

2023

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Ilari, Mayumi, "Mamulengo as Cultural Resistance" (2023). *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects*. Edited by John Bell, Matthew Isaac Cohen, and Jungmin Song.
https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst_alterity/7

Mamulengo as Cultural Resistance

By Mayumi Ilari

Abstract: The aim of this essay is to briefly present mamulengo puppetry as an artistic form of cultural, social, and racial resistance. Mamulengo is one of the oldest and most representative artistic expressions of popular culture in Brazil. While its origins are mostly undocumented, it is considered a probable development of the influence of European puppetry brought by Portuguese settlers in colonial times. Its traditional audiences lived in remote rural areas, composed of humble northeastern villagers who gathered together especially for the puppet shows, in lively performances that originally lasted from four to six hours.

Today, mamulengo is still typically performed by popular artists, portraying the lives, everyday situations, and hardships lived by lower-class characters. Often dealing in humorous ways with themes of violence and brutality, mamulengo puppets typically make fun of the locally powerful: While dramatically defying and fooling typical authority characters (a sheriff, local priest, or politician, etc.), they momentarily invert current injustices and release through laughter, sentiments of oppressiveness (even if briefly and symbolically only), suppressing social differences in a lively, cathartic show.

Usually bringing up themes of class differences (except in touristic or carnival-related adaptations), mamulengos simultaneously address the issue of race. Having as protagonist a “Black Arlecchino,” this form of theatre touches the very roots of the country’s cultural and social formation. In that sense, two recent initiatives that restore and dignify the contribution of Black artists in Brazilian puppetry will be addressed: Sebastian Marques’s “Benjamim, the Clown” puppets (created after our first Black clown, the late Benjamim de Oliveira), and Chico Simões’s 2020 *Mamulengo Arts and Tricks*, his version of the legendary story of brave slave Benedito (who, according to oral narratives, was the creator of mamulengo in Brazil).

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, Puppet theater—Brazil—History, Popular culture—Brazil

Mamulengo puppetry is one of the oldest and most representative artistic expressions of popular culture in Brazil. While its origins are mostly undocumented, it is considered a probable development of the influence of European puppetry brought by Portuguese settlers in colonial times. A tradition once present strictly in the North and Northeast, its theatrical version gained variations in plot, characters, stage, and material characteristics through different regions and generations of puppeteers. Its traditional audiences lived in remote rural areas and were composed of humble northeastern villagers who gathered together especially for the puppet shows, with lively performances that originally lasted from four to six hours, or even longer.

Today, in an age of sophisticated and technological entertainment, mamulengo puppetry is still typically performed by popular artists, portraying the lives, everyday situations, and hardships lived by lower-class audiences. Often dealing in humorous ways with themes of violence and brutality, mamulengo puppets typically make fun of the locally powerful; while dramatically defying and fooling typical authority characters (a sheriff, the local priest, or prominent politician, etc.), they momentarily invert current injustices and release, through laughter, sentiments of oppressiveness (even if only briefly and symbolically), therefore suppressing social differences in a lively, cathartic show.

Typically bringing up themes of class differences (except in touristic or carnival-related events and adaptations), mamulengo performances simultaneously bring forth the issue of race (see Figure 1). Having as protagonist a “Black Arlecchino,” as some puppeteers name him, mamulengo puppetry touches the very roots of the country’s social formation. Two recent initiatives that restore and dignify the contribution of Black artists in the context of puppetry in Brazil will be briefly addressed. The first is puppeteer Sebastian Marques’s “Benjamim, the Clown” puppet (created after late Benjamim de Oliveira, our country’s first Black clown). Second is puppeteer Chico Simões’s book *Arte e Manha do Mamulengo (Mamulengo Arts and Tricks)*, his created version of the legendary story of the brave slave Benedito who, according to oral narratives told through generations of traditional Mamulengo puppeteers, invented and created the first puppet show in Brazil.



Figure 1. (2012). A typical Brazilian hand puppet mamulengo: A lively black character wearing bright and colorful clothes. Behind it, we see typical northeastern puppets painted in the backcloth. Image in the public domain and held by *Empresa Brasil de Comunicação*.

