Partido-alto: Samba de bamba

Reviewed by Beto González

Trained in law, author, historian, poet, composer, recording artist, and blogger, Nei Lopes is a renowned *bamba.* To be "bamba" is to be an authority on a given subject, but more specifically, a highly skilled and respected samba practitioner. Abandoning a career in law to dedicate his time to music and literature, Lopes has composed numerous unforgettable sambas such as "*Goiabada-cascão*," co-authored with Wilson Moreira and recorded by Beth Carvalho on *De pé no chão* (1978). The breadth of his written work includes various books on samba, Afro-Brazilian identity, a Bantu dictionary (1995), and an ambitious Brazilian encyclopedia of the African diaspora (2004).

As the title of Lopes' latest work suggests, the *partido-alto* is urban samba's most respected form, where few achieve the status of an accomplished *partideiro*, or improvisational singer of the genre. The *partido-alto*, or "high party", is a sub-genre of samba that, in its most revered form, features two or more singers in a duel of improvised verses. The genre, as the author argues, has its roots in several Afro-Brazilian styles and has been significantly changed in its performance throughout the twentieth century. From its rural origins to the highly commercialized (and non-improvised) form in the recording industry, the *partido-alto* today is mostly associated with a particular rhythmic style than for its original improvisatory elements. Lopes traces the *samba de partido-alto* from its Bantu roots to the various migrant groups that flocked to the burgeoning metropolis of Rio de Janeiro throughout the twentieth century, forging the urban samba that is today the cultural pulse of Brazil.

In the first chapter, Lopes provides a definition of the *partido-alto* as both an improvisatory genre and a rhythmic style. Such an attempt to define the genre is compounded by the testimonies from some of samba's oldest living practitioners that are cited throughout the book. The various sub-genres of samba are given wildly differing interpretations by the veteran musicians. In conclusion of the short introduction, the author summarizes the numerous interpretations of *partido-alto* as a formerly instrumental genre that became associated with a vocal duel where verses are improvised based on the theme of a given refrain, but that can also draw from a traditional repertory of verses (26-7).

The second chapter is a very brief overview of the Congo-Angolan heritage in Brazil, one of the two major cultural areas of Africa with connections to Afro-Brazilian musical forms, the other being Nigeria and Dahomey (present-day Benin). The *batuque*, generic designation of Afro-Brazilian drumming and dancing of Bantu origin, is the precursor to the modern urban samba. The author asserts that improvisational singing over a choral base is not exclusive to African origins citing the Iberian origin of the northeastern *embolada* rhythm as an example (18). Angolan singing is characterized by the improvised verses of a solo singer over the responsorial refrain of the chorus (32), trademark of the modern *partido-alto*.

The Bahian roots of the urban samba of Rio the Janeiro have been highly emphasized in relevant literature. Chapter three elaborates on the impact of inter-provincial migration in Brazil during the 17th and 18th centuries. With the shifting of the agricultural economy from the northeast to southern Brazil came the dislocation of large numbers of enslaved Afro-Brazilians, primarily of Congo, Angolan and Mozambican origins. The subsequent change of the capital from Salvador to Rio de Janeiro and increasing industrialization further exacerbated migration to the city. As abolition and government-sponsored "whitening" campaigns brought thousands of European immigrants to southern Brazil in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, poor Brazilians were marginalized to the peripheries of the city center forming what are today known as *favelas*, the most densely populated shantytowns in Latin America. The large population of black Brazilians surrounding the city center also formed what Roberto Moura coined as the "Little Africa" of Rio de Janeiro in the late 19th century (1983).

Chapter four introduces the reader to a number of song texts collected by folklorists and musicologists in diverse regions of Brazil. Drawn from various regional genres like the *calango*, the *cateretê*, and the *coco*, the song texts illustrate the formulaic construction of verses and refrains that provided the foundational elements for much of the traditional *partido-alto* repertory of later decades.

In chapter five, Lopes discusses the impact of the Zona Portuária (port district) of Rio de Janeiro on the development of the modern *partido-alto* style. As the city of Rio de Janeiro became the major Brazilian port of call at the turn of the 20th century, the busy ports provided relatively good remuneration and attracted a significant

number of black Brazilians. The port region was fertile ground for spontaneous *pagodes* (samba parties) as several key figures began to establish themselves as skilled *partideiros* (improvisational singers). By comparing song texts of some of Rio's early *partido-alto* practitioners, Lopes highlights how much of the repertory of the genre is based on standardized refrains that are known throughout Brazil. With the commercial explosion of the *partido-alto*-influenced *pagode* in the 1970s and 80s, many of the genre's younger practitioners began to record new compositions and thus permanently changing the genre from an oral to a recorded tradition. As Lopes demonstrates, the new generation of *partideiros*, though skilled improvisers, relied heavily on the "trampolines" and "crutches" of the oral tradition (132).

In chapter six, Lopes further elaborates on the concept of standardized verses as defined by several of the folklorists and musicologists cited. Providing examples of recorded samba lyrics, Lopes reveals that the use of "crutches" and "ready-made" verses has been a significant factor throughout the history of recorded samba. Further analyses of song texts also reveal early references to colonial times, implying the probable antiquity of such verses. In the last part of the chapter, Lopes briefly discusses the influence of the northeastern *embolada*, an improvisational song duel, on the modern *partido-alto*.

The next chapter is dedicated to a discussion of modernity versus tradition in the culture industry as applied to samba and *partido-alto*. The commercialization of samba paralleled with the increasing migration from rural areas to urban centers further enhanced the influence of northeastern styles on the music of Rio de Janeiro. The fundamental characteristic of the *embolada*, and of the most respected form of the *partido-alto*, is the improvised duel by two or more singers. Lopes accounts some legendary duels by some of the city's most venerated artists but somewhat laments the irony of the recorded form of *partido-alto* as the beginning of the decline of the improvised genre.

The final chapter is a collection of interviews with some of the genre's key players, such as Clementina de Jesus and Martinho da Vila, conducted by the author in previous years. Some of the interviewees, who passed away long before the publication of the book, provide fascinating insight to the history of the *partido-alto* and the emergence of the urban samba of Rio de Janeiro. The appendices include maps of the port district of Rio de Janeiro in the 19th and 20th centuries and some unidentified (and unexplained) transcriptions of melodic solos that are perhaps intended to illustrate the melodic contour of the *partido-alto* singing style, though the author provides no clues.

Lopes' treatment of the *partido-alto*, undoubtedly informed by the author's own intimate knowledge of the music of Rio de Janeiro, has been long overdue in scholarship on samba. Recent publications on the phenomenon of the *pagode*, or "backyard samba", such as Roberto M. Moura's *No princípio, era a roda* (2004) [1], are beginning to emphasize the importance of the spontaneous and improvised samba jams to the social fabric of working-class Brazilian society. The most fascinating part of reading this book was my familiarity with many of the old song texts cited by Lopes. I have found variations of the verses and refrains in many recent popular music recordings. I also found, however, that there is little discussion of the specifically musical elements of the *partido-alto* style aside from the vocal/lyrical aspects of the genre. While Lopes assumes that the reader can distinguish between a *partido-alto* and an *embolada* rhythm, his discussion of this oral tradition is nonetheless an invaluable contribution to current scholarship on samba.

Notes

1. Roberto M. Moura, who unexpectedly passed away in late 2005, is of no relation to Roberto Moura, author of *Tia Ciata e a pequena África no Rio de Janeiro* (1983).

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