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History of Modern Brazil: Artists to Activists

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Music and Nationalism: Vargas Cultural Endeavor

Vargas' most distinctive activity of forging a national identity for Brazilians was through its culture. He focused on funding many cultural projects, specifically music, in order to give a sense of identity to the Brazilian people while also co-opting their support for his regime. Vargas understood that repression and force alone wouldn't be sustainable if he was going to change Brazil's society.³ With the limitations that were in place during Vargas rule, many Brazilian artists worked with the censors that were in place.¹ Many Brazilian musicians, influenced by the new ideas about what it means to be Brazilian,² wanted to use their music to forge a new national identity. These musicians either made patriotic songs about Brazil's beauty or played songs about the diverse characteristics of many Brazilians like the *jangadeiros*. Music was a powerful creative tool that was able to create stories about Brazil that unified the divided regions of Brazil into one national identity.

Vargas wanted to use Brazil's artistic creativity as an agenda for his nation-building project. This idea of using artistic creativity as a form of nation-building was explored by earlier Brazilian intellectuals. An earlier generation of Brazilian intellectuals understood that the arts, specifically music, can serve as a powerful tool for national unity if they are able to dive into the "national consciousness" of Brazil.³ These intellectuals believed that Brazil was still stuck in its primitive, collective, psyche that was holding back the nation from becoming great.³ They combined German Romanticism and eugenics as a way to explain and justify that Brazil's collective mind needs to develop. Graca Aranha emphasized this idea in his book *Canaan*, critiquing Brazil for its patronage system for its immorality and kept Brazil psychologically underdeveloped.³ Vargas learned about these intellectuals and their ideas from his time

¹ Lilia M. Schwarz, Heloisa M. Starling, "Brazil: A Biography," pg 426

² Lilia M. Schwarz, Heloisa M. Starling, "Brazil: A Biography," chapter 13

³ Micah Oelze "Diagnosing A Nation," (published in Adelphi University)

as a law student. He took these ideas and used them as an engine for his Estado Novo project.

Vargas established the “Press and Propaganda department (DIP)”⁴ to censor and control every aspect of Brazilian culture. DIP was made in order to control information and sponsor pro-Brazilian cultural projects. Vargas was trying to dive into the national consciousness of Brazil,³ creating a new Brazilian culture that emphasizes the beauty and greatness of Brazil. This “new Brazil” was an attempt to fuse aesthetics/culture and politics to create a new story about Brazil and create symbols that all Brazilians can rally behind.⁵ Samba greatly exemplified itself as the national symbol for Brazil. Vargas made January 3 the day of “popular music”² and made Samba a “symbol of national identity.”² Vargas understood the power of Brazilian popular music/samba; Vargas wanted to use it to harness the power of the masses and further his Estado Novo project.

People needed to believe that they were part of something greater than themselves, considering the Great Depression was hitting Brazil particularly hard with inflation, currency devaluation, and high unemployment.⁶ Life started to look bleak for most Brazilians around that time. Samba became the very thing that was able to bring a sense of community amongst Brazilians. Samba exaltation was a genre of samba that thrived under the new environment of Vargas’s Estado Novo because the genre’s very premise is its very patriotic tune about Brazil. One great example of this is the song “*Aquarela do Brasil*” by Ary Barroso. Considered one of the most popular songs from Brazil.

The song overall has an upbeat rhythm and a pitch that isn't too high or low with the lyrics being about the beauty of Brazil. The combination of the lyrics, major keys, and the overall melody give a sense of admiration and pride of what Brazil is. A place of beauty and a vibrant culture that even the world is amazed to see.⁷ The song did get scrutinized by DIP because of its colloquialism and folkloric theme to it but Barroso convinced DIP officials that his piece of work as being patriotic and modern, exactly

⁴ Lilia M. Schwarz, Heloisa M. Starling, “Brazil: A Biography,” Pg. 423

⁵ George L. Mosse, “The Nationalization of the masses,” pg. 10

⁶ Lilia M. Schwarz, Heloisa M. Starling, “Brazil: A Biography,” Pg. 405

⁷ Ary Barroso, “Aquarela do Brasil,” published 1939

what Vargas wanted.⁸ Consequently, this allowed more folkloric songs to be made and approved during Vargas's rule. Ary Barroso's song became a founding song or hymn that all Brazilians know and follow.

