

Dialogues between tradition and contemporaneity in the Jongo Mamulengo creation process

Diálogos entre tradição e contemporaneidade no processo de criação de Jongo Mamulengo

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Abstract

Jongo Mamulengo was created in 2016. It is a partnership between Bonobando Collective, *Jongo da Serrinha* and Cordão do Boitató. On stage are *jongo*, samba and *mamulengo*, assets of Brazilian cultural. The narrative traverses several stories of *jongo* in the Serrinha favela and its relation with the foundation of Império Serrano in 1947. To understand the creative processes in *Jongo mamulengo* it is necessary to observe the interplay between the ritual and cosmological dimensions of the actions and representations of *mamulengo* as a whole. It chose to emphasize the forms, devices, strategies and techniques present in *mamulengo*. One of the keys to this conception is the notion of *brincadeira* (game).

Keywords: *mamulengo*; *jongo*; intangible heritage; politics and epistemology; creative processes

Resumo

Jongo Mamulengo foi criado em 2016. É uma parceria entre o Coletivo Bonobando, o *Jongo da Serrinha* e o Cordão do Boitató. Em cena estão o *jongo*, o samba e o *mamulengo*, patrimônios culturais brasileiros. A dramaturgia percorre diversas histórias da presença do *jongo* na favela da Serrinha e sua relação com a fundação do Império Serrano, em 1947. Para compreender os procedimentos de criação em *Jongo Mamulengo* é preciso observar o imbrincamento entre a dimensão ritual e a cosmológica das ações e das representações do *mamulengo* em si. Optou-se por ressaltar as formas, os dispositivos, as estratégias e técnicas presentes no *mamulengo*. Uma das chaves para esta concepção é a noção de *brincadeira*.

Palavras-chave: *mamulengo*; *jongo*; patrimônio imaterial; política e epistemologia; processos de criação

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We can define *mamulengo* in general terms as being a specific form of puppet theatre most often practiced in the Zona da Mata, Pernambuco State, North-eastern Brazil. The locality is marked by high levels of social and economic inequality, compounded by processes resulting from the cultivation of sugarcane for sugar plantations and, recently, for alcohol as a fuel. This mode of exploration began in the 16th century in the early years of colonization and is related to the settlement of the region. One of the oldest references to the term *mamulengo* is dated 1889 and found in an entry in the *Dictionary of Brazilian Vocabulary* by Viscount Beaurapaire Rohan.

Mamulengo is comic theatre that has a broad and well defined body of figures or characters corresponding to the local socio-cultural context. These figures stage passages, that is, short plots that serve as the basis for improvisation. This dramaturgical game combines diverse resources, such as so called *loas* or *glosas de aguardente* (firewater), rhymed verses that are spoken by the characters to present themselves or comment verbally on events. The passages are interspersed with live music performed by a set of players, considered integral for the overall presentation. The songs played are specific to *mamulengo* and correspond to popular rhythms from the region. *Mateus*, an "actor", stands in front of the booth and mediates between the puppets and the audience. Interacting with and relating to the audience are fundamental characteristics of *mamulengo*. Spectators can be considered "specialists", because they know the elements and resources of *mamulengo*, dialoguing and participating in the presentations with ease. The bearer of all this knowledge is the *mamulengueiro*. In order to be considered a "master of *mamulengo*", they go through a long and specific process of learning, involving oral transmission and experience, which will not be analysed here. These devices, features and resources resemble many popular theatrical expressions found in various cultures, both Western and Eastern.

Having been inserted in the universe of popular culture, *mamulengo* was often defined as being "folkloric" in nature. It is remarkable to see that in plain 2017 some types of shows with widespread appeal are absent from most of the historiographical works on Brazilian theatre. This exclusion demonstrates not only an ignorance of these manifestations, but also a disregard for the particular dramatic, technical and symbolic aspects of these types of theatre. The inclusion of *mamulengo* as part of "Pernambuco folklore" makes us reflect on the nature of the "typically national", and its relationship with tourism and the construction of regional images. These reductionist images contributed to the strangeness and lack of precision in the identification of the specific characteristics of the theatre of *mamulengos* and their importance as entertainment for the inhabitants of Zona da Mata in Pernambuco, while paradoxically connecting *mamulengo*, in a dependent way, to the appreciation of popular culture. The "pasteurizing" impulse, affecting folklore studies, creates a perfect space for rhetoric which involves the problematic and cultural policies for the immaterial Brazilian patrimony (Gonçalves, 2002).