Mamulengo as Cultural Resistance

Only very recently, in 2015, did the Brazilian National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN) officially acknowledge mamulengo theater as part of Brazil's Intangible Cultural Heritage. One of the oldest and most representative forms of popular culture in the country, traditional mamulengo is practiced to this day, particularly in the northeastern states of the country, where it was born. Dating from colonial times, the form emerged from successive amalgamations of European, African, and indigenous features. From early *commedia dell'arte* influences, at times echoing elements of French Guignol and English Punch and Judy traditions, Mamulengo underwent a long process of syncretism with other popular forms of traditional dramatic dances. It bears elements from traditions of the regional forms *ciranda*, *caboclinhos*, *maracatu*, and the nationally known *Bumba-meu-boi*, a huge and embellished dancing ox puppet that typically defies the established order and literally hits and bumps onto other characters and its audience), as well as from the mambembe circus (a sort of popular or beggar's circus), encompassing several specific regional variations.

The term *mamulengo* comes from the junction of two words: *mão* (hand) and *molenga* (loose or flexible), referring to the puppeteer's hand movements when manipulating a glove puppet. Known in its giant and small forms, mamulengos are found mainly in two variations: 1) larger-than-life puppets, currently made of more modern materials, such as styrofoam, fiberglass, or resin, dancing and parading in Carnival and local festivities; or 2) smaller puppets, sometimes rod but usually hand puppets who perform theatrical shows. These mamulengos used in theatrical performances are traditionally sculpted in mulungu, a local northeastern wood, and come typically dressed in colorful calico fabrics (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Benedito puppet (2018). A typical black character from mamulengo tradition, Benedito wears colorful calico fabric and a straw hat. From the collection of Sebastian Marques. Photo by Mayumi Ilari.

In mamulengo puppet shows, even though there is an initial and basic plotline, dialogues are created during the performance, and improvisation plays a major role. The artists perform traditional shows that are comic and highly musical, usually sung to northeastern and Afro-Brazilian rhythms, in a general tone of high comedy. The scenes are exaggerated, burlesque, farcical, and the situations comical. Improvisation and spontaneity play a major role. While many traditional puppeteers have little formal education and no artistic schooling, their art is spread from contact with experienced masters.

Concerning the issues of alterity and ethnicity, it is difficult to speak of *mamulengo* (and other folkloric manifestations, such as *Boi-Bumbá* (a variation of the aforementioned *Bumba-meu-Boi*) without considering the country's early formation and its history of slavery and colonialism. Brazil was the last Western country to abolish slavery after more than three hundred years of imposed forced labor. And, after abolition, the lack of policies to properly include former slaves in society left scars and social consequences that are still found today.

Only very recently has a historical understanding of the real dimensions of colonial slavery, slaughter, and long-term oppression widely emerged, along with the acknowledgement of the fact that the commercial traffic and enslavement of African people in the modern age produced the greatest diaspora in the world since the Roman Empire. It is estimated that between 38 and 44 percent of all slaves forced to leave Africa were brought to Brazil and then spread throughout the whole country (Carneiro). According to anthropologist and historian Lilia Schwarcz (2018), in the last 130 years, Brazil has not only continued, but, in fact, radicalized its structural separation and racism. Different from other nations, in which later generations (for example in Germany, in regard to the Holocaust) lived with the shock of acknowledging their country's atrocities, in post-slavery Brazil no such perception exists. Instead, Brazilian society developed a very orderly and benevolent view of slavery—its official memory has largely remained as the naturalization of an extremely brutal process, an idealized picture of a melting pot, mostly advertised and sung as a joyful communion of ethnicities in a beautiful tropical country, now a receptive and friendly nation free of racism and prejudice.

