

A man and a woman are captured in a dynamic dance pose. The man, on the left, is wearing a blue tank top and has his eyes closed with a joyful expression. The woman, on the right, is wearing a green and yellow patterned top and has her hair flying out in a circular motion, suggesting a fast spin. They are both smiling broadly. The background is dark, with a vibrant rainbow light effect emanating from behind the couple, creating a sense of energy and movement.

BRAZ DOS SANTOS'

BRAZOUKA



# "BRAZIL-AFRICA-LAMBAZOUK!"

This is the chorus of *Brazouka's* title song. A group of dancers move exuberantly to the rhythms of Brazilian zouk, their multi-racial composition visually affirming the chorus of the song. This dance-drama on Brazilian social dance chronicles how 'Lambazouk' was born in the town of Porto Seguro in Brazil's tropical northern state of Bahia. Through *Brazouka* unfolds the journey of Braz dos Santos, one of the original dancers in the group Kaoma, whose catchy songs and videos first introduced the world to Lambada, from which Lambazouk evolved.

From a bordello in Bahia to the British stage - the story of Lambazouk (and of Braz), moves across races, social classes and continents. *Brazouka* reveals 'the secret of Brazil' to the world - as Braz, playing himself, declares in the opening scene. This secret is the world of the orixas: the divinities that populate the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. We hear their names - Iemanjá, Xangô - and see them move across the stage in their majesty, grace and power. What is their place in Brazilian society? Why are they so important to the social dances that *Brazouka* pays homage to?



Rio Carnival

Photo: Leonardo Guerra

## TO BRAZIL FROM AFRICA

The orixas (pronounced 'orishas') travelled across the Atlantic Ocean during the 'Middle Passage', or the transportation of slaves from western and south-central Africa to the New World. On the sugar cane and coffee plantations of the Caribbean and North and South America, including Brazil, the Christian slave owners forbade the worship of what they considered to be pagan gods. But the orixas did not die. They went underground, and assimilated with the worship of Catholic saints that the slaves were exposed to through their masters. Thus disguised, they remained a powerful source of spiritual succour within the dehumanising life of the plantations.

African spirituality was not the only aspect about their slaves' culture that the plantation owners found problematic. This spirituality was deeply connected with rhythm, which manifested itself in percussion instruments, movement and chanting. All these modes of self-expression were recognised as potentially inciting rebellion and uprisings. Indeed, they did so throughout the Americas - resulting in bands of maroon communities in

inaccessible uplands and, in the case of Haiti, the formation of the first black republic in the world. Where rebellion was not overtly possible, the slave's body became its own source of resistance.

Any available surface or object could become a percussion instrument: leading to the proliferation of myriad shakers, rattles and vibrating surfaces. The orixas were invoked through ceremonies ostensibly calling on Catholic saints. The martial art of Capoeira evolved in secret self-defence, disguising readiness for battle as play. Body movements used to propitiate the gods in the old world were retained but gradually became fused with European dances, such as the Contredanse (from 'Country Dance'), Waltz, Polka and Mazurka - the staple of balls in stately plantation homes. The secular and sacred merged to become something new: couple dances with oddly resonant names such as 'Lundu', 'Maxixe' and 'Modinha'. These were the ancestors of the modern Brazilian dances we see in *Brazouka*.

## FROM BAHIA TO RIO

In 1888, Brazil finally abolished slavery. By then, it had accumulated the largest African diaspora in the world. The culture of the slaves had developed into a rich mixture incorporating European and Amerindian elements - just like Brazil itself. Its nerve centre was the north-eastern province of Bahia, particularly its city of Salvador. The first colonial capital of Brazil, Salvador was - and remains - the beating heart of Afro-Brazilian culture. Called 'Black Rome' because of its numerous beautiful churches, Salvador's historic centre Pelourinho ('little whipping post' - a name which testifies to slavery's brutality) resounds with the drums of carnival samba, hypnotic Afro-Brazilian liturgy calling on black saints, and the insistent one-stringed berimbau urging Capoeiristas into the battle circle.

In the Pelourinho today, Bahian ladies in traditional dress sell delicacies loved by Orixas and their devotees alike - popcorn gilded with caramel, and black-eyed pea fritters filled with vatapa, or shrimp in palm oil. In 1939, the Brazilian icon Carmen Miranda feted the Naiana, her accoutrements and her Acarajé in a new genre of music: samba. Brazil's centre was now Rio de Janeiro.





