Lick Samba Cultural Synergies between Brazil and Jamaica

(Dedicated to the memory of Lino de Almeida, Spirit of the Crossroads)

Carolyn Cooper

Abstract

This decidedly embryonic article has its genesis in a May 2000 symposium on "Cultural Synergies and Business Opportunities between Brazil and Jamaica: The Case of Music and Book Publishing", held in the capital city of Kingston, Jamaica. I intend a pun on 'capital,' signifying not only the geopolitical placement of the city but also the somewhat colloquial modern sense of 'capital,' meaning 'first rate.' This is an article that is based, beyond investigation, in conversations about samba from Jamaica to Brazil.

Keywords: Samba, Brazil, Jamaica

Resumo

Este artigo embrionário teve sua origem em maio de 2000 no Simpósio "Sinergias Culturais e oportunidades de negócios entre Brasil e Jamaica. O caso da música e das publicações", realizado na capital, cidade de Kingston, Jamaica. Há um jogo de palavras sobre o conceito "capital", significando não somente o local geopolítico da cidade senão também algo coloquial do moderno sentido de "capital" significando "primeiro valor". Este é um artigo que tem como base, mais que uma investigação, conversações sobre a samba, iniciadas na Jamaica e que agora se estendem ao solo brasileiro.

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Palavras- chave: Samba, Brasil, Jamaica

Resumen

Este embrionario artículo tuvo su génesis en mayo de 2000 en el Simposio "Sinergías Culturales y oportunidades de negocios entre Brasil y Jamaica. El caso de la música y de las publicaciones", realizado en la ciudad de Kinsgton, Jamaica. En este intento un juego de palabras sobre el concepto "capital", significando no sólo el local geopolítico de la ciudad sino también algo coloquial del moderno sentido de "capital" significando "primer valor". Este es un artículo que tiene como base, más allá de la investigación, conversaciones iniciadas en Jamaica y que ahora se extienden al suelo brasileño.

Palabras Claves: Samba, Brasil, Jamaica.

This decidedly embryonic article has its genesis in a May 2000 symposium on "Cultural Synergies and Business Opportunities between Brazil and Jamaica: The Case of Music and Book Publishing," held in the capital city of Kingston, Jamaica. I intend a pun on 'capital,' signifying not only the geopolitical placement of the city but also the somewhat colloquial modern sense of 'capital,' meaning 'first rate.' Kingston is a much under-rated city, often excluded from the itinerary of most visitors to Jamaica who fear its vile reputation as a 'murder capital.' Here, yet another meaning of 'capital' resonates: 'mortal, deadly' as in capital punishment.

The 2000 "Cultural Synergies" symposium was hosted by the Jamaica Promotions Corporation (JAMPRO), now re-branded as Jamaica Trade and Invest. As a cultural critic specialising in Jamaican popular culture and literature, I was invited to contribute to the deliberations. My intuitive reflections on that occasion have now been somewhat refined for presentation on this panel. But I wish to make it absolutely clear that what I offer here is not a scholarly article – the product of prolonged research and analysis. Instead, it is an intervention in a conversation, initiated in Jamaica,

that now continues on Brazilian soil.

Bob Marley's invocation to "lick samba," which I use to frame my remarks here, is the pulsating refrain of a song which appears to emblematize samba in primarily sexual terms:

> Lick samba, lick samba, lick samba
> Oh oh, lick samba
> An mi seh, lick samba, lick samba
> Oh yeah
> I could not resist, oh nah
> Another like this, oh nah
> And though I know you hurt me again
> I'll go on, I'll feel the pain
> And it's not that I am meek
> But it's that I'm on a peak, oh darling
> Ah just a lick samba, lick samba, lick samba
> Ah say, lick samba
> Ah bring it up, ah lick i one time, right here
> I'll settle the little I claim, baby
> You can write it down in my name
> Morning time, noon or night
> Ah just a lick samba, lick samba, lick samba
> If it's morning time, I'm ready
> And if it's late at night I'm steady
> Give it to you anytime, Oh darling
> I'm not a preacher, but I am calling
> Ooh, ooh, lick Samba[1]

