

# Reflections on the *Popular* in the Context of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos

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**ABSTRACT – Reflections on the *Popular* in the Context of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos** – This article presents and discusses the notion of popular culture and theater based on the experience of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos (Aracaju/SE), a popular nucleus with a specific relationship with the academic space. The study is a partial result of a master's research and makes extensive use of literature review, primary sources, and interviews. Through these discussions, a critical view of popular theater is obtained, which can manifest itself in different places, modes, and contexts, deviating from a stereotyped and largely homogeneous view of these phenomena, resulting from literary production that approaches history from the perspective of lettered culture.

**Keywords:** Popular Culture. Popular Theater. Mamulengo. Theater from Nordeste. Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso.

**RÉSUMÉ – Réflexions sur le *Populaire* dans le Cadre du Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos** – Cet article présente et discute la notion de culture et de théâtre populaire à partir de l'expérience du Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos (Aracaju/SE), un noyau populaire ayant une relation spécifique avec l'espace académique. L'étude est le résultat partiel d'une recherche de maîtrise et fait largement appel à la revue de littérature, aux sources primaires et aux entretiens. À travers ces discussions, une vision critique du théâtre populaire peut être obtenue, qui peut se manifester dans différents lieux, modes et contextes, ce qui diffère d'une vision stéréotypée, largement homogène, de ces phénomènes, résultant d'une production littéraire qui aborde l'histoire du point de vue de la culture littéraire.

**Mots-clés:** Culture Populaire. Théâtre Populaire. Mamulengo. Théâtre du Nordeste. Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso.

**RESUMO – Reflexões sobre o *Popular* no Contexto do Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos** – Este artigo apresenta e discute a noção de cultura e de teatro populares com base na experiência do Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos (Aracaju/SE), núcleo popular com específica relação com o espaço acadêmico. O estudo é resultado parcial de pesquisa de mestrado e utiliza-se, em maior escala, de revisão bibliográfica, fontes primárias e entrevistas. Por meio das discussões, tem-se uma visão crítica acerca do teatro popular, que pode se manifestar em diferentes lugares, modos e contextos; o que destoa de uma visão estereotipada, largamente homogênea, acerca desses fenômenos, decorrente de uma produção literária que aborda a história sob a ótica da cultura letrada.

**Palavras-chave:** Cultura Popular. Teatro Popular. Mamulengo. Teatro do Nordeste. Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso.

In the city of Aracaju, capital of Sergipe, there is – among other popular groups and *folguedos* – the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos, with 45 years of uninterrupted history. Teacher and researcher Aglaé D'Ávila Fontes founded it in 1978. Since 1985, Mamulengo de Cheiroso has been directed by Mestre Augusto Barreto, and is currently also composed by Marlene Barreto, Artur Barreto, Pedro Freitas and Isaac Alves.



Figure 1 – Augusto Barreto, Artur Barreto and Maira. Spectacle *Talco no Salão*, by Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso, 2018, Aracaju/SE. Source: Photo by Janaína Vasconcelos (Group's Instagram page)<sup>1</sup>.

Aglaé D'Ávila Fontes was a professor in the Pedagogy course of the Departamento de Educação (DED)<sup>2</sup>, at the Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS), where she taught, among others, the discipline *Psychology of Adolescents*. In 1978, in the pedagogical process of this discipline, the teacher decided to work, based on popular culture, in the making of toys and dolls using organic materials as a pedagogical tool to assist in the classroom. The discipline resulted in mini spectacles, for which the students made the puppets and animated them on stage. The presentations were held at Escola Estadual Armindo Guaraná<sup>3</sup>, in the Rosa Elze neighborhood, in São Cristóvão/SE, and on the occasion, small workshops were also held with the students of the school. Once the discipline and the phase of presentations and workshops, which were part of the planned evaluation instruments, were concluded, there was a desire on the part of the university students to continue with that process, involving the scenic creation based on popular puppet theater in educational contexts.

Professor Aglaé Fontes then proposed, in view of the class' desire, an extension project with popular puppet theater, in which the students joined as scholarship holders of the Program Bolsa/ Trabalho /Arte, from Funarte. This federal government resource, at the time, besides working as a direct aid to university students, also provided that group with subsidies for the production of new spectacles, as well as the promotion of exchanges between artists outside the university (including from other states).



Figure 2 – Nildete Santos, Walkyria Sanders, Aglaé Fontes, Augusto Barreto, Edivaldo and Neli Tavares, Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso, 1987, Laranjeiras/SE. Source: Freire (2018, p. 21).

The initiative gave rise to the nucleus of artists that, still in the first months of formation, was named Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos, a popular theater collective originated in the academic environment, at that time composed solely of university students, who promoted shows and workshops, experimenting with the relationship between art and education.

The baptism with the name *Mamulengo de Cheiroso* makes explicit references to the popular puppet theater as practiced in the state of Pernambuco. The term *Mamulengo* is used to name the *brincadeira* [game] in the territory of Pernambuco (and, later, Paraíba), and has as a possible origin an analogy to the movement of the hands to animate the puppets on stage: the *mão-molenga*. The use of the name *Cheiroso* is a tribute to the popular artist known as Mestre Cheiroso, who lived between Recife and Olinda, one of the first traditional *mamulengueiros* about whom we have documented records (Santos, 1979), who had a strong prominence in the early 20th century.

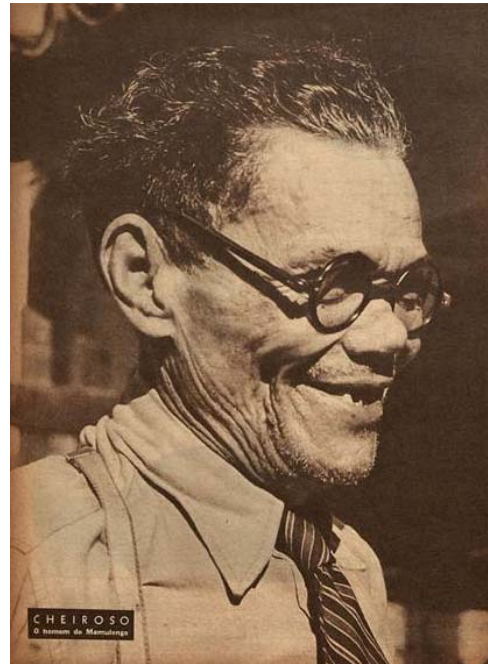


Figure 3 – Cheiroso: the man of mamulengo. Source: Verger (1947, p. 90)<sup>4</sup>.