The circulation of *mamulengo* in other contexts than that of Zona da Mata in Pernambuco is a relevant factor for its analysis. In Brazil, artistic groups inspired by the "tradition" (due to limited time we will not problematize the notion of "tradition" here) are numerous, are not continuous, forming and breaking up all the time, and when they divulge their works in the media, present themselves as " *mamulengo*

re-creators" or "inspired by *mamulengo*". They may or may not have a direct connection with the *mamulengueiros* of Zona da Mata, and may or may not have practical knowledge of the *brinquedo* (toy) itself.

The movement of "traditional" *mamulengueiros* from Zona da Mata toward other cities, states and countries, touring to give presentations, participate in festivals, etc., is a recent phenomenon. Izabela Brochado studied the presence of *mamulengueiros* in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, in relation to the construction of the city in the 1950s when North-eastern labourers were used. However, it can also be argued that this type of displacement is intrinsically related to campaigns for the appreciation of popular culture, or to historical periods when this debate intensifies. In the 1990s, contracts for "traditional" *mamulengos* outside Pernambuco, including outside Brazil, increased significantly. Also of interest are the workshops and courses where more experienced *mamulengueiros* train other *mamulengueiros*, or simply share their knowledge with artists and other interested parties. If we contrast the processes of learning and transmission that we will classify here as "traditional" for now, with these new experiences, it is evident that they are a forbearer of new times.

In 2015, the long process of registering North-eastern Popular Puppet Theatre as an intangible Brazilian cultural heritage was concluded by IPHAN. Four of its forms, *mamulengo* from Pernambuco, *João Redondo* from Rio Grande do Norte, *Babau* from Paraíba and *Cassimiro Coco* from Ceará were included. The study also considered the recognition and analysis of the official inclusion of *mamulengo's* presence in the Federal District. The debate about the inclusion of the Federal District in the registry was quite controversial among the community of researchers and puppeteers. In my view, some misconceptions were cited to serve as a basis for negative criticisms: the notions of "traditional", "original master" and "authenticity". I participated in the registration process as a consultant and director together with Rodrigo Savastano from the documentary films that form the basis of the research². I discuss these issues in an article published in the magazine *Móin Móin* (Alcure, 2016), but here I would like to highlight a procedure common to the intellectual field that relates theatre and popular culture: the interest of the urban middle classes from large cities in forms of theatre such as *mamulengo* and the way in which these appropriations and translations have been assigned to theatre.

The purpose of this introduction is to contextualize questions that moved the process of creating the theatre play that I directed, *Jongo Mamulengo*³. I started to research *mamulengo* theatre in Zona da Mata in Pernambuco in 1997. Since then I have been following some *mamulengueiros* from this locality. I have been interested, above all, in understanding the development process of *mamulengo* and its relation with broader policies in the cultural field. This relationship didn't come about in a distanced or neutral way, quite the contrary. It involved a number of elaborations

² Adriana Schneider Alcure e Rodrigo Savastano. *Brincadeira de Boneco* - documentário de 23 minutos, 2015. Acesso em: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOt-m7HfEMM>

Adriana Schneider Alcure e Rodrigo Savastano. *Brincadeiras, Bonequeiros e Bonecos do Nordeste* - documentário de 68 minutos, 2015.

³ Dramaturgy and text: Coletivo Bonobando; Cast: Karla Suarez, Livia Laso, Marcelo Magano, Patrick Sonata e Thiago Rosa; Musicians: Cristiane Cotrim, Fabio Pereira, Lazir Sinval, Luisa Marmello Mestre Flavinho e Thiago Queiroz; Direction and Dramaturgic Methodology Adriana Schneider; Colaboration: Lucas Oradovschi; Puppets: Mestre Zé Lopes, Adrianna Trivelato and Thiago Rosa; Musical Director: Lazir Sinval, Luisa Marmello and Ricardo Cotrim; Art Director: Adrianna Trivelato; Project: Dyonne Boy; Lighting: Lelé Santiago and Lucas Oradovschi; Production: Karla Suarez; Executive Producer: Dyonne Boy and Marcelo de Brito; Realization: Jongo da Serrinha, Coletivo Bonobando, Grupo Pedras de Teatro and Cordão do Boitá.

over and above a typical researcher's practice.

