

## **Puppetry, Cultural Manifestations and Environmental Issues: Folk Puppet Tradition and New Dancing Amazonian Puppets in Brazil**

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**Abstract:** This study addresses the traditional Bumba-meu-Boi, a popular Brazilian ox-puppet that acts as a central character in several popular festivals and celebrations throughout the country. Large and embellished, the Boi originates from syncretic traditions whose roots stem from colonial Brazil and served as inspiration for a new puppet the Amazonian Jabuti-Bumba, a relatively new colorful and larger-than-life tortoise puppet that has become a “new tradition” in the state of Acre, located in the western extreme of the North region of Brazil. The performing company that bears its name was created in 2005 and the Jabuti performances mix local and popular legends, myths, rhythms and cultural manifestations, denouncing the growing destruction of the Amazon forest. Contrasting with the ox tradition, the Jabuti puppet symbolizes the preservation of life in the Amazon forest: a symbol of endurance, the tortoise though bearing a thick and strong shell is too slow to run away and escape from the fire and is thus the first species to be victimized in the destruction.

**Key words:** Brazilian folk puppetry, Brazilian puppetry, 21st century, Bumba-meu-Boi, Jabuti-Bumba

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This study analyzes recent developments in Brazilian folk puppetry, more specifically of an Amazonian cultural folk manifestation that has started a new tradition in the remote state of Acre, located in the Amazon region having as its central character a tortoise puppet named Jabuti-Bumba it is a variation of specific ancient popular art manifestations in the country and its origins are related to older and traditional forms that were originated much earlier and in different regions and contexts. Deeply concerned with the local culture and environment it stands as a popular and independent form of art that mixes puppetry, music, dance and local history, generating a genuinely local and popular art form. Our aim here is to introduce Jabuti-Bumba’s research emphasizing its innovation concerning popular puppetry which in Brazil is known especially for its Bumba-meu-Boi (a dancing ox) and mamulengos (popular and larger than life dancing puppets).

### **FOLK PUPPET TRADITION IN BRAZIL: THE BUMBA-MEU-BOI**

**Roots from earlier dramatic dances: the bumba-meu-boi:** Categorized by Andrade (1959) one of Brazil’s most celebrated writers and arts critic in the 20th century (as well as one of the main writers in Brazilian literature as a poet, novelist, art historian and critic Andrade was a key

figure in the country’s literary modernism) as one of the country’s most beautiful dramatic dances (1959), Bumba-meu-Boi is a naïf and very popular theatrical form nowadays present in several different states. Once a tradition strictly from the North and Northeast regions, it gained several variations in rhythm, plot, style, etc., according to the specific area in which it was developed and performed anew. The great variation of names given to it may give a slight idea of the wide multiplicity of forms and characteristics the Boi (Portuguese for ox) has acquired through the country Boi-Bumba (in the states of Para and Amazonas), Boizinho or Boi-Jaca (in Sao Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul), Boi-Surubim (Ceara), Boi-de-Mamao (Parana, Santa Catarina), Boi-de-Reis (Espírito Santo), Boi-da-Manta (Minas gerais), Bumba-meu-Boi (Rio Grande do Norte and Alagoas), among many others.

Brazilian dramatic (The term “Brazilian dramatic dances” was created by Mario de Andrade and his research team in the 1930s) or popular dances originated in the sixteenth century, stemming from Spanish and Portuguese traditions of enacting religious acts for the population in Catholic festivities against Paganism. This was a very popular procedure in the early colonization when Jesuits sought to convert the indigenous populations to Catholicism by use of dances, chants and simplified playlets. Local elements and indigenous deities were often present in such demonstrations and as time passed the dances increasingly acquired new and secular themes.

The Bumba-meu-Boi tradition exists in Brazil since early 19th century, though its precise origins are uncertain. The most widely accepted hypothesis for its appearance is linked to the Cattle Cycle (17th and 18th centuries) and the Leather Civilization period when Northeastern Brazilian populations were deeply concerned with the raising of cattle. Some scholars have pointed to possible foreign influences such as the Spanish and Portuguese touras (festivities in which fake oxen made of bamboo, wood and fabric paraded with the crowds) or the Fiesta de la Vaca (or “Cow party”, a January festivity in which a beautifully adorned cow character shoved off people in the crowd). Yet as the specific and theatrical dance it is, the Bumba-meu-Boi is a popular festivity that exists exclusively in Brazil. According to Cascudo the Boi was born amid the African-Brazilian slaves, dancing, leaping and singing to be then assimilated by some indigenous populations who added to it their own features and was lastly attended by the white population who would join in the festivities. Initially regarded as a dangerous practice by local authorities it was forbidden in the 19th century (Cardoso, 2004) describes the prohibition of Bumba-meu-Boi presentations in the state of Maranhao, from 1861-1868 and several occurrences of prejudice against its manifestation, regarded as ‘the most terrible dance of Slaves’ before being acknowledged as one of the country’s most important manifestations of local popular culture and folklore as it is today.

