

In the Empire's web: The Oporto Orfeão's musical journeys to Africa

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Introduction

The Orfeão Universitário do Porto, a choral and musical student association connected to the Oporto University, regularly organized tours in Portugal and abroad, namely to former Portuguese colonies in Africa in 1956 (Angola) and 1959 (Mozambique). This decade was marked by important changes in colonial policy. Salazar's dream of a multi-continental and multiracial nation suffered its first blows with the creation of pro-independence organizations in Portuguese African colonies, and successive recriminations by the UN concerning the status of these territories lead to their inclusion in a list of "non-autonomous" countries. In the same decade, the Portuguese government issued a decree that restricted the autonomy of student organizations.

Aims

The research departed from this specific historical and cultural context, and focused on two issues: 1) research of the group's appropriation of continental traditional music and modes of projection to the colonial cultural space; 2) the impact of the group's visit on colonial subjects and on white residents, documenting and classifying procedures of identity construction and transfer.

Context

The Orfeão Universitário do Porto (OUP) is a nearly centenary institution, founded in 1912. It was modelled after similar musical organizations in Portugal that followed a late 19th-, early 20th-century common cultural outlook that valued choral singing and choral organizations as, respectively, educational and social tools of self-improvement, and models/metaphors of effective and balanced social models. The repertoire of the OUP changed over the decades, but maintained a focus on Portuguese repertoire, as represented by works of Portuguese composers and, in particular, choral versions of traditional Portuguese music. Its first artistic director, Fernando Moutinho, claimed in 1912 that the Orfeão "should have as its goal the rebirth of Portuguese music, and should present national music exclusively."¹

The African tours of the OUP in the 1950s were carefully organized: metropolitan and colonial authorities contributed to the logistics of sending over 100

¹ Hugo Silva, ed., *Amores de Estudante: Notas Históricas do Orfeão Universitário do Porto* (Porto: Universidade do Porto, 2003), 14.

students to Africa on the two different occasions, and were in attendance at reception and farewell ceremonies. The first tour accompanied a journey denominated “Périplo de África”, a boat-trip around Africa designed as a showcase for Portuguese maritime entrepreneurship, in which the Orfeão Académico of Coimbra, a similar university organization, also participated. Among the Coimbra students travelled Zeca Afonso, who later became one of Portugal’s leading songwriters and singers, associated with the resistance to the dictatorial regime that lasted until the revolution of 1974. The presence of Zeca Afonso is an odd fact, taking into account his subsequent link to resistance movements, but it represents a sort of ‘age of innocence’ outlook that partly characterized contemporary representations and visions of the relationship between Portugal and its colonies.

The 1950s witnessed a marked change in the legislative status of the former colonies, identified henceforth as ultramarine provinces, and of indigenous inhabitants, who were classified as assimilated citizens in some of these territories.² Independence was yet to become a publicly-discussed issue: isolated episodes of mutiny in the 1950s were not widely acknowledged, but led eventually to the creation of pro-independence movements from 1954; even the Portuguese communist party did not assume a clear anti-colonial stance before 1957. The regime’s desire to integrate all colonies into a multi-continental state is evident in the support it lent to visits to Africa such as the Orfeão tours or, in 1950, prior to the 1951 constitutional review that would change the colonies’ status to provinces, to a trip of the Portuguese Feminine Youth, a state-sponsored youth organization.³

Methodology and analysis

This investigation relied on combined methodologies: research of tour-related materials (press reports, official correspondence and documentation, photographs, journey albums, newsletters), interviews to participants and theoretical analysis. The study of these elements revealed a number of issues that are pertinent for the understanding of the role of choral organizations and activities as representative of procedures of cultural identity formation and its relationship with questions of gender, nationalism, cultural transfer, and social interaction within a dictatorial regime. In this specific case, where the contact with the African Other is a significant topic, two aspects were particularly focused, namely the role of repertoire and its contribution for a specific sense of nationalism, and identity formation and transfer processes in a colonial geographical context, marked by the political context.

The programmes presented by the Orfeão in the decade of 1950 were not exclusively focused on Portuguese music; a typical programme of that decade included three parts: the first part presented music by major foreign and Portuguese composers of the Classical Western tradition; the second part consisted mainly of arranged traditional Portuguese choral music; the final part was referred to in programmes as “variedades,” and included musical / theatrical numbers prepared by the students, featuring the groups formed within the Orfeão (tango, Coimbra fado, dances groups, among others).

The inclusion of traditional (albeit arranged) Portuguese music can be analysed within Philip Bohlman’s concept of musical journey and its relation to nationalism in music. His vision of a journey that traditional music, in many European countries, undergoes, from the rural sphere to urban centres, stands for a procedure of “transition from representing the immanent quintessence of the nation to representing the nation

² Fernando Rosas, ed., *O Estado Novo (1926-1974)*, 8 vols., História de Portugal (Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1998), 436.

