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Author(s): Jochen Eisentraut

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Samba in Wales: making sense of adopted music

This study examines the relationships between street samba percussion as performed by a band in Wales and the players' reported understanding of its significance for them as a group and as individuals. The questions of how the music first revealed itself to the informants and what preconceptions and prior experience they brought to it are addressed. The ethnography takes into account the cultural and linguistic context represented by a Welsh-speaking area, and the practice in Wales is compared with observations made in Bahia, Brazil.

Introduction: adopted music

Most ethnomusicological study is concerned with music “in context”, and the wider cultural context concerned is usually one in which that music has developed for some considerable time – albeit often in very specific circumstances, as with displaced populations of various kinds. There has been relatively little ethnomusicological study of cases in which members of a particular community adopt a musical style with which they have apparently no historical connection whatever. The present paper considers such a case: that of a samba band in North Wales.

This kind of study raises a number of questions concerning the relationships between music, meaning and culture – questions which this paper considers, though without attempting to provide definitive conclusions. Blacking's claim that “Music can communicate nothing to unprepared and unreceptive minds” (1995:35) reflects a well-established stance in ethnomusicology, emphasizing that musical understanding is dependent on enculturation and a familiarity with other cultural norms. The idea of what Turino calls the “homologous relationship between musical culture and ... values in other realms of activity” (1989:2) is also widely espoused. But if an apparently alien musical style is adopted, what force do those “homologous relationships” retain, if any? In what ways are the adopting community prepared for, or receptive to, the adopted music? Is it in fact possible that social relationships and ideologies are encoded in musical styles and can be decoded reliably by an entirely different set of people? Or, on the other hand, do the adopting parties ascribe meanings to their chosen style in a way that bears no relationship to the originating culture? If meaning is merely associational, the adopted form could be used as a *tabula*



Figures 1 and 2
Samba Bangor
warming up on the
periphery of carnival
events at Y Felinheli

rasa to represent any desired set of values. If there is an element of homology, the question of how meaning is derived and constituted for practitioners who are not originally culture-bearers becomes pertinent.

This paper examines some of these questions in relation to a group named Samba Bangor (Figures 1 and 2) based in the small Welsh city of Bangor, Gwynedd. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, which comprised attending rehearsals, performances and social gatherings, both as an observer and as a player, over a period of three years. Further investigations included participating in and hearing other ensembles, meeting members of different bands from Britain and Germany and the gathering of video material in Salvador Bahia, Brazil, in 1997/98. The data include extensive interview material, and the tenor of the argument represents respondents' attributions and perceptions as much as those of the researcher. The following part of the paper introduces the band and outlines something of their geographical and cultural context.

Samba Bangor

In a scorching summer field near Ffostrasol an audience of several hundred local youth and fans from around Wales appreciate Welsh and other Celtic “folk”-orientated bands at the Cnapan festival. The atmosphere is very relaxed, mainly due to the heat and brisk business at the marquee bar. In these circumstances the bands are finding it difficult to elicit any reaction beyond lethargic applause. Enter Samba Bangor, 15 people in patterned ponchos and mini-parasol hats playing frantic Brazilian rhythms on a variety of strange and impressive percussion instruments: tiny drums, a reco-reco (scraper) made with springs and huge surdos (tenor and bass drums). A significant section of the audience is galvanized into excited dancing and whooping and more people gather round for a better view of the stage. The applause becomes enthusiastic. Several girls dance wildly for the entire set, and when the band moves into the crowd to play the last couple of pieces they are ringed by the appreciative and the curious.

The 1990s in northwestern Europe saw the flowering of dozens of percussion groups, often calling themselves samba bands or schools of samba. The website “Samba in Britain and Ireland” listed over 90 bands in May 2001.¹ Essentially these bands specialize in the rhythms (rather than the songs) of street bands and *blocos* of the kind that process during *carnaval* in the urban centres of Rio de Janeiro, Salvador Bahia and Recife. In many cases European samba groups play music with a variety of origins (Manchester boasts a band called Sambhangra which plays a mixture of Brazilian and Indian music!), but Brazilian rhythms, instruments and terminology are central.

Samba Bangor are a group with about seven core players and a fairly fluid wider membership of about another 20. Most are in their thirties and forties, with a few younger adults. The majority are well educated but with low to medium incomes. There is a more or less equal balance between the sexes (which veered towards the male in the summer of 1999, however, as a number of births affected the availability of female members). There are no obvious categories that encompass all Samba Bangor members. The band divides in more or less equal proportions into those in formal employment, the unemployed, those in casual or self-employment and students. In all, this results in a varied social mix with a majority of members able to organize much of their time themselves. The student contingent provides a few players from overseas, and almost all the others are from an English background. At the time of writing Greek players (two) outnumber native Welsh-speaking Welsh (one).

To some extent one may discern a predilection for alternative lifestyles – which is also a feature of many who choose to live in and around the small University town of Bangor. In the 1960s and ’70s the area became something of a magnet for those seeking a way out of the materialistic mainstream because of its remoteness, its natural beauty, its low cost of living and perhaps also because

¹ <http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/mally/samba/bands.htm>.

of the cultural liminality (exemplified by Welsh–English bilingualism). Some Samba Bangor members have been resident since that time, and the locality retains something of an “alternative” ambience.

One player mentioned that he thought people in Bangor were more receptive to samba than in Caernarfon or Llandudno (towns in the region) because Bangor consisted of “left-overs”: left-over students, hippies, escapees from Thatcher’s Britain, those who have opted out. This suggests a particular use of samba as community-generating music for people who are somehow adrift and cut off, which could of course also apply to current Bangor students who are far from home.

