

Ethics in the Sung Duels of North-Eastern Brazil: Collective Memory and Contemporary Practice

Author(s): Elizabeth Travassos

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## Ethics in the sung duels of north-eastern Brazil: collective memory and contemporary practice<sup>1</sup>

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*This article deals with a genre of Brazilian sung poetic duels called “cantoria”, “repente” or “desafio”. It begins with a short description of the performance context of cantoria, commenting on some of the poetic styles the singers employ, including “louvação” (praise), “elogio” (eulogy), “malcriação” (rudeness) and “sabedoria” (knowledge). There follows a discussion of the ethical norms that inform contemporary practice during confrontations, which the singers contrast with the great duels of the past. During the highly idealized “heroic era” of the tradition, two singers confronted one another as adversaries, while today they engage in “friendly bouts”. I deal with “folhetos de cordel”, pamphlets which publish representations of sung duels, treating them as one of the ways in which the collective memory of cantoria is elaborated and preserved. I suggest that sung duels demarcate a space in which the contestants temporarily suspend their social identities to confront one another as equals. Thus, cantoria establishes a neutral arena in which, through poetry and music, the experimentation of ethical and logical solutions related to hierarchy and equality can take place.*

Most Brazilians have some idea of what is meant by a “*desafio de repentistas*”: a sung poetic competition, in which two singers (*cantadores* or *repentistas*) attempt to out-do one another in the art of verse improvisation. The two singers play *violas* (guitar-like instruments with five double-courses of strings), and their art is known as “*repente*” or “*cantoria-de-viola*”.<sup>2</sup> Although *cantoria* is

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1 A preliminary version of this article was presented at the meeting “Voice, music and society” in Rio de Janeiro in 1998. The current version was translated into English by Suzel Ana Reily.

2 The terms “*cantoria*” and “*repente*” are synonymous in their cultural universe of origin, and this is how they are used in this article. The singers speak of themselves as “*cantadores-de-viola*” (distinguishing themselves from other *cantadores*, such as those who accompany their singing on tambourines), “*repentistas*” (literally, those who sing “suddenly”, or improvise in song) or “*violeiros*” (*viola* players). Sometimes these terms are combined, with a singer being referred to as a “*cantador-repentista*” or a “*cantador-violeiro*”.

commonly associated with the north-east of Brazil, it can now be heard all over the country. Since the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, north-easterners have been moving from rural areas into cities, and from north-eastern cities to other parts of the country in search of work. Amongst the migrants there have been singers, whose lifestyles have been historically linked to nomadism, given their trade.

Even though *cantoria* has become widely diffused throughout the country, vast sectors of the Brazilian population know very little about the tradition. Many seem surprised when, by chance, they encounter such performances; others are unable to hide the extent to which *cantoria* diverges from their musical tastes, associating it with the archaic and remote world of a poor population from one of the poorest regions of the country. At best it is taken for “folklore”, that is, as a quaint and picturesque tradition. Amongst *repentistas*, their audiences and promoters, however, *cantoria* is a highly valued cultural expression. Thus, attitudes toward *cantoria* vary according to the level of familiarity a person has with the tradition, which can be quite limited, even amongst the middle and upper classes of the north-east.

It is, therefore, necessary to provide a description of *cantoria* performances, even if one is writing for a Brazilian readership. As in any ethnographic description, my short account is incomplete, particularized and analytical. Presuming that my readership here has little or no direct experience of *cantoria*, I shall attempt to describe how the events called “*desafios*” (lit., challenges) take place. The description has been abstracted from a number of actual performance events which were observed and documented through fieldnotes and recordings. It emphasizes the norms which govern the *desafio*, particularly the interactions amongst the singers and between the singers and their audiences. These norms were not derived simply from my observations: I learned about them from the *repentistas*. I was alerted to them by the importance the singers placed upon their professional ethics when they discussed their practices during *desafios*. In their discussions they frequently contrasted contemporary norms with past practice, an era in which – allegedly – these norms did not apply. This contributed toward drawing my attention to both the practices they considered important in *desafios* today as well as to their collective memory of the tradition.

Ultimately, my objective is to account for the vitality of this tradition within the restricted – but faithful – audiences who contract and attend *cantoria* performances, who applaud the performers in specialized festivals, who buy their records and tune their radios to *cantoria* programmes.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, I shall attempt to understand what constitutes the *repentista* identity, a profession which, besides poetic and musical talent, requires the performer to accept an insecure income and to confront the consequences of extensive vocal strain and continuous travel.

3 The expression “restricted audience” is not based on a specific quantification. It simply indicates that *cantoria* is not transmitted by the media of mass communication, such as television, large record companies and major public performances.

The popularity of the *desafio* has been put down to the “appeal of the tournament itself” (Ferreira 1991:71), but this generic explanation could apply equally well to football or to Balinese cock-fighting, while providing little indication of how the specificities of different types of tournament articulate with the social contexts in which they are practised. Roger Bastide (1959) also based his hypothesis upon universal presuppositions. He claimed that poetic musical duels derive from the competitive games of (primitive) dualistic societies. In Brazil, he argued, one still encounters ritual expressions of antagonism between opposing social groups in the north-east, as well as contexts, such as the *desafio*, in which two individuals confront one another. In moving from a collective ritual function to a form of individual expression, he contended that duelling moves into the properly aesthetic terrain; once divorced from the ritual sphere, such confrontations become “literary genres”. My interpretation is far less ambitious, remaining restricted to the *desafio* in the north-east, but it aims to look at how the vitality of the tradition in this context is closely linked to the ethic structuring its performance.

A *desafio* involves two individuals who confront one another as poets. As ordinary men and women, their social identity is constituted by a range of attributes, such as status, a network of relations, gender, age, religion and so on; but on entering the performance arena, they must strive to suspend their everyday social identities, neutralizing these attributes to engage with one another as poets, that is, as “equals”. The success of the performance is contingent upon this suspension. To ensure it happens, practices which I refer to as the ethics of the *desafio* have been instated, and it is precisely these practices which the singers define in contrast to the great duels of the past.

Vitality is, of course, a relative concept, and here it has been inferred from my field experience in the 1980s on the basis of a number of factors. Firstly I was made aware of a large number of active singers within the tradition, even though I did not meet them all personally: the singers I did meet estimated that there were between two and three thousand *repentistas* performing throughout the country. The singers with whom I co-existed were continuously in demand; their diaries were full of engagements to sing at small rural properties (*sítios*), urban households, bars, restaurants, clubs, radio programmes and festivals. Those who were unable to make every engagement that came their way passed on contracts to other singers, and they took great pride in this. There was also a fair number of young singers whose careers were just beginning.

It is also worth noting the distinct trajectories taken by *cantoria* and the Brazilian form of broadside poetry known as *literatura de cordel*.<sup>4</sup> Rather like the two sides of a single coin, these two traditions have been closely associated with one another since the end of the nineteenth century, when chroniclers and folklorists began to produce the first systematic accounts of these poetic forms. Poets who wrote and disseminated their work through printed pamphlets were, in some cases, also singers of improvised verse. The pamphlets were sold at fairs by peripatetic vendors, who sang the initial verses of the poems to attract

4 The pamphlets are called “*de cordel*” (of string) because they were hung on string when displayed at fairs.

buyers. In turn, the buyers sang the verses until they memorized them. According to Luís da Câmara Cascudo (1952:19), the pamphlets are a form of oral literature; they depend on the written word for their mode of composition, but their mode of dissemination takes place through oral performances.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, while *cantoria* dispersed in urban centres, *literatura de cordel* went into decline. Many small specialized printers closed down and the number of new titles began to fall, as the readership dwindled. Poets of great productivity, such as Caetano Cosme da Silva, whom I met in Campina Grande, Paraíba, kept a number of original unpublished manuscripts tucked away in drawers for lack of a publisher. Perhaps *literatura de cordel* was unable to confront the competition coming from alternative forms of literature for a low-income readership, such as illustrated magazines, popular pocket books and newspapers, and this was further aggravated by the many narrative forms made available on radio and television, such as dramatically presented popular news programmes, soaps, variety programmes and the like.<sup>6</sup> There are, however, no counterparts to *cantoria* in the spheres of popular theatre and music. Even though *cantoria* has not found a niche within the media of mass communication, remaining restricted to an autonomous parallel circuit, it does not seem to be a threatened tradition,<sup>7</sup> making it rather unique. While researchers are used to having to explain the decline, adaptation, revival or other forms of change which affect popular oral musical traditions, the challenge facing the study of *cantoria* is to account for its resilience.

Despite the decline in the *folheto* tradition, it has remained linked to *cantoria*. Several *repentistas* said that their initiation into the world of poetry had taken place through the reading and singing of poems in published pamphlets during childhood (thus, some time between 1920 and 1970). A significant part of this vast repertoire of published poems belongs to a genre called '*peleja*' (battle).<sup>8</sup> Many *pelejas* are presented as written documents of real confrontations between two singers, while others are fictional *desafios* created by a poet. By recreating sung duels, published *pelejas* constitute an important source for the preservation of collective representations about *desafios* within the *cantoria* universe.

5 On the oral-written continuum, see Ruth Finnegan (1977), from whom I have borrowed the distinction between the "mode of composition" and the "mode of dissemination".