Ary Barroso's song wasn't only popular in Brazil but internationally as well. The song was promoted by Carmen Miranda. Carmen Miranda became an internationally acclaimed Brazilian singer, producer and film-maker⁹ in Hollywood because she combined many elements of Brazil's culture into her own brand as a celebrity. Miranda served as cultural agent for Vargas, spreading the idea that Brazil was a harmonious multiracial/ethnic paradise. This solidified Brazil's national identity, not only in Brazil, but all around the world. Carmen Miranda was able to spread many famous Brazilian musicians' songs to the U.S and help popularize them around the world. One of them was *O que e que a bahiana tem (What is it about Bahian Women)* by Dorival Caymmi.¹⁰

Caymmi was a famous Brazilian singer who ran a radio station that played many of his songs and participated in many artistic endeavors in Brazil. Caymmi's songs focused more on the folkloric aspect of Brazil, referencing the many regional differences in Brazil. Especially his home state of Bahia being his main focal point of inspiration. Caymmi popularized his songs through the use of his radio station, exploring different themes. A well known radio program from Caymmi is the History of the Fisherman which tells the story of the fisherman/jagenderios that live in Ceara. Caymmi described the fisherman's life as a romantic story of going out to the sea as a form of "seduction" but also a struggle for life.¹¹ A chorus follows this introduction of the fisherman with a sense of dreariness and mystery behind it. The melody is opposite to exaltation Samba, being more melancholic than happy or jovial. The variety of melodies allows Caymmi to explore a story about the fisherman.

The songs played on the Caymmi's radio show have different ranges of emotions that are being played out. Whether it's the somber melody of the second song detailing the prayers of the wives of the fisherman or the chaotic despair behind the lyrics of the third song because of the storm that arrived on the sea.⁸ All of these songs have a

⁸ Smashed Hits, "Smashed Hits: Aquarela do Brasil, published by BBC

⁹ Lilia M. Schwarz, Heloisa M. Starling, "Brazil: A Biography," Pg. 427

¹⁰ Campbell, "Four Fishermen and Orson Welles," pg. 18

¹¹ Dorival Caymmi, "History of the Fisherman" published in 1957

narrative based on suspense, brotherhood, duty, and adventure. This romanticization of the fisherman or jangadeiros is based on the 1941 fishermen "raid" (voyage) from Ceará to Rio de Janeiro in order to advocate that jangadeiros should be recognized as workers under the new labor reforms established by Vargas. Its story was highly publicized in Brazil where the press started to make stories about these people, their way of life, the voyage, and the region that they came from.

Journalists started to characterize jangadeiros as the northeasterner: describing them as brave, stoic, ethnic/"indigenous," rustic, and strong.¹² This regional rhetoric⁹ that was happening in the Brazilian press actually supported this idea that Brazil was a nation of interrelated regions that are fused together. Jangadeiros social conditions and their political history was stripped away from them. Jangadeiros served as national heroes for the nation of Brazil, representing that even the most "pre-modern" people can be brought to the light by Vargas's Estado Novo reforms.⁹ The history of the jangadeiros was put under a veil of "myths and symbols"⁴ that most Brazilians would refer to but not their political advocacy and poverty.

The music during the Estado Novo era served as a tool for nation-building for Vargas. Many musicians took pieces of what makes Brazil a special place. The romantic aesthetic of the jangadeiros gave Brazilians a national hero to look up to but at the expense of the fisherman. The patriotic songs of samba exaltation empowered many Brazilians to be proud of their identity and their culture. To this day, samba is still an important symbol for Brazil's national identity. Many Brazilians still hinge on romanticized ideas like the jangadeiros or that Brazil is a place that has embraced all races and ethnicities and has no racism in its society. Many of these elements of contemporary Brazil can be linked to Vargas' nation-building project.

¹² Campbell, "Four Fishermen and Orson Welles," pg. 17

References

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