The Welsh context

The county of Gwynedd in which Bangor lies – most Samba Bangor members live outside what is officially the “City” of Bangor – is predominantly Welsh-speaking and therefore rich in Welsh cultural activity. In UK terms, however, it is peripheral, and non-Welsh speakers find themselves part of a minority within a minority, which can be difficult to come to terms with. This may be expressed in a rather defensive and sometimes negative stance towards Welsh culture, which is at times also articulated by some Samba Bangor members. Some incomers try to learn the language in an attempt at a more positive engagement with their adopted home, but only a few reach the stage of comfortable fluency.

The ensemble under scrutiny is part of a UK- and, indeed, Europe-wide growth in Afro-Brazilian percussion bands. Most Samba Bangor members are non-Welsh speaking, and the group may in many ways be typical of others in the rest of Britain. However, in this part of Wales the linguistic and cultural environment has a particular structure that must be fed into the ethnography. Furthermore, although rehearsals are conducted in English, many of the performance contexts – such as playing in the street or at *eisteddfodau*,² village carnivals, sports events and Welsh-language rock concerts – bring the band into contact with the Welsh environment. At many such events some nervousness is apparent over the band’s position as cultural outsiders, as is a certain apologetic reticence about introducing the band in English when all other communications from the stage are in Welsh.³ Another aspect of this is that many of the mainstream cultural activities which are supported by the community, and in some cases funded by government agencies, are configured around Welsh language and identity, such as the *Urdd*,⁴ *eisteddfodau*, *cerdd dant*⁵ and choirs. There is a perception among some members that Samba Bangor is somehow excluded from funding and such opportunities as holding youth workshops because they are outside the circle of Welsh cultural activity.

² Cultural festivals and events held at local and national level throughout Wales incorporating competitions in music, poetry and other arts.

³ At the time of writing Samba Bangor are regularly playing support to Anweledig, a successful Welsh ska band. The audiences are almost exclusively Welsh-speaking but very appreciative of the samba band, and relations between the two groups are friendly.

⁴ *Urdd Gobaith Cymru*, literally “Welsh league of hope”, a cultural youth organization.

⁵ Musical form or discipline in which a melody on harp is conjoined with another that is sung.

It is impossible to live in Gwynedd without being confronted by the Welsh–English cultural divide. Many people on both sides have strong feelings and opinions on the matter. When anyone engages in a socio-cultural activity, the question of whether it takes place through the medium of Welsh, or not, is woven into a complex web of historical, demographic and linguistic juxtapositions and power relations. When Samba Bangor perform in an *eisteddfod* they are unusual not just because they play Brazilian music but because they are not Welsh speakers. The uses samba has for these players may therefore be amplified and inflected by the context into which it is projected.

Some key band members

John, the leader of Samba Bangor, was involved in the percussion workshops in 1994 that led to the band's inception.⁶ Since that time he has been the main motivating force, becoming knowledgeable about samba in the process and providing much-needed continuity in a group with quite fluid membership. Musical interests date from his teens, when he liked rhythm and blues, and he later enjoyed soul. In the 1980s he became interested in world music and went to WOMAD festivals. He has a self-deprecating view of his own musical gifts, and apart from his present interest in percussion played piano as a child, to which he does not attach any significance. John has a strong sense of what the band's aims should be. "Community" and "empowerment" are terms he uses readily, and he expects others to be prepared to contribute time and effort freely for the furtherment of the group and its ideals.

An enthusiastic member of the group, who attends regularly and knows the repertoire on *tamborim* (small hand-held drum), is Susan. She is in her thirties and has returned to Bangor from London, where she had a successful career, to recuperate from an illness. Susan plays and dances with the band and is powerfully drawn to several kinds of Latin and African rhythmic music. In London she participated in the salsa scene, and there are some interesting parallels between her initial encounters with the two genres. In both cases she describes having become fascinated by them at a key moment: salsa on hearing a piece on television and feeling compelled to find out more about it, and samba when she saw two *baterias* (percussion groups) play at the "Hay on Fire" festival in Hay on Wye and found she just had to follow them around the town while dancing – to the consternation of the friends accompanying her. Samba clearly replaced salsa when she moved to Bangor in terms of both her social and her musical life. She explains that the interpersonal aspect has grown in significance for her, claiming that initially "the rhythm thing was about 99% of it" whereas after two years its importance had dropped to "50 or 60% and the other part is the group ... creating something in a group situation". At the time of writing Susan lives with another group member and their young child.

⁶ Band interaction is entirely on first-name terms, and this has been adopted in the paper to convey the social closeness of the group.

Maggie is another player who values the communal feeling the band affords. She is specific about how she perceives this as musically engendered: "It's a communication ... with the other people you're playing with or for." She is one of the members with a "regular" job, and in a way samba is simply a leisure pursuit. She explains, "I needed a hobby, and I've tried things like pot plants, but I can lose myself completely in samba whereas I couldn't lose myself in propagating plants." Maggie, who is in her forties and lives with a semi-professional blues musician, claims that playing samba has not only opened up the possibility of performing music to her but has also boosted her confidence in other ways.

Dewi is a native Welsh speaker and, interestingly, was brought up in a family that practised traditional Welsh musical forms such as *cerdd dant*, but he turned away from this music as he came to adulthood. Although he has many English friends he is supportive of Welsh culture generally. What he made very clear was that he feels samba to be "more me" than traditional Welsh music. In his case the adoption of an "alien" music is particularly remarkable since it has been made in the presence of an available musical culture rooted in his personal and ethnic history, which does not seem to be the case for most of the other members.

