

Listening, learning and making music collectively: the case of Bombos, a Portuguese percussive tradition

Good afternoon everyone,

First of all, I would like to thank the organizing committee for the opportunity of sharing my work. My name is Lucas, I'm a drummer born in Brazil and currently living in Portugal. Although I'm a drum set player, my presentation today concerns a different topic. Today I will introduce you to *Bombos*, a tradition that caught my attention as soon as I started studying Portuguese music. Mixing Ethnomusicology and Sound Studies theory and method, that's the subject of my Ph.D. research I'm still working on.

I need to start conceptualizing the term. In Portugal, Bombos is a word with many meanings.

First: The *Bombo* is a double-headed bass drum made of wood or metal sheet with heads composed of goatskin.

Second: *Bombos*, in the plural, refers to a set of instruments consisting of bombos and *caixas*, smaller drums composed of plastic heads and with wire snares. Bagpipes and diatonic accordions are also present here;

And third, it refers to a predominantly male, intergenerational, and rural-based collective practice presenting up to 20/25 musicians. Currently, we can find more than 350 ensembles active in Portugal.

If, on the one hand, from the very first moment I started my fieldwork, I realized the mobilization of musicians to sustain what they see as valuable cultural heritage, the research I conducted on different sources of folk music literature has shown how scholars ostracized Bombos since the late 19th century. In the light of Ana Maria Ochoa's (2014) decolonial thinking and the "aural turn" she identifies in the field of music studies, I not only found the music centrism to be a real force guiding ethnographers, musicologists and editors dealing with acoustic phenomena of the rural world, but also the impact it had on the domain of Bombos. That's where I get started.

1. The academic modes of listening

Transcription and harmonization processes in the late 19th century

As ethnomusicologist Salwa Castelo-Branco (2010) has written, Portuguese rural music started being transcribed in the 1850s. Through the work of music editors, it first began to circulate in pamphlets sold in the cities of Oporto and Lisbon and, soon after, in popular songbooks. Along with classical and urban songs, rural music was then introduced in bourgeois rendezvous where musicians were hired to play piano arrangements accompanied by a voice who "knew" how to "properly" sing it. Perhaps it's not necessary to remark that a stylized canon will flourish in the following decades. But I want to stress the omissions it gave rise to: it excluded a whole set of cultural manifestations whose sonic features were not in tune with the elites' values of listening. Getting close to rural repertoire meant seeing it through the lens of sheet music, a resource embodying aesthetical requirements those people wanted to be appreciated as music. Because they were 'non-melodic' and 'non-harmonic', there are no significant traces of Bombos in the vast body of printed works.

"Music of rhythm and nothing else", "primitiveness", "music without music" ... or the lack of an appropriate category for listening to percussion?

This becomes even explicit if we take a look at some texts. I will mention only three examples today. In the research published in 1902, musicologist Michelangelo Lambertini reported Bombos in the countryside celebrations. Stressing what he understood as the peasants' preference for "noisy instruments", Bombos were described as an "infernal gathering of several drums who, at the head of processions, invite peasants to take part in the Feast" (Ibid. 47). When performing, they constituted "diabolical orchestras" (Ibid., 47) who made "music without music – everything that is most primitive" (Ibid., 47).

Describing a journey in northern Portugal, ethnographer Alberto Pimentel (2011/1902) also tell us he has watched

the dance of the drums, a truly wild revelry. Imagine four or five drums beating at the same time, and in the middle, the man of the Bombo making it resound with strong blows of a stick, vibrated above the head, above the shoulders, sometimes under the left arm, sometimes the right arm. The pirouettes he was obliged to do to achieve these effects of musical acrobatics, I cannot say. Just seen. Truly comic, the man of the Bombo!
(2011/1902: 257)

Likewise, musicologist Thomaz Borba also reported the music of Bombos was "naturally, a music of rhythm and nothing else" (Thomaz Borba 1907: 834-835).

So, what may we get from all this? Above all, I want to stress the consequences such ethnocentric "modes of listening" (Ochoa 2014; Dominguez Ruiz 2019) may have generated: on the one hand, they led to the suppression of values shaping the practice, of the ethical and aesthetic criteria of musicians, of sensitive kinds of knowledge those people kept in the body; on the other, they resulted in the disengagement with relational forms of knowledge construction. In my fieldwork, I've often been noticing musicians refuting historical labels they still see connected to their activities. That's my friend Jorge Sousa's case, whose voice I bring you now:

here on Bombos, it was always like that: young people could not come to play with us because the groups of Bombos were all seen as a bunch of drunk and ugly people, do you understand? To play diatonic accordions, people used to go to the folkloric ensembles; but, for the Bombos, parents rarely let their children come to play. And many people look at us today and still think that we are all idiots who have nothing else to do in life! But of course, it's not like that! That's a battle we've always had and we're still having so we can change the stereotype of Bombos' player (Interview, Bombos de São Sebastião de Darque, Viana do Castelo, 27/12/2019).

Following John Cage (1973:12), I could start by saying that the disharmony associated with them "is simply a harmony to which many are unaccustomed". It was with that in mind that I thought of three lines to develop my research:

- (i) the first one refers to collaborative writing experiments with people from the field, in which musicians themselves engage reflexively with me on topics concerning their practices;
- (ii) the second one refers to a sound composition project. Inspired by the "ethnography of/in sound" framework (Rice 2018; Ferrarini & Scaldaferrri 2020; Feld 2020), I've been creating sound narratives emphasizing listening as a way of knowing Bombos better. They are available on the Internet if it may interest you;

(iii) the third one refers to my participation in the Grupo de Bombos de São Sebastião de Darque. Since 2019, by playing the *caixa*, I've been participating in their musical and social life. And that's what I will share with you in the last part of my presentation.

2. Taking part in a Bombos ensemble

The Grupo de Bombos São Sebastião de Darque: where and who they are

Bombos São Sebastião was founded in 2005. They are based in Darque, a small village close to Viana do Castelo, the biggest city in the Alto Minho region, northern Portugal. The group comprises approximately 35 individuals, 87% men and 13% women. The ages range from 15 to 65, although most are between 18 and 35. While very few are students, most develop professional activities such as mechanics, supermarket employees, security workers, and others. Unlike the three bagpipers or the accordionist, participants have never had any formal percussion