6 This is rather curious, if one takes account of historical examples in which the opposite occurred. In western Europe, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the dissemination of literacy and of popular literature occurred in conjunction with the decline in the singing of epic poems, whereas in regions which retained high rates of illiteracy, such as Sicily, Bosnia and Russia, the sung epic survived (Burke 1989).

7 It is worth nuancing this statement. Luciano Py de Oliveira (1999) conducted field research in the 1990s in Campina Grande, Paraíba, and heard many complaints from *repentistas* regarding a decline in invitations to sing in rural areas. He also noted the decline in the number of programmes of *cantoria* on the local radio stations. I do not have sufficient data to estimate the dimensions of this trend.

8 '*Peleja*' is a synonym for 'fight'. Most *folhetos* that reproduce *desafios* are called '*Peleja* of so-and-so with so-and-so'.

## On the field research

When I embarked upon this study, my knowledge of *cantoria* was as superficial as that of the majority of the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro and other Brazilian urban centres. I had already seen and heard *repentistas* singing in public places, surrounded by the passers-by who tend to congregate around the available “attractions” in public venues. I was also familiar with the São Cristóvão fair, a popular market where the large north-eastern population of Rio meets every week. At the market, vendors set up stalls to sell north-eastern products; there are regional foods and drinks to be had; and north-eastern music and *cantoria* are performed. The market has multiple functions: it is a place for economic exchange, a meeting place and a place of entertainment. It is called the “north-eastern fair” (*feira nordestina*) or “market of the north-easterners” (*feira dos nordestinos*), and these names are not neutral in Rio: they underline the distinctive cultural traits of the north-eastern population, such as accent and other speech mannerisms, but, above all, social position. The jobs available to most north-eastern migrants are the low-paid positions for unskilled workers which require low levels of education; they are non-specialized construction workers, guards, doormen, cleaners, domestic servants and so on. Thus, north-easterners are stigmatised by certain sectors of the population, amongst whom they are called ‘*paraibas*’, a pejorative term which refers to the regional and class origins of this social group.<sup>9</sup>

With this superficial knowledge of *cantoria*, I could not have imagined that there would be people ready to spend six or more hours listening to a pair of *repentistas*, as I was to witness during my time in the field. In 1983, I assisted the composer and folklorist Aloysio de Alencar Pinto at the National Folklore Institute in Rio while he was editing the studio recording of two famous *cantadores*, Otacilio Batista and Oliveira de Panelas.<sup>10</sup> He introduced me to the literature on *cantoria* and *literatura de cordel*, an extensive and varied bibliography, which includes the pioneer research of the romantic novelist José de Alencar and the critic and folklorist Sílvio Romero in the nineteenth century through to writings by folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, literary critics and ethnomusicologists, throughout the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

As I explored this literature, I noted the almost complete absence of studies focusing on *cantoria* as a poetic-musical performance, a gap which I attribute to two related factors: firstly, the marked interest in *literatura de cordel*, which has always received considerable attention from researchers; and secondly, the tendency to reduce *cantoria* to the sung verses, which are transcribed and transformed into written texts to be analysed in terms of their thematic material,

9 “Paraíba” is the name of a state in the north-east which is synecdochally applied to all north-eastern migrants.

10 The former National Folklore Institute is known today as the National Centre of Folklore and Popular Culture.

11 For an overview of this literature up to the 1970s, see Luyten (1981). My bibliography only includes references cited in the paper.

poetic form and style. Though the properly oral dimension of the tradition is recognized formally in preliminary observations, it tends to be ignored in the studies themselves. Few writers have attempted to deal with *cantoria* as music, and those who have attended to the music have tended to focus upon its cultural and musical origins. Intrigued by the use of “exotic”, “defective”, “modal” or gapped scales (see Lamas 1973, Correia de Azevedo 1979, Béhague 1980), they have endeavoured to identify the origins of these musical characteristics.<sup>12</sup> In contemporary anthropology, however, such perspectives have been criticized for the way in which they fragment the object of research by dividing it into a series of traits, losing sight of its totality. Furthermore, they limit the investigative scope to issues that can be approached from diffusionist and historical-culturalist perspectives. Over the last few decades, however, the limitations of such perspectives have been recognized within *cantoria* research, and a number of studies have emerged, which employ other approaches to deal with a variety of different aspects of the tradition.<sup>13</sup>

My first opportunity to attend a performance of the so-called “*cantoria de pé-de-parede*” (lit., foot-of-the-wall *cantoria*) occurred in 1984. I was invited to attend the event by the singer Geraldo Amâncio, then a resident of Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará. *Cantoria de pé-de-parede* is the expression *cantadores* and their audiences use to refer to live performances of *desafios* which take place in private homes, rural communities, bars or restaurants. These events always take place in closed venues, and they involve two singers who improvise in front of audiences of various sizes. Generally a performance begins around 8 p.m. and only finishes at dawn the next day. The expression *cantoria de pé-de-parede* has emerged because, during such performances, the *repentistas* sit side by side with their backs to a wall. These events are distinguished from performances which take place in public venues, radio stations and festivals, which have an occasional audience of passers-by. *Cantadores* tend to denigrate public performances of *cantoria* in open spaces, fearing that their art could be confused with begging. Many of them do not even contemplate singing in the street, but they are aware that colleagues in Rio and São Paulo have no option but to do so. Radio programmes of *cantoria* take place in small local north-eastern stations, and they generally involve short live transmissions.<sup>14</sup> They are produced, directed and presented by the *repentistas* themselves, who search out patrons from local commercial establishments to “buy” the station’s transmission time. Such programmes help disseminate the names and voices of

12 The attempt to uncover the European, African, Indigenous, Arab and other contributions to Brazilian culture dominated folklore studies in Brazil (Matos 1994, Vilhena 1997).

13 See especially the book by sociologist Maria Ignez Novais Ayala (1988), the MA dissertations in sociology by Elba Braga Ramalho (1992) and in ethnomusicology by Luciano Py de Oliveira (1999).

14 A few *cantadores* have maintained regular links to stations which have contracted them and paid them for their services in specialized programmes. Luciano Py de Oliveira (1999) documented the practice of pre-recording programmes in the 1990s in Campina Grande, Paraíba, a practice I had not encountered a few years earlier.

the singers, and they provide the performers with a means of maintaining contact with their audiences. Festivals are tournaments assessed by a group of judges, in which various duos compete against one another for prizes.

On that night in 1984, I went to the small rural landholding where Geraldo would be singing. Everything was new to me. A large covered area had been prepared for the performance, in which a canvas sheet had been suspended over the beaten earth in the yard next to the house, and it was lit with kerosene lamps. The *repentistas* (Geraldo Amâncio and his colleague Antônio Nunes de França) sat on two chairs placed upon a table, allowing them to be seen and heard by all. At some point a tray was placed at their feet, which was where the audience placed their payments to the singers along with pieces of paper on which they wrote their requests. The host kept the singers supplied with beer. Those sitting in the front rows commented loudly on what was being sung, establishing a continuous dialogue between the singers and the audience, which even included a (sung) critique of the disruption caused by a motorcycle when its motor was turned on in the vicinity of the performance space. In the morning, as the audience left the premises, the head of the household invited me to join his family and the singers for a special meal prepared for the occasion. The event had been staged as part of the birthday festivities of the head of the household and one of his sons. A few days later I conducted an interview with Geraldo Amâncio in his home, and a number of elements I had observed during the performance that night began to make sense.

When I returned to Rio, I prepared a research proposal centred on the production of an ethnomusicological description of *cantoria* that would take account of the oral and ephemeral character of this type of artistic expression. I returned to Juazeiro do Norte in 1985, and drawing on my contact with Geraldo Amâncio, I met a number of other singers, through whom I was able to attend a continuous string of *cantoria* performances and radio programmes. During fieldwork I made a number of short trips to Recife and neighbouring towns, such as Caruaru, Campina Grande and Patos, where I was further assisted by a large number of singers, who allowed me into their homes for both informal conversations and formal recorded interviews.<sup>15</sup> As the project progressed I decided to focus upon the *cantorias de pé-de-parede*. During radio programmes, each performance lasts five or ten minutes; these performances are followed by readings of commercial announcements, messages from the singers and letters from the listeners, and then the duo sings again, or it gives way to another set of singers, who perform for a further five or ten minutes. At festivals dozens of duos perform on a single evening, providing good opportunities for the researcher to hear many different duos within a short time-frame. I focused

<sup>15</sup> The research project was financed by the National Folklore Institute, which covered travel expenses, and by CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Pesquisa), which provided a research grant from 1986 to 1990. Besides this institutional support, the singers and their families were considerate collaborators. I am grateful to all of them, with special thanks to Miguel Bezerra, João de Lima, Geraldo Amâncio, João Bandeira, Sílvia Grangeiro, Ivanildo Vilanova and Severino Ferreira. I have particularly fond memories of Severino Ferreira, who died tragically in 1997, and of the hospitality of his family in Patos (Paraíba).



upon the *cantorias de pé-de-parede*, because they involve a single duo performing for an extended period of time.