Instruments, repertoire and dissemination

The repertoire of Samba Bangor consists of some of the important urban Brazilian rhythms such as samba-reggae,⁷ *baião*,⁸ *batucada*,⁹ *afoxé*¹⁰ and *samba de roda* (samba in the round) as well as a piece of Sikh origin and the occasional version of a western popular or dance track. There are also some compositions generated within the group and these may have an optional rap or melody. Instruments are imported from Brazil and purchased from specialist suppliers in the UK. We would recognize them as staples of Rio *baterias* such as the *surdo*, *caixa*, *repinique*¹¹ and *tamborim*.

Street samba rhythms consist mainly of two-bar 2/4 patterns, which are sometimes written as two 4/4 bars with the note values doubled. In 2/4, however, there are generally *surdo* beats on the crotchets. *Caixas* and *repiniques* largely play continuous semiquavers, but with accented off-beats – particularly the notes leading into crotchet on-beats. The patterns are often busier, with increased dynamic and even a slight, momentary *accelerando* around the last crotchet of

⁷ Form in which *surdos* imitate typical reggae bass lines while smaller drums accent the up-beats, which would be played by a reggae rhythm guitar.

⁸ Also given as *baion*; traditional northeast Brazilian song style. The version played by Samba Bangor has a swing or triplet feel.

⁹ Rhythm played by Rio de Janeiro *baterias*, which the term is also used to describe.

¹⁰ Rhythm based on *candomblé* ritual music from Bahia played predominantly on *atabaque* (Brazilian conga) by groups such as Filhos do Gandhi.

¹¹ The *caixa* is a snare drum, while the *repinique* is a medium-sized deep drum played either with two sticks (in Bahia these are literally long sticks and not shaped into a drum stick) or with one stick and one hand.

the second bar (an effect I have heard described as being like a “rolling egg”), giving a sense of rising and falling tension. Bells and *tamborims* accent syncopations and are frequently used for two-bar patterns, with one half mainly on the beat and the other emphasizing off-beats. Particular parts sometimes vary their pattern so that in effect they play a longer one, which might repeat every four or eight bars.

Pieces tend to have introductory and coda sections and “breaks” in the main groove. During such breaks instruments often play in unison or in mixed groups for call and response passages, or the call and response may be between the leader’s *repinique* and the rest of the *bateria*. In Brazil, where many of the conductors do not play while they lead, such punctuations, changes and breaks in the fundamental groove are often dictated by the song with which that particular variant of the rhythm is associated. In Europe, where use of melody is the exception rather than the rule, they represent independent determinants of the structure of the piece. Samba Bangor play a number of arrangements that change into a completely different rhythm after a bridge section and back again later. They also make use of dynamic and tempo variations. Further light and shade is achieved through *tacet* passages in one or a number of instrumental groups. For instance, there may be a section in an arrangement with *agogo* bells only, or the conductor could indicate that the shaker should drop out for a number of bars. This type of contrasting orchestration was used by most *baterias* encountered in the course of the study.

Dissemination of samba rhythms to and among Europeans is by a mixture of face-to-face teaching and notation. A number of professional Europe-based percussionists, such as Dudu Tucci and Sam Alexander, “import” rhythms and techniques. Sam Alexander, for instance, has close links with Recife and specializes in the *Maracatú* beats associated with that Brazilian city. He runs workshops attended by players from a number of other bands. On returning to their own bands *sambistas* may pass on what they have learned.

The main form of transmission is teaching by the band leader, who will have a piece committed to memory. He or she demonstrates the rhythm that each instrumental section has to play and the section concerned imitates. Subtle elements, such as degrees of swing and precise mallet or stick technique, are sometimes contentious and there is a certain amount of striving for “authenticity” in these matters, although direct information about Brazilian practice is scarce and meetings with specialist teachers in the UK are most often the final authority.

Rehearsals and performance

The band usually rehearses once a week and plays in public once or twice a week during the summer. Sometimes a gig replaces the rehearsal. Performance opportunities include town and village carnivals, festivals and clubs (e.g. at a Bangor Student’s Union club night called “Ethnomuzicology”), as well as events such as bonfire nights, *eisteddfodau*, rock gigs and parties in North Wales and beyond. Occasionally they travel to England, Ireland or even France to

perform, meet with other *sambistas* (meetings band members refer to using the Portuguese word *encontro*) or attend workshops. Band strength at concerts and rehearsals is generally between seven and fifteen, which is about the size of the *baterias* in Rio de Janeiro in the early days of samba (Raphael, 1990:79) and of some *carnaval* bands in provincial areas of Brazil (Scheper-Hughes, 1992:487).

A typical rehearsal takes place in a small disused Catholic church in Bangor on Saturday afternoon. Players drift in and chat between the official start time and about half an hour later. The instruments are brought in by John, helped by Bryn, a stalwart band member. Both are men in their mid-forties who have lived in Bangor most of their adult lives and have been heavily involved in “community” ventures such as street theatre and a food co-op. The players are dressed casually and colourfully. John is keen to get the rehearsal underway and tries to fix everyone up with an instrument. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly. Any newcomers or spectators are given an instrument to try.

Eventually a circle is formed and, after some quick reminders to the different sections of their patterns, the first rhythm is started with a virtuosic introduction on John’s *repinique*. Players who are not sure of their part will often follow a neighbour who is playing the same type of instrument or pattern. Although the *mestre* (conductor or leader) has clear authority over the proceedings, a good deal of help is given by other experienced players to those in need of it. This is conducive to a feeling of mutual support and, once a piece is going well, the band stepping to the rhythm, there is a tangible sense of communal enjoyment, with people smiling at each other as they play.