In fact, the Bumba-meu-Boi has strongly provocative origins as it was born an artistic form in which the slaves could set free their feelings of oppression and inequality towards their masters, indirectly protesting and often satirizing or ridiculing the power of the ruling white authority. According to the ritual at a certain point the ox dies and is then reborn with a renovated soul, announcing thus the possibility of a new world order. In its later variations, several figures of power would be satirized: sheriffs, vicars, lawyers, judges, tax collectors, politicians, etc. The verb *bumbar* means to “hit”, “hit with the horn”, “move”, emphasizing its belligerent and fighting atmosphere which is closely related to the element of cultural resistance of popular expression present in the festivity.

Similarly to *Commedia dell’Arte*, the Bumba-meu-Boi consists of several independent tableaux, characterized by the successive presentation of new characters who dance or enact a specific theme accompanied by a song. Originally, the characters were invariably played by male actors (except for Catarina, a drunken black female puppet) and could be human, animal or fantastic/legendary whether from indigenous mythology

or an evil being invented specifically for that plot. The latter are usually proportionately very huge and intend to cause fear: examples are the Giant, the Werewolf the Devil and other local monsters (Guariba: half animal, half man; Folharal a leaf covered monster; Ze do Abismo or Abyss Man a very tall man with a tiny head; Babau: a horse-head shaped monster Mane-Gostoso: a herb sorcerer; as well as many others). Among the fixed characters, stands the captain, Sea-horse or the Master, a few somewhat clownish cowboys (two of which resembling the pair Arlequin-Brighella), a priest, a doctor and perhaps a few ladies. A small orchestra bearing a guitar, percussion instruments and sometimes a harmonica play through the whole presentation.

In a very simplified scheme and with possible local variations the plot followed the outline below (General scheme provided by Meyer. Variations have been introduced in different states and Bois).

#### **Bumba-meu-boi: plot scheme:**

- Character entrance: the captain enters riding a puppet horse followed by his men
- The master or a chorus announces the arrival of the Ox; it then enters and is vividly acclaimed by the audience
- Dance scene: the Ox performs a frantic burlesque dance, pushing off the cowboys and people from the audience
- Death and song: at the end of the dance it dies (out of exhaustion, excessive hitting a gun shot etc.,). The remaining characters express sadness and consternation a popular song follows (O Meu Boi Morreu, or “My Ox has Died”)
- Dramatic scene: the captain sends for the doctor to cure the Ox and demands the sheriff to find its murderer
- Burlesque scene the vicar arrives and confesses the Ox; he may then marry Catarina to a cowboy
- Comical-ironic scenes: the doctor arrives and refuses to cure the dead animal people supplicate or try to bribe him, the cowboys hit him with balloons He finally agrees and after a medicine shot is prescribed or given or out of its own will the Ox resurrects
- The sheriff returns, tied by his own ropes (presumably, the criminals he was after tied him up) he is ridiculed and booed by the audience
- Final dance and parade: all characters parade in a final goodbye dance

The general tone of the performance is of high comedy. The scenes are exaggerated, burlesque, farcical, the situations comical. Like a carnivalesque pantomime, its

main objective is to release (and thus balance) the tensions and oppressions through role inversions (as the figures of power are satirized and the clumsy and wild Ox resurrects powerful, safe and lively in the end), symbolically empowering the laughing audience that cheers its merry Ox.

**From ox to tortoise: Jabuti-Bumba:** While the Bumba-meu-Boi and its ox have become a traditional folk tradition in Brazil and established specific characteristics in many different regions, Marupiará Jabuti-Bumba is a new playful dramatic dance created in 2005 in Acre, one of the most remote states in the western extreme of the North region of Brazil. Its creators, a family of local artists, chose the Bumba-meu-Boi tradition as its main inspiration, yet substituted the ox as the central character by a jabuti or tortoise.

This new character is a colorful and larger than life tortoise puppet whose image strongly resembles the traditional Bumba-meu-Boi (the large dancing and embellished popular ox puppet whose syncretic tradition began over a century ago). Strongly influenced by diverse regional and Amazonian cultural manifestations the homonymous company mixes local and popular rhythms, legends, history, myths and dances in order to address and denounce the growing destruction of the Amazon forest. In that sense, the jabuti represents the preservation of life in the forest the tortoise, though bearing a thick and strong shell is the first species to be victimized in the destruction since it is too slow to run and escape from the fire. A symbol of endurance it dances with red Mappinguári, a local Amazonian monster and honors religious and legendary characters (such as Nossa Senhora Seringueira and fathers José and Peregrino) or local environment leaders such as Chico Mendes, Helio Mello and Matias. Chico Mendes was a rubber-tapper and environmentalist who advocated for the rights of peasants and indigenous peoples in Brazil. He was assassinated by a rancher on December 22, 1988 and became internationally known as a symbol of the fight for the preservation of the Amazon forest and the environment. Helio Melo was a local writer, musician and painter and Matias, an equally important cultural activist and rubber-tapper of Acre state) while executing rhythms and dances of Acrean popular religions. Nossa Senhora da Seringueira or Holy Mother of Rubber Tree, a local Christian entity, is the patroness of the festivity, along with Santo Daime, a syncretic religious manifestation that was born in Acre in 1910, congregating alternately Catholicism, African rituals and kardedicim.