Even though I understood my relationship with the *mamulengueiros* as being long term and permeated with ethical and political concerns, I did not feel, as an artist, authorized to stage *mamulengo*. In 2010, I directed and did the dramaturgy for the theatre play "O reino do mar sem fim" ("The Kingdom of the Sea With No End"), which told the story of Severino da Cocada, a *mamulengueiro* I met during one of my field studies in the Zona da Mata area of Pernambuco. It was not a *mamulengo* performance, the approach was ethnographic, almost documentary-like, and even when using puppets, *mamulengo* language was not adopted.

Throughout this period, I ended up gathering a significant collection of *mamulengo* puppets from several *mamulengo* masters. For years, these puppets were kept in my house. Watching them gather dust annoyed me. They were forgotten in one corner of the apartment. My difficulty in working with these puppets relates to the fact that the *mamulengo* puppet made in the context of Zona da Mata operates on a number of different and specific levels. These can be observed in the way the puppet, as an object, is created and made; in the combination of shapes, colours, repairs and use of materials; in the techniques for manipulation; in the well-structured range of characters and the relationship with their own material form; in the network of exchanges and commerce that it articulates; in the legitimation disputes in which it is involved, assigning different values to it; in the multiple meanings that can be obtained as an object. In 2016, I decided to give them to the Casa do Pontal Museum, an important Brazilian institution that brings together the largest collection of popular art in Brazil. The theatre play *Jongo Mamulengo* was created based on these reflections, experiences and actions.

Jongo Mamulengo was created in 2016. It is a partnership between the Bonobando Collective, which I am a part of, with *Jongo da Serrinha* and *Cordão do Boitátá*. In scene are *jongo*, *samba* and *mamulengo*, three important assets of Brazilian popular culture. The dramaturgy traverses several stories of *jongo* in the Serrinha favela and its relation with the foundation of Império Serrano Samba School in 1947, one of the most traditional samba schools in Rio de Janeiro.



Jongo Mamulengo, rehearsals at Casa do Jongo da Serrinha, Rio de Janeiro (2016)
Photo: Cristiane Cotrim

The Bonobando Collective, which I am a part of, began in 2014. It is a project based on dialogue between local and academic knowledge. The group, which is made up of young actors from working class areas and favelas in Rio de Janeiro, constructs shared knowledge and, through art, works to address compelling issues in contemporary Brazil, reshaping the boundaries between aesthetics and politics. In October 2015, the play *Cidade Correria* premiered and continues to be presented in various places. The dramaturgy of *Cidade Correria* was collectively constructed in an environment of tension between urban transformation strategies in Rio de Janeiro for the Olympic Games, on the one hand, and the tactics of occupying the so-called “insurgent bodies” of young actors, on the other. The exploration of the relationship between body and territoriality, along with reflections on “colonial wounds” (Anzaldúa, 1987) that permeate these relations, were fundamental in the process. The Bonobando Collective has reflected on a possible “urgent scene”, in which the proposal of radical decolonization has been a motto of investigation.



Jongo Mamolengo, season at Teatro Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro (2017)
Photo: Ricardo Brajterman

Jongo is a Brazilian dance and rhythm that originated in the cultural processes emanating from the diaspora of Africans enslaved to Brazil. It is practiced to the sound of drums. At the time of slavery the Paraíba do Sul River Valley, the most important river basin in the Brazilian Southeast, was one of the sites where *jongo* was practiced. Coffee cultivation was developed there with slave labour during the 18th and 19th centuries. According to several *jongueiros* and scholars of Brazilian popular music, *jongo* would have directly influenced the formation of samba in Rio de Janeiro. After violent struggles for abolition, the slavery of black men and women officially ended in 1888 with the signing of the "Golden Act". As a result, black ex-slaves migrated to cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, where they settled in several hills. Serrinha, Madureira in the northern zone of the city was one of these places where *jongo* practice became popular (Valença & Valença, 1981).