Sometimes – particularly when there are beginners present – John begins the session with a series of warm-up exercises which also demonstrate some samba percussion fundamentals. Crucially this begins with the “samba step”. This movement is one of the aspects of playing this music that is emphasized in almost every situation where it is taught, whether in Wales or Brazil. The two main forms are either two steps forward followed by two steps back or a side-to-side movement of swaying steps and stops. In both cases the first beat of the first bar of the cycle coincides with the right foot stepping out or forward. John explains that the step measures out the two-bar cycle and how the beats are distributed along it. Everybody stands in a circle and follows the sequence of steps continually. He then asks everyone to clap minims, then crotchets, quavers, quaver triplets and semiquavers, while doing the step.

Beginners are always taught to “step” to the beat. Conductors will regularly demonstrate and lead it, reminding even expert *sambistas* to move to the rhythm. Not every player is always moving; on the other hand, more elaborate dance moves are often incorporated, which may be individual variations on the step or synchronized choreographies involving groups of players.

Rehearsals continue for about three hours, with a break halfway during which we chat, drink coffee and smoke. During the entire rehearsal as few as two different rhythms may be attempted. These will usually be new to only a minority of the players. While these players learn them for the first time, others

are perfecting their technique, enjoying playing and bringing in subtle variations. Players generally adhere to their pattern when playing a specific piece but may vary emphases and dynamics. Occasionally improvisatory sessions develop where everyone chooses what they play and changes it at will. Band members are generally associated with a particular instrument, and therefore with particular patterns for each piece.

Punctuality at rehearsals is not expected of *sambistas*. Although there is an official start and end time, people drift in and out during the session. One rehearsal I attended was scheduled to run from midday until 3 pm but actually lasted from 12.20 until 4.45. During that time people came and departed, with only a core of about five remaining for the whole time. At its peak the band numbered 16 players. This particular session, however, was not an aimless “jam”. It was a specific practice for a forthcoming performance at a large private party over the border in England. Particular pieces were being worked out, rehearsed and refined. Yet no one was told they were too late, or too inexperienced, to join in.

Ways into samba: possible preconceptions

In the mid-1990s Brazil did not attract much attention from the British media. “*Carnaval* in Rio” was in the public consciousness – for instance through occasional media representations of costumed dancers – but this did not extend to clear associations with the sounds of particular musical genres.¹² Some aspects of Brazilian *carnaval* that were in the British consciousness are clearly rejected by the respondents and do not generally form part of British samba culture:

I had a vision of samba ... of half-nude women sort of twirling their tits – the *carnaval* – and I wasn’t interested, I just thought “this is exhibitionism”.

I think I’d just seen lots of tinsel and glitter on various pictures.

The costumes worn by Samba Bangor are humorous rather than “glamorous”, silly rather than sexy. They show confidence by drawing attention to the band but are worn with irony. They tend towards self-mockery (e.g. umbrellas or flowers worn on the head), rather than towards the heavy satire found in Rio de Janeiro (Guillermoprieto, 1990:188) or the specific ethnic references of Bahia.¹³

In the interviews conducted for this study the question of what brought people to samba and, more specifically, what prior knowledge they had of it was explicitly and thoroughly explored. Typical responses included “I couldn’t have told you what country it came from” and “I just found it clicked into

¹² Samba rhythms have influenced popular dance music during the last four years in particular, but this phenomenon, which is probably in part due to the UK samba movement, was not significant at the time the informants for this paper became involved with samba.

¹³ The *afoxé* band Filhos do Gandhi dress like the eponymous Mahatma, and North American Indian costumes were a favoured Salvador theme in the 1970s. Today, Ilê Aiyê use African-style graphics and clothes and refer to African identity in their lyrics.

something". I was also interested to discover whether notions of exoticism were a factor in people's attraction to the music. This did not appear to be the case. Respondents asserted that what initially engaged them was the experience of samba percussion in action. The direct impact of the music and its production is extremely powerful for some listeners in that it effects major changes in their social and cultural behaviours, both immediately and in the long term (if they join a band). This can also be observed in the reaction of audiences, as the earlier description of the *Cnapan* performance illustrates.

The social context in which the music is encountered may be a street procession, a performance at a festival or tuition at a workshop. Clearly, in the workshop situation participants have already shown an interest by attending, but the decision to sign up for tuition often results from having heard a band perform. Some Bangor players had been interested in percussion, other kinds of world music such as Bulgarian music, or Latin forms such as salsa dancing, prior to their encounter with samba. These previous musical predilections of Welsh *sambistas*, while quite wide-ranging, usually have some commonality with samba percussion, being either dance forms, non-western and/or percussion-based. Thus the attitude people brought to samba was informed and prefigured by an interest in tangentially related music. However, this does not negate the specificity of samba as a genre and their reaction to it. Band members usually become involved after hearing a performance by a British samba band, which is recounted as an epiphanic moment. One said: "I thought 'This is it, I'm hooked on this samba sound'". They were not musically naïve, but neither did they bring with them any specific knowledge of the original cultural context of the music. Their reaction was no blasé acceptance of yet another kind of "ethnic" rhythmic music but rather a recognition of something that spoke to them in a particular way and in which they wanted to participate.