### ***Cantorias de pé-de-parede***

*Cantorias de pé-de-parede* are characterized by face-to-face interactions between the singers and their audience. The events are organized by a promoter who contracts a duo of *repentistas*, with whom he arranges a date and venue for the performance, or he may contact a particular singer he knows and admires, leaving it up to the *repentista* to choose his partner. The host also invites his relatives, friends and neighbours. The performance can take place in the promoter's own home or in the hall of a public establishment, where chairs are arranged for the singers and the guests. The *cantadores*' chairs are often placed on a table to create a stage. Sometimes there aren't enough seats for all the guests, and some remain standing or circulate about the house, if they are relatives or friends of the family. Whole families come to *cantorias*. When the children are tired, they are put to bed in the bedrooms of the house. In private households, the promoter also offers two meals to the *repentistas* – one before the performance, the other at the end – and he serves them beer, sugar-cane schnapps (*cachaça*) or soft drinks throughout the night. At the *repentistas*' feet, or on a bench in front of them, he places a small receptacle, such as a plate or a tray, in which the guests deposit their contributions during the performance; these donations are the *repentistas*' main form of remuneration.<sup>16</sup>

After the evening meal and sometimes after watching the news on television with their hosts, the *cantadores* take their seats and tune their *violas* to begin the *cantoria*. They begin their performance by playing the “*baião-de-viola*”, which consists of two chords played to a particular rhythmic pattern over a pedal note; the cycle is repeated many times, with minor variations, during which small melodic fragments begin to emerge in the upper regions of the instrument. The introductory *baião* can go on for up to ten minutes, raising the expectations of the audience, drawing their attention to the performance, while focusing the concentration of the performers. Then they sing the first “*sextilhas*” (heptasyllabic six-line verses, in which lines 2, 4 and 6 rhyme), which praise the head of the household, the place and the guests. This initial section is called the “*louvação*” (praise). In the *cantorias de pé-de-parede* which I attended, at least one of the *cantadores* knew the host, his family and some of the friends of the household. He knew their names, nicknames, professions and other particulars, and he drew on this information to construct the praise verses.

16 The so-called “tray” (*bandeja*) is the universal form of payment for the *cantadores*, but it is not the only one. There can also be an “adjustment” (*ajuste*) with the promoter, which ensures a minimum remuneration paid independently of the monies obtained from the tray. There can also be an entrance fee, which the promoter divides with the singers.

Sung over one amongst many *toadas* (melodies), the *sextilhas* are the traditional means of opening a *cantoria de pé-de-parede* performance. The *viola* accompaniment is not used to provide a rhythmic and harmonic base for the voice, as this is provided by the metric accents of the verses, and not by a musical metre. When a singer is performing a verse, he does not play his instrument; the instrumental accompaniment is provided by his partner, who discretely proceeds with the *baião-de-viola*. An experienced instrumentalist might pick out the *toada*'s melodic lines or play counter-melodies over the *toada*, while his partner sings. But there are also moments in which the *violas* only sound during the intervals between verses, which is consistent with early accounts, which claim that they were played only in introductions and interludes between verses. Even though they are not central to the accompaniment of the improvisations themselves, one should not conclude that the *violas* are not important to the tradition. Indeed, *cantoria* performers refer to themselves as "*cantadores-de-viola*" (*viola* singers) and the *viola* is an emblem of the tradition. It is present in all iconographic representations of *cantoria*, from festival posters and trophies in competitive tournaments to record covers and illustrations on *folhetos* of *pelejas* (see Figure 1).

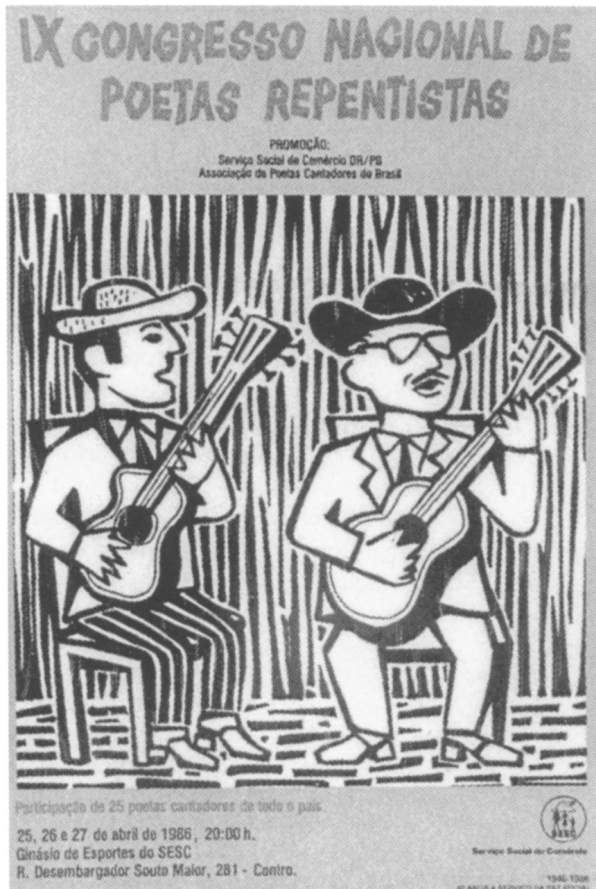


Figure 1 Poster of the IX National Meeting of Repentista Poets (1986). It is illustrated with an unsigned wood-cut representing two singers. Photo: Décio Daniel.

Without an interruption in the *sextilhas*, the *cantadores* can alter the subject-matter of their verses, drawing on issues emerging from the immediate circumstances. Thus, in *cantorias de pé-de-parede*, the interaction between the two singers and between the singers and the audience in a given situation generates the moment, or the “*repente*”, a word which translates literally as outburst or suddenness; the *repente* is the here-and-now. Soon after beginning their performance the duo begins to sing the “*elogio*” (eulogy), in which an improvisation is directed at each of the adults in the audience, requesting a contribution in money for the verse. On one occasion I saw the head of the household designate one of his sons to act as the “*apontador*” (pointer). In the Zona da Mata region of Pernambuco, it is customary for the *apontador* to whisper the names of the guests to one of the singers; he stands next to the duo, supplying them with the information they need to construct the eulogies.

Donations are generally made in the form of cash, and sometimes of cheques, and the payments vary according to the financial conditions of the members of the audience. In theory, it is possible to attend a *cantoria* without making a contribution, but everyone tries to deposit something into the tray. There are tacit moral sanctions against attending a *desafio* without leaving a donation; it is viewed as an affront to the singers and to the hospitality of the promoter. Payment is a public gesture, made during the *cantoria* and in front of everyone: the attendant stands up, goes to the tray, and places the money there along with a piece of paper containing a “*mote*” (generally two lines of seven or ten syllables each), which the listener wants the singers to develop in their improvisations. Members of the audience can also make their requests verbally, asking the *repentistas* to deal with a particular theme: “Critique the politicians!”, for example.

The themes of the improvisations derive from the suggestions and requests put forward by the audience, but they are also drawn from the traditional ways in which certain styles of *cantoria* are used.<sup>17</sup> Every now and then the singers stop for a break, giving them time to turn to their drinks and to converse with the people in the front rows, and once they’ve had their rest, they resume their performance. The sequences sung between pauses are called “*baiões*” (singular: *baião*, not to be confused with the *baião-de-violão*). A *baião* can be performed from beginning to end in a single poetic modality, such as the *sextilha*, or it can begin in one form and move to another. Each *baião* can deal with several topics and be performed to more than one *toada*. A *cantoria* is a long series of *baiões*, each of which is clearly demarcated by the breaks. Transitions from one topic to another and from one poetic form to another always generate commentary,

<sup>17</sup> I use the term “style” to designate the principal poetic formulas of *cantoria*. The styles are recognized by the *repentistas* and they have their own terminology to distinguish between them. The styles differ in their subject matter, in the treatment of the subject and in the language used and they can also be directed at particular people. The eulogy, for example, is an appropriate style to use to request payments from the audience; it uses a mocking tone (for it is worth “playing” with the audience when one asks for money); and the vocabulary draws on everyday speech; in this style the singers direct themselves to the audience. In the “knowledge” style, the singers direct themselves to one another, their tone is serious and they use rich vocabulary.

giving the audience a sense of how the thematic sequence is organized. The way the melodies are used also contributes to structuring the flow of the performance; when the singers change the subject-matter of their verses, they often change the *toada* accompanying the improvisations. Furthermore, *repentistas* contend that the melody they use should relate to the text of their performance; a sentimental theme, for example, requires a sad *toada*.

One notes, therefore, that music plays an important role in *cantoria* performance: the melodies contribute to constructing the meaning of the poetic texts, both by signalling transitions from one theme to another and by reinforcing the ideas and emotions they contain. It is also worth remembering that *cantoria* sessions are long performances, which go on far longer than a modern concert or a show of popular music, and they are sustained solely by two singers, without the assistance of dancing, drama, masks or special outfits. To lose one's concentration under such circumstances is as easy for the audience as it is fatal for the singers. In such a context, music is the main prop supporting the audience's attention upon the sung verses, of which there are literally thousands. When they have completed a sequence of verses, singers can inform the audience that there will be a break, and that they will return with a sequence of eulogies, as in the example below:

*Eu tenho merecimento  
Igual ao meu parceiro  
Mas somente por dois minutos  
Vou fazer um paradeiro  
Depois eu volto cantando  
Mas é falando em dinheiro.*

I have merit  
Equal to my partner  
But for only two minutes  
I will make a stop  
Then I will come back singing  
But I will be speaking of money.