While the ox in the Bumba-meu-Boi tradition may be considered a symbol of abundance from the cattle cycle in 19th century northeastern Brazil in the state of Acre the ox is on the contrary, currently viewed as a living symbol

of destruction of the Amazon forest in that region in exchange for profits at any cost, its lands are increasingly burned down, turned into pasture and populated with the cattle which will in the end replace the tortoises (and several other local native species). Jabuti-Bumba was thus born against the devastation of the forest and the exploitation of animal life, recreating a traditional art form in a new historical reality and creating a new identity for its players and audience. Jabuti-Bumba is then a new and original variation of the Bumba-meu-Boi tradition, adding to its earlier indigenous European and African roots important elements of our present time and history while recreating one of Brazil's most popular and beloved folk puppets.

**The invention of a new tradition:** While the Boi was originally based on a religious auto (a theatrical form in some respects similar to the English morality plays), Jabuti-Bumba is rather a folgado, a playful popular festivity performed as a street performance, played in the form of a parade or in a circular location. Its main larger-than life puppets/characters are Marupiará (which means "a gathering of happy people"), a giant colorful and embellished tortoise, played by an adult and its companions, two small tortoises, Tinga and Tinguinha, played by two children. At least ten players or brincantes participate in the show wearing colorful ribbons and calico costumes, embellished with seed necklaces and paper crowns. Created in 2005 in Rio Branco, Acre, it would originate different versions and since 2009 spread to different locations and states, adding to the original creation new players, characters and costumes (as Jabuti-Carumbe and Marupiará Jabuti-Bumba, located in the state of Goiás).

All tortoise puppets are made of very simple materials styrofoam (for the head), papier-mache, rubber and plastic tubes in the structure, covered with colorful calico fabric and satin ribbons (predominantly green, yellow, white, red and blue), ornamented with bits of mirrors, seeds and figures representing elements of nature and the Amazon forest. In common with the Boi characters the jabutis are made of themes, symbols and materials related to the historical situations and experiences directly lived by the communities in which they are born, constantly adding to each newly created performance the current local cultural and political dynamics and experiences at hand.

In the creation of both popular festivities the idea of resistance was central whether overtly conscious or not. In them, men dance with animals, ideally staging an act of resistance of a group or community that fights to keep its identity as a group and society. Now a day while many Boi festivities have become huge commercial enterprises and lost their original local and popular origins in the recent tradition of jabuti folgados the collective and

family bonds of their creators express the companies very specific and local modes of living and challenges their identities and origins, struggles and determination to act and transform the environment.

From a theatrical perspective, both Jabuti-Bumba and Bumba-meu-Boi (the latter in its initial and grassroots versions when it had not yet become the vast sophisticated and commercial show for tourists it would turn into) can be categorized as authentic popular forms of theatre in the sense that was theorized by Augusto Boal (Augusto Boal was one of the most significant theater theorists in Brazil and founder of the Theater of the Oppressed. He was also an important playwright and director and was nominated Doctor Honoris Causa in the universities of London, Queen Mary, Worcester State College and Nebraska University. He received several awards and honours and was nominated World Theater Ambassador by UNESCO in 2009. In 2008, Boal was one of the nominees for the Nobel Prize) one of Brazil's most significant playwrights. According to Boal, popular theater can be divided in three main categories:

- Popular theater made by common people and addressed to common people
- Popular theater made by common people for bourgeois and petit-bourgeois (paying) audiences
- Popular theater addressed to the common people that is yet ideologically against common people

These categories are based on two major and distinct representations of reality, world views and ideologies the first of them supports and consolidates the existing social order, relations and general political system and presents the existing establishment as fixed and unchanging whereas the second presents the world as a reality that is constantly changing and reshaping itself, unveiling its contradictions and transforming society's dynamics towards freedom and a better world.

