

EMICS AND ETICS RE-EXAMINED, PART 3

THE DISCOURSE ABOUT OTHERS' MUSIC: REFLECTING ON AFRICAN-BRAZILIAN CONCEPTS*by*

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Introduction

The studies of "African cultural extensions overseas", in particular those regarding musical expressions, have been enriched with new perspectives since the publication of Gerhard Kubik's Book *Angolan traits in Black music, games and dances of Brazil* (1979), and Kazadi wa Mukuna's Brazilian dissertation on the Bantu contribution to Brazilian popular music (Kazadi 1979). At least since that time, superficial comparisons between cultural traits in Brazil (and in Latin America in general) with those from contemporary Africa can no longer be accepted. To proceed this way would imply a total rejection of the fact that the history of Latin America developed independently and differently from African history (Grupo de Trabajo 1990).

What I propose in this introductory essay, is that comparison of contemporary African and so-called African-Brazilian musics is possible to a limited extent as an experimental tool. Without disregarding the methodological problems, which are implicit in any comparison of a cross-cultural nature, I wanted to test some assumptions regarding the historical, linguistic, and organological links between the Brazilian *berimbau* musical bow and the Angolan *mbulumbumba* musical bow from Wila province (Kubik 1987, Oliveira Pinto, 1986). To gain insights about the musicians' concepts, i.e. their "emic" theory, it is necessary to learn from their verbalising of specific problems and aspects of their music. In addition, the discussion on something which is completely new from the Brazilian musicians' point of view can complement their discourse about musical practices.

By means of a music perception experiment, which is described below, I had it in mind to find out

- (1) to what extent evidence of historical connections between Brazilian and Angolan music could be illustrated by the specific reactions of Brazilian musicians while listening to recordings of a specific genre of African music, and
- (2) what the experience of listening to an alien — although structurally and historically related — repertoire would add to the outline of deep-level organisational principles of the African-Brazilian music which I have been considering. The question was more or less this: "What can I learn about their concepts, when they

evaluate other people's music?" Or to put it in another way: "What can etic comments reveal about emics?"

A music perception experiment

The experiment consisted in presenting two recordings of José Virasanda's performance on the *mbulumbumba* made in 1965 in Southwestern Angola by Gerhard Kubik,¹ to musicians in the Recôncavo Baiano region, the hinterland of Bahia. With the exception of some brief attempts made by Gerhard Kubik (1979:30), sound material of Angolan musical bows had never been presented to Brazilian *berimbau* players.

The population of the Recôncavo region has a high percentage of African descent. For several years I had been conducting fieldwork in this region, studying a variety of cultural expressions such as the *berimbau* and its repertoire, the *capoeira* (also called *capoeira de Angola*) fighting game, which is deeply rooted in the cultural history of the Recôncavo and its accompanying *berimbau* music (cf. discography). The organological aspects of the musical bows on both sides

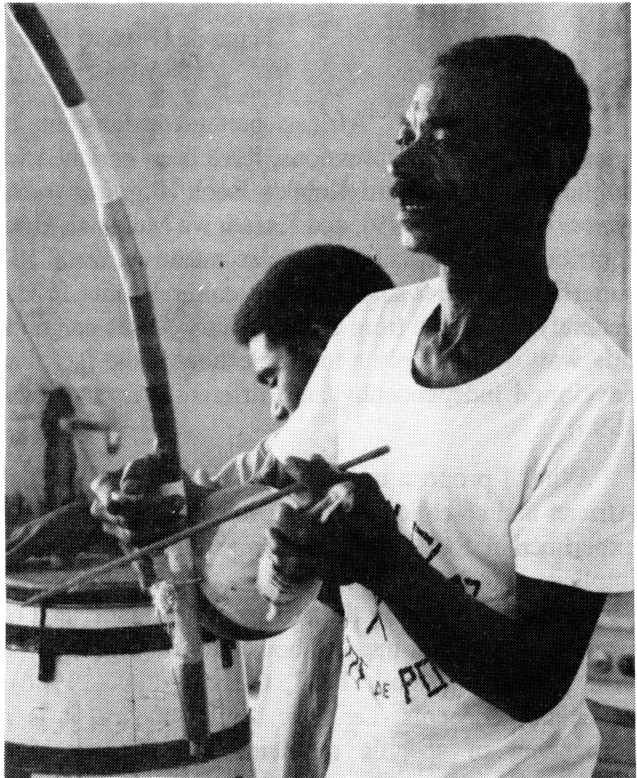


Fig. 1. Mestre Vavá playing the *berimbau* musical bow, Santo Amaro de Purificação, 1988

of the Atlantic ocean, i.e. details of manufacture as well as the musicians' playing techniques, have revealed significant congruences (cf. Kazadi 1979, Oliveira Pinto 1986, 1991:58, 59). As far as I know, musical structures themselves had only been analysed in Brazil (Shaffer, 1982, Oliveira Pinto 1986, 1991 etc.).