One of the styles used in *desafios* is known as "rudeness" (*malcriação*), in which each singer praises himself and denigrates his partner, transforming the performance into a confrontation between two opponents. In this style, self-praise takes the form of hyperbolic assertions of fictitious exploits, in which the singer might claim that he drank the water of a flood or that he put out the flames of Vesuvius. To belittle his opponent, each singer threatens to defeat him in the verbal duel, all the while ridiculing and insulting him.<sup>18</sup> There is a certain verbal permissiveness in this style, although insinuations and ambiguities are used more frequently than direct affronts. During these sequences, the singers can increase the tempo of their performances, and often they almost become emphatic recitations. They may be performed in the "*martelo agalopado*" form,

<sup>18</sup> This is the best-known part of the *repente* tradition. Those who are unfamiliar with *cantoria* think that the singers engage in this type of confrontation all the time, and that the *desafio* is an exercise in verbal attacks.

which contains ten-line verses of ten syllables each in an ABBAACDDC rhyming scheme. (See Figure 2, opposite.)

Audiences are greatly amused by this style, and they comment vociferously on the boldest verses as they wait for the opponent's response. Most *repentistas* with whom I spoke claimed that the rude style is vulgar, but even though they preferred other styles, they had to acknowledge the requests of the audience. On one occasion the *repentistas* José Galdino and Sinésio Pereira improvised verses that placed a frame around the rude sequence they were about to perform, by making it clear that the disrespectful verses had been requested by a member of the audience. In this way the singers distanced themselves from the content of the verses, placing them in a fictitious sphere. Such poetic constructions – as well as the verses that end passages and announce what is to come next – function as “keys to performance” (Bauman, 1977:15), providing the audience with tools through which to interpret the performance frame:

Sinésio:

*Já falei na Cobrinha e no Leão  
Manoel Nério agora fez mandado  
Que se canta um martelo malcriado  
Animando a nossa diversão  
Não queria cantar malcriação  
Mas eu tenho que me desenvolver  
Meu colega não vá se aborrecer  
Nem ficar com a matéria oprimida  
Bote sal e pimenta na ferida  
E se deite um pouquinho que vai doer.*

Sinésio:

I have already spoken of the Snake and the Lion<sup>19</sup>  
Manoel Nério has now demanded  
That we sing a rude *martelo*  
Adding to our entertainment  
I didn't want to sing rudeness  
But I have to develop it  
My colleague, don't get upset  
And don't hold anything back  
Put salt and pepper on the sore  
And lie back a bit, because it is going hurt.

This was followed by a torrent of insults, for which the audience was prepared:

J: Galdino:

*Você hoje fica arrependido  
De cantar martelo com Zé Galdino*

<sup>19</sup> These animals are emblems of two football teams.

*Que pra mim você ainda é menino  
Muito antes não tivesse nascido  
Vou danar-te a viola no ouvido  
E depois vou quebrar teu candeeiro  
Não nasceste pra ser um violeiro  
Não tem ritmo nem métrica nem sonora  
Seu João, bote este doido para fora  
Que lugar de cachorro é no terreiro*

Sinésio:

*Cale a boca [ininteligível] de tabuleiro  
Vaca velha saltando num pé só  
Barriga de cobra de cipó  
Espírito de galo zombeteiro  
Cantador perverso, desordeiro  
Miserável, ferrugem de oficina  
Tapuru de bicheira de suína  
Vagabundo, serra-bóia, preguiçoso  
Escarradeira de porta de tuberculoso  
Papel podre de porta de latrina.*

Sinésio Pereira

Já fa-lei na Co-bri-nha\_e no Le-ão\_\_\_ Ma-noel Né-rio a-go-ra fez man-da-do  
Que se can-ta\_um mar-te-lo mal-cri-a-do A-ni-man-do a nos-sa di-ver-são  
Não que-ri-a can-tar mal-cri-a-ção\_\_\_ Mas eu te-nho que me de-sen-vol-ver  
Meu co-le-ga não vá se\_a-bor-re-cer\_\_\_ Nem fi-car com a ma-té-ria\_o-pri-mi-da  
Bo-te sal e pi-men-ta na fe-ri-da E se dei-te\_um pou-quin' que vai do-er.

Figure 2 Toada in the *martelo agalopado* form, performed by Sinésio Pereira (Nazaré da Mata, Pernambuco, 1988)

J. Galdino:

Today you will regret  
 Having sung a *martelo* with Zé Galdino  
 Because to me you are still a boy  
 Better you had never been born  
 I shall hit your ear with the *viola*  
 And then I am going to break your lantern<sup>20</sup>  
 You were not born to play the *viola*  
 You don't have rhythm nor metre nor a voice  
 Mr João, put this crazy man out  
 Because dogs belong in the yard.

Sinésio:

Shut up [incomprehensible] of a tray  
 Old cow jumping on just one leg  
 Stomach of a tree-climber snake  
 Spirit of a mocking rooster  
 Perverse, disorderly singer  
 Miserable rusty bit from a workshop  
 Worm-infested sow's wound  
 Vagabond, scrounger, lazy man  
 Door spittoon of a tuberculosis patient  
 Rotten paper of a latrine door.

The insults are intended to disqualify the partner as a singer ("you were not born to play the *viola* / You don't have rhythm nor metre nor a voice") and to equate him with an animal and repulsive things. Another common device is to raise doubts about the masculinity of one's opponent. A rude duel can also be made up entirely of threats of verbal beatings, and among *repentistas*, this is referred to as a "*pisa*" (stomp). Moving from the *martelo* to the *sextilha*, Sinésio and José Galdino ended the rude bout by reaffirming that they had only been playing, lightly criticizing the person who requested it. They entered and ended the confrontation as poets, as inventive and imaginative men, not as common men, who engage with violence and vulgar language. Naturally the *toada* in the *martelo agalopado* genre gave way to a melody appropriate to a *sextilha* (see Figure 3).

Sinésio:

*Já cantei na brincadeira*  
*O martelo malcriado*  
*O amigo Manoel Nério*  
*Eu já cantei seu mandado*  
*Maltratei o meu colega*  
*E também fui maltratado*

<sup>20</sup> To break someone's lantern is to take from them that which gives them light, or inspiration.

J. Galdino:

*Eu queria de outro lado  
Fazer interpretação  
Mas sou empregado do povo  
Atendi a sugestão  
Tantas coisas pra cantar  
Pediram malcriação.*

Sinésio:

I have already sung in playfulness  
The rude *martelo*  
My friend, Manoel Nério,  
I have sung your demand  
I abused my colleague  
And I was also abused

J. Galdino:

On the other hand I wanted  
To make an interpretation  
But I am an employee of the people  
I acknowledged the suggestion  
So many things to sing about  
They asked for rudeness

José Galdino

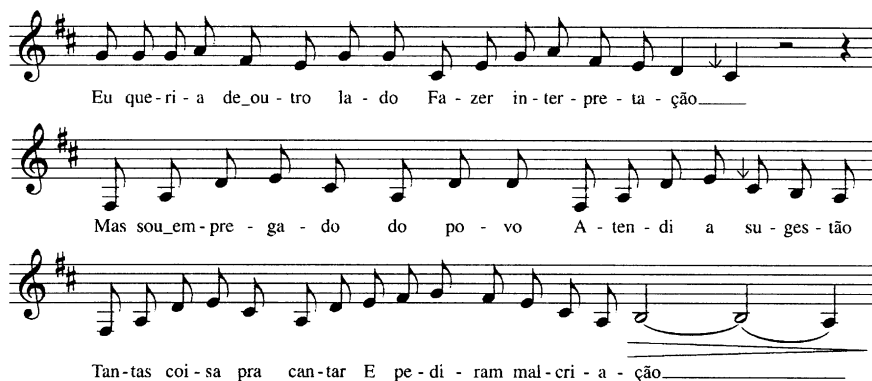


Figure 3 A toada for sextilhas, sung by Sinésio Pereira and José Galdino (Nazaré da Mata, Pernambuco, 1988)



Besides praises, eulogies and rude bouts, another style which is used in the *desafio* is “*sabedoria*” (knowledge), in which singers display their familiarity with a particular subject. This requires the performers to memorize information on a variety of topics, from biblical history to football. This genre also includes inventories of the names of rivers, oceans and bays, or even of pharaohs who built pyramids in ancient Egypt. Both the singers and their audiences place considerable value upon encyclopaedic knowledge. There are poetic forms for these displays, such as the “*quadrão perguntado*”, in which one singer asks a question which the other must answer. In this poetic genre the singers alternate within the verse, each improvising a line, and at the end of the verse they perform together.

- Antônio: *Me cite um livro bonito*  
 Geraldo: *A Bíblia uma página amiga*  
 Antônio: *Cite construção antiga*  
 Geraldo: *As pirâmides do Egito*  
 Antônio: *Diga quem foi Hiroito*  
 Geraldo: *Imperador do Japão*  
 Antônio: *Passou um mês no caixão*  
 Geraldo: *Quase não ia enterrado*  
 Ant. & Ger.: *Isto é quadrão perguntado*  
                   *Isto é responder quadrão.*  
 Antônio: Give me the name of a beautiful book  
 Geraldo: The Bible is a friendly page  
 Antônio: Give me an ancient construction  
 Geraldo: The pyramids of Egypt  
 Antônio: Tell me who was Hirohito  
 Geraldo: Emperor of Japan  
 Antônio: He spent a month in a coffin  
 Geraldo: They almost didn't bury him  
 Ant. & Ger.: This is a *quadrão perguntado*  
                   This is to answer a *quadrão*.