Agláé Fontes already mentioned Mestre Cheiroso, when speaking briefly about the Group's trajectory, in a spectacle program:

Upon discovering the space, it embarked on the paths of Popular Culture and fed on its roots. Between amazed and dazzled, it got a name: MAMULENGO DE CHEIROSO. A tribute to Cheiroso, a *mamulengueiro* from the Nordeste who animated the fairs with the sale of his smells and the stories of his puppets in Pernambuco and Paraíba (Fontes, 1982, n. p).

The Mamulengo de Cheiroso Group at UFS was directed by Professor Agláé Fontes, who coordinated the actions of the university extension project in those early years. In this context, Augusto Barreto, who was part of the group as a student at the time, considers Agláé the founder of the Group, although she claims that she provoked the students, and they did found it.

Augusto entered the university with a previous repertoire and experience with puppet theater, including being an apprentice of Agláé Fontes and his mother, Marieta Fontes, as they had a previous contact due to a parental bond between the Barreto and Fontes families. He comments that, in his childhood, he had contact with pottery, a craft of his neighbors, and that he played many *brincadeiras* in the clay when it rained. From there would come his admiration and his mastery of working with ceramics, pre-

sent in artifacts produced by the Mamulengo de Cheiroso Group, including some dolls for spectacles or for sale.

In the early years, in 1985, the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso disconnected from the university and became independent, that is, it had to manage itself, without Aglaé's more committed participation as a teacher-director, and ceased to be configured as an extension project of UFS. With the departure of the first members, Augusto Barreto gradually became a leading figure and took on the role of director of the group, of master, always with Aglaé at the back of this process. He sees her as a master, a source of wisdom and artistic, cultural and intellectual inspiration. He makes a point of always mentioning her, in classes, lectures, etc., so that she becomes, in fact, a reference in the history of Sergipe's theater.

Even though it is now 45 years old in 2023, we still have few records about Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso, its history, its characteristics or any other specific aspect of the collective. An advance was made by two recent academic researches focused on the group, both completed in 2023: one is my master's research, which resulted in the dissertation entitled *História e pedagogia do teatro no Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos (Aracaju/SE)*, by the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Cênicas (PPGAC/Unirio); and the other is that of researcher Gustavo Floriano, entitled *'Mestre Cheiroso chegou': a formação artística e pedagógica do brincante Augusto Barreto – reflexos para a carpintaria teatral do Mamulengo de Cheiroso*, by the Programa de Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinar em Culturas Populares (PPGCULT/UFS).

The movement to promote records on Mamulengo de Cheiroso is important because it deals with theater (in contrast to still existing thoughts that disregard these aesthetics as theatrical making), the theater of the Nordeste (which strives for an awareness that will break the homogeneous idea in relation to the characteristics of the Nordeste its people), for reheating the dialogue of language with popular culture, for helping to understand the history of the people, through their theater.

In terms of recording and producing sources for contemporary and future studies of a knowledge, of a heritage (in this case, especially a cultural and artistic heritage), it is important to write this particular history, based on sources and references of various kinds; it is important that its historiog-

raphy is organized and narrated. However, I am aware that there are specific limitations to the nature of research in theater history, since there is no possibility of recording everything without leaving gaps, as a *single, official* history; also because research data can always be changed, updated and/or re-signified. To support this reflection, I quote professor and theater historian (2017, p. 52-53):

With the awareness that the writing of history shares the ephemerality that is commonly attributed to the scenic fact, the theater historian too, with humility in the face of the history he/she believes to be helping to build, bringing traces to the future, is condemned both to exhaustive exercises and to inexhaustible writing operations, because he/she knows in advance that the historiographical writings of a time are always precarious, determined by the state of the art to which he/she is linked and especially determined by new and perhaps more precious, and perhaps more accurate data. His/her awareness of the infinite rewriting of history and the precariousness of his/her unstable writing, however, do not relieve him/her from diving into the details, the variations, the contradictions, the utopia of precision, to the detriment of what was intended to be simple, homogeneous.

It was in this perspective that I traced my research, in the search to compose and write a historical panorama, at least, of the founding period of Mamulengo de Cheiroso, in order to analyze how the identity characteristics, planted from the beginning, influence their artistic and formative practices in contemporary times, in favor of the maintenance and dissemination of popular puppet theater. To do so, I needed to open a discussion on the notion of *popular*, which aroused some reflections reorganized here, for theoretical contribution in the area, based on the example of Cheiroso.

Among the many possibilities of understanding and expressing the popular, including the vast universe of Popular Puppet Theater that is defined as *of the Nordeste*, the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso Teatro de Bonecos has its cutouts, its prisms to sculpt and shape its sense of culture, of popular, of theater, of identity. The repertoire that the group has been building is one that values the aspects of the local tradition of the territory, the heritages of tales and chants of orality, the daily customs observed in the Sergipe's people, the expressions of the word, the crafts, the symbolic goods and other artistic manifestations originating from the state, with its stories, its myths and its mystics.

In parallel, Mamulengo de Cheiroso studies and travels the world researching other forms of popular expression, especially those with puppets, because it knows that the history of the Sergipe tradition (Northeastern, Brazilian) lives in dialogue with the temporality of the popular traditions of Latin America and the whole world, in fact, to the detriment of the temporality of the European tradition. With this, we can note that the calendar that governs this history, as it is mostly taught, including in universities, cannot only be European, because, with regard to the path of popular culture, as in the case of Mamulengo de Cheiroso, some paths are crossed. As American professor of literary hermeneutics and history of comparative literature, Mario J. Valdés (1934-2020), warns:

[...] the temporality of the popular tradition is very different from that found in Enlightenment literature and the historian will therefore have to find a way to respect these two temporalities. Popular tradition does not follow the European calendar, nor does it follow the periodization of these literary histories. [...] In Latin America, the two traditions clash every day (Valdés, 2000, p. 8-9).

