Portuguese</p> <p>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</p>
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In this samba Rosa fiercely defends Brazil’s linguistic independence from the former colonial power, Portugal, as well as criticising 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 :

<i>Já faz hoje mais de um mês</i>	Today it is more than a month
<i>Que ela me abandonou</i>	Since she abandoned me
<i>Pra morar com um português</i>	To live with a Portuguese
<i>Iludindo com carinho</i>	Deceiving with affection
<i>Explorou aquele anjinho</i>	She exploited that little angel
<i>Pôs a casa no leilão</i>	She put his house up for auction
<i>E depois meteu o braço</i>	And then beat him up
<i>Bem na cara do palhaço</i>	Right in the clown's face
<i>Veio me pedir perdão</i>	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 price<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>. As he writes in « *Leite com café* » (« Milk with Coffee ») of 1935<sup>10</sup>.

<i>A morena lá do morro</i>	The dark girl from up there on the hill
<i>Cheia de beleza e graça</i>	Full of beauty and charm
<i>Simboliza a nossa grande raça</i>	Symbolises our great race
<i>É cor de leite com café</i>	She's the colour of milk with coffee
<i>E a loura da cidade</i>	And the blonde girl from the city
<i>Nunca foi nem é meu tipo</i>	Was never my type
<i>Perto dela sempre me constipo</i>	When I'm near her I catch a cold
<i>De tão gelada que ela é</i>	Because she's so icy

8. Jeffrey Lesser gives a thorough explanation of immigration policy in the 1930s in « Immigration and Shifting Concepts of National Identity in Brazil during the Vargas Era », *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 31, 2, Winter 1994: 23-44. For more information on Brazil's immigration policies in this era, see LESSER (1995, 1999).

9. 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 hardship<sup>11</sup>.

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 « *Posivitismo* » (« 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 :

11. 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 de Andrade'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 alimária* », *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).

<i>O amor vem por princípio, a ordem por base</i>	Love comes on principle, order as a basis
<i>O progresso é que deve vir por fim</i>	Progress must come last
<i>Desprezaste esta lei de Augusto Comte</i>	You ignored this law of Augusto Comte
<i>E foste ser feliz longe de mim</i>	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 is 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<sup>12</sup>. 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 :

<i>Yvone ! Yvone !</i>	Yvone ! Yvone !
<i>Eu ando roxo pra te dizer um picilone !</i>	I'm dying to say a letter « y » to you !
<i>Já reparei outro dia</i>	I noticed the other day
<i>Que o teu nome, ó Yvone</i>	That your name, oh Yvone
<i>Na nova ortografia</i>	In the new orthography
<i>Já perdeu o picilone</i>	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 :

<i>Cansei de andar só de tanga</i>	I'm tired of going around in a loin cloth
<i>Já perdi a paciência</i>	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 :

<i>Como vou pagar agora</i>	How am I going to pay for now
<i>Tudo o que comprei a prazo</i>	Everything that I bought on tick
<i>Se ando com um mês de atraso?</i>	If I'm a month behind?

12. Rosa chooses to use the word *picilone*, the colloquial and infantilised form of *ípsilon* or *hipsilo* (the letter « y »), thus adding to the mockery and further undermining officialdom.

<i>Eu que sempre dormi durante o dia</i>	I've always slept during the day
<i>Ganhei mais uma hora pra descanso</i>	So I've gained another hour's rest
<i>Agradeço ao avanço</i>	I'm grateful for the putting forward
<i>De uma hora no ponteiro</i>	Of the clock's hand by one hour
<i>Viva o dia brasileiro !</i>	Long live the Brazilian day !

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

<i>O carioca</i>	The inhabitant of Rio
<i>Perdeu a calma e a paz</i>	Has lost his cool
<i>A hora pulou pra frente</i>	The hour leaped forward
<i>E a nota pulou pra trás</i>	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 »)<sup>13</sup>

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 :

<i>Campanha da boa vontade !</i>	The good-will campaign !
<i>Viver alegre hoje é preciso</i>	It's necessary to live happily today
<i>Conserve sempre o teu sorriso</i>	Always keep smiling
<i>Mesmo que a vida esteja feia</i>	Even if life is ugly
<i>E que vivas na pinimba</i>	And you're living in a right state
<i>Passando a pirão de areia</i>	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 :

<i>Acabando o que era doce</i>	Putting an end to the good times
<i>Uma voz manifestou-se</i>	A voice was heard
<i>E a sala fez tremer</i>	And the room shook
<i>« Esperamos por dinheiro</i>	« We are hoping for money
<i>E que cada brasileiro</i>	And that all Brazilians
<i>Cumpra com seu dever ! »</i>	Will do their duty ! »
<i>Encontrei muito funil</i>	I found lots of blokes
<i>A chorar junto ao barril</i>	Crying by the barrel
<i>Quando o chope se esgotou</i>	When the beer ran out
<i>Houve a tal pancadaria</i>	There was a punch-up

13 . *O Globo*, 31 December 1932, quoted in Antônio, J. 1982 : 97.

*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 Livia 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.

**Lisa SHAW**  
University of Leeds  
United Kingdom

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