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African Puppetry and Brazilian Mamulengo: Possible Links between Symbolic and Material Representations

by Izabela Brochado

Mamulengo is a popular form of puppet theater of the Northeast region of Brazil. It seems to have originated about two centuries ago, and even today, it remains a significant form of entertainment for the people. Mamulengo is both informed and shaped by the context of its production. It also reflects a society resulting from an intense process of miscegenation and cultural exchange between Indian, White, and Black populations in which hierarchical divisions have been based on race, gender, and class distinctions. Consequently, it conveys the prejudices, tensions, and contradictions arising from these distinctions.

In the view of some scholars, European culture seems to be the primary source of Mamulengo. However, the hypotheses of some puppeteers present new possibilities of looking at this subject. For them, the primary source of the Mamulengo lies with African slaves.

1. The Puppeteers' Hypotheses

Research has shown many hypotheses which point to the elements of Mamulengo coming from the African people who were taken to Brazil between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Due to the limited space here, I will limit my description to only three hypotheses. The first is from Januário de Oliveira, a puppeteer from Pernambuco, deceased in 1977:

There used to be an owner of many slaves on a farm in the interior of our State [Pernambuco]. He was rude and mean to his slaves. There was a very smart slave, his name was Tião. After being questioned for arriving late at work, the slave answered his master:

—I am late because my wife received the visit of the stork.

—You silly Negro! My wife is the one who waits for the arrival of the stork. Your woman receives the visit of a vulture.

—Master, it's not possible. We are human too.

So the slave got beaten up and tied to the stocks. At night, when the black got to the slaves' quarters, he thought: the master seems to have no heart. He seems to have a stone instead of a heart. Even his face is made of wood. So quickly the slave sculpted a head out of wood, and having covered it with rags, he started to play with the puppet, doing everything the master did during the day. (Borba Filho 65)

Another version, very similar to the above, comes from a self-taught folklorist, João Emílio de Lucena, who had heard it from puppeteers in Paraiba:

I think that the puppet theater came from Europe, from Africa, and so on. But the puppet theater we have in the northeast of Brazil was created during the time of the slaves. The owners of the sugar plantations (the slave owners) used to be dreadful at that time. They bought, sold, and treated the slaves as if they were animals. The slaves worked very hard in the sugar plantation. There was so much injustice and the slaves understood everything, because among the black people who came to Brazil, there were very smart people. So the slaves started reacting in a way, creating those little plays, showing what was happening, occupying some spaces. It was a social issue, a way of giving the masters a lesson and making the black people prevail in the end. That is the reason the black character wants (and often succeeds) to marry the white lady, the daughter of the landowner. Dancing, drinking and challenging everyone, he always wins. (Braga 28)

There is also an account by the puppeteer Manuel Francisco da Silva relating that Mamulengo first appeared on a farm, having been derived from a performance by a woman slave: "The black woman created a great variety of puppets representing the human beings and animals that live on the farm. She asked her master (the landowner) permission to present her show and named it João Redondo (the landowner's name) as an homage to him" (Pimentel 41).

As can be observed, the story of the origin of Mamulengo is woven through the imagination of the puppeteers themselves, who seek explanations for the roots of their art. Those images are related to the sugar plantation context where Mamulengo seems to have developed. In that context, there was a strong hierarchical division between the masters (slave-owners) and the slaves.

While the first two hypotheses view the rise of Mamulengo as a form of revenge, a way of resistance, and a manner of survival, the last one appears as a type of reconciliation between the two races, the two poles of Brazilian colonial society. The contradictions contained within these hypotheses bring to light the tension and constant displacement of the Mamulengo subjects—that is, the themes and plots of Mamulengo plays—that shift between subversion and conformity. On one hand, it shows a corrosive and irreverent criticism of representatives of the dominant class (politicians, priests, landowners, policemen); on the other, it reproduces and reinforces conservative values and ideas, mainly regarding gender and race.