While the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso defends identity issues, reflected in its shows and in its pedagogical practices, awareness of the plurality of cultures also permeates this mixed composition. This is due to several contexts of cultural hybridization in Brazil, from indigenous cultures present in the territory, in its various ethnicities, crossed with African cultures brought to the country in the process of slavery (similar in some aspects, for example, in the relationship with rituals and with nature). Some European countries, still in the colonizing process, also imported characteristics of their cultures, in addition to other universal influences, including from the East, resulting from the accelerated process of globalization.

After all, Mamulengo de Cheiroso researches the culture of several nations, has a history of traveling for work, and was able to grope this tangle of affectations. In the collection of the headquarters<sup>5</sup>, we find several dolls and masks from all over the world, which the group bought on its travels or was gifted. The group obviously recognizes the existence of manifestations originating and belonging properly to the territory of Sergipe. This gives rise to pride and celebration for the richness of the popular in local culture, and the path of research and creation in the performing arts committed to the

identity issues of the Nordeste [Brazilian Northeast] region and its popular traditions.

It is well known that the tradition of literate culture is associated with a position of power. Historically, it was constituted in this way, because written history exerts an oppressive function in the face of oral history, so that we inherit precisely the triumph of the letter. Although the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso has not exactly dedicated itself to writing/wording its historiographical path, it has initiatives that point to a *concrete* construction of its history, since it gathers diverse documentary sources (photos, documents, newspaper articles, spectacle programs, etc.). At its headquarters, in addition to its own collection of puppets, masks, dramaturgies, books, articles and periodicals, as well as taking the initiative to make its physical space official as a museum.

In other words, there is a bet on the *edification* of the narrative of the 45 years of history of the group for recognizing, certainly, the contribution it will bring to popular manifestations, artists and researchers, as well as to the population itself. This awareness, for example, positively affected the generous permission and openness of the team for me to develop my master's research, centered on two historical periods of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso: the founding context and the initial years (1978-1982), and its performance with artistic and formative practices in contemporary times (2018-2022). It is possible that the group functions in this way due to its specific relationship with the academic space since its formation, given that it was created in the artistic-pedagogical context mentioned before.

So, could Cheiroso be considered a popular group? In what terms? The context and profile of this popular puppet theater group, with academic roots, makes us reflect on notions, discussed in this text, about *popular culture* and *popular theater*, based properly on the *mamulengo*.

In this sense, methodologically, the path to reflect on the issues raised in this research was framed in the type of descriptive study, which essentially “[...] describes the characteristics of a given population or a given phenomenon, and interprets them” (Costa; Costa, 2011, p. 36), not shying away from a constant reflection translated into comments and analyzes. Thus, this study is of qualitative approach and had as methodological option the ethnographic and historical research. The research was divided into



cumulative stages, the first being the bibliographic review related to the theoretical foundation of the theme under study, which presents and discusses the main notions present in the research objectives. The other stages, which appear with less emphasis in this article, consisted of interviews with the current members of Mamulengo de Cheiroso, as well as the analysis of archival materials.

It is worth noting that the theoretical field on which the research object is focused is not, by any means, based on simple and totally convergent concepts and notions. On the contrary, it is a dense area, full of contradictions, tensions and approaches that sometimes intersect, sometimes distance themselves, but that make up a wide network of notions that we can minimally grope. Far from wanting to end the proposed discussions, but in order to rub them and bring new data closer to the research universe based on the questions raised before the object, I will reflect and position myself as a teacher-artist-researcher of theater.

### **From popular culture to popular theater: some meanings**

The single story creates stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are lies, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the single story (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2019).

In the field that focuses on analyzing the so-called *popular culture*, as well as problematizing the term in force, researchers from various areas of knowledge list and question more appropriate theoretical perspectives to deal with the subject of *culture levels*, which is a great sign, because it is relevant that theories are in this movement of tension over time. The fact that we are still discussing the topic today proves how much it is alive and carries meanings pertinent to the societies of past centuries, but which persist in contemporary times. It is a *traditional* issue, from the perspective of the survival of popular culture over time, and, at the same time, it has an *erudite* dimension, since it arouses interest among the intellectuals of literate societies.

Roger Chartier, a French specialist in cultural history and history of reading, presents a dubious meaning for the term discussed. Before tracing a historical entanglement of popular culture, the author begins by presenting a certain conceptual problematic, sometimes taken up in his writing, and

presents, in the set of reflections, social and above all political problems involved in historical issues. He proposes two models of description and interpretation of *popular culture*, on which he discusses:

The first, in order to abolish all forms of cultural ethnocentrism, conceives popular culture as a coherent and autonomous symbolic system, which functions according to a logic absolutely alien to that of literate culture. The second, concerned with recalling the existence of relations of domination that organize the social world, perceives popular culture in its dependencies and deficiencies in relation to the culture of the dominant. We have, then, on the one hand, a popular culture that constitutes a world apart, closed in on itself, independent, and, on the other, a popular culture entirely defined by its distance from the cultural legitimacy of which it is deprived (Chartier, 1995, p. 1).

Unraveling Chartier's vision, popular culture can be read or as a self-sufficient universe, independent and parallel to that of literate culture, as legitimate as the other, opposing the idea of ethnocentrism (a view that centralizes one's own culture as a reference to qualify other cultures); or as a manifestation resulting from historical power relations to the detriment of erudite culture, that is, it would be valued as inferior, no longer independent, because it suffers from this other, and is generally associated with socially disadvantaged groups, bordering on what the author calls *miserabilism*. However, Chartier draws attention to the fact that these two models are not necessarily used in an exclusive way, and may be present in an intercrossed way, as some historians and researchers do.

Néstor García Canclini, an Argentine anthropologist, a reference in cultural studies, especially the phenomenon of cultural hybridization in Latin America and its relationship with modernity, in the chapter he calls *A encenação do popular*, makes similar points to this last perspective when he states that "the popular is usually associated with the pre-modern and the subsidiary" (Canclini, 2019, p. 205). He adds:

In this story, the popular is the excluded: those who do not have heritage or cannot have it recognized and conserved; artisans who do not become artists, individualize themselves, or participate in the market of 'legitimate' symbolic goods; mass media spectators who are left out of universities and museums, 'unable' to read and look at high culture because they are unaware of the history of knowledge and styles (Canclini, 2019, p. 205).