Local paintings portraying the colonial period do tell us a very different story, though. In painter Jean Baptiste Debret's iconic depictions of everyday domestic scenes, for instance, the many kinds of racial violence and abuse, whether symbolic or portraying physical brutality, speak for themselves (see Figure 3). According to Schwarcz (2020), "every racism is vile, but [Brazil's] is terrible." The country's existing racism, corroborating the current views of Kabengele Munanga and earlier observations of Brazilian researcher Florestan Fernandes, is based on a premise of prejudice against prejudice. Since racism is socially understood as vile, it is typical to hear proudly that "Brazilians have no prejudice at all." This exists to the point that one finds, in fact, in usual discourse, prejudice against racial prejudice: Since one should not embrace such a shameful practice, racism remains unacknowledged, denied and covert, rather unidentified. As a result, Schwarcz says, recalling Frantz Fanon, Brazil's Black populations end up twice deceased: first

physically and then in the collective memory. A politics aiming at repairing this prejudice and racism must be also a politics of memory, encompassing African-Brazilian, indigenous, and mixed-race histories and traditions.

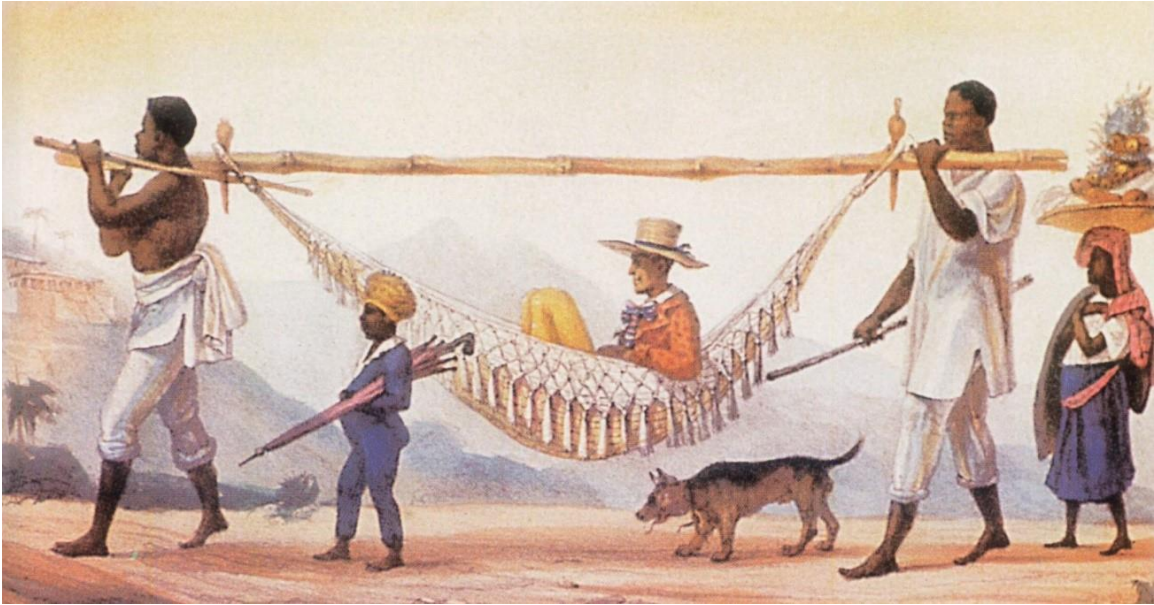


Figure 3. Jean Baptiste-Debret. “Voyages au Brésil: Retour, a la ville, d’un propriétaire de chakra” (1834-1839). In this iconic painting of Brazilian slavery, a wealthy landowner is carried in a hammock held by two strong slaves. A Black boy follows the group, carrying an umbrella for his master, while a Black woman carries a large dish of fresh fruits on her head. Image in public domain.

In that sense, the study of the popular mamulengo art form can help uncover colonialism and silenced forms of alterity, thus challenging systemic racism and prejudice through the historicity of puppets and performing objects belonging to this traditional Brazilian art form. Mamulengo puppets today still represent traditionally humble characters, in many ways similar to the once-enslaved populations. Its female characters are often depicted in traditionally “feminine” and housekeeping roles: as cooks, washerwomen, maids and servants wearing cheap, colorful outfits. Exaggerations in characterization and movement often match not only the comic tone of the plays but also social roles and mores often attributed to an economically less privileged part of the population.