In search of a source culture

Some band members are content just to play and take no further interest in the cultural origins of the music, while others go deeper – but not before it has taken on its own form and significance for them, so that when they come into contact with the Brazilian manifestation through seeing a video, such as my documentary, or travelling (from Wales to England) to attend a workshop with a Brazilian teacher such as Dudu Tucci, they are already comparing their own practice with the indigenous one.¹⁴ Those *sambistas* in Wales who do learn more come to identify with the street percussion of northeast Brazil rather than that of Rio de Janeiro. This has to do with the perception of the latter as being commodified, institutionalized and presented with surplus kitsch and titillation, whereas the tradition in Bahia and Recife is seen as less compromised.

¹⁴ I am aware in this connection of providing more contact with Brazil for Samba Bangor than they had had previously as I brought back instruments and video recordings which they were obviously keen to see. There is an ironic inversion here of the anthropological anxiety about polluting the culture being studied.

For this reason I decided to conduct the Brazilian part of this study in the northeastern city of Salvador in the state of Bahia, where I recorded video material during December 1997 and January 1998. This is also the region with the highest proportion of Brazilians of mainly African descent. More than twenty-five *blocos* and *bandas* were observed in a number of different settings, many more than once. One particular group, Bira Reis' *bloco afro instrumental* Kizumba, was followed from their first rehearsals of the (pre-carnaval) season to their first public appearance (still called an *ensaio* or rehearsal) on the beach at Itapoã, a suburb of Salvador.

Brazil

On my first bus journey into the centre of Salvador I am surprised by the sound of drums from the side of the road. I rush to the front, get off at the next stop and find myself among a group of seven percussionists playing atabaques (Brazilian conga) and various idiophones in the shade of the concrete canopy of the bus shelter, which protects them from the piercing midday sun. On the other side, on a paved area overlooking the sea, a group of young dancers performs involved and athletic synchronized choreographies.

I watch, feeling fortunate at having found musical activity so quickly, when a man next to me collapses. He is one of the dancers. His friends quickly gather round and I try to help, offering water. He comes round after a couple of minutes. People thank me and I make my first acquaintances. The dance group is a class who are performing in public to celebrate the New Year. The tutors give me their cards and two German women who were watching introduce themselves and join in the conversation. They are in Bahia on extended visits and are heavily involved in Afro-Brazilian culture – one with dance, the other with percussion music.

This first impression demonstrates some of the important aspects of urban Bahian music and dance: street performance and rehearsal, more or less formal instruction, widespread local involvement as well as dissemination to outsiders, and economic and cosmopolitan dimensions – as evidenced by the tutors' professional cards and the non-accidental presence of foreigners, including myself.

Children are taught formally. At this level the less talented are indulged with great patience alongside faster learners. However, *carnaval* bands or *blocos* do practise a certain amount of selection. Sometimes there is open access for initial rehearsals during the season, but at some point the *mestre* makes decisions about who can continue and eventually parade. There is obviously competition to play with the top bands and the standard is extremely high. Nevertheless, a feature of performance, or more specifically rehearsal, that exemplifies the communality and inclusivity of street percussion music in Salvador is that people will casually play on a drum someone else is wearing – in passing, so to speak. This involves borrowing the beaters or sticks from the player, playing along with the band for a number of bars, then returning them and moving on.

Performances in Salvador are often distinguished by great exuberance, physicality, eroticism and athleticism. Young people in the audience form ad hoc dance groups and follow each other in ever new synchronized delineations of the two-bar cycles. Couples act out sexual movements. Olodum *surdo* players stomp and posture in ways that can appear highly aggressive. Members of the female band Didá, on the other hand, produce fluid movements with their beaters and move their hips vigorously. Male percussionists playing on-beats frequently lift their large *surdos* above their heads while playing them with the other hand.

Two other aspects of samba in Bahia should be mentioned. One is the celebratory context. The ultimate forum, after all, is Brazilian urban *carnaval*, which is one of the most extraordinary celebrations in the world. The time leading up to this is the Brazilian summer, which includes Christmas, the New Year and local Bahian festivals such as the *Festa da Boa Viagem*. Many people take their summer holiday at this time and considerable numbers of Brazilians come to Salvador to be part of the season of festivities, in which music and dance are central.

The second aspect is political. It is well documented that many Afro-Brazilian cultural forms have been subject to suspicion and repression during their history (Guillermoprieto, 1990:24; dos Santos Barbosa, 1988:70). The growth of the Bahian *blocos afro* since the inception of Ilê Aiyê in 1974 in the wake of the North American black consciousness movement has served to make explicit notions of Afro-Brazilian solidarity, identity and empowerment. Olodum, like the big samba schools of Rio de Janeiro such as Mangueira, funds and runs social programmes and cultural centres such as the *Escola Criativa Olodum*, where “children have lessons in diction, theatre, dance, sexual education, English and music”.¹⁵ The movement as a whole works to empower poor blacks culturally, creatively, socially, educationally and to some extent economically, but the purpose of some bands is to bring the benefits of playing in a *bloco* to particular groups, such as young women (Banda Didá) or street children. Bands such as Olodum and Timbalada are world-famous in samba circles. The success of the former is linked to the revitalization of the old slave-market quarter, Pelourinho. Powerful interests have become involved, including the city government and the global music industry. The commodification is in a sense total, as it ranges from the selling of Olodum designer clothes from the band’s own luxury shop to the marketing of Salvador as a tourist destination for relatively prosperous Brazilians and Europeans. The cultural confidence engendered, however, is tangible and all-pervasive. Most *blocos*, even the most illustrious, still play gratis in the streets.