Slave ship hull, Museu Afro-Brazil, São Paulo



Salvador Carnival banner commemorating the "nation of Luanda" as one of the sources of Afro-Brazilian heritage



Salvador: Black Rome



Salvador: historical centre



Salvador: Church of Our Lady of the Rosary

Photos on this page: Professor Ananya Kabir

Freed slaves were moving southwards from Bahia to Rio in search of economic opportunities. Their rhythms got a fillip in the anonymity of the big city. Samba de Gafieira, or the samba of the dancehalls, crystallised through open house parties organised by baianas resident in Rio. Big cities meant technological innovation: the first samba song ever recorded, *Pelo telefone* (1917), pays homage to the telephone.

*Brazouka* enthralls us with superb instances of dexterous Samba de Gafieira. This dance transmits the velocity and quick thinking demanded by urban life. Scissor-sharp footwork with unexpected syncopations, crisp dissociations of the torso from the lower body, and graceful leg extensions remind us of Argentinian Tango, with which Samba de Gafieira shares a history - but the mood is altogether cheekier. The key figure here is the Malandro, a loving scoundrel who navigates Rio's (largely white) beachfront neighbourhoods and its (largely black) morros or hills covered by favelas. Out of this negotiation emerged samba, including the Samba of Rio's famous carnival schools, to furnish Brazil's national rhythm.

### ...AND BACK TO BAHIA

But Brazil is not only about Samba. This vast country thrives on its regional rhythm cultures, which dialogue with Samba through both music and dance forms. These rhythms are themselves in a constant state of evolution. Urban myths proliferate around their development, obscuring definitive histories of their emergence and popularity. *Brazouka* treats us to Forró, a fast and exhilarating dance from north-eastern Brazil. Did the name evolve from the English phrase 'for all', used by English engineers stationed near

the city of Recife to describe their parties? The music sounds a bit like zydeco from New Orleans, and the dance feels a bit like Dominican Merengue. The result - flying feet, spun-out hair and lateral hip movements - is, however, totally Brazilian.

These movements seep into the other north-eastern dance form that takes centre stage in *Brazouka* - Lambazouk. In the 1980s, in the Bahian town of Porto Seguro, a regional genre of music, 'Lambada', gave rise to a dance form with the same name. The web of rhythmic connections connecting the Caribbean, the Americas and Africa led to further developments. Seeking new songs to move to, Lambada dancers discovered the Zouk music from the French Caribbean that reached northern Brazil through the airwaves. Technology and African-diasporic rhythm connections gave their dance a new lease of life. Lambada dance + Zouk music developed into 'Lambazouk'. Today, Lambazouk is danced all over the world wherever there are passionate social dancers of Brazilian and Latin styles.

Rewind back to the late 1980s: the popularity of the dance style lambada led to the internationally successful Lambada songs by Brazilian-French group Kaoma. Colourful videos of whirling skirts, breathtaking dips, and swirling hair gave viewers across the world a glimpse of contemporary Brazil, drenched in sun, sea and dramatic dance. But the music videos hinted at the history of race and rhythm behind that picture postcard vision. This history is contained in Lambazouk's movements: the sideways sway reminiscent of African Yuka dance, distinctive head movements which could well derive from possession rites of Candomblé, and sinuous body waves which echo the rippling spine movements of the Yanvalou, the dance for Haitian Vodou's snake god Damballa.

### DANCE AS TRANSFORMATION

*Brazouka* takes its audiences right to the heart of that complex history of Afro-Brazilian dance. By linking Lambazouk so closely to the energies of the orixas, and to rich Afro-Brazilian cosmologies, the musical invites us to uncover the hidden connections between these social dances and Afro-Brazilian spirituality. Given that the story is set in a port town and narrates in part the precarious life of fishermen, Iemanjá, the goddess of the waters, and Xangô, the god of thunder, are everywhere. Yet resistance and enjoyment go hand in hand. Sacred and social dance, Capoeira and, of course, football: all these forms find due place on stage. This is a cross-section of Brazil's rhythmic heritage.

This is also the story of Braz dos Santos of Porto Seguro, just south of Salvador; the young boy overwhelmed by the sea; the young man seduced by women dancing Lambada; and, in the end, the Brazilian who represents to the world dance's ability to transform the pain of slavery into alegria, or joy. Once, Braz saw the Atlantic sweep away some of the beads of a beloved necklace that had happened to break as he stood there on the water's edge. "Take it all away, Iemanjá!" he had declared with fervour, transforming the accident into an impromptu offering.

Transformation, the ultimate secret of African heritage dance forms, is what makes them such a powerful mode of cultural sharing worldwide today. It doesn't matter who we are and where we are from - when we hear those rhythms, we want to get up and dance, to be transformed, ourselves. *Brazouka* shows us how to get there, through the pathways the orixas open up.

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