Though somewhat enigmatically expressed, the sexual allusions are, nevertheless, apparent: "And it's not that I am meek/ But it's that I'm on a peak, oh darling." The singer is ready for action, morning, noon and night. But there are claims to be settled, however "little." Unable to resist the woman's power, the man surrenders to the painful pleasures of love, which are heightened by the seductive refrain, "lick samba." The primary meaning of 'lick' in English is to 'tongue.' In slang usage in English, it means

as well "to beat, thrash." This is the primary sense in which the word is used in Jamaican. But the double English/Jamaican meanings appear to converge in this song. The line "Ah bring it up, ah lick i one time, right here," [I bring it up, I hit/lick it once, right here] ambiguously suggests the pleasurable hit of vigorous – not violent – oral/sexual contact. The generic 'it' that is licked/hit may be read as the objectified female body, especially by those disposed to see misogyny at every turn in Jamaican popular music. But I would argue, instead, that here this 'it,' conjoined to 'lick,' is essentially a euphoric expression of a natural high. This ameliorative meaning of "lick" that I attempt to recuperate here encodes the complexity of male/female relationships that are not always open to transparent, singular interpretation. Indeed, the version of "Lick Samba" that is recorded by Gilbert Gil and Rita Marley (and the other I-Three, Marcia Griffiths and Judy Mowatt) on the *Kaya N'Gan Daya* CD, explicitly evokes playful sexual seduction.[2] The song opens with titillating exclamations, heightened by percussive guitar beats: "ooh! hah! aiya! woyio!" After the opening refrain, "Lick Samba," sung as a duet, Gilberto takes the lead, "I could not resist, oh;" to which Rita replies, "Another like this". The entire song becomes an amusing mating ritual, connoting the call and response structure of African oral discourse.

Widened beyond the immediate sexual context, the refrain 'lick samba' evokes, as well, the percussive beats of global African music. The explosive hit/lick becomes a celebration of the potency of music as word, sound and power. In the song "Trench Town Rock," Bob Marley deploys the trope of music as a 'hit' in precisely this way. Not just the conventional chart 'hit' but also the physical impact of megawattage sound systems licking the body:

> One good thing about music,
> When it hits you feel no pain
> Wo wo I say
> One good thing about music,
> When it hits you feel no pain

Hit me with music
Hit me with music now
This is Trench Town rock
Don't watch that
Trench Town Rock
Big fish or sprat
You reap what you sow
Trench Town Rock
And only Jah Jah know
Trench Town I'll never turn my back
Groovin it's Kingston 12
Groovin It's Kingston 12
No waan yu come galang so
No waan yu fi galang so
Ska ba dip, ska ba dip
You waan come cold I up
I'm a groover an the world know it by now[3]

Like reggae, samba is a popular music whose origins are decidedly urban and down market. Reggae is "Trench Town rock"; a Kingston 12 groove. Similarly, samba is the music of Rio de Janeiro. But in both instances, this localised, working-class, African diasporic music is not only globalised but it becomes an iconic manifestation of national identity, incorporating cultural meanings far beyond the intentions of its progenitors.

At that JAMPRO seminar, Hermano Vianna's book *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*, was a featured text, exemplifying the cultural synergies between Brazil and Jamaica in the field of book publishing. The book was simultaneously published in 1998 by the Press University of the West Indies and the University of North Carolina Press in the series "Latin America in Translation/ en Traduccion/ em Traducao," sponsored by the Duke-University of North Carolina joint program in Latin American Studies.