The interacting entities of the experiment were:

a) The sound example selected for the experiment: two recordings of José Virasanda's

¹ These recordings were published in 1973 on the LP *Humbi en Handa* (cf. discography).

performance on the *mbulumbumba* (gourd-resonated musical bow), recorded by Gerhard Kubik in southwestern Angola, July 1965.

b) The audience of Brazilian musicians, composed of *berimbau* players and *capoeiristas* (i.e. *capoeira* practitioners) between the ages of 10 and 14, and two adult *capoeira* masters (Mestre Vavá and Mestre Furringa), to whom the recordings of the Angolan *mbulumbumba* were played (in September 1984).

c) The researcher conducting the experiment (myself), who proceeded from the notion that there is a remote historical connection between the *mbulumbumba* musical traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries and that of the Brazilian *berimbau* (Kubik, 1987).

While one cassette player was reproducing the African musical examples, another tape recorder was recording the reactions (bursts of laughter, clapping hands, people playing along, questions, comments, etc.) from the audience. In this situation I limited my intervention to a set of questions devised for the purpose of the experiment, concerning the Brazilian *berimbau* and its repertoire, the relationship of the musical patterns (*toques*) with the "fighting game" *capoeira*, and a variety of unrelated questions and comments.² These questions included:

Dá para jogar capoeira com isso? Is it possible to do the *capoeira* with this?

Esse toque é parecido com alguma coisa? Does this pattern resemble anything?

Parece com Iúna, esse aí ?

Does it resemble Iúna [name for a specific *toque*] there? etc..

The grammar of the *berimbau* repertoire: the *toques*

As already mentioned, one of the objectives in presenting the Angolan recordings to the Mestre Vavá's *capoeira* group at Santo Amaro da Purificação was to see how the musicians would react from the standpoint of their emically definable system, listening to sound material, to which they had never been exposed before, from a historically related area in Africa. Another question was whether Virasanda's music would reflect any conceptual patterns which would be recognisable within the emic system of the Brazilian audience. This would bring new insights into the Brazilian concept of *toque*.

Several translations, such as pattern, performance style, motif, rhythm, etc. have been attempted for the term *toque*. None of them are fully semantically congruent with it. Derived from the Portuguese verb *tocar*, which literally means to touch, to play, to perform, *toque* is used in a very broad musical sense. In the local music

² A selection of the interview is published in my contribution to the *Festschrift for Gerhard Kubik* (Schmidhofer & Schüller, eds.), Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt 1994.

theory of the Recôncavo the term has gained its own signification, especially regarding the repertoire of the *berimbau* musical bow. There are several *toques* with their own denomination and function within the music and its close relationship to the *capoeira* "fighting game" (*jôgo*). Under the term *toque de berimbau* the musicians conceptualise organized patterns of two basic pitches produced by striking the open or the stopped string of the bow. Besides these basic pitches, a number of other sounds are produced, by the shaking of a small basket rattle (*caxixi*) held in the same hand as the stick, or by only partly hindering the vibration of the string, without really stopping it (*squitim*) and so forth. Another important acoustical feature of *berimbau*-playing is the organised control of the overtone spectrum created by moving the resonator off and on the musician's abdomen.

Besides the horizontal ('rhythmic') and the vertical ('melodic') component of the *toque*, it is important to recognize its inner structure and also its character. Inner structuring is circumscribed by the musicians with terms like *dobrado*, *amarrado*, i.e. "doubled", "tied" etc. These concepts are strongly based on performing techniques. The character of a *toque* may be the most difficult parameter for an outsider to perceive, the musicians referring simultaneously to sound and to movement patterns of the *capoeira* game.³

Musical transcriptions based only on the audio material, without considering the components of the *toques de berimbau* as a whole, have always failed to provide a consistent document of this music. Movement, in musical bow performance, is as important as the sound produced. Therefore the system developed by James Koetting for notating West African drumming ("time-unit-box", cf. Koetting 1970) seems to be useful for transcribing *berimbau* music also. The idea is to fix the basic movements at least, together with the sound patterns.⁴ To give an example, the following short selections of a *toque de berimbau*, named Angola (!), played by two musicians, Mestre Vavá and Evilásio de Andrade, confirm that a *toque* may differ in performance from one musician to another, basically in its motional realisation.