The value placed on knowledge and the disapproval of rude duelling can be understood in relation to the focus modern class societies place upon books and education. *Cantadores* and their audience identify the content of *sabedoria* with legitimate knowledge, while rude confrontations refer to a socially censured language of aggression and rusticity. In this sense the singers are not alienated from the hegemonic value system of the wider society, which establishes a hierarchy of linguistic styles and forms of expression. For an outside observer, *sabedoria* sometimes comes across as a bizarre display of bits of information, but this is probably the result of ethnocentrism (or class-centrism). Within *cantoria* communities, *sabedoria* is a source of respect and admiration.

The appreciation for displays of knowledge was highlighted in a renowned work of Brazilian sociology, where it is characterized as a trait of the traditional social mentality. According to Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1984:51), this trait is coherent with the model of the Brazilian patriarchal society, which created a massive divide between manual and intellectual labour, in which the value of intellectual labour lies in its “love of the sonority of a phrase, of spontaneous and abundant words, of ostentatious erudition, of rare expressions”. These values, common to slaveholders and their descendants, survived industrial modernization, and have diffused to the popular classes, such that today they are found amongst *repentistas* and their audiences. To some extent, it is not just *sabedoria*, but the whole of *repentista* culture, that displays an appreciation for oratory. Even rude bouts, which draw profusely on grandiose and grotesque imagery, have something of the oratorical flare displayed in confrontations that invoke historical facts and Greek mythology. The *repente* tradition is a rhetorical art, in which the singers’ ultimate aim is to affect the audience in a particular way: they strive to convince them of their superiority in relation to their partners, who are also interlocutors and opponents. When the partner’s turn comes round, he has an opportunity to respond, employing the same degree of eloquence as his challenger.

Judging from Luís da Câmara Cascudo’s description of *cantoria* performances (which, he claims, have not undergone significant alterations since 1875), the stylistic conventions to which I have referred are traditional:

In 1960 they do as my Father heard them in 1875, [with regard to] the series of phases of the performance. They sing the Praise. They duel, they praise themselves, attacking the opponent. They perform questions-and-answers, tests of capacity to evaluate merit. They narrate episodes. They ask for tips and demonstrate their gratitude for them, criticizing the parsimonious, those who feign ignorance or those who try to flee the obligation to contribute. The resources are different but the organizational principle is the same.

(Cascudo 1978:xlvi)

Toward the end of a *cantoria de pé-de-parede* performance, the *repentistas* begin to sing memorized songs, drawing from a repertoire of pieces composed by one of the two singers or by a colleague. Many songs propagated on the radio become fashionable and well-known to *cantoria* audiences, and they ask the *cantadores* to sing them. The audience slowly disperses, but the host’s family and a few others remain to talk to the singers and to watch them count the money collected in the tray. The money is divided evenly between the singers in front of everyone. Indeed, the hosts want to know how much money has been collected, and *repentistas* told me that the promoters, especially those of humble households, feel responsible for the remuneration of the singers, for they hope they will leave with a good impression of the family. Exhausted and often quite hoarse, the singers go to the nearest bus station or wait for the car

contracted to take them home to rest, or on to the next city or venue where another host awaits their arrival.

## Ethics in *cantoria* duelling

*Cantorias de pé-de-parede* are regulated by a code of ethics, which outlines how the two singers should relate to one another and to their audiences. Although these norms are not followed strictly, they inform the singers' practice and they reveal the most important aspects which the singers highlight in constructing images of themselves and those which their audiences see as constitutive of their reputation. In discussing these norms, *repentistas* typically invoke memories of past practice, contrasting it with current procedures. Therefore, to speak of ethics in *cantoria* duelling is to speak of the singers' collective memory, and of the ways in which they distinguish between the past and the present, demarcating the transformations that have led to the demise of the great confrontations of the past – true verbal duels in which personal honour was at stake – and to the establishment of the friendly tournaments of today.

Certain aspects of the collective memory of *cantoria* are evinced in the *folhetos de cordel* that “reproduce” *cantoria* duels. Some of these poems are presented as documents of *desafios* that occurred between two singers who actually existed (or who still exist), while others are explicitly framed as products of their authors' imaginations. Within this universe, however, the dividing line between historical account and invention is difficult to establish, because the work of these writers draws on memories of verses they have heard in *cantoria* performances, on well-known popular verses circulating in the oral domain and on verses obtained from other *folhetos*. Although they cannot be considered trustworthy accounts of actual *cantoria* performances, they are valuable sources for investigating the ways in which *cantoria* duelling has been represented within this cultural context. Read and memorized by *repentistas* and their audiences, *folhetos* constitute one of the spheres in which the image of the heroic duel is cultivated. From *folhetos* written at the beginning of the twentieth century through to recent publications, these pamphlets recreate the heroic images of past practice against which the code of ethics in contemporary *desafios* is defined.

## Ethics in contemporary performance

It is said that to begin a *cantoria* performance, or to “come out in the *baião*” (*sair no baião*), is the privilege of the more experienced singer, or of the better known of the two singers, since it is thought that the one who sings the first *sextilha* has a slight advantage over the other, in that he can choose how the praise is initiated:

The partner has the advantage because he comes out in the *baião*. For the second *baião*, the [other] partner has the right [to begin]. Now he will come out in his *toada*. It will also be his subject; he will choose the subject.

(João Bandeira, interview 23 November 1988)

It is also said that, in a duo that is used to singing together, the two decide who will begin and which *toada* will be used. When no prior negotiation has taken place, each singer strives to be courteous, giving way to his partner.

Since both singers use the same *toada* in their exchanges, it is considered a courtesy for the partner to pluck out the melody on the *viola* for the other singer. An entirely unknown *toada*, or one which is too “high” (in pitch), could compromise one’s partner’s performance. To sing the same *toada* does not mean that singers must reproduce “note-for-note” what their partners have sung, since variations are common. But because the singers strive to maintain both poetic and musical cohesion, complications could arise if one of the singers were to employ an unusual *toada* that is unfamiliar to his partner. Particularly high melodies cause considerable anxiety amongst singers: they increase their vocal strain and the singers risk “failure” (*fracasso*) during performance if they are forced to sing far above the register of their voices. Furthermore, over time high-pitched *toadas* can cause irreparable damage to the vocal chords. As one singer put it, “a *toada* can be a weapon.” Thus, the ideal of good conduct in the *desafio* involves the totality of the performance, including its musical dimensions.

Singers worry about the possibility of losing their voices, and they discuss cases of aphonia and other vocal chord problems that have affected *repentistas*.<sup>21</sup> I was told that one singer had died because of a high-pitched *toada*, and this was invoked as proof of the dangers such *toadas* can cause members of their profession. Singers who lose their voices become unable to continue performing. While they can then engage in the production of *folhetos de cordel*, they must also live with the stigma of being merely “table poets” (*poetas de bancada*). In other words, being a poet-singer is inextricably linked to oral performance. Furthermore, a singer does not recite his verses; he sings them. In this cultural universe, the boundary between song and recitation is defined through a distinction between “*cantoria*” and “*glosia*”, which refers to improvised spoken poetry. Just as *cantadores-repentistas* distinguish themselves from “table poets”, they also distinguish themselves from “*glosadores*”, poets who engage in the recitation of poetry without the use of musical instruments. It is said that recitation has fallen into disuse, and it probably was never integrated into a formalized performance setting comparable to *cantorias-de-pé-de-parede*. It is rather unlikely that *glosadores* could have entertained an audience for a whole night, as *cantadores* are able to

<sup>21</sup> One of the most well-known examples is that of the singer José Alves Sobrinho. After losing his voice he became a researcher of *cantoria*, and together with Átila de Almeida, he published a bio-bibliographic dictionary of popular poets (Almeida and Sobrinho 1990).

do.<sup>22</sup> It is, therefore, natural that *toadas* are also understood in terms of the ethics of *cantoria*.

Another norm in *cantoria* requires singers to maintain a certain thematic and stylistic coherence in their performances. When the subject proposed by one of the singers is unknown to the other, he can keep to the theme by paraphrasing what his partner has already said, thus giving the other singer an opportunity to display his knowledge. This practice is referred to as “*fazer mesa*” (lit., to set the table). To “set the table” is to allow one’s partner to expand on themes in which he is proficient, in the expectation that such an opportunity will be reciprocated. In rude confrontations, the singers avoid insults and insinuations that could actually offend or humiliate their partners. Their weak points, if known, are left to one side in the *desafio*, so that the confrontation can be instituted as a battle between poets, without leaving resentments for either singer.