³ Irene Flunser Pimentel, *Mocidade Portuguesa Feminina* (Lisboa: A Esfera dos Livros, 2007), 95.

itself.”⁴ This attempt at creating national identity paradigms through music can be expanded, in the case of the OUP’s travels, to a concept of national identity transfer to yet another sphere, the sphere of the colonial world, where traditional Portuguese music, represented, for white residents, the re-creation of the continental homeland.

Evidence of the musical journey effects on the colonial sphere are documented in the reviewed press materials and in the interviews, which reflect the interaction between OUP members and the white population in Angola and Mozambique. This interaction was further intensified by participation in set sequences of musical and non-musical rituals that, following Victor Turner’s definition,⁵ could be classified as liminoid activities, such as: the inclusion in all shows of a musical adaptation of the initial section of Camões’ 16th-century epic poem *The Lusiads*, which involved inviting former *orfeonistas* onstage to sing along while using the university students’ black capes; the invitation of an adolescent of a reputed family to be the ‘godmother’ of the group for each performance; offering and receiving ribbons that would be hanged at the group’s ceremonial flag.

The regime’s endorsement of these tours was part of the state’s promotion of carefully selected cultural products, which were socially and politically sanctioned as representative of a national distinctiveness. This cultural policy was associated, in particular, with Salazar’s regime,⁶ the *Estado Novo*, which strived to extend standard cultural values to the multi-continental empire. This uniformity could be associated with Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry as a representation of a difference “that is almost the same.”⁷ Even though this concept is normally applied to the colonial subject, the unfolding of the musical journey to Africa led to similar behaviour patterns in colonizer groups, recognizable in some types of exchange between the student group and colonial white residents. The analysis of the interviews, published materials and official documents reveals constant references to identity issues, represented by the comparison with the black, but also the colonial white culture. Documented reactions by colonizers include repetitive seeking of approval and recognition, interacting with students in family-like manner, and expressing that quintessential Portuguese notion of *saudade* at every possible occasion. As Moore-Gilbert points out, “for Bhabha there is a curiously contradictory effect in the economy of stereotype, insofar as what is supposedly already known must be endlessly reconfirmed through repetition.”⁸ Repetition is also a feature of this musical journey, in which familiar music is repeated in its travels from the rural periphery to the urban centre, and further into the colonial space, “almost the same” but not quite the same anymore.

Stereotype is also pertinent within the context of characterizing the African Other. Documents printed aboard the ships used for these trips, for example, are representative of these views. The official onboard journal of the 1956 trip⁹ included facts and figures for the coastal territories that the ship visited, presenting a view of African populations that ranges from the sympathetic view of the Europeanized black African to frequent references to indigenous propensity for laziness and cannibalism. It contrasts with students’ newsletters from the 1956 and 1959 trips, which focused on

⁴ Philip V. Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History*, ed. Michael B. Bakan, World Music Series (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 86.

⁵ Cited in Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2 ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006; reprint, 2007), 67-70.

⁶ Jorge Ramos do Ó, *Os Anos de Ferro. O Dispositivo Cultural durante a “Política Do Espírito” 1933-1949: Ideologia, Instituições, Agentes e Práticas*, Histórias de Portugal (Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1999).

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 86.

⁸ Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1998), 117.

⁹ Alexandre Lobato, *Périplo de África. Itinerário da Viagem à Volta de África que fiz a Bordo do “Vera Cruz”* (Oficinas gráficas do Pacote Vera Cruz: Companhia Colonial de Navegação, 1956).

antics, pranks and onboard events that configured the students' trip and expressed mechanisms of social cohesion and group rituals.

Conclusions

The OUP's travels to Africa document not only a musical journey, but also reveal mechanisms of cultural identity formation that marked Portuguese colonial society at the onset of the colonial wars, and the role of musical nationalism in fostering this link to the motherland.

The documents, however, also show a carefree group of youngsters, apparently oblivious of the political and social context in the Portuguese ex-colonies: the testimony of an *orfeonist* who returned with the OUP to Angola in 1962, right after the beginning of the colonial war, expressed the same obliviousness about a situation that was by then becoming strained and violent. The group, in spite of close contacts and sharing of selected rituals with the local population, remained centred on itself: testimonies of interviewed participants repeatedly stress friendship and comradeship within the group as the prevailing feelings during these tours.

External awareness seems, in this circumstance, to have rested mainly on the side of the authorities and the white population in Africa. On one hand, we find acknowledgement and support, by official authorities, of the relevance not only of the group, but also of its repertoire and the national identity it conveyed; promoting the OUP's tours was, as acknowledged in official documentation and newspaper reports, part of the regime's multi-continental cultural policy. On the other hand, we have the identification of white African residents with the group, their music, and their youth, revealing a stance that reflects, in many aspects, the process of mimicry that is normally associated with colonized populations.

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