Jongo Mamolendo, rehearsals at Casa do Jongo da Serrinha, Rio de Janeiro (2016)
Photo: Cristiane Cotrim

The *Jongo da Serrinha Cultural Group* is a social organization from this locality which promotes integrated actions between culture, art, memory, social development, work and income. It commenced in the late 60's, arising from the concerns of Mestre Darcy Monteiro and his mother Vovó Maria Joana about the extinction of *jongo* in the city of Rio. The residents of Morro da Serrinha, in Madureira, began to teach children, artists and university students to practice *jongo*, innovating in musical terms and introducing harmony to their arrangements. Vovó Maria Joana was also known for being the *mãe de santo*⁴ of singer Clara Nunes, who frequented her home for many years. The cover of the album *Brasil Mestiço*, from 1980, has a photo of Clara Nunes dancing *jongo* with Vovó Maria Joana, while Darcy plays atabaque.

⁴ *Mãe-de-santo* is a priestess of Candomblé or Umbanda, the Afro-Brazilian religions. In Portuguese it is translated as "mother of [the] saint[s]", which is an adaption of the Yoruba word *lyalorishá*, a title given to priest women in African religions. *lyá* means mother, and the contraction *l'Orishá* means "of Orisha".



Jongo Mamulengo, season at Teatro Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro (2017)
Photo: Ricardo Brajterman

The performance *Jongo Mamulengo* does not mimic *mamulengo*. The structure of dramaturgical organization promotes a transposition of *mamulengo* devices and techniques, maintaining its performing logic. Some of the key devices and techniques are: the use of a booth with the puppeteers hidden behind a cloth moving on foot; the dramaturgical organization into passages; the constant presence of music which interweaves the scenes; the presentation of the figures that make use of loas or rhymed verses. The figures are real historical characters from jongo and samba in Rio, made with *mamulengo* puppet techniques. These characters use dramaturgical plays and logic from some well-known *mamulengo* scenes. In the show, the figure of *Mateus* becomes *Jongo Master Darcy*, performed by an actor manipulating a ventriloquist puppet who stands in front of the booth leading the presentation. The process involved an exchange between artists from the collective and the *mamulengueiro* Zé Lopes, from Zona da Mata in Pernambuco. He was also responsible for the production of more than 20 puppets that are in the show. The members of *Jongo da Serrinha* and *Cordão do Boitatá*, a carnival street collective that has played in the Rio carnival for 21 years, both play music and dance.



Jongo Mamulengo, season at Teatro Ipanema, Rio de Janeiro (2017)
Photo: Ricardo Brajterman

To understand the creative processes in *Jongo Mamulengo* it is necessary to observe the interplay between the ritual and cosmological dimensions of the actions and representations of *mamulengo* as a whole. When choosing procedures, we did not opt to use the *mamulengo* theme or mimic *mamulengo* characters because they are based on specific contextual needs. We chose to emphasize the forms, devices, strategies and techniques present in *mamulengo*.

One of the keys to this conception is the notion of *brincadeira* (game). The ideas of *brinquedo* (toy), *brincadeira* (game) and *brincar* (to play), recurrent in all manifestations of the Zona da Mata, in Brazil in general, imply a series of relationships, behaviours, representations and collective attitudes that are significant for the constitution and comprehension of these expressions. I note that there is a similarity between the native meaning of the notion of *brincar* (to play) and the definition of ritual as a symbolic and technical system of communication. This perspective allows us to relate the type of art, form of communication and content produced in these games with the social system in which they are immersed. To understand *mamulengo*, it is necessary to establish a relation between the actors and their social experiences as well as the cultural forms and contents with the context that surrounds them. To broaden our understanding of *mamulengo* is to unravel the social processes of the Zona da Mata region of Pernambuco. Therefore, *mamulengo* being incorporated into our performance as a thematic or through mimicry of the characters does not fit. To bring *mamulengo* to the performance, we had to highlight its devices, techniques and resources and thus convert *mamulengo* into performing language.