Benjamim de Oliveira

One example of a very popular artist who outlived prejudice in the so-called “Brazilian Belle Epoque” in the beginning of the 20th century is Benjamim de Oliveira. Actor, composer, singer, director, and writer, he was Brazil’s first Black clown. Both his parents were slaves, and his mother, a dedicated house slave, (*escrava de estimação*), was esteemed by her owners, who decided

to free her and her children, so Benjamim became a free person eighteen years before the national abolition of slavery, in 1888. His father was a *capitão do mato* (literally, a “bush captain” employed by plantation owners). During slavery, bush captains, usually mulattoes, had the job of “patrollers.” Infamous for their brutal tactics, they were sent by the plantation owners to locate, hunt down, punish, and return escaped slaves. Escaping this violence, which was directed to his brothers and sisters as well, Benjamim ran away with the Sotero Circus at the age of twelve, which was passing through his town. After he was also beaten by the circus owner (in Sotero Circus), he ran away once again, only to be captured soon after by a group that tried to sell him as a slave. He fled once more, following several other circuses, until one day he was able to substitute for a performer who had fallen ill, improvising as a clown. The audience, outraged, hated the show and walked out. After that, Benjamim started to paint his face chalk white for the performances: Audiences then accepted him, and he was able to make a career traveling around the country as a circus and theater performer.¹

It would take more than a century in a former colonial country for a performer such as Benjamim the Clown to be publicly acknowledged as a great Brazilian artist. In 2020, around 150 years after his birth, Oliveira was finally praised and remembered in the Rio de Janeiro Carnival, when the samba school Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba Acadêmicos do Salgueiro paid homage to Brazil’s first Black clown. That year, a larger-than-life styrofoam Benjamim puppet paraded along with hundreds of Benjamims in costumes, dancing on the avenues of Rio and on broadcast television.² Praising and acknowledging his history and value as a great national artist, the samba lyrics stated:

There is hope between bells and springboards
and certainty that millions of Benjamims
are on stage under the limelight.
Jump, boy!³

¹ The history of Benjamim de Oliveira and related newspaper notes can be found in Diego (2020).

² The giant Benjamim puppet in the 2020 Rio Carnival can be seen at <https://youtu.be/uaJN7FvJeBk>. Compact video of the parade: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR4fNXWUSbU>.

³ Portuguese excerpt of the lyrics:
Há esperança entre sinais e trampolins
E a certeza que milhões de Benjamins
Estão no palco sob as luzes da ribalta
Salta, menino.

Full lyrics available here: <https://www.lettras.mus.br/sambas/salgueiro-2020/>.

Before this popular 150-year celebration, Benjamim de Oliveira had also received a humbler but consistent tribute in the world of puppetry through his depiction in glove puppets made by master puppeteer Sebastian Marques (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Two Benjamim, the clown puppets, by Sebastian Marques (2020). Differently from the stage puppets, these mamulengos have heads made of papier-mâché and hands made of fabric. Photo by Mayumi Ilari.

Dream Inventor Company

Inventor de Sonhos, or “Dream Inventor Company,” was founded in 2002 by theater director Sebastian Marques, a mamulengo master, poet, and researcher of Brazilian culture and Afro-Brazilian religion. Born in a semi-rural district in Southeast Brazil, Marques created and ran his company for ten years as the primary puppet theater of the state of São Paulo, aiming to preserve popular culture and disseminate art and poetry to the local community by fostering educational and social development through cultural and artistic apprenticeships. His tribute to Benjamim consisted of a series of papier-mâché hand puppets depicting the clown. These were sold to the public at festivals and performances, always accompanied by a printed description of the story of Benjamim, whose face was portrayed not in chalk white, but in its natural black.

Commenting on the issue of alterity, Marques (2018) noted an incongruity between mamulengo and certain audiences. Apart from shows for children or as touristic productions related to regional folklore or carnivalesque manifestation, he emphasized that “typical middle-class audiences do not identify with lower-class puppets or a Black protagonist challenging traditional authorities.” Consequently, mamulengo still remains in the streets, as a popular art form mostly outside the fringes of what is considered elegant, cosmopolitan, or sophisticated culture. And yet it was, in a way, very good that this happened, for this very lack of adaptation to “higher” forms of art and consumerism has certainly helped to protect the form from becoming just one more mere cultural product or commercial commodity. To this day, mamulengo puppeteers still come mostly from traditional culture, well rooted among the popular classes, genuinely maintaining the form’s original and rebellious essence.