The principle norm in *repentista* practice is the condemnation of the excessive use of previously prepared verses, the so-called “*decoro*” (memorized) or “*balaio*”. A *balaio* is a receptacle for transporting the harvest, but metaphorically, it means ready-made verses, ones that have been “put away”. To hinder the use of memorized verses and guarantee the authenticity of the improvisations, singers can be called upon to make the first line of their verse rhyme with the last line of their partner’s improvisation; this practice is called “*pegar na deixa*” (lit., take from what’s left). A *balaio* is a verse or a certain number of lines within a verse which have been carefully elaborated with the help of books and dictionaries, and they fit perfectly within the formal requirements of particular verse forms. Singers claim that they can instantly recognize a *balaio*; if they hear one, they let their partner know it, by telling him “to take from what’s left”. Ideally, everything a singer does in the performance setting is improvised. There is, however, some degree of tolerance for the *balaio*, even though it is not possible to say at what point its use is considered excessive. Two singers who sing together regularly accept the use of prepared verses. The role of the norm, therefore, is to protect singers against its treacherous use as a weapon to perplex the opponent.

All of the norms that are explicitly articulated within *cantoria* are designed to guarantee parity, fair play and courtesy amongst the singers; they create an ideal representation of *cantoria* as a confrontation between poet-partners who stand as opponents within the performance arena. As we have seen, the performance establishes the fictitious plane of rude confrontations, permitting the singers to present themselves to the audience as targets of aggression and ridicule. The norms are meant to eliminate the factors which might advantage one singer over the other. Thus, both singers should employ the same *toada*, as this helps maintain the equality amongst them. The establishment of parity

22 This is substantiated by the *folhetos* that are generally referred to as “discussions” (*discussões*) rather than *pelejas*, which have two glosadores as protagonists. They come upon one another in a chance encounter in a bar, a railway station or in the street; they are not presented as poets who have been invited or contracted to perform in a closed space.

amongst the singers does not abolish real differences between them, such as preferences for certain styles, reputations in certain regions, the number of trophies received and so on. But the code of ethics strives to minimize the effects of these differences within any given performance context. This is especially evident in the way the money on the tray is divided between them at the end of a performance: both singers receive exactly the same amount. A singer should not mistreat a colleague who is clearly weaker than himself – a beginner, for example – but singers are expected to deploy all their potential as *repentistas* with partners who are as competent as themselves.

These norms are part of the contemporary professional ethics of *cantoria*, but singers claim that they have not always been operative. Today, performances are structured as “friendly *cantorias*”, which involve two singers who are also allies in the production of the improvisations; but this scenario is contrasted with the past, in which it is said that *desafios* took place between two adversaries intent on establishing a clear winner. The singers’ memory of these heroic times and their representation in *folhetos de cordel* present a very different image of the *desafio* from that enacted in today’s friendly duels. At that time, singers did not perform with a partner, but against an opponent, and the dignity and reputation of each contestant was put on the line with each performance. It has not been possible to determine exactly when the friendly duels became the norm, just as one cannot precisely situate the demise of the heroic times. But there is no doubt that current accounts of past duels are part of the shared memory of the singers. This collective memory has been conditioned by contemporary preoccupations and it is re-elaborated each time the theme is raised. It is as a constructed past in the oral tradition of the *repentistas* that I deal with collective memory, and I refer to it as the heroic past of *cantoria*.

## Collective memory of the heroic times and its representation in *folhetos de cordel*

Contemporary singers claim that *desafios* in the past could last for several days, and if the promoters did not intervene, they could come to a head. In extreme cases, they erupted in physical violence; having begun as confrontations between poets, they ended in fights between common men. Even when a *desafio* did not reach the point in which the verbal confrontation turned into fist-fighting, at the end one singer always emerged victorious; he received all the money collected in the tray and his reputation was confirmed and enhanced, with one more exploit reaching the oral domain.

It is also said that there were no regular partnerships amongst *cantadores*: the singers confronted whoever the promoters put at their side. *Cantorias* were organized as bouts in which the two poets measured their strength against one another. Some *cantadores* were “owners” (*donos*) of particular areas, and they defeated any outsiders who happened to venture into their territory. If someone invited an outsider, generally a famous one, the encounter had a strongly competitive character. Cascudo (1984:167), who had the opportunity to attend

*cantorias* at the beginning of the twentieth century, refers to poets who dominated certain territories, and he also writes of the custom in which the loser deposited his *viola* upside-down in front of the winner, confirming that there was an unfavourable outcome for one of the singers. In these bouts, there was not a preoccupation with establishing symmetry between the opponents.

The practice of singing in duos continuously with a colleague is related to the demise of the decisive duels. With a partner, work opportunities and rewards are divided evenly. By ruining one's partner's reputation, one's own popularity also suffers. One accepts a "stomp", in which one singer gets the better of the other, in good sportsmanship, since the situation will be inverted further on. The audience tries to separate regular duos which they have heard together many times, but if this happens, the same professional behaviour is maintained with any other singer.

According to the singers, the introduction of a code of ethics increased their social status, which was tarnished by the ambiguities associated with their condition as nomadic poets.<sup>23</sup> Singers have been viewed as vagabonds without a proper trade, as drunkards and as seducers of respectable women. Accounts of living singers tell of the resistance within their families toward their desire to become nomadic poets, because of the bad reputation attached to the profession. In some places singers received hostile receptions; for many people the image of an outsider carrying a *viola* suggested a person who refused routine work and led a life without house or home. It is not surprising, therefore, that *cantadores* try to keep away from markets and public plazas, since these are places in which poetry and begging can become easily confused with one another. Against the backdrop of this prevalent stereotypical image, *repentistas* invoke examples of morally sound professionals, who fulfil their duties as respectable heads-of-household and whose drinking habits do not exceed acceptable socially established limits.

Although contemporary singers applaud the changes that have taken place within the tradition, they affirm their links to a vast gallery of poets whose names have been preserved in collective memory. Amongst the most important are Inácio da Catingueira and Romano da Mãe d'Água (Francisco Romano Caluête, 1840-91), who allegedly sang together in 1874 in Patos, Paraíba. Little is known about Inácio, not even the dates of his birth and death; what is known about him derives from accounts of those who knew him and heard him sing. It is said that he played the tambourine (*pandeiro*) (see Lessa 1982), an instrument which does not have the same prestige as the *viola*. This information has been put to verse in *folhetos de cordel* that claim to reproduce the confrontation of

23 It is known that at least in western societies itinerancy has affected the status of the musician. The wandering minstrels of Europe experienced differing degrees of social condemnation and official repression, after flourishing in the Middle Ages. They became victims of dishonour and were eventually suppressed through restrictive laws which hindered their movements. When secular musicians began to organize guilds, wandering musicians were lowered to inferior social categories. In Elizabethan England, for example, an act of parliament equated wandering minstrels with vagabonds and thieves (Chanan 1994:128).

1874.<sup>24</sup> In the version provided by Leandro Gomes de Barros, “Romano e Inácio da Catingueira”, of 1910, Inácio claims he is a slave, whose owner did not force him to undertake manual labour and approved of his life as a singer.<sup>25</sup>

If one disregards the factual dimension of the *desafio* which allegedly took place in 1874, thus prior to the abolition of slavery (1888), one can treat the poems which recreate it as versions of a myth, in which the *desafio* originated as an encounter between poets. Even if the most impressive verses of this confrontation may have been retained in the memory of those who witnessed it, the written versions are the work of poets who create in the genre called “*peleja*” (battle), whether the characters in the narrations are fictitious or historical figures. This is a specific genre within *literatura de cordel*, which has its own compositional rules; it is not, therefore, simply a register of the ephemeral verses sung in a specific situation. Given the specificities of this cultural context, in which *cantoria* and *folhetos de cordel* are the two sides of a single coin, one can legitimately move between sung and written examples in the analysis of collective memory. The very existence of the *folhetos* that recreate sung encounters are a testament to the relationship between the two media, even though the term *peleja* – the most common word used in the titles of *folhetos* – also ensures that a distinction is maintained between them.

It is not because this confrontation tells of facts that occurred in some immemorial past, giving rise to a contemporary custom or institution, that it can be treated as an origin myth, but rather because it documents events that “also form a permanent structure” which “relates simultaneously to the past, the present and the future” (Lévi-Strauss 1975:241). Like a myth, the confrontation between Inácio and Romano offers a logical instrument through which the asymmetries between the opponents can be eliminated, transforming them into an opposition between poets: “The objective of myth is to provide a logical model to resolve a contradiction (an unrealizable feat, when the contradiction is real)” (Lévi-Strauss 1975:264). As in the study of myth, versions of the encounter between Inácio and Romano should be seen in relation to one another and in conjunction with other *pelejas*.

According to the version provided by Leandro Gomes de Barros (in Lessa 1982; Barros 1977), an illiterate slave (Inácio) challenges a singer of some instruction who was himself a slave-owner (Romano). The social and ethnic differences between them, as well as the differences in their poetic abilities, constitute the theme of the duel. The opponents are asymmetrically positioned in relation to one another: one is black, the other white (or *mestiço*); one is a slave and the other a free man; one has no possessions and the other owns a work-force. As Orígenes Lessa has observed: “He [Romano] wants to clearly mark the profound differences that separate the two” (1982:12). In some way,

24 Átila Almeida and José Alves Sobrinho believe that the confrontation between Inácio and Romano never took place, suspicious – as they are – of the documentation provided by the collectors Leonardo Mota and Padre Manuel Otaviano (Almeida and Sobrinho 1990).