Adoption and adaptation

The most fundamental musical difference between street samba in Brazil and Wales is the dissociation in Europe of rhythm from melody. In Brazil, and more particularly in Bahia, the form is based around percussion and singing, although

¹⁵ *Jornal Olodum* Ano II, No. 5, November 1994, 5.

in Rio de Janeiro samba traditionally includes the sound of the *cavaquinho* (a small ukelele-like guitar) playing chords. The usually numerous *bateria* or percussion section accompanies a song which features a solo singer and sometimes a chorus. In formal settings, such as staged concerts and recordings, other instruments are often present. This can include a full pop band line-up.

In Bahia many performances I observed used melody and percussion only. Ilê Aiyê's heats for choosing *carnaval* numbers used massively amplified solo singers and acoustic *bateria* only, while Bira Reis' *bloco afro* is made up of the *bateria* and a saxophone section (playing in unison or octaves) of around eight, augmented by guest solo singers. Crucially, however, *baterias* are detachable and work as free-standing (or moving) entities. There are many situations where just percussion is performed and appreciated. It is this, the percussion of street samba, that is the mainstay of UK samba. There are bands which include sung or played melody, "horns" or rap, but most samba played in the UK is percussion only. Thus two important elements of the Brazilian manifestation are largely left behind – melody and words.

Priorities, perceptions and uses of samba in Wales

The following section is predicated on the respondents' foregrounding of values they associate with participation in the band. There is little question that for them these values are to some extent genre-specific. Finnegan's work in *The Hidden Musicians* gives a wealth of examples of musical involvement in a British community, some of which suggest that a single genre may serve different ends. For instance, she contrasts two rock bands with entirely different aims, one hoping to become "famous and wealthy" whereas the other "saw the band's main rationale as voicing their political convictions" (1989:110–11). It may be significant however, that the bands in question had different membership systems, used different instruments and contrasted in levels of musical training and gender ratio. Different constructions of meaning clustered around a musical system may also feed back into performance and attenuate the resulting sounds. Thus a particularly ambitious and competitive choir might sound different from one to which people belong purely for enjoyment. In the following sections possible links between perceived meaning and musical form and practice are highlighted.

Inclusivity

One of the aspects of samba that is important to members of the band is inclusivity. There are a number of ways in which the specifics of the form facilitate this reading. For one thing, the fact that drums are relatively easy to begin to use means that a newcomer can take part immediately. Once novices realize that the music is made up of discrete and manageable patterns (something not immediately apparent to everybody) they feel that this is something that they can attempt. Usually, each pattern is played by several people, so the success of the piece is not dependent on a particular drummer. The size of the band is

entirely flexible. One can play with three or 300 people. "I didn't know what I was doing but I could just go along. They were doing a gig, this was actually out of doors, we played outside three pubs and I had such a great time", reported one respondent. At rehearsals observers, latecomers and beginners are always encouraged to participate.

Many of the larger British bands have a beginners' and an advanced group. This is true of the Cardiff band Samba Galês, for instance, and enables the fostering of excellence in one "elite" group while the other is open to all comers. The size of Samba Bangor prohibits such a division, which means there is inevitably tension between achieving musical excellence and allowing everyone to participate. Samba Bangor are acutely aware of the tradeoff between open access and the standard of the music, and would discuss this frequently and at length. A split that took place in the late summer of 1997 was essentially over this contradiction.

Tim was the unofficial musical director for about a year, but eventually he found it impossible to come to terms with the lack of a group of dependable players with whom he could build up a number of fixed arrangements. During the latter part of his involvement the atmosphere – by his own admission – suffered. Although the band regretted the fact that they were not going to attain a polished repertoire, ultimately inclusivity was their priority. They were also concerned that too much emphasis on the standard of playing at rehearsals undermined the spirit of community. Tim eventually left and several members quit the band at the same time. This demonstrates that the music is open to be conjoined to a less inclusive ethic than the one espoused by the majority of Bangor players, but the size of the band prohibits the equal accommodation of both currents.

Community

The intra-band community is close-knit and the opportunities for social interaction the group presents are an important factor for players. The music often becomes pivotal to the social life of the members. Close friendships and romantic attachments are formed through the band, and children are conceived between band members. The word "community" also appears regularly on the "Samba in Britain and Ireland" website, although sometimes it refers to the wider community from which the band is drawn:

The Barracudas, Barrow-in-Furness. Loud and spectacular community street band formed after the closure of the Barrow shipyards, memorable for their samba version of Also Sprach Zarathustra.

A samba band is itself a community that is open to and plays for a larger community. In Bangor this dynamic is complicated by the predominantly English composition of the band, which contrasts with the mainly Welsh environment. However, this discourse also needs to be read in terms of the "community music movement" and its terminology. Everitt, in his examination of "participatory music", points out that in western society

... we tend to make opportunistic use of multiple communities to construct a confident, customised sense of ourselves ... Community music [is] speaking less to identifiable social groups than to *ad hoc* gatherings of deracinated individuals for whom it may be a ladder to the attainment of a personal aspiration as well as a means of personal empowerment in the context of a wider social movement.

(Everitt, 1997:86)

Although it is difficult to give a precise definition of “community” in terms of samba in Wales, it is possible to see how the music lends itself to this kind of interpretation in a number of ways. First, a samba band is communal in the same sense as any other ensemble. Second, the interlocking rhythmic patterns can be seen as an analogue of a tight weave of social interaction. Furthermore, musically, equal weight is given to different parts, i.e. it is not entirely apparent which is the lead line and which are accompanying voices. Indeed, one of the pleasures of this music is that the listener can focus in on different patterns and compound patterns. However, there are certainly hierarchies of:

1. complexity (some patterns are more syncopated or difficult to play);
2. experience (e.g. in Bangor only old hands play the big drums or *surdos*);
3. freedom (only the conductor improvises);
4. knowledge (the conductor does the vast majority of the teaching).