In his author's preface to the US edition, Vianna declares that he valorises "the intellectual trajectory of anthropologist Gilberto

Freyre" as a "narrative and interpretive thread" for the book. He elaborates the rationale:

> Freyre's home was the Brazilian northeast, not Rio de Janeiro, but that does not matter. This book is about movement, about back-and-forth flows of influence that connected Rio not only to Pernambuco, but to France, the United States, and the rest of the Atlantic world as well. Various kinds of cultural mediation, spanning geographical and social distances, become crucial to the 'nationalization' of samba. Freyre was one the mediators.[4]

For reggae, as for samba, trans/national cultural flows are an essential element of the formation and reproduction of the music. In private conversation with me, legendary Jamaican footballer Allan 'Skill' Cole, Marley's long-time friend and producer of the song "Lick Samba," disclosed that it was his own involvement with football in Brazil that sparked Bob Marley's experimentation with samba. That football connection is a whole other story of cultural synergies. Would Jamaica have made it to the World Cup without the technical input of the celebrated Professor Rene Simoes? Hardly likely.

Given the scale of geographical difference between Jamaica and Brazil, it might appear hubristic to even attempt to delineate cultural synergies between the two. Nevertheless, the globalisation of reggae suggests that, as with athletics and football, Jamaica's international reach greatly exceeds our geographical size. Jamaican cultural icon Louise Bennett-Coverley, affectionately known as Miss Lou, gives an amusing rendering of the Jamaican psychology of 'largeness' in her poem "Independance." Miss Lou, the ventriloquist, speaks through the mouth of Miss Mattie, a self-aggrandizing character she creates, who loudly proclaims the benefits of the nation's newly acquired state of independence. Flag independence confirms an enlargened conception of both her own person and the landmass of the former colony:

> Jamaican
> She hope dem caution worl-map

Fi stop draw Jamaica small,
For de lickle speck cyaan show
We independantness at all!
Moresomever we must tell map dat
We don't like we position -
Please kindly teck we out a sea
An draw we in de ocean.[5]

English
She hopes they've warned the mapmakers
To stop representing Jamaica as tiny,
For the little speck can't show
Our independence at all!

Moreover we must tell the mapmakers
That we don't like our position –
They must please take us out of the sea
And put us in the ocean.[6]

Jamaicans do, indeed, have an oceanic consciousness. The landmass of the island (and 'mass' is a gross exaggeration in comparison to the expansive landscape of Brazil) does not contain us. Though seemingly bound on all sides by the sea, we are not insular. Psychologically free, many Jamaicans claim a much wider sphere of influence than the circumference of a small island, especially when the diaspora is taken into account – all those Jamaicans, with so many passports (legal and illegal), scattered across the globe. We constitute a formidable, transnational, constantly mobile nation-state.

There is, obviously, another quite literal sense in which the Jamaican people are continental, like the Brazilians. The majority of Jamaicans are of African origin and we retain ancestral memories of a vast continent of mythic proportions. It is Rastafari who have most articulately propagated the philosophy of repatriation of the mind. Many Africans in the diaspora – in Brazil as in Jamaica – choose to keep genetic memory alive. In our language, music,

food culture, religion we memorialize the past. And we keep our ancestors alive and available to dream us into waking consciousness; in the present. Africa is not the distant past; it is contemporary culture.

But, like Jamaica, with our optimistic national motto, "out of many, one people", Brazil privileges a model of multi-racial harmony that to outsiders often appears to repress the powerful African presence in this complex society. Brazil is home to the largest number of people of African origin outside the continent of Africa. John Chasteen, translator of Hermano Vianna's *The Mystery of Samba*, defines the issue of racial identity in Brazil in this diplomatic way:

> Scorn for the official platitudes about Brazilian 'racial democracy' has animated a number of recent U.S. multiculturalist views. They emphasize that, when racial and cultural mixing becomes a nationalist ideology, other racial identities (especially indigenous and African ones) remain marginalized and may be snuffed out altogether. In Brazil, the multiculturalist critique has circulated only in narrow intellectual circles and seems unlikely, for now, to diminish the popular appeal of mixed-race (*mestico*) nationalism. After all, it was not so long ago – in the 1930s – that mestico nationalism overthrew and replaced the official doctrines of white supremacy. Nor is white supremacy gone from Brazil, except officially. Therefore, the basic nationalist message – 'It's okay not to be white and European' – retains its value in many people's lives. The mestico category is so loose as to exclude almost nobody who seeks an 'authentic Brazilian' identity.[7]