Jongo Mamulengo, performance at Vovó Maria Joana Crèche, Serrinha, Rio de Janeiro (2016). Photo: Maria Mazzillo

In the midst of the artists who participate, as well as among the audience that attends, the activity of presenting oneself is denominated by the verb *brincar* (to play). This is a marked difference if we think that in the context of conventional theatre in Brazil the verb that indicates the actor's actions, for example, is *to represent, to act*. It is interesting to note that the verb that indicates this action in other languages has the double meaning of "play". Pavis explains in the entry "Jouer", of his Dictionary of Theatre (1999, p.289):

Neither the French language (nor Portuguese) have parallel expressions for *jeu and théâtre* (or *pièce*) like English (*to play, a play*) or German (*spielen, Schauspiel*). An important dimension of representation, the playful aspect, is thus excluded from the imaginary of language. On the other hand, English plays beautifully with words and notions ("A play is play", BROOK, 1968: 157, "The play's the thing", Hamlet, II, 2), while German conceives the actors as "Players of the show" (*Schau-spieler*). Only expressions like *jogo do ator*, for example, give an idea of the playful activity. The very recent term *jogo dramático* rediscovers, in a symptomatic way, the spontaneous and improvised tradition of the game.

Roberto Da Matta provides us with an interesting reflection on the idea of the *brincadeira* (game) at Carnival. Da Matta's consideration (1997, p. 144) can also be extended to our case:

It should be mentioned, as an important fact that the verb to sing, like the verb *brincar* (to play), is full of metaphorical possibilities in Brazil. So, *brincar* (to play) also means to relate to, trying to break the boundaries between social positions, creating a fake atmosphere, superimposed on reality.

In the second revised and expanded edition of the Dictionary of Brazilian Theatre (Guinsburg, Faria, Lima, 2009, pg. 70-72) the following entries were included: *brincadeira* (game), *brinquedo* (toy), *brincante* (player) and *brincar* (to play). In my opinion, this gesture demonstrates an epistemological opening in theatre studies in Brazil, as well as changes resulting from a long dispute in the processes of legitimizing expressions previously excluded from certain theatrical canons. The recognition of these categories, concepts and notions is, in my view, an important step in the development of research in the field of the arts. Dealing with these specific Brazilian practices and theatricalities, legitimizing their makers, creating visibility for poetics and aesthetics previously considered marginal and peripheral, may perhaps trigger paradigmatic and critical changes necessary for the contemporary scene.

The concept of *brincadeira* (game) in the *Jongo Mamulengo* play becomes a practice, a way of doing, that creates an ethical, aesthetic and political sense for the joining of *mamulengo*, *jongo* and *samba* from Rio in the same scene. The creative process in *Jongo Mamulengo* was guided by the practice of *brincar* (to play) as an instrument, a scenic ethos, a way of being onstage and was key to the theatricality of the play. *Mamulengo*, *jongo* and *samba* have semantic amplitudes that allow us to perceive a series of different feelings. As they do not operate on a single plane of meaning, they are also linked to heterogeneous, non-harmonious processes and reciprocities.

In order to bring *mamulengo* to the stage it was necessary to privilege the form, understood here as full of technical content, of specific instruments. *Mamulengo* evokes a specific universe of knowledge, practices, techniques and artistic content, of the use of multiple means of communication and the insinuation of meanings. This would be one of the interesting meanings to be observed in the notion of *brincadeira* (game). Understanding *mamulengo* in relation to the notion of *brincadeira* (game), we highlight its particularities that make it transcend the simple definition of puppet theatre. Thus, we reposition *mamulengo* in a broader context than within definitions of theatre in general, guaranteeing its legitimacy in the field of art and not only in projects that place it in the field of rhetorical national patrimonialist disputes.

The *Jongo Mamulengo* project questions the notion of a play by expanding this notion, linking it to the category of *brincadeira* (game), *nosso brinquedo* (our toy). If it is indeed relevant to question the colonality, according to Quijano (2000), of the presuppositions and procedures of the art scene in contemporary Brazil, perhaps the first step is to problematize our epistemological references, proposing model disobedience (Mignolo, 2008). In this sense, in the field of legitimacy disputes in the arts and culture in Brazil, the notion of *brincadeira* (game), as well as being a specific form of theatricality to be considered, is an exercise in decolonization of the scene, a necessary shock to hegemonic concepts of sensitivity.

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