Thus, we may conclude that the music and its production incorporate “communal elements”, certainly, but not that these are by any means wholly democratic or egalitarian.

Community values in “Welsh samba” are stressed to the extent that competitiveness is essentially absent. The inclusive attitude means that there is a supportive atmosphere within bands and also co-operation rather than competition between them. This represents a marked contrast not just with samba in Brazil but with many amateur musical ensemble types, such as brass bands and choirs, where formal competition plays a major rôle, and particularly with the Welsh *eisteddfod* tradition, which is fundamentally competitive both for groups and soloists.

Physicality and sexuality

The nexus between instrumental performance and whole-body movement formed by the “samba step” is crucial to some of the meanings perceived by informants. The forceful physicality of striking the drum is augmented into the involvement of the entire body. Synchronized movement of the group inextricably integrates the musical, the physical and the social. Many samba bands have attached dance groups, or players who double as dancers for some performances. Beyond this, audiences and bystanders are often moved to dance when they hear a performance, and this “infectious physicality” is one of the powerful dynamics of samba.

The precise placement as well as the macro-ordering of beats can be read as complex patterning that requires a high level of concentration and control in performance. Frith (1996:123–58) foregrounds this aspect of African-derived rhythmic musics, claiming that the physical and sexual emphasis is a construction of detractors of these traditions. A full discussion of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is precisely the visceral, physical and sexual effects and meanings of this music that were emphasized by the respondents in Wales:

It's something here, it's very gut, it's a very gut feeling, it's a very sexual thing, I think it's kind of deep, it's not a music that happens up here ... [indicates head] it happens here [indicates abdomen] ... and that's where people are, that's where I'm coming at it from.

This seems to contradict any assertion of conceptual content, but as Browning puts it, samba comes from “a culture which comprehends intelligent bodies” (1995:xiix). As my respondent implies, whether one approaches it cerebrally or in movement depends on where one is “coming at it from”, and interesting though it is to engage with this music intellectually, it is also to understand it only partially. In Wales people often become *sambistas* at an age when their sexuality and behaviour might be circumscribed by social strictures associated with maturity. However, street samba percussion enables them to assert themselves socially, personally, physically and creatively.

Wellbeing

Some respondents reported that playing with the band usually influences how they feel:

It changes your brain chemistry in some way. You can go with a headache and play for half an hour or so and it's lifted your mood. If it goes well it has a predictable effect.

This may be partly due to this being a recreational activity – a favoured sport or hobby might work in a similar way. However, the many uses of rhythmic grooves for physical work situations and for religious ceremony in different cultures suggests the action of additional processes to those responsible for the benefits of tennis or gardening. The rhythm animates the body in a way that appears to release energy resources, “for rhythmic movements that are properly organised on some regular basis appear to be less fatiguing” (Nketia, 1975:29), eventually giving way to post-cathartic relaxation: “The playing keeps you going, when you take the drum off you collapse.”

Celebration

The celebratory potential of street samba percussion represents another important significance and use of the music in Wales. The bands enhance important national events such as international rugby football matches in Cardiff, the

national and the international *eisteddfod*, as well as local festivals such as regattas and, appropriately, carnivals. As outdoor music to dance to and observe (particularly when the bands play in costume and are accompanied by dancers), samba fulfils an important function at these events, imparting a sense of occasion, celebration and elation, which, in the right conditions, engenders enjoyment for performers and audience alike. This is echoed on the aforementioned website by the Chorley Escola de Samba; “We are essentially community based and our intention is to create carnival, maas, street celebration – whatever you want to call it, from the bottom up and create some Samba Joy!”

Empowerment

The potential of processional performance of percussion music for martial and political purposes suggests the appropriateness of street samba for communicating “empowerment” and “confidence”. “Empowerment” is a word used freely by John of Samba Bangor as being a central aim of the band. This is closely bound up with the already cited benefits such as the opportunity to play and perform music, the assertion of one’s physicality, musicality and sexuality, and the perceived feeling of physical and emotional wellbeing. The strength derived from acting together as a micro-community and through projecting this togetherness in performance is another aspect of this empowerment. There is also pride in creating a life-enhancing activity out of nothing more than the will of the players (or the “community”). This is reinforced because Samba Bangor does not depend on grant aid but has been entirely self-supporting for the last five years, so there is a sense of economic self-reliance, too. The powerful sound of the band, heard in public spaces, proclaims the confidence of the individuals. Several *sambistas* also reported experiencing a particularly notable sense of achievement when passers-by spontaneously started dancing on hearing the band.

From Brazil to Wales – what remains?

A full comparative study of samba in Europe and Brazil is not within the parameters of this paper since my ethnography is focused on Samba Bangor and their reported experience of the music. However, the well-documented history of Brazilian samba as well as my own observations do allow the identification of certain potential points of contact. As the section on Brazil relates, street samba is used to represent, bond and *empower* communities there, as demonstrated by Olodum in Pelourinho. The *celebratory* aspect is prominent during the summer holiday season and carnival itself, while *physicality* and *sexuality* play an important part in performance and reception. *Inclusivity* is also evident in the toleration of indifferent players at certain levels, bystanders playing performer’s drums and the encouragement through tuition of outsider groups, such as street children and even tourists.