Emics

What kind of information about the concept of *toque* could one obtain from the reactions of the Brazilian audience listening to Angolan music? What immediately attracted their attention in Virasanda's performance was not what Westerners would identify as the music, but the singing in a strange language, and how verbal phrases interacted with the sounds Virasanda produced on his musical bow. To me, this was a proof that in this Brazilian cultural cluster of the Recôncavo Baiano, what would

³ For further discussion on the *toques de berimbau* cf. Oliveira Pinto 1991:71-87.

⁴ Later I discovered two written *berimbau* methods, where this same idea prevails. *Capoeira* masters had made these methods for their students, applying a movement-based concept.

2 EP. = 120 MM

	A						A						a ₁						
rH	x		*				x		*				x		*	*	*	*	*
	/	/					/	/					/	/	/	/	/	/	
lH	o	●					o	●					o	●	o	●	o	●	
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2 EP. = 90 MM

	A						A						a ₁					
rH	*	*					*	*					*	*	*	*	*	*
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lH	o	●					●	o	●				●	o	●	o	●	●
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Fig. 2. The beginning section of the *toque* Angola. Explanation of the transcription:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> rH right hand lH left hand x strong, fast downward movement with <i>caxixi</i> rattle * diffuse movement (horizontal) with <i>caxixi</i> rattle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> / stroke with the stick on the string ● stopped string o open string < open resonator (off the abdomen) > closed resonator (on the abdomen) |
|--|---|

be qualified in ethnomusicology as 'music' appears cognitively to include an extension of language-based entities.

After this first reaction, the Brazilians began to concentrate on the identifying the *toques* in terms of their own musical practice. Such question as "what kind of *toque* is that for us?" revealed the shift in the focus of interest. Those in the audience who had *berimbau* and drums attempted to play along with the recording. Finally, they asked me a question:

Eles não deram o nome disso lá, não?

Didn't they give you a name for this over there?

Analysing José Virasanda's playing technique in relation to their own on the *berimbau*, Mestre Vavá and the young Brazilian audience observed:

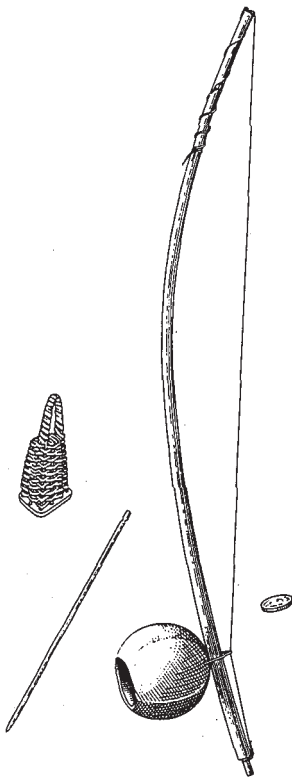


Fig. 2. Berimbau musical bow, caxixi rattle, baqueta stick, dobrão coin

O tocador de berimbau aqui no Brasil trabalha mais do que eles lá, com isso aqui...

The *berimbau* player here in Brazil works this thing more than the people over there [in Angola]...

and Mestre Vavá proceeded to demonstrate the interaction between the *dobrão* (coin used to stop the string of the musical bow) and the *baqueta* (playing stick). This interaction is called *dobrar* ("to double"), derived from the idea that there is a basic *toque* and that the performer shapes it according to his individual style. The Brazilian *berimbau* player meant here that in Virasanda's performance, unlike the Brazilian practice, the Angolan '*toque*' was maintained throughout in a basic shape, without inner structuring. While this observation seems to elicit information about Virasanda's music, in fact it tells us a great deal about the musical concepts of the Brazilian musicians. From its sound alone, the Angolan recording stimulated the Brazilians in their notion of movement patterns as being closely related to the music.

Finally, the following statement was made about the music performed on the Angolan musical bow. It functions perfectly as a 'native definition' of emics:

... tudo é instrumento, né?! Pra eles lá é gostoso, eles lá pra gente não presta e a gente pra eles lá, eles vão ver qualquer coisa ... é, o menino não é mole não, é um negócio ... Cada lugar tem o seu jeito.

... For them there [in Angola] it is all very pleasant. But for us their things just don't fit, and in the same manner they too would find faults with our things.... Each place has its own ways.