While the theatrical productions in category which include most commercial productions on show clearly state a conservative worldview that assumes and presents the world as unchanging, category productions aim at the transformation of the external reality; these last productions subdivides themselves into three main trends:

- Popular theater as propaganda: deals with urgent popular issues such as ongoing strikes, current elections, specific events and political situations, etc. This class of theater could be staged in the streets, squares, public spaces in front of factories, etc
- Didactic popular theater: instead of dealing with urgent matters, a theater that discusses broad issues such as work, justice, labor divisions, power relations, etc

- Cultural popular theater: from the perspective of common people it is a theater that discusses political matters as well as other themes and subjects. This subcategory includes several Brazilian dance and folklore manifestations as well as more traditional plays (by Shakespeare, Moliere, Goldoni for instance)

The Jabuti-Bumba festivities fit precisely in the latter category as a *folguedo* (or playful popular festivity) dance/theatrical presentation idealized, created and performed by artists/common people, aimed at popular audiences and at preserving the local culture, denouncing immediate and more general environmental problems that directly affect their community in and at the Amazon forest.

The Bumba-meu-Boi shows, on the other hand, can no longer be represented in the same category. Though this *folguedo* was born out of an utterly popular urge to give voice to the exploited and dispossessed populations (of slaves and indigenous peoples) this popular manifestation has become, in many places, a sumptuous and luxurious show tourist-oriented, played for huge audiences. Their current basic commercial features and spectacular dimensions (in the sense defined by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*) shift the Boi shows from Boal's category to category (in which the work of art is transformed into a commodity, a planned commercial show devised to be consumed as mere entertainment. In such cases, of course there are still seeds of the rebelliousness of the Boi's early manifestations and origins in the denouncing, ridiculing and mocking of corrupt authorities, for instance. Yet such criticism is easily debunked by the mega shows' magnanimity, sumptuous costumes and precisely rehearsed choreographies their fantastic technical display of lightning and sound effects. Such dimensions in these new shows and their entertainment-oriented nature clearly erase the earlier potential for social criticism and change.

According to Erwen (1992), liberation as a political idea became popular in the sixties "when a worldwide solidarity movement emerged in support of the plight of the oppressed and exploited peoples in the world". John Bell in *The End of the Domestic Resurrection Circus: Bread and Puppet Theater and Counterculture Performance in the 1990s* analyzes how the development of counterculture in 1990s consumer society affected Bread and Puppet Theater's radical circuses which started in the sixties in small scales and were in the nineties attended by thousands of spectators.

Despite many differences in various levels, Jabuti-Bumba, though created in Brazil decades later, already in the 21st century has artistic roots that much resemble Bread and Puppet's origins in America in the sense of being a company strongly involved in the immediate issues of its own community and making art for

“Da minha carne; Ninguem vai fazer cozido!; E no meu casco; Ninguem vai; comer farofa!; Tadado o recado; Jabutis e jabotas; Nao teima, nao teima; Nao teima que eu tenha reima; Nao teima teimoso; Nao teima que eu sou teimoso; A mata ta caindo; A derrubada ta demais; Proteja o jabuti; E todos os animais”

the betterment of society. Bell’s analysis of the large scale circuses in the 1990s helps us think critically of the large scale Bumba-Meu-Boi shows in Brazil. While Bread and Puppet has always maintained its radicality and coherence throughout its long theatrical history the traditional and genuinely popular Boi festivities were “kidnapped” or appropriated by great companies and enterprises that turned its tradition into a large scale and very profitable mega spectacle. In both cases the idea of art as commodity invaded the original radicality of these companies’ initial premises in the case of Bread and Puppet, through vast alienated audiences and the urban demons brought with them and in the case of the Boi, through direct commercial exploitation.

Jabuti Bumba, on its turn, recently (2005) created by local artists in Acre, remains in its simplicity and combativeness, as a genuine popular dance/theater manifestation that culturally resists the environmental destruction of the environment and the Amazon forest, while intentionally preserving the state’s cultural traditions and history. Consumer society has not (yet) invaded the company’s affairs. In the remote state where it was born, Jabuti-Bumba resists nature’s and society’s destruction. Marupiará the larger-than-life sized puppet, dances merrily through the years’ multiple presentations, along with the brincante players and street audiences, singing songs of joy and conscience rising, songs of environmental politics and awareness much necessary songs of hope and resistance:

(excerpt from the song “A Mata Ta Caindo” or “Jabutis e Jabotas”, lyrics and music by Bob Franca) (FARIAS: 2012) Translation:

“From my meat; no one will make broth!; and in my shell; no one will eat farofa! (Farofa is a typical Brazilian dish usually made with fried flour, meat bits or eggs and various seasonings); this is the message; Jabutis and jabotas. (Jabota is the Portuguese term for female tortoise); don’t insist, don’t insist, don’t insist, I’m right; don’t insist, stubborn; don’t insist for I am stubborn; the forest is being logged; the logging is abusive; protect the jabuti and all the animals”

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to address it as a new and original variation of one of Brazil’s most popular puppet manifestations, the Bumba-Meu-Boi folk tradition which adds to its earlier indigenous, European and African roots important elements and issues of our own time and history.

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