In terms of differences, the omission in Europe of melody, on the whole, has already been mentioned. As a result of this, British bands tend to play a greater

range of rhythms than an Afro-Brazilian *bloco*, which would normally vary and elaborate one format. A typical Salvador *bloco* plays rhythms based on samba-reggae, whereas for Samba Bangor samba-reggae represents a single piece which would be followed by a samba rhythm as played in Rio de Janeiro. Thus the repertoires of bands in Brazil and Wales grow along different lines, the former exploring a particular sub-genre and the latter presenting a selection of such styles. This does not fundamentally affect the level of difficulty for the players since Brazilian arrangements can present considerable variations on the “stem” rhythm. Another contrast is that Brazil has a samba hierarchy, with national media exposure and international concert tours beckoning to those who can command a place in a top band such as Olodum or Timbalada. In Wales there is no such perspective. Ambition has its limits in workshops, *encontros* and community-based “gigs”. A high point for one interviewee was playing at the Notting Hill Carnival with London School of Samba. It could be claimed that in Brazil the music’s potential to empower is greater in that it can offer, to people impoverished and excluded in ways not easily comparable with conditions in Wales, more opportunities than a Welsh band conceivably could. This is partly a function of the national and international status of top Brazilian bands. However, the plethora of lesser Brazilian ensembles evidences communality and inclusivity.

Why samba? Towards a theoretical synthesis

Whereas ethnomusicologists would more usually be researching music that is made by a community, this is a case where the more immediate band community could be said to have been generated by the music. There are a number of approaches which might help to illuminate the processes that led people to involve themselves in samba. Paul Willis refers to music that is “differentially sought out and pursued by ... a social group” because it can “sum up crucial values, states and attitudes” (quoted in Middleton, 1990:159–60). Gibson uses the word “affordances” for the adaptive, and therefore interpretative, options provided by environmental “surfaces”. He emphasizes the “complementarity of the animal and the environment” (1979:127) that links the actual form of an object with the uses an organism might have for it.¹⁶ This complementarity is heightened with music because it is a part of the environment produced by human beings for human beings. It might be argued that players in Europe are responding more directly to possible meanings afforded by the sounds (and the process of their production), whereas in Bahia the music is embedded in a whole range of historical and social phenomena to whose significations it inevitably relates.

I have already cited Finnegan’s example of similar music giving rise to different interpretations (see also Meyer, 1956:271, and Blacking, 1995:35), and

¹⁶ I am indebted to Eric Clarke for drawing my attention to Gibson’s work and to Martin Clayton for the incisive discussion developing Gibson’s ideas in the introduction to this volume.

the period of conflict within Samba Bangor over the band's ethic supports this. Small (1998) also draws our attention to the different ways in which western orchestral music has been performed and received during its history, and Cook claims that "the listener can ... take up an interpretative position in relation to" particular works (1990:169). However, the various continuities discernible in the readings and uses of samba also invite us to consider the notion that "Though imprecise, the relationship between the form of the symbol and its symbolism, between structure and meaning, is fluid and yet not arbitrary. The symbol is not infinitely adaptable." (McKinnon, 1994:8) A possible connection between the malleability of associated meaning *and* a degree of resonance between music and interpretation may be found in Merleau-Ponty's proposition that "It is the work itself that has opened the field from which it appears in another light." (1961:750) In other words, whatever meanings different adopting groups formulate or construct are built around the music chosen and that music represents a bridge between those groups and the original culture-bearers. The nature of that connection is what this kind of study may be able to illuminate.

If "the cultural construction of hearing [is] the key to understanding" (Segado, 1993:16), it raises the question of why the Bangor *sambistas* initially knew how to read the text when it could be argued that their minds were "unprepared" – although it is clear that for some reason they were not "unreceptive". I have drawn attention to certain practical and physical aspects of performance that have a bearing on how this music is used and perceived: the association with movement through the "samba step"; the comparative ease of joining in; and loud performance in public spaces. We might say that these carry the "affordances" of physicality, accessibility and empowerment in ways that a proportion of Europeans respond to without specialist cultural initiation.

In general terms the process may to some extent be based on commonalities: commonalities between human beings, human cultures and between musics. In identifying these we might begin with "the biological anchoring of symbolic associations" (Nattiez, 1990:104). In terms of culture, Blacking allows that people can "make connections between musical and non-musical experiences without specific cultural rules ... because the human brain's ability to relate different transformations of the same figure do not depend entirely on cultural experience" (1995:233). Furthermore, musically, there are clearly links on a number of levels. Afro-American popular music shares some of the same West African roots as street samba. More recently, reggae has fertilized Bahian practice and given rise to samba-reggae. These American and Jamaican genres would clearly be familiar to many British listeners. Global cultural interchange (in this case going back to the transatlantic slave trade) has ensured that completely "alien" music is hard to come by.

Members of Samba Bangor find themselves in a complex cultural environment, and one of the ways in which they locate themselves within it is through their involvement in the band. Their adoption of an extraneous musical form defines them as different from both a specifically Welsh context and the wider society of the UK. In playing samba they create a community which reaches

out to others and yet emphasizes their particular “values, states and attitudes”. Samba percussion has become important in their lives by releasing and realizing potentialities that are immanent in themselves, the music and its performance.

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Note on the author

Jochen Eisentraut is lecturer in music at the University of Wales, Bangor. After gaining a degree in psychology at Bangor in 1982 he wrote music for television professionally for 12 years before taking up his teaching post. He continues to compose and is pursuing research into adopted music and cultural change. Address: School of Music, University of Wales Bangor, Gwynedd, Wales, UK.