25 In an anonymous and undated version called “*Peleja de Romano*” (see Lessa 1982:56), Inácio says: “in the house of my master / I buy, sell and go to market”.



however, Inácio resolves each of the asymmetries. In response to Romano's arrogance in flaunting his status as a free man while underlining the blackness of his opponent as a means of inferiorizing him, Inácio reminds Romano that he too has black physical traits:

*Para vossa mercê ser branco,  
Seu couro é muito queimado,  
Seu nariz achatou muito.  
Seu cabelo é agastado.*

For you to be white,  
Your leather is too burnt,  
Your nose too flat,  
Your hair is stiff

(in Lessa 1982:45)

Romano, therefore, is represented as a *mestiço*, thus neutralizing – or at least reducing – the racial difference between the two singers.<sup>26</sup> This motif reappears in other *pelejas*: a singer who has been attacked for his blackness responds to his aggressor by reminding him of the dark colour of *mestiços* and mulattoes. Romano highlights the social inferiority of the slave, to which Inácio responds by informing him that his owner lets him sing; in other words, because he is not compelled to engage in manual labour, he is not treated as a slave. Inácio neutralizes the distance between the two by thus invoking the practice of verse improvisation as “proof” of his freedom. When Romano states that he has a slave whom he compels to work, Inácio ridicules this ostentatious remark by saying that his owner does not have only one, but 20, slaves. The message here is that the distance between a slave belonging to a rich man and a poor slave-owner is not that great. Romano then challenges his opponent to speak of “geography”, but Inácio admits that he cannot compete in this sphere: “Geography is difficult / I am very far from it”. In the three versions of this encounter contained in Orígenes Lessa's collection, this is where the *desafio* ends. At this point Inácio recognizes that he cannot sing about “science”; his lack of education does not allow him to proceed with the *desafio*. In the version by Francisco das Chagas Batista, Inácio presents himself as illiterate:

*Eu bem sei que “seu” Romano  
Sabe ler, sabe contar,  
E não é como o Inácio  
Que não sabe assoletrar:  
Mas nasceu com dote e sina  
No mundo para cantar*

26 Ideas about racial hybridity and the specificities of the *mestiço* type, as they developed in the thinking of Brazilian intellectuals since the late nineteenth century, placed a particular slant upon the European racial theories in vogue in Brazil. Hybridity came to be seen as a “solution” to the problem of the biological and cultural legacy of blacks and Amerindians, initially proposed as a strategy for “whitening” the country (see Matos 1994, Schwarcz 1993, Vianna 1995). Leandro's folheto of 1910 does not present Romano as a “whitened” black, but as a man who is as racially “impure” as Inácio.

I know that Mr Romano  
 Can read and count,  
 And is not like Inácio  
 Who doesn't know how to spell:  
 But was born with talent and destiny  
 To sing in the world

(in Lessa 1982:47)

The *peleja* ends with the following verse by Romano:

*Inácio, eu reconheço  
 Que és bom martelador,  
 Mas, agora que apanhastes,  
 Dirás que tenho valor:  
 Porque eu em cantoria  
 Não temo nem a doutor*

Inácio, I recognize  
 That you are a good singer of *martelos*,  
 But now that you have been beaten,  
 You will say that I have value:  
 Because in *cantoria*,  
 I am not afraid even of the highly educated

(in Lessa 1982:53)

Even though Inácio has to suspend the duel because he is no longer able to compete with Romano, he is the one who grows morally as the *folheto* progresses, overcoming various inferior attributes through his abilities as a *repentista*.<sup>27</sup>

The confrontation between Inácio and Romano can be viewed as a myth of the origin of the *desafio* as an encounter between poets in so far as it shows how the asymmetries between the opponents are neutralized through the power of sung improvisation. The opposition between the black man and the white man is mediated by the figure of the mulatto, who is partly white and partly black; the opposition between the slave and the free man is mediated by the figure of the slave who is free to come and go at will and by the contrast between powerful and poor slave-owners. The final asymmetry, that between the singer of "talent and destiny" and the singer of "science", is not resolved, and the duel comes to an end. Both of these predications are constitutive of the singers' identity today, as I noted in the discussion of *cantoria* styles: in the *sabedoria*, singers display their scientific knowledge, while in rude bouts what matters is inspiration. As long as Inácio's poetic verve is capable of producing mediations, the confrontation can continue. The final difference between the two contenders defines the complementary attributes of the *repentista*. Even though society inferiorizes the illiterate in relation to the literate, the practice of *cantoria* is not

<sup>27</sup> There is a statue of Inácio da Catingueira in the public plaza of a town in Paraíba. This monument is a testimony of his importance to the local society.

restricted to the educated. Thus, what this *peleja* established is that symmetry amongst the competitors is a precondition for a *desafio* to proceed. The code of ethics of the *desafio* is also its logic, in so far as it maintains the equilibrium between the opponents.

The *peleja* between Inácio and Romano can also be viewed as a peculiar development of the verbal interactions in which the ready-made phrase – “Do you know who you are speaking to?” – is used, which Roberto DaMatta (1983) analysed in relation to his representation of the Brazilian dilemma. According to DaMatta, Brazilian society oscillates between juridical universalism, in which all citizens are equal before the law, and the particularism of relations between hierarchically situated “social persons”.<sup>28</sup> The question – “Do you know who you are speaking to?” – arises in confrontational situations in which one of the interlocutors feels compelled to defend the dignity of his or her social position. In such situations the anonymity of citizenship is renounced in an attempt to reinstate the hierarchical differences thought to be threatened. But this phrase is used to silence one of the interlocutors and to somehow alter his or her behaviour, while in the *desafio* each intimidation is meant to elicit an immediate response. As DaMatta notes, it is not considered socially elegant to invoke this question, but nonetheless social practice stimulates its use (1983:143). The game of creating and neutralizing asymmetries in the *desafio*, however, opposes the logic of interactions based on the “Do-you-know-who-you-are-speaking-to?” interjection; in a *desafio* each interlocutor can give as good as he gets and the exchanges occur within the social space of a performance in which they don’t generate resentment, but rather elicit the admiration of the audience and provide them with entertainment. While verbal interactions mediated by the differentiating question aim to redefine encounters between anonymous individuals, who are equal before the law, as relationships between clearly positioned social persons, the objective of the heroic *pelejas* and the ethics of the *desafio* is to mark the transition of hierarchically positioned social persons into poets with unique and special abilities.

The *folhetos* that recreate *pelejas* cultivate heroic images of the *desafio*, and these images have been absorbed into the collective memory of the singers. In the literary model *cantoria* is represented as a duel in which the singers risk their honour, as the author of the following verse announces:

*Portanto vamos saber  
quem vai obter a glória  
quem vai sair na carreira  
quem vai contar a história  
quem é bamba no repente  
e quem vai ganhar a vitória.*

28 Although the confrontation between Inácio and Romano took place in an historical period in which the juridical equality of individuals did not exist in Brazil, since it occurred prior to the abolition of slavery, I am emphasizing the contemporary interest in this *desafio*, which is frequently remembered by the singers.

Therefore let us know  
 who will get the glory  
 who will run away  
 who will tell the story  
 who is agile in improvisation  
 and who will win the victory.<sup>29</sup>

Since the outcome is uncertain, the singers must be characterized as symmetrical opponents, and this is the starting-point of many *folhetos* that document fictitious confrontations, such as those between a Catholic and a Protestant, between a Protestant (*crente*) and a drunkard (*cachaceiro*), between an urban dweller (*pracião*) and a rural bumpkin (*matuto*), between a priest and an atheist, between a north-eastern migrant (*pau-de-arara*) and a person from Rio de Janeiro (*carioca*). The characters in these discussions (*discussões*) do not have names; they are not individuals, but social types. In these cases differences of religion, worldview, customs and values do not constitute asymmetries. Even poems that narrate confrontations between a Protestant and a drunkard do not necessarily have moral objectives, and they are not premised on the principle that a man who drinks is inferior to one of austere customs.<sup>30</sup> In effect, these characters stand in opposition to one another – and it is upon this opposition that the confrontation is based – but, in principle, neither contender has an advantage over the other within the context of the *desafio*.

But there are also numerous *folhetos* in which the opponents are in an asymmetrical relation to one another, as in the confrontation between Romano and Inácio. This is the case in the *peleja* between Cego Aderaldo (a real singer) and Zé Pretinho do Tucum, a character created by an author of *pelejas* known as Firmino Teixeira do Amaral (Cego Aderaldo's cousin). The head of the household in which the *desafio* takes place gives Zé Pretinho special attention, offering him a hardy dinner and a place on the sofa near the spittoon. Cego Aderaldo is given only coffee and biscuits, and his seat is an old, rickety chair. Zé Pretinho removes his highly decorated *viola* from a new sack, impressing the audience, while Cego Aderaldo humbly get out his old fiddle (*rabeca*). These images indicate that one singer is favoured over the other, providing a prelude to Zé Pretinho's defeat, and he is booed by the audience at the end. Social privileges – such as the preferential treatment given to one of the singers – and material wealth – symbolized by the *viola* decorated with ribbons and kept in a new sack – are insufficient to compete against an inspired *repentista*.

29 Verse from “Peleja de José Costa com Severino Paulino”, by José Costa Leite (n.d.:1).

30 In “Discussão do chachaceiro e o crente”, by Apolônio Alves dos Santos (n.d.:8), the narrator says that a drunkard enters a Protestant temple and begins to misbehave. The pastor intervenes and both argue until the police arrive and take them both to jail. The final verse (with an acrostic of the author's name) is as follows: “*Aqui findei de versar / A famosa discussão / Levando um livrinho deste / Verão quem teve razão / É claro que o protestante / Saiu perdendo a questão*” (Here I finished versifying / The famous discussion / Buying a little book like this / You will see who was right / It is obvious that the Protestant / Lost the issue).