In turn, Chartier stresses that, even in historical moments of repression, there was not effectively the total exclusion of a certain *acculturated* culture, because, although there is pressure for it to die, popular culture continued to exist, transforming itself, until today, always with historical strength, with resistance, cunning and rebelliousness. On this matter, Mario J. Valdés (2000, p. 9) writes: “[...] they comfortably forget that indigenous cultures have not been annihilated, but have continued and endured; despite exogenous interference, they have assimilated new means of expression without renouncing their own and are part of this open dialectic”. The question is: what has hegemonic history – told and, above all, written – chosen to narrate?

The historiographical destiny of popular culture is therefore always to be stifled, repressed, razed to the ground, and at the same time always to be re-born from the ashes. This undoubtedly indicates that the real problem is not so much to date its disappearance, supposedly irremediable, but to consider, for each era, how the complex relationships between imposed forms, more or less constraining and imperative, and affirmed identities, more or less developed and repressed, are elaborated (Chartier, 1995, p. 3).

Still in this perspective, Hilário Franco Júnior, a Brazilian specialist in medieval history, points out that folkloric influences make popular culture a culture of contestation for carrying mythological residues, for containing *the knowledge par excellence* of mythical basis, for coming from an oral transmission, for belonging to the *people*, for remaining linked to ancestral traditions that have surpassed time and social segments. He adds: “Now, the fact that that culture is ‘folkloric’, that is, contestatory, indicates that the clerical culture had not totally deprived the folkloric culture of its functions, hence the very existence of this and the possibility of it exercising a resistance, a contestation” (Franco Júnior, 1991, p. 24).

As seen, the theme usually brings opposites that are related in a line of tension composed, commonly, by two meanings of culture: *popular x erudite*, or *traditional x literate*. These are concepts that are directly linked in the search for a conceptual autonomy – perhaps not applicable. Canclini highlights and criticizes the hegemonic factor that permeates this complex denomination by considering that “[...] modernizers extract from this opposition the moral that their interest in advances, in the promises of history,

justifies their hegemonic position, while the backwardness of the popular classes condemns them to subalternity” (Canclini, 2019, p. 206).

In the case of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso, from its foundation until today, its members do not fit the profile historically traced about the agents of popular culture, neither in the period of formation, nor in contemporary times. The director of the group, Augusto Barreto, although he had lived in the countryside as a child, was a student of Aglaé Fontes, as said, and obtained a degree in Pedagogy from UFS. After that, he was a teacher of basic education in the state school system.

Franco Júnior invites us to relativize the supposed distances between divergent cultures (traditional/erudite, for example), as the history of Mamulengo de Cheiroso itself relativizes, and proposes to consider the interrelation of cultures. In this way, according to him, we tend to deepen the issue better, instead of enclosing it in concepts of opposition, considering society as a common, hybrid organism, which does not necessarily dilute internal differentiations. The researcher comments:

The realization of the simplism of the binary systems civilized/primitive, rational/irrational, historical/mythical, religious/magical and others of the type, would provoke important reflections in the human sciences of the second half of the century [20]. In fact, it accompanied the epistemological revision that was taking place in other areas of knowledge, and which, in short, revealed the limits of the Cartesian model (Franco Júnior, 1991, p. 19).

Related to the discussion of the junction of different cultures, Chartier brings an idea associated with *annulment*, which considers the social and economic spectrum, which results in an uncompromising imposition and the consequent elimination of a certain culture considered inferior. On the other hand, Franco Júnior initially approaches it as *interrelation*, considering the similarities between the various popular cultures as a common denominator, broadening the zone of group identity and cultural intermediation.

Based on data from studies on popular religion, Franco Júnior shows that popular culture is not only present in rural, peasant, ignorant, primitive or outdated contexts, as is usually associated with the term. On the contrary, it is present even in other instances, functioning, according to the historian, as a strong link that would affect – and unite – the whole society.

He uses witchcraft and the belief in the Devil as examples of medieval landmarks still present in today's society, all over the world, both in the cultural spectrum of the dominant classes and in that of the oppressed classes. Perhaps this line of thought is the most reasonable, as it recognizes that there are conceptual differences, attempts at segregation, and assumes that there will always be permeability between the parties. It is a real universe of tensions, not oppositions.

It is important to unfold this note about the presence of popular culture outside rural and peasant, illiterate contexts, determined by essentially hereditary ties, as it helps us to think about the formation and performance of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso Teatro de Bonecos.

During Augusto Barreto's administration, and his transformation into a master, as the group diluted its university character and assumed a family structure, the relationship between his personal life and his work life began to strengthen, in a successive adaptation. This started with the arrival of his sisters Mary and Marlene Barreto, in 1989; then, with the arrival of Artur Barreto, his nephew, in 2013; Pedro Freitas, his partner; in addition to other artists and collaborators, all literate, mostly with academic training; and to a large extent from the moment Augusto started living in the house that is on the same plot as the group's headquarters.

Augusto states that his and his sisters' background "[...] is rural, because my father was a farmer, he supplied sugar cane to the mills here. Then he started working with cattle, and ended up as a citrus grower in Boquim/SE. Then he bought a farm in Itabaianinha/SE" (Barreto, 2022, interview with the researcher). About his observations and inspirations, the master comments:

What is this theater that I perceived? I saw the *cassimicocos*, the primitive popular theaters, in the countryside, at the fairs. Because the fair is where everything happened. At the fairs, there were brothels, there were tin theaters, there were people's meetings. The fairs were scheduled weekly, on Saturdays, on Mondays. [...] The fair had everything, the vendors, the pharmacies, the herbs [...] It was an event, the fairs. That was very useful for my basis. And the circuses. I took circuses still of popular drama: Circo Zé Bezerra, Circo da Mulher da Goiaba, Gran Bartholo Circus, Circo Garcia, the '*circo pano de roda*', '*pé duro*', which was called '*o circo de sarna*' (Barreto, 2022, interview).

Although Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso was not founded (nor has it been based, during its existence) in rural areas, it has a directly urban performance in the city of Aracaju, even while it identifies itself as a popular group and has the influence of peasant and primitive traditions as inspiration and working material. Raising and reflecting on such issues, it is a fact that traditional cultures themselves have already been autonomously playing their role of transformation, as they always have.