The experiment showed clearly, in terms of cross-cultural comparison, that nothing came out about the deeper structure and style of Virasanda's music. As any evaluation of something new always has to establish a parameter to be able to come to definitions, and this parameter pertains to one's own conceptual framework, 'ethnocentric comments' like those made by the *berimbau* players from Bahia reveal much about their own concepts and frame of reference but little about the other. Perhaps their comments could stimulate an Angolan researcher interested in pursuing study with the Angolan musical bow player. Stimulated by the Brazilian observations, he could, for example, focus his attention on the verbal aspects of

Virasanda's performance style (more than a Western trained musicologist would ever do), and take a closer look at the handling of the basic bow patterns and their variations in movement and sound. If we hypothesise that the two traditions are related historically (Kubik 1987) not only superficially way but also at a deeper, namely a conceptual, level, then it could be that the Brazilian comments would help towards a better understanding of the emics of José Virasanda's music. But this remains pure hypothesis.

On the other hand, much was learned about the Brazilians' concepts of *berimbau* performance and their predominant focus of attention. I learned more, or had previous assumptions confirmed about the emics of their musical culture, by listening to their discussions about and their reaction to the Angolan music. At the same time the experiment exemplified Kenneth L. Pike's verdict that culturally specific emic patterns are always intertwined with etic background patterns and thus emics and etics cannot "be treated separately, or first one, then the other, or as one as outside the mind, the other inside it" (in Kaye 1994:297).

A problem remaining here is where to place my own standpoint in the experiment. Did I work from an etic or an emic standpoint? The problem is that etic standpoints, in Pike's definition (1954), presuppose the existence of an extra-systemic frame of reference constructed by the researcher and projected upon her/his research object. In my experiment I had a limited system of references to project on the participants, leaving it open as to which direction the experiment would draw my ultimate attention in.

Conclusions

Finally, the experiment outlined above confirmed that studies of so-called African-Brazilian music must deal with the specificity of the local phenomena and all their widespread cultural, social and conceptual implications. Superficial cross-cultural comparisons do not lead to any results; on the contrary, they can easily foster misinterpretations.

On the other hand, the dominant Brazilian viewpoint, i.e. the 'Western' one, is also not able properly to understand musical processes in this domain and can be equally misleading. There are plenty of examples. Just to mention one: Brazilian folklorists very often remain on the surface in their evaluation of popular culture. Furthermore their approach to most of the popular manifestations known as *afro-brasileiras* is premised on the strong belief in the complete 'acculturation' of these forms of expression. Internal structures and highly differentiated emic concepts are ignored in favour of a superficial 'reading' of the manifestation. This leads directly to false conclusions, like:

– If the instrument is of Portuguese origin, the music must also be.

– If the performance context is linked to so-called 'popular' Catholicism, then the beliefs and concepts of the practitioners must be Christian etc.

None of this is true. In previous studies I have shown that even Western terminology on tonality, e.g. D Major (*tom ré*), G Major (*tom sol*) in a specific guitar repertoire from the Recôncavo is based on a locally defined set of movement-sound concepts with distinct inner qualities ('feelings'), and not on tonality in the functional harmonic, i.e. Western, sense (Oliveira Pinto 1991:121-137). Naming and certain contextual features may reveal the cultural values of the dominant social group, but on the local ground they function as mere emblems for the contents, which differ completely from these emblems. Real miscegenation, or 'hybridisation' of African cultures in the New World — to use the dubious term in recent use by some Hispano-american scholars — has not taken place too often. In Brazil the practice of labelling popular manifestations in accordance with dominant values, without adopting them on a deeper level, functioned as an efficient strategy for the maintenance of cultural identity and survival. This process should not be understood in terms of the maintenance of pure African traits. African-Brazilian manifestations adopted new configurations, according to the region, to the specific environment and to the elements which were taken over and reshaped, thus becoming real Brazilian expressions. It is the idea of the existence of a deeper level of organisational principles which relates conceptual 'Africanisms'⁵ in Brazil to specific African cultures. The materials which contributed, and still contribute, to the development of African-Brazilian music and its connected cultural manifestations in general are manifold and — this seems important — are not only African. In addition to a careful evaluation of these materials, cultural studies must consider the way these materials are thought of conceptually, without falling back and getting stuck on notions such as 'acculturation', 'retention' etc.

The field of African-Brazilian concepts and theories is a large one. In many instances new methods and ideas are necessary to reconsider an important part of Brazilian cultural history and to understand its present forms of expression, dynamic and full of creativity as they are.

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⁵ Interesting approaches to Africanisms in American culture are presented in Holloway (ed.) 1990.

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