

An Interactive Animation of Maracatu de Baque Solto Collective Choreographies (Brazil)

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INTRODUCTION: MARACATU PERFORMANCES

Maracatu de baque solto (“free-rhythm” Maracatu), also known as *Maracatu rural* (“rural” Maracatu), constitutes a public performance of sounds, music, dance, oral poetry, decorated objects and costumes that takes place in the *Zona da Mata Norte* region of Pernambuco (Northeast Brazil) during the Carnival period. Maracatu groups[2] may differ in size (20 to 200 performers) but they always feature the same key components: 1 or 2 poet-singers (*mestres de apito*), 5 percussionists (*terno*), a small brass section (2 to 5 trumpets and trombones, called *músicos*), and several costumed dancers, representing various characters linked to the indigenous and Afro-Brazilian history and culture (*rei*, *rainha*, *caboclos de lança*, *baianas*, *dama do paço*, and others). Low-income rural workers, mainly sugarcane cutters, join these groups in keeping with their family ties, sense of belonging to their neighborhood, and/or out of a spiritual duty as Maracatu closely intertwines with the worship practices of the *Jurema* religion (see Guimarães de Salles, 2010). Maracatu groups perform in different contexts and periods of the year: from September to February, they “rehearse” (*ensaíam*) next to their own headquarters (*sede*); during the three days of Carnival, they “present themselves” (*se apresentam*) in the neighborhood towns and, on Fat Tuesday, they compete in the official parade organized in Recife, the state capital. Whether the performances are all-night long as in the former case, or of a shorter duration (15 to 30 min) as in the latter two cases, they always take place in a public arena, usually in a square or on a straight road. In some cases, the group starts at one point of the city and ends in another one, following a predetermined itinerary that passes by symbolic locations (e. g., the house of a deceased group member or that of a politician sponsoring the group).

THE *MANOBRAS*: COLLECTIVE MOVEMENTS IN SPACE

A Maracatu performance involves collective movements in space, called *manobras* (lit. “maneuvers”, e.g., evolutions or choreographies), during which each group member occupies a precise position in relation to the others, and moves according to a common plan. Some *manobras* have precise symbolic meanings or functions: for instance, when the Maracatu traverses any crossroad, the group always turns in each direction (left and right, back and forth) before continuing on its path with these moves designed to “undo” (*desfechar*) witchcraft. This *manobra*, and a few others, are identical for all groups while others stem from the creativity of each group’s lead dancer (*mestre caboclo*). In both cases, these collective movements are quite challenging, especially for large groups as performers do not retain their relative positions but rather continually change them while moving through space. For instance, two or four lines of male dancers (*caboclos de lança*), always positioned on the external flanks of the group, cross over whenever this changes direction. In another *manobra*, performers realize a spiral movement, called the *curupim*, revolving around the group’s central nucleus (*miolo*). Moreover, even while realizing collective maneuvers, each performer has also to focus on his/her own individual movements, intended as “dance” (*dança*).

According to the local discourse, individual and collective movements are supposed to “animate the puppet” (*animar o brinquedo*), that is, to bring life to a holistic entity endowed with a spiritual substance and magical attributes; and to “close the Maracatu” (*fechar o Maracatu*), meaning to protect the group from eventual spiritual and/or physical threats emanating from rival competitors. A Maracatu group may only effectively become “animated” and “locked” whenever its members are both moving correctly and ensuring

their collective movements take place “in consonance” (*consonância*), hence, with a high level of interpersonal coordination, mutual understanding, and proper behavior (see Acselrad, 2013). In the opposite case, negative entities, aroused by the envy (*inveja*) of rivals, may “dismantle” (*desmantelar*) the group, breaking it up and causing individual health problems and interpersonal conflicts (see Bonini Baraldi, 2021; 2022). Grasping the cultural and social meanings underlying a Maracatu performance therefore requires describing the *manobras* and understanding how these should be performed.