The asymmetry amongst the contestants is amplified by Aderaldo's visual deficiency, which is treated as an attribute that affects his moral integrity as a person.<sup>31</sup> No scruples or compassion hinder Zé Pretinho, who declares:

*Cego eu sei que tu és  
da raça de sapo sunga  
cego não adora Deus  
o deus de cego é calunga  
onde os homens conversam  
o cego chega e resmunga*

I know that you are blind  
of the race of the sunga frog  
blind men do not adore God  
the god of the blind is "calunga"<sup>32</sup>  
where men converse  
the blind person arrives and complains

Aderaldo responds with a racist insult meant to reinstate the balance of power: "*Esse negro foi escravo*" (this black man was a slave).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, any asymmetrical duo can feature in a literary *desafio* that reproduces the mythological model: the asymmetries are presented and then transcended through the improvisations. In performance, asymmetries are transcended through the ethics of the *desafio*, but some forms of asymmetry are problematic. According to one *repentista* I interviewed, "women, children and the blind" are always complicated opponents, because they always have the sympathy of the audience on their side. When singing with one of them, he claimed, it is necessary to temper one's verve, in the same way as one must be charitable with a beginner. The ethical code condemns demonstrations of strength toward weak opponents. Since age, gender and physical condition are also factors that produce hierarchies – besides those delineated by social class, skin colour and education, which emerge in the confrontation between Inácio and Romano – children, women and the blind are weak in relation to adult men. Their weakness, according to *repentistas*, gives them the advantage, because the audience is disrespectful of a strong opponent who defeats a weak one. In

31 Documentation since the late nineteenth century attest to the existence of many blind singers in the north-east.

32 The *calunga* is a doll that is carried in the carnivalesque parades of the Afro-Brazilian maracatu, and it is probably linked to ancestor cults. The term, therefore, invokes (pagan) Afro-Brazilian religiosity.

33 In other *pelejas* by Firmino Teixeira do Amaral (1961:23), Cego Aderaldo confronts Jaca Mole, who is also insulted for being black: "*vale mais cego com honra / do que um preto ladrão / eu sou cego mas sou gente / preto não tem distinção*" (A blind man with honour is worth more / than a thieving black man / I am blind but I am human / blacks have no distinction). I found other *pelejas* between a blind man and a black man in which these features are symmetrically highlighted in the insults. See "Peleja de José Félix com Mangabeira" (1961).

these circumstances, symmetry cannot be achieved, but it creates a problem which is both ethical and logical.

This impasse has received literary treatment by various poets who have written *pelejas* involving singers of different genders (see Fig 4). According to José Gustavo, *cantorias* between men and women create dilemmas: there is no advantage in being victorious against an adversary of the “fragile sex”, nor is it gentlemanly to “give them a stomp” (*dar-lhe uma pisa*); on the other hand, it is humiliating to be defeated by a woman:

*Disse eu: Dr. a mulher  
nos vence com sua imagem  
e mesmo cantar com moça  
precisa muita coragem  
que se apanhar faz vergonha  
e se der não fez vantagem.*

I said: Dr., the woman  
beats us with her image  
and even to sing with a young woman  
one needs a lot of courage  
because if you lose it's embarrassing  
and if you win there's no advantage.<sup>34</sup>

This does not mean that the ethics of the *desafio* are impotent in such problematic situations. Most singers are men, but there are a few women, some of them quite famous, who perform regularly alongside men; and if they sing it is because they are able to establish the balance of power necessary to a successful performance. I do not know of any children performing *cantoria* professionally. Singers generally begin performing from an early age at informal occasions, and it is only in their youth that they embark upon professional careers. Some poets who write *pelejas* have tested formulas to transcend the problem of the inherent asymmetry in confrontations between men and women. One way of achieving the balance is to present the female singer as extraordinarily talented, that is, as a poet above all else. This is the case of the “Peleja de Caetano Cosme da Silva com Maria Lavandeira”, by Caetano Cosme (editor João José da Silva), in which Maria Lavadeira says:

*Juro não ficar empate  
Essa nossa cantoria  
um de nós será vencido  
antes do amanhecer do dia  
porque cantoria empate  
É ponto de covardia*

I promise there will be no tie  
In our *cantoria*

<sup>34</sup> Verse from “Peleja de José Gustavo com Maria Rouxinha da Bahia,” by José Gustavo (1959:4).

one of us will be beaten  
before the sun rises  
because a tied *cantoria*  
Is a sign of cowardice.

(p.4)

Taking on the identity of a *repentista*, it is Lavandeira herself who wants the fact that she is a woman to be ignored. At the end of the *peleja* the readers are told that the confrontation did end in a tie, and the two singers divided the donations evenly. Another alternative is to present the woman as a terrible singer, thus declaring the man the victor.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 4 Poster of the Festival of North-eastern Cantadores de Viola (1983), illustrated with a wood-cut by Dila, representing two singers, a man and a woman. Photo: Décio Daniel.

<sup>35</sup> See also "Peleja de Severino Borges com Patativa do Norte" by Severino Borges (n.d.:16), which ends like this: "Nisso a donzela parou / e ao povo esclareceu / – por hoje eu não canto mais / pois nunca me sucedeu / eu encontrar um poeta / pra cantar mais do que eu" (With this the damsel stopped / and explained to the people / today I sing no more / for it has never happened to me / to encounter a poet / who can sing more than I).

## Conclusion

As one can see from the examples derived from the literary universe, the real advantages that the rich have over the poor, whites over blacks, the educated over the illiterate, men over women can be reversed through talent in the art of verse improvisation. This is what defines the *repentista* and this identity overrides real differences between individuals. Social position, skin colour and even education are not decisive in a verbal duel, even though they certainly are outside the pages of the pamphlets. In contemporary *desafios* it is not common for two individuals so radically separated as a slave and a free man to be placed side by side. The singers generally come from the popular classes, such as sons of rural agriculturalists and of low-income urban labourers. Some proudly hold university degrees, but most have spent little time in school. Other differences, such as religion, skin colour, gender, age, experience achieved through travel and relational networks, are not obstacles to performance and the ethics of the *desafio* provides a means of dealing with them.

It would be imprudent, however, to state that the readers and listeners of *pelejas* and *cantoria* – who cannot be reduced to a homogeneous social category, especially if one considers the temporal dimensions of these traditions – cultivate a utopia of social equality capable of abolishing class distinctions and of promoting the co-existence of groups of different ethnic origins and religious options. As in the moral code of the wider society, the ethics of the *desafio* are also premised on the distinctly hierarchical precept of protecting the weak from the strong, and this is very clearly explicated in accounts about the difficulties of singing with the blind, with children and with women – thus, of treating social persons as poets. When Inácio invokes the image of his (comparatively) “rich” owner, he invokes an identification with someone who is hierarchically superior to himself, which is also characteristic of vertical ethics (DaMatta 1983). Furthermore, it is worth remembering that *folhetos* of *pelejas* do not only recreate heroic confrontations, since there are also literary representations of friendly *cantorias*. The relations between life and literature are multiple and complex, even though it is possible to exercise the imagination in *folhetos* without the same constraints that social relations entail.<sup>36</sup>

An appreciation of *cantoria* cannot be explained in simple terms, but the aspects of the tradition identified here allow for a better understanding of what it means to the singers and their audiences. The *desafio* has sustained its popularity and vitality by promoting a horizontal ethic among individuals whose weapon is their poetic talent, and the singers strive not to contaminate their identity as poets with the social identities they carry outside the performance arena. *Cantoria* creates a social space for verbal confrontations between individuals who temporarily suspend the attributes of their social

<sup>36</sup> The liberty of the poet is greater when he writes about confrontations between fictitious singers and characters he has invented. There are norms for the publication of *folhetos* that “reproduce” *cantorias* between real poets, particularly when they are still alive. One should request their permission to transform them into characters and the authorization can result in a *peleja* in which the development and outcome does not affect anyone’s reputation.



persons to engage in a partnership of equals. Brazilian society hierarchically orders the differences that constitute its groups on various planes – economic, racial, cultural, religious, gender and age – but in the modern juridical plane and in the ideology that supports it, all citizens are considered equal before the law. As a sung performance and as a literary representation, the *desafio* envisages a number of logical and ethical ways of treating hierarchy and equality. Clearly this does not exhaust the scope for investigation. Denser explanations might also consider the aesthetic and ludic aspects of the tradition, which make *cantoria* irreplaceable for some and a curiosity for others.

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## Note on the author

Elizabeth Travassos holds a doctoral degree in Social Anthropology from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and she is a lecturer in Folklore and Ethnomusicology at the University of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). She is the author of *Os mandarins milagrosos. Arte e etnografia em Mário de Andrade e Bela Bartok* (1997) and *Modernismo e música brasileira* (1999) and she edited an issue of *Revista do patrimônio* (1999) on popular art and culture. She has also published numerous articles on the music of Brazilian indigenous peoples and on Brazilian popular culture. E-mail address: [etravas@cybernet.com.br](mailto:etravas@cybernet.com.br).