2. African Puppetry and Mamulengo: Possible Connections

The African influence on Mamulengo, although recognized by Mamulengo scholars, has not yet been discussed. In regard to this, Santos argues that

The Africans did not bring any particular form of popular puppetry. They were only an influence during the development of Mamulengo. [...] There is no doubt that Mamulengo is full of interventions originating from African culture: the victims, all the characters that are humiliated and who avenge the poor people, are black Africans and have a great importance in the Mamulengo. (215)

The lack of discussion about the African influence on Mamulengo seems to be related mostly to the lack of information, both about African puppet theater and Mamulengo history itself. Consequently, to establish possible links between them is a difficult task. Nevertheless, ethnographic studies of African puppetry¹ have brought to light

¹ See: Scheinberg (1977); Proschan (1980); Arnoldi (1995); Nidzgorski and Nidzgorski (1998); Witte (2001); Den Otter and Kéïta (2002).

information regarding the forms and functions of puppets in Africa, and their enormous variety among African nations and ethnic groups.

As is well known today, puppets in Africa were (and still are) widely used and serve many different functions: in divination, in the process of curing illnesses, in religious ceremonies (for example, the initiation process, cult of the dead, etc.), and finally as entertainment. Moreover, puppets occupy an important place in African myths. Brazilian ethnographers and folklorists have pointed out the influence of African fetishist cults in Brazil, in which figures are seen as having magical powers, or as being inhabited by a spirit. In the Pernambucan dramatic dance, Maracatu, a female puppet named Calunga appears as one of the sacred elements. Even today, the Calunga is part of the Maracatu ritual, and, like so many other sacred objects (*axés*), embodies the strength of the group's ancestors. For Mário Andrade, "the Calunga puppet is probably reminiscent of African fetishist cults" (6).

2.1 The Mamulengueiros' Beliefs

There is no doubt that the puppeteers see their Mamulengo shows as entertainment and as a means of earning their living. Nevertheless, some of the mamulengueiros believe they have a spiritual experience when they present their puppets, either throughout the show, or only during certain scenes related to Afro-Brazilian cults, such as in *Xangô*, a Mamulengo scene that shows a spiritual session in which a healer takes the spirits out of some puppet characters.

Master Ginu used to say that when he dies, his puppets should be burned with him, since "the puppets were given to me as a kind of mission, received by me from spiritual entities." Therefore, "they must leave this world together with me." Ginu says that when he enters the booth he is not "himself" anymore. Only when the show ends does he become "himself" again. Ginu tells us that he used to participate in *Umbanda* cults for more than twenty years. This fact leads us to believe that his vision of the supernatural powers he receives during the performance may be linked to the embodiment of spiritual entities, which are the basis of this Afro-Brazilian cult.²

Zé Lopes, another Mamulengo puppeteer who also used to participate in *Xangô* cults, says that when he is presenting the *Xangô* scene, he can feel the presence

² Interview: Januário de Oliveira (Mestre Ginu), 1975, Tape no.46 (70 min.). Museu da Imagem e do Som de Pernambuco—MISPE—FUNDARPE.

of many entities (spirits) inside the booth. According to him, some of these spirits use the puppets as a way to manifest themselves.³

These notions, of the puppeteer as a mediator between two universes—transcendental and earthly—and of the puppets as objects which embody spiritual entities believed in by some traditional puppeteers from the Northeast, evoke the functions that puppeteers have in many African traditions.

Besides the symbolic aspects, we can observe many other connections to African puppetry related to formal procedures—for example, the puppets' visual representation and subjects.

2.2 Sexual Matters and Work Activities

Sex is one of the main subjects of Mamulengo, and one of the main sources of its humor. Sexual content is expressed in the puppets' visual representations (exposure of genitals), movements (parodies of sexual intercourse), and in many textual references (both obvious and subtle). In contrast to Mamulengo, sexuality was seldom a central part of European puppet traditions. Yet sexual exposure is very common in African puppetry. It appears in the puppets' visual presentation, in scene content, and in such subjects as *Ekon* puppets from Ibibio people of Nigeria, and *Gelede* puppets from the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Benin.