AN INTERACTIVE ANIMATION OF THE MARACATU *MANOBRAS*

Standard videos of Maracatu performances might provide a useful tool for describing and analyzing the collective *manobras*. However, given the high number of people involved and the complex movements carried out, these images prove difficult to obtain. During my field research, I was able to capture the *manobras* of the Maracatu group *Leão de Ouro de Condado* (“Golden Lion of Condado”) on many occasions, eventually choosing the highest filming position (e.g., the top floor of a nearby house) but I was never able to shoot footage including all of the performers. Thus, an alternative able to this limitation would involve depicting the collective movements in space by means of a computer animation in which the Maracatu characters are represented by simple icons that move bi-dimensionally (across the computer screen), hence, generating a bird’s-eye view of the *manobras*. Within the framework of a graduate dissertation project carried out at the Polytechnic of Porto School of Engineering, we set out to implement such a project.

The platform was designed in HTML 5 as this provides specific multimedia controls. The animations are run by javascript through recourse to d3.js and anime.js. Figure 1 illustrates the pipeline for developing the final solution. For each actor, an icon was designed to provide some feedback on their respective roles (Figure 2).

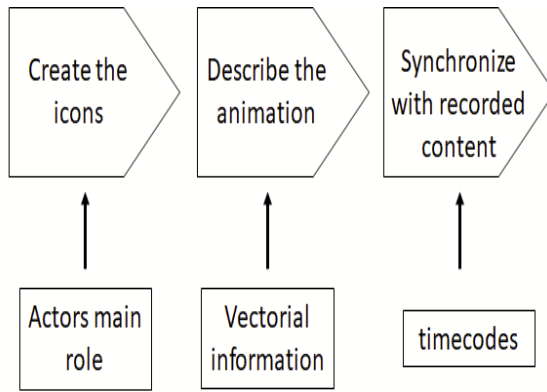


Fig. 1. Implementation pipeline.



Fig. 2. Icons representing each actor of the Maracatu group *Leão de Ouro de Condado*.

The application enables the reproduction of the actors and their movements in a two-dimensional format. To achieve this, each *manobra* is described as a vectorial representation of the actors’ positions and the speed of their movements. The videos obtained in the field served as the references for correctly programming the movements of participants. The final animation enables a perception of how a *manobra* unfolds in time. Figure 3 displays a sequence of frames extracted from two animations, each representing a different *manobra*: the circular *curupim* and the back and forth change in direction. These two *manobras* are the most commonly performed by the Maracatu group *Leão de Ouro*. A prototype version of both *manobras* has since been uploaded online (<https://maracatu.surge.sh/>).

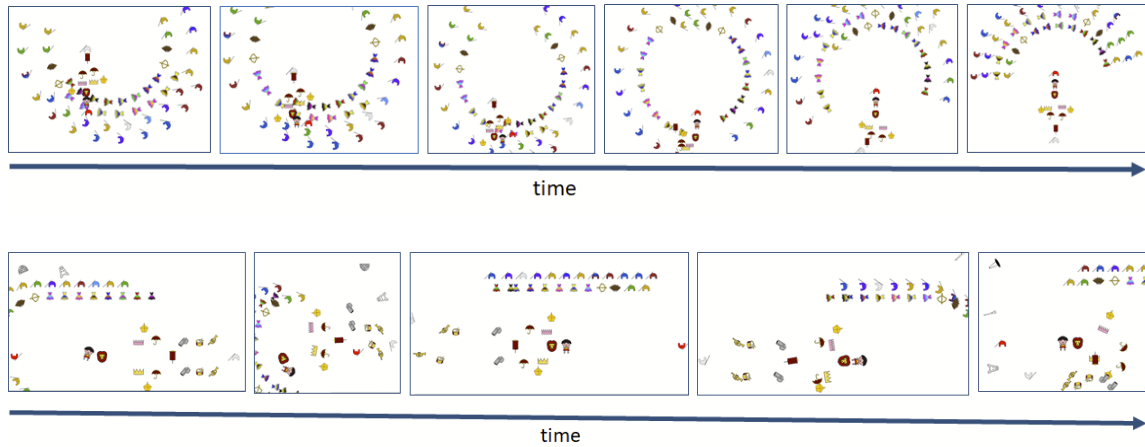


Fig. 3. Frames of the interactive animations of two different *manobras*.

To enable a still better understanding of the two *manobras*, the animation is synchronized with the audio and video captured in the field. Additionally, informative pop-ups about the characters provide basic insights in their roles (Figure 4).