Even in rural areas, folklore today does not have the closed and stable character of the archaic universe, as it develops amid the versatile relationships that traditions weave with urban life, with migrations, tourism, secularization and the symbolic options offered by both electronic media and new religious movements or the reformulation of the old ones (Canclini, 2019, p. 218).

The reality of popular culture today goes far beyond the imaginary that makes it exclusive to rural, peasant areas, and is no longer represented mostly by this common sense about culture. In this regard, José Jorge de Carvalho, anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, brings relevant contributions that update the data.

[...] a large circuit of rural culture in the cities, as many groups transplanted from the interior are remade (and their culture, obviously, reinterpreted) in the metropolitan environment, also starts existing. Thus, several symbols that, in the countryside, function as strong elements of characterization and consolidation of peasant identity, become, in the city, mere ritual celebrations of the peasant way of life, carried out by groups that are now urban-like (Carvalho, 2000, p. 24-25).

Thus, the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos, even without having been formed by the traditional/hereditary way, is configured as a popular group composed of popular artists. The previous quotations help to contextualize the group in the urban context, from its formation, of academic matrix, to the performance in the city of Aracaju, in the state of Sergipe, in Brazil and in the world. Although the master Augusto Barreto makes it clear that he has the heritage of an immersion experience in the popular culture of Sergipe, in his education and in his relationship with people, places and contexts with which he related, and reverberate to this day in his professional performance at the head of the collective.

Diluting this border of characteristics, rooted in generational principles (ancient or contemporary), geographical (rural or urban) and/or cultur-

al (popular or erudite), we can consider the popular character of a group that, because it was born anchored in the academic universe, is different from a peasant, illiterate, traditional reality, but that will bring peculiar issues even to its formative project. Mamulengo de Cheiroso, with its origin and founding members in an intrinsic relationship with the university, a characteristic to be emphasized, has been developing a systematic artistic and pedagogical practice with *mamulengo*, to be presented and discussed in depth in the dissertation resulting from this research. We can consider that the group is neither from the past tradition, nor totally distanced from it: the ensemble is a metaphor of the spirit of innovation/transformation inherent to the tradition itself.

Following this brief contextualization of the vast conceptual terrain about popular culture, reflected from the perspective of the example of Cheiroso, I propose a cut and approach the discussion of this theoretical field towards the universe of puppet theater research, understanding that it is an artistic language strongly present in certain cultural, social and historical contexts. In dialogue with the previous contributions, I quote again the theater historian Beti Rabetti, when she talks about traditional cultures:

By way of synthesis, it is possible to recover here the fundamental elements of those cultures, linked to long-lasting currents (which involve persistence and variations), to oral transmission, to the hegemony of the party, to the mixture of the sacred and the profane, to the rustic, to the election of squares and streets as spaces of intense coexistence between diversified artistic manifestations, to the laughter, to the search for the maintenance of collective production parameters, to the anonymity prevailing over authorship, to the profuse to the detriment of the specific, to the apparent *spontaneity* (Rabetti, 2000, p. 4).

By extending the discussion to the scope of popular tradition theater, which, like culture in general, has several facets according to the place and time in which it occurs, the challenges about the *popular* remain present. In Brazil, we have a vastness of cultural manifestations throughout the territory, many of which are loaded with elements of artistic languages, such as dance, music and theater. Much more in the theatrical perspective and less in the folkloristic one, I will then highlight a popular *brinquedo* [toy] originating from the Nordeste region, precisely from the state of Pernambuco: the Mamulengo<sup>6</sup>, a form of theater that underlies the analyzed group.

### ***Mamulengo* theater and popular puppets: notions and categorizations**

As I propose to approach the *mamulengo*, the demand to understand some categorizations regarding the lineages of popular puppet theater arises. This will better visualize the context in which the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso is inserted, with its artistic and formative practices.

The *mamulengo* is a popular form of puppet theater in the Nordeste, with a particular aesthetic, with specific meanings, precepts and working methods. It is called *brinquedo* [toy] because it contains the presence of *objects* as protagonists of the theatrical event (Lima, 2009). In the case of *mamulengo*, the fundamental – and central – object is the *puppet*. Thus, it fits into the language formerly called Teatro de Marionetes [Marionette Theater] and currently called Teatro de Formas Animadas [Animated Forms Theater], or Teatro de Animação [Animation Theater], or even Teatro do Inanimado [Theater of the Inanimate], which encompasses: *objects, puppets, shadows* and *masks*. Always maintaining the same principle around the *anima* (Amaral, 2011), synonymous with soul, human spiritual principle that opposes the body, because, to manifest itself as theater, these inanimate objects need the vital energy of some animating living being.



Figure 4 – Cheiroso and Augusto Barreto. Source: Group's Instagram page<sup>7</sup>.

The composition of the character Cheiroso, played by Augusto, is an archetype of popular circus clown. When Augusto leaves the tent and appears to the public as a person, and not as a doll, it is as if he were incarnat-



ed and turned, there, into a popular clown: crudely made up, thunderous voice, sarcastic laughter, exuberant sexuality, ancestral improvising spirit of street actors.

Traditionally, the *mamulengo* is a popular *brinquedo* in which the *mestre brincador*<sup>8</sup> stands behind an *empanada*<sup>9</sup> (may be accompanied by counter-masters and helpers); and begins to represent, with the puppets, to the people of the city (in the streets, squares, sidewalks), stories and tales based on popular sayings, passed down from generation to generation. Above all, seeking inspiration in the situations he experiences and observes in his daily life, in the surroundings, in the relationships he experiences in society (in the personal, social, beliefs sphere, etc.). The Pernambuco researcher and artist Hermilo Borba Filho (1917-1976) is a fundamental character to understand the *mamulengo*. He wrote, among several texts, the book *Fisionomia e espírito do mamulengo* (Borba Filho, 1987).