Master Chico Mamulengo Simões and the Story of Benedito

Another important example of Brazilian cultural preservation is the work of master puppeteer Chico (Mamulengo) Simões. A long-term artist and educator, Simões is the director of the Ponto de Cultura Invenção Brasileira (“Brazilian Invention Cultural Spot”) cultural center in the city of Taguatinga, in the Federal District, and founder of the Mamulengo Presepada (“Mamulengo Hijinks”) Company. Having studied in Northeastern Brazil with several grassroots and traditional mamulengo masters (such as Carlos Babau, Master Solon, and Master Chico Daniel), Simões has been performing, studying, and lecturing about mamulengo traditions throughout Brazil for over 30 years.

In 2020, he published *Arte e manha do mamulengo (Mamulengo Arts and Tricks)*. Based on stories of master Januário de Oliveira, written down by Hermilo Borba Filho, and other variations told by other puppet masters, as well as a written version by Altimar Pimentel, Simões wrote his own version of the legend of brave Benedito, the colonial slave who, according to the oral narratives of generations of traditional Mamulengo puppeteers, was the one who invented and created the very first puppet show in Brazil.⁴ In this legend, Benedito fools his cruel owner, the Captain, and overcomes violence and exploitation through art and puppetry, providing a delightful show for his fellow companions, inverting the “official” plot and show for their master. Whatever truths and accuracies there may be in the legendary story of slave Benedito, spread for so long by

⁴ The full digital version of Chico Simões’s book, along with its beautiful illustrations by Ana Göbel can be found at <http://www.Mamulengomamulengopresepada.com.br/livros/>.

word of mouth, it substantially dignifies the lives of the enslaved workers by giving them voice to tell a non-official story, their own story, in their own names. It is certainly no vague coincidence that the rebellious art of puppetry would provide the means for that.

Puppetry as a Means of Cultural Resistance

As a result of centuries of exploitation and exclusion, African Brazilians and indigenous communities were continually left in the fringes of a safe and economically protected society. As a result, they have less access to health and education and are known statistically to live shorter lives. While Brazil has implemented significant policies toward affirmative action concerning equality and attempts to fix such great historical debts, only very recently have issues of equality, exclusion, racism, and empowerment of minorities come to light. The assassination of the Afro-Brazilian human rights activist and politician Marielle Franco, shortly before President Jair Bolsonaro's election, tells much about our present times. After thirty years of democratic achievements, Brazilians realize that their attention to human rights must be constant. Franco's death, exactly 130 years after abolition and one more example of racial and gender exclusion, is an unsolved murder that scandalizes Brazilian democracy.

Even in such bleak contexts, Punch-like or trickster-inspired mamulengos play a role of resistance in the cultural scene: While dramatically defying and fooling the authorities (even if for a moment, and only symbolically), they invert current injustices and release, through laughter, feelings of oppression, thus suppressing differences. While it might seem that mamulengo performances keep the mainstream order mostly untouched, they simultaneously resist commodification, give dignity and acknowledgement to forgotten characters of a history that needs repairing and social restoration, and embody the efforts of a part of the nation that wishes for a different, more inclusive, multiple, and diverse country. A popular theater made by common people and addressed to common people, Mamulengo 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.



Figure 5. "A popular puppet show" (2020). The image shows a young boy happily interacting with a mamulengo from Inventor de Sonhos company. Puppet show held in a fair in downtown Campinas, SP. Photo by Mayumi Ilari.

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About the Author

Mayumi Ilari teaches English and American Literature and Dramaturgy at the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences in the English/Modern Languages Department of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. She studied American drama and literature at State University of Campinas and at University of São Paulo, Brazil, where she has taught since 2009, and has written mainly on topics related to theater and society. Her current research focuses on literary and cultural studies in contemporary theater and dramaturgy.