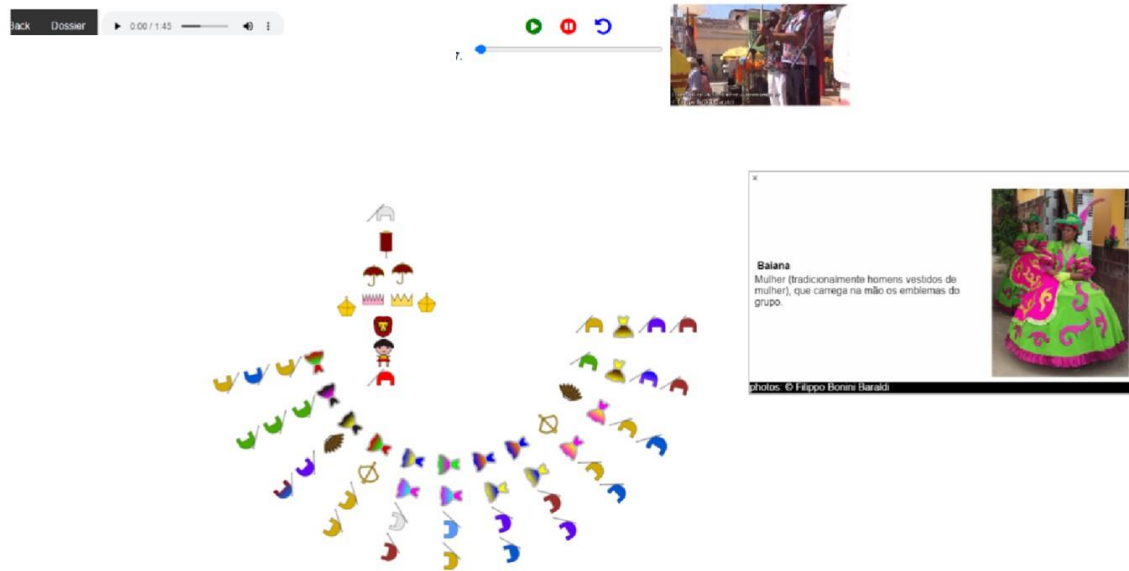


Fig. 4. Video captured in the field (up right) and corresponding animation. On the right, the informative pop-up window on one actor (*baiana*).

CONCLUSION

Interactive animations have proven worthwhile for describing various musical cultures worldwide, notably catering to non-specialist audiences. The French Society of Ethnomusicology website contains a section featuring several of such animations for screening (see <https://ethnomusicologie.fr/category/plateforme-multimedia/>).

The term “interactive” refers to how users are invited to play active roles, for instance by opening the pop-up windows, operating the multimedia controls or performing other similar actions. In the case of our project, the user is able to click on the icons and open pop-up windows with basic explanations of the different characters involved in Maracatu. Secondly, users can choose to observe the two animations at two

different speeds (standard and accelerated), which favors the understanding of Maracatu collective movements “in the blink of an eye”.

The term “animation” reflects how some musical and/or danced processes are made explicit through various visual and audio effects. A musical transcription in which the user can follow a cursor moving along with the notes being played accounts for a simple example of an interactive animation. More elaborate animations, such as the “digital gamelan” (<https://pad.philharmoniedeparis.fr/gamelan.aspx>), enable the user to follow and understand the researcher’s analyses of the rhythmical and melodic structure of a foreign musical culture (in this case, Balinese gamelan) in an intuitive and interactive approach. In our case, users are able to understand the functioning of Maracatu collective *manobras* simply by pressing the play button and observing the icons displayed on the screen.

Interactive animations may also prove useful as a means of supporting field research. Screening the animation with Maracatu performers stimulated a rich debate on just how the *manobras* should be performed, their symbolic meanings, the creative process behind them, etc. Ideally, such an animation would also serve as an inspiration for performers seeking to create new collective choreographies. However, the eventual limitations include the time-consuming aspect of programming such animations as well as the short lifespan of some coding languages.

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NOTES

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[2] In the *Zona da Mata Norte*, a region of 3,200 km² dominated by a sugarcane monoculture, there are currently around 130 active Maracatu groups.

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