The work contextualizes the *mamulengo* before the manifestations of puppet theater in the world (in countries like China, Egypt, India, France and England), as well as the influences of its origin, and describes the characteristics of this popular art of the people of the Nordeste, defending it as theater. The book also provides a record of dramaturgies for spectacles of the popular *brinquedo*, some of them created by the renowned *mestres mamulengueiros* [masters of *mamulengo*] Januário de Oliveira (Mestre Ginu) and Manuel Amendoim. In a brief text, published in the *Revista Mamulengo* in 1974, Hermilo narrates the following scene:

Inside the tent, made of straw, with a blanket on top so as not to damage the puppets in violent scenes, are three suitcases where the characters rest, in order, waiting to enter the scene. A woman and a girl hand the puppets over to Manuel Amendoim, the *mamulengueiro* from Goiana, who performs with his voice, face, gestures and body, tap dancing, sweating profusely, a spectacle apart: - 'You see? I invent stories according to the figure'. This statement contains his entire relationship with the wooden character – his poetic act (Borba Filho, 1974, p. 22).

The primitive *mamulengueiros* at the fairs, with possible influences inherited from circus-theatre, used similar strategies that captured the attention of the public in the street, attracting them to watch their shows. Some theatrical sketches, mixed with circus numbers, *rodas de ciranda*, *cordel* singing, etc., compound certain resources present before the spectacles, ensuring a

warm reception by the spectators, who were already directly inserted into the theatrical game. The *brinquedo popular*, which tends to function almost as a portrait of the people from Nordeste, is mainly based on the relationship between the actor- animator and the audience, by a strong spirit of game and *interacting*, relying on scenic resources such as: satire, *peripécia* [peripeteia], rhyme, puns, sayings and popular chants, dances, sounds and music, *pancadaria* [brawl], cursing, naughtiness etc.

These popular dolls are an ancient artistic manifestation and have their birth associated with the constitution of Brazil. They appear with the enslaved in the middle of the *senzalas* [slave quarters], as a tool for fun and projection of their social issues, still as free *brincadeiras*. It is an art that is directly related to the beginning of theatrical production in Brazil, when the ways of making puppet theater were imported from the world, especially from Europe and Africa, as well as having a relationship between the indigenous cultures already present in the territory. According to the interpretative dossier:

The puppet theater that developed in the Nordeste was strongly influenced by African and indigenous cultures. [...] There are also influences from the popular puppet traditions of Europe, such as the Italian Pulcinella, the Portuguese Robertos and the English Punch. In these traditions, as in the TBPB, the protagonists, always identified with the popular classes, fight against various types of authorities (soldiers, priests, rich farmers), showing their bravery and courage (IPHAN, 2014, p. 24).

In 2015, the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN) granted the title of Intangible Cultural Heritage, in the Book of Forms of Expression, to the then called *Teatro de Bonecos Popular do Nordeste: Mamulengo, Babau, João Redondo e Cassimiro Coco – TBPB*. The nomenclature was created by the Associação Brasileira de Teatro de Bonecos (ABTB)<sup>10</sup> and presented to IPHAN in the process of requesting the registration of the good as cultural heritage of Brazil, in 2004.

In the process of preparing the inventory carried out by IPHAN (2014), a research cut was made in view of the difficult task of creating the lineages of Mamulengo. Based on what makes up the important dossier, we can reflect on which *category* the Mamulengo de Cheiroso can fit into,

which is not actually registered in the document. In its introductory part, in relation to the lineages, it is recorded that:

Unlike that region [Southeast], the popular puppet theater remained in almost all states in the Nordeste until the mid-twentieth century, but from the 1970s onwards, it also began to decline, *disappearing in the states of Alagoas, Bahia and Sergipe* (IPHAN, 2014, p. 41, emphasis added).

Although the Registry itself does not contain the criteria for delimiting the categories of *mamulengueiros*, in the text *O processo do Registro do Teatro de Bonecos Popular do Nordeste do Brasil como patrimônio cultural do Brasil*, by Izabela Brochado, coordinator of ABTB at the time of the development of the inventory, the author deals with such definitions:

In this context, are included, primarily, the *brincantes* who learned and learn by 'family' lineage, that is, who are inserted in the community and/or social group of their master and who become puppeteers by constant contact with the language and the associated goods of experiential and cultural heritage. This distinction was made once the existence of two other categories was identified: b) those who learn from one or more masters and who appropriate the language elements of traditional forms, incorporating them into their spectacles, but who, unlike the first group, come from outside the community – social group of the master, that is, they learn through temporary experience, starting to form their own group and *brincadeira*; c) those who appropriate certain language elements of traditional forms, starting to incorporate them into their spectacles from re-readings. In this case, they do not have a permanent link with traditional popular forms, using them discontinuously (Brochado, 2018, p. 32-33).

This is a delicate conceptual tangle, as the author herself recognizes, which opens up a series of questions still in the scope of the popular, which tries to separate, with the necessary purpose of registration and analysis, what would be the *traditional mamulengo*, translated into the first lineage, and the *contemporary*, with the two possibilities (*b* and *c*) pointed out in the quote above. Based on the categorizations proposed by Brochado, Mamulengo de Cheiroso could fit into type *b*, a living example of an initiative to maintain and disseminate popular puppet theater, as it inherited the art of *mamulengo* and has the look of re-elaboration of the *brinquedo*.

Regarding the conceptualization of *mamulengo* according to a generational prism, Aglaé D'Ávila Fontes, playwright and researcher of popular culture, proposes the nomenclatures *authentic mamulengo* and *mamulengo of*

*aesthetic projection*. The first refers to the primitive *mamulengueiros*, those who first had a record of their *brinquedos*, and held the *root* form of *brincar* [playing]: Doutor Babau (Severino Alves Dias), Mestre Cheiroso (Severino Francisco da Silva<sup>11</sup>) and Mestre Ginu (Januário de Oliveira), from Pernambuco state. The second nomenclature refers to a form of *brincar*, *inspired* by the first *mamulengueiros*, based on the understanding of that theatrical genre and the culture in which it is inserted, and may, in fact, have different socio-cultural contexts.