A much less diplomatic reading of 'authentic Brazilian identity' recognizes that it is not only in 'narrow intellectual circles' that the critique of 'mestico' identity circulates. There is a popular Black nationalist movement alive and growing in Brazil. And this present African political struggle can be related to the long history of resistance to enslavement, both literal and mental – to cite Bob Marley and before him Marcus Garvey who truly exemplifies the

continental consciousness of African Jamaicans: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery/ None but ourselves can free our mind."[8]

Like Jamaica, Brazil has a long history of maroonage: an intractable refusal to be enslaved on the plantation. And we must remember that Brazil is directly responsible for the development of the sugar plantation economy in the Caribbean. It was the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Brazil in the seventeenth century that forced them to seek refuge first in Suriname, then Barbados where they developed the sugar industry, which then spread to other islands and precipitated the enforced migration of Africans to work on the plantations in the Caribbean. Movement of Jah people.

In *The Mystery of Samba*, Hermano Vianna asks a provocative question: "How and why did Brazilian 'authenticity' become essentially 'Afro-Brazilian'?"[9] The answer he provides is equally provocative, especially for us in Jamaica where the elite continue to disparage forms of popular culture (like dancehall) that have their origins in the consciousness of the masses – or, as we prefer the 'massive' with its connotations of power, not just faceless anonymity. It is these very despised cultural forms, like contemporary dancehall culture, that have come to be identified globally as the quintessential markers of Jamaican identity.

Vianna argues that "[t]he invention of Brazil's national essence, at least in the version symbolized by samba, turns on the importance of popular culture."[10] He foregrounds the distinction between 'pop' culture and 'popular' culture: 'Samba, despite its long and intense association with the Brazilian mass media, is never thought to have originated (or even to belong) there. Pop culture has been viewed, to the contrary, as a corrupting, alienating influence: the worst enemy of "authentic" popular culture."[11]

Just as Jamaicans have been hit by samba and feel no pain, Brazilians have been hit by reggae. I must honour Jimmy Cliff for the role he has played in the globalisation of reggae music, particularly in Brazil. I must also celebrate the work of Lino de Almeida, now numbered among our ancestors, who was so instrumental in

establishing the musical connection between Jamaica and Brazil. It is my vision that we, at the University of the West Indies, can initiate with our colleagues in Brazil a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral research project focusing on intellectual property and related cultural productions – with practical industry applications – that will indeed strengthen strategic partnerships between Jamaica and Brazil.

Notas

[1] Bob Marley, "Lick Samba," Track 2, Disc 2, *Songs of Freedom*, Compilation, Tuff Gong/Island Records, LC0407, 1992.

[2] Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Trench Town Rock," Track 4, *African Herbsman*, Disc 1,Trojan Records, ASIN:B0000011DQ, 1973.

[3] Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*. Barbados Jamaican Trinidad and Tobago: The Press University of the West Indies & Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998, xvii.

[4] Mervyn Morris, ed. Louise Bennett *Selected Poems*, Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's, 1982; rpt 1993, 118. (Subsequent references cited in text)

[5] Mervyn Morris, ed. Louise Bennett *Selected Poems*, Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's, 1982; rpt 1993, 118. (Subsequent references cited in text)

[6] John Charles Chasteen, "Translator's Preface," in Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*. Barbados Jamaican Trinidad and Tobago: The Press University of the West Indies & Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998, xiv-xv.

[7] Bob Marley, "Redemption Song," Track 10, *Uprising*, Island Records, ILPS 9596, 1980

[8] Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*, xvii.

[9] *Ibid.*