In his essay "Ekon Society Puppets," Alfred Scheinberg explains that *Ekon* puppets were a source of public entertainment and instruction, and also were used as agents of control: "The *Ekon* plays employed humor (often sexual) and public criticism within a ritualized context to influence social attitudes and to expose wrongs which, although not necessarily illegal, could threaten the equilibrium of the Ibibio community"(2).

Many types of comic exposure in Mamulengo (including sexual ones) may act as a form of social control, mainly related to homosexuality and sexuality among elderly people, especially women. Moreover, we find various links between sexual representations in puppet figures and movements appearing in Mamulengo and some African puppet traditions, such as in *Gelede* puppets, in which articulated puppets often appear mounted on the top of the masks. These puppets are often moved by

³Interview: José Lopes in Glória de Goitá, Pernambuco, 14 February, 2004.

means of strings or wires manipulated from below, facilitating the puppets' repetitive movements and depicting scenes related to sexual, social, and work activities.

Brand describes a sexual intercourse scene played by two puppets in the *Gelede* ceremony: “[T]he second [puppet] was a woman who removed her dress during the dance and simulated coitus with the third puppet, a man with an articulated penis which pushed its way out of his loincloth to engage in coitus. The puppets were wood, maneuvered from below by means of wire or string” (7).



Fig. 1. A lascivious priest with a huge penis appears in some Mamulengo plays. Photo courtesy of Izabela Brochado.

A figure with similar characteristics is the priest present in some Mamulengo shows. Dressed in a long black tunic, inside it has a long, articulated phallus that emerges from the costume, causing a surprise effect (see Figure 1). The disproportion between the puppet and the phallus size is striking, which reminds us of the large phallus of Karagöz, and also of some puppets appearing in Africa, such as in the Hausa ethnic group of Niger.

Hans Witte's referral to Yoruba *Gelede* puppets provides plenty of details of humorously depicted sexual intercourse scenes, including the erect phallus and even

scenes of “sodomy” (69). Similar types of puppets depicting sexual intercourse (including scenes of sodomy and group sex) appear in the Museu do Homem in Recife. The figures are mounted on a type of gun and are being penetrated by a man with an enormous penis (see Figures 2 and 3). The male figures can move back and forth, being moved by pulling the gun’s trigger, allowing for repetitive and rhythmic movement.



Fig.2. Scene of “sodomy” involving three male figures. The puppets are made of wood and cloth.
Photo courtesy of Izabela Brochado.



Fig. 3. Another version of copulation scene with a man and a woman. Puppets made by Sauba. Photo courtesy of Izabel Brochado.

Scenes depicting work activities, so common in Mamulengo, seem to show an African influence, not only as subjects, but also related to similarities in the technical aspects of puppet construction, control points and articulation. Some of the puppets appearing in Mamulengo are very similar to *Gelede* figures, such as *Pisa-Pilão* (grinding grains; see Figure 4). Moreover, *Chica-do Cuscuz* (couscous-makers) appear frequently in Mamulengo scenes to sell their goods. Also, we have to take into account the *casa-de-farinha* (flour mill) puppets that, like *Gelede* figures, make repetitive movements showing the manufacture of cassava flour.



Fig. 4. Mamulengo Pisa Pilão. The figures make repetitive movements grinding corn. Photo courtesy of Izabel Brochado.

To conclude, I would say that even if African puppets were not physically taken to Brazil as material objects, or as a particular form of popular puppetry, they nevertheless were kept alive in slaves' memories. Finding a niche for them in the new society, African people found a way to continue playing with their puppets. The puppet figures and performances surely were transformed by contact with European and Amerindian indigenous cultures.

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