However, after all, when does something stop being *primitive* and become a *projection*? The researcher commented, in an interview granted to this research:

I think that Mamulengo de Cheiroso is a group of aesthetic projection, that is: it took this cultural aspect of the puppet theater of the people, in the language of the people, in the way of the people. But everyone there is graduated, they are not illiterate. One is graduated in this, the other in that. They took on the language of Zé de Vina, they took on the language of other famous *mamulengueiros* and they watched, that is, they spied. [...] How are these boys, all trained, the same as Zé de Vina? To Cheiroso himself? They are not. [...] These are *mamulengueiros*, which I call authentic, usually illiterate, play the viola. They have these characteristics, and that's not why they're worth less. They are worth so much that I copy them, that I want to be as popular as them. [...] At no point does it take away from their value, on the contrary, it increases it: they seek inspiration for their work in the authentic, to project more and more. [...] What does it [Mamulengo de Cheiroso] seek? To work with a popular language, to work with the authentic popular music of Sergipe folklore (Fontes, 2022, p. 123, interview granted to the researcher).

He makes considerations about the emergence of the *brinquedo* [toy] and points out, based on his observations and research with the Só-Riso group, about the presence of *mamulengo* in the state of Pernambuco, two areas of activity in the 1970s. One is the *urban area* (which he considers to encompass the Metropolitan Region of Recife) and the other is *rural area* (which comprises the interior of the state). Each of them would preserve particular characteristics, but with a common sense that made both be *mamulengo*. One of the points on which he relies to think of such a distinction is based on what refers to the periodicity/calendar and the spaces/places in which *mamulengo* performances take place.

It is true that events such as popular religious festivals, notably Christmas festivities (Christmas, New Year and Epiphany) or patron saint feasts, al-

most always motivate performances, but as a rule the *brinquedo* [toy] is made, being itself the reason or cause of the event. It is not necessary to have a party in a farm to have a *mamulengo*. The owner of the farm hires the *mamulengo* as a form of entertainment for the local residents. Often this is the reason for the party and not necessarily the opposite, that is, the party causing the *mamulengo*. [...] In the *urban* area, the presentations are usually linked to events. When the *mamulengo* happens, it is usually during Christmas and June festivities, or at folk festivals, and nowadays it is presented more frequently when hired by tourism agencies [...] (Santos, 1979, p. 42, emphasis added).

As said, this form of *brincar* occurs spontaneously and is not necessarily linked to events. In these cases, very strong in the Zona da Mata of Pernambuco, the *mamulengo* is the one that generates the party, the collective, public *brincadeira*, in open spaces. The other form would have a direct dependence/connection to external situations, such as theater festivals or other cultural production programs. The latter, the *mamulengo* of the urban area, we can observe as the case of Mamulengo de Cheiroso. In addition to participating in theater festivals and making individual presentations, inside and outside Brazil, the group is always present at the June and Christmas festivities, including with unpublished creations of dramaturgies and stagings dedicated to the presentation of that year, inspired by oral narrative stories, which have these festivals as a thematic environment, as inspiration.

Having its beginning linked to the Universidade Federal de Sergipe (UFS), the group is not formed by *primitive* artists. As already said, they are people who had access to *mamulengo* as a pre-existing artistic language, unlike the first *mamulengueiros*, who *invented* the *brinquedo* [toy] more for the purpose of fun. Although these *mamulengueiros* recognize the principles of creation, of techniques of their works, the nature of their creation was more intuitive, and transmitted still in the scheme of *family* lineage – they were the precursors of the art of *mamulengo*, as we know more or less today (given the scarcity of records with data precision). And there is a later generation that – based on the reception of spectacles, books, dramaturgies, historical sources – has a notion of the *brinquedo* [toy] as a whole, a dimension distanced from the elements that constitute it, as researchers and language experimenters. From what is known, from what is observed, this group begins to create, *brincando* with the existing elements, and *moves forward*, cre-

ating other ways of doing based on this inherited model, and may even follow, moreover, another social, economic, geographical profile, etc.

The idea of the Mamulengo de Cheiroso is not to maintain a purism, a unique and unquestionable way of doing, that crosses time intact, but to understand that contexts change and, consequently, change the ways of *brincar*, of looking at the world. After all, as Canclini himself reflects, this would not be the best resource of the popular to stay alive. Regarding the *traditional x modern* dualistic equation, he unfolds:

[...] what can no longer be said is that the tendency of modernization is simply to bring about the disappearance of traditional cultures. The problem, then, is not reduced to conserving and rescuing supposedly unchanged traditions. It is a question of asking how they are transforming, how they interact with the forces of modernity (Canclini, 2019, p. 218).

With social, cultural and political changes, even though we are in the same geographic-cultural-historical territory, there are changes in society that directly affect the artists' view of the world, as well as the world's view of the artists and their creations. The most recent, contemporary masters work in this dimension, proposing, for example, crossing with other ways of making theater, new and improved techniques, other forms of dramaturgy, new modes of production, etc. What seems important is to avoid placing the primitive *mamulengo* in a sacralized, crystallized place – while recognizing the beauty of this powerful *womb* that gestated the *brinquedo* [toy] –; nor to assume another extreme that intends to *save* the authentic work, in the utopia of performing it continuously *in the same way*.

I agree with Marco Camarotti (1947-2004), professor and researcher of popular theater in Pernambuco, when he raised the perspective that “[...] especially in a country as large as Brazil, which has assimilated a diverse ethnic and cultural heritage, folk theater<sup>12</sup> needs to be read and re-read ‘through the elements that make it work the way it does’” (Camarotti, 2001, p. 70-71). Canclini also strongly discusses the idea of thinking about applied culture in the current socio-economic context, which is different from the folklorist current, which tends to cling to a decontextualized past. He argues:

The perception of popular objects and customs as remnants of a social structure that has been erased is the logical justification for their decontextualized

analysis. If the mode of production and the social relations that generated these ‘survivals’ have disappeared, why bother to find their socio-economic meaning? Only researchers affiliated with idealistic historicism are interested in understanding traditions in a broader context, but they reduce them to testimonies of a memory that they suppose useful to strengthen historical continuity and contemporary identity (Canclini, 2019, p. 210).

According to the author, in these approaches, although there is a *rescue* of the people, it is not recognized. I also highlight, based on the scholar’s statements, the idea of thinking about popular culture mainly from the point of view of its agents. After all, the *mamulengo* is a creative object resulting from the production modes of theater artists inserted in certain social, cultural, political and historical contexts, so that, without *mamulengueiros*, there can be no *mamulengo*, because it is not in the objects that the popular is concentrated. Canclini (2019, p. 217) adds: “But all these uses of traditional culture would be impossible without a basic phenomenon: the continuity of the production of artisans, musicians, dancers and popular poets, interested in maintaining their heritage and renewing it”. This justifies the social character of the maintenance of popular culture, as well as implies the economic aspects concerning the survival of the agents of this sector of the cultural chain.

Although *mamulengo* was not used as a profession in its early days, nowadays it appears socially as a sustainability factor for popular *bonequeiros* [puppeteers], who commonly sell puppets and other related objects (popular toys, masks, decorative items, consumer goods, etc.) in their ateliers/shops, receive fees from performances at cultural events, resort to public incentive laws through safeguarding notices, etc.

The idea is to keep the language alive, since it intends, from the beginning, to represent the Nordeste (as a *geographical* territory – physical and subjective – and *corporeal*) and to represent the people from Nordeste in the *form of dolls*, to refer us to the already mentioned book by master Fernando Augusto Gonçalves Santos (1947-2022), from Mamulengo Só-Riso (PE), *Mamulengo, um povo em forma de boneco* (1979). I understand that this paradoxically composes a chain of persistence and variations, as Rabetti (2000, p. 12) said about popular theater, according to time, society and technological advances, so that this art also makes sense today.

With the performance of Mamulengo de Cheiroso in Sergipe, I propose the idea of *re-semantics*, from the perspective of a new look, a new sense. Or a look that gives meaning, also in the present time, to *mamulengo*, to its contexts and developments. In this way, we invest so that the *mamulengo* does not run the risk of assuming a folkloric dimension, of the past, almost like a legend, a myth or a record of a phenomenon that has already ended. On the contrary, it should be something that transforms itself and continues to happen, in a constant improvement of the technique of puppet theater associated with the identity dimension of the people of Nordeste, crossing time and generations.

### Some considerations

This article aimed to untangle the threads of the theoretical field about popular culture in the specific case of the Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso de Teatro de Bonecos (Aracaju/SE), while helping to complexify the issues addressed here, since it put in check concepts that can be plastered and taken as solely opposites, such as the notions of *popular* and *erudite*.

Through the discussions fostered in this article, we can have a critical and updated view of popular theater, which can manifest itself in different ways, in different places and contexts; which is different from a stereotyped, largely homogeneous view of these phenomena, resulting from a literary production that approaches history from the perspective of literate culture.

We found that the maintenance and dissemination of *mamulengo* follows a continuous flow of the self-transforming nature of popular culture. Although, from the perspective of a classist elitism, popular culture is inferiorized to this day; or, in counterpoint, it is strategically praised, but as a victim of a *miserabilism*, which feeds more and more on the advantages existing when the separation of value between the erudite and the popular.

Born at the university, a space that has teaching, research and extension as its pillars, Grupo Mamulengo de Cheiroso is also sustained by these biases, while, from its origin to its 45 years of exercise today, it invests in formative actions in favor of sensitive aesthetic education; nurtures a collective research practice in the area of popular culture in Sergipe and animation theater; continues to promote theatrical performances of a popular nature and identity aspiration, occupying various spaces in the city of Aracaju



and the state of Sergipe, especially those spaces in which the public, the people, can gather and share, collectively, the artistic fruition of a theatrical, festive, popular work.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQKNeW9h4en/>. Accessed on: June 19, 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> At the time, there was no education degree course in Theater at UFS yet, implemented only in 2007, on the Laranjeiras *campus*, due to the creation of the Theater Center. In 2017, the Center was transferred to the São Cristóvão *campus*, and, at the time, became the current Departamento de Teatro (DTE).
- <sup>3</sup> The school is located next to where the UFS São Cristóvão *campus* is today, and even receives interns from the Theater Education Degree who develop artistic-pedagogical interventions.
- <sup>4</sup> Available at: <http://memoria.bn.br/docreader/003581/52579>. Accessed on: Dec. 19, 2022.
- <sup>5</sup> Rua do Igaruana, nº 127, Aeroporto, Aracaju/SE.
- <sup>6</sup> There are differences between the ways of making and playing the popular puppet theater of the Nordeste, according to the other states where it is found (*Cassimiro Coco*, in Maranhão, Piauí and Sergipe; *João Redondo*, in Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba; *Mané Gostoso*, in Bahia; *Babau e Mamulengo*, in Pernambuco), and these variations must be recognized and respected. However, I choose to use the term *mamulengo* to refer to the *brinquedo* [toy] because it is the baptismal nomenclature in the state of Pernambuco, where it emerged and from which it expanded (IPHAN, 2014; Lima, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJWrLWqhNWt/>. Accessed on: June 19, 2021.
- <sup>8</sup> In addition to this term, others are used: *folgazão*, *brincante*, *ator-animador* and *mamulengueiro*, the latter also linked to the artisan who makes the *mamulengos* (*bonequeiros*).
- <sup>9</sup> Also referred to as ‘tent’ [tenda], ‘awning’ [toldo], or ‘booth’ [barraca], it is the structure that serves as a stage for the puppets.

- <sup>10</sup> Entity that articulates puppeteers and other artists of the animation theater, at national level. ABTB represents, in Brazil, the Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA), an entity that brings together associations and puppeteers from around the world, created in 1929.
- <sup>11</sup> In the research, I found two possible baptismal names for Cheiroso: according to one source, Severino Francisco da Silva (Balzoni Filho, 1947, p. 92), or, as in another document, Amaro Branco (Cunha, 1952, p. 9).
- <sup>12</sup> “Finally, Abrahams considers as *Teatro Folclórico* (which can also be called *Teatro do Povo*, as Camarotti prefers, or *Teatro da Gente*) that which is practiced in small communities, where actors and audience share the same worldview. It is performed and maintained according to the precepts of a tradition and its presentations occur on special occasions, usually in traditional festivals” (Lima, 2009, p. 31).

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Availability of research data: the dataset supporting the results of this study is published in this article.

This original paper, translated by Thuila Farias Ferreira, is also published in Portuguese in this issue of the journal.

*Received on January 31, 2023*

*Accepted on June 15, 2023*

*Editor in charge: Celina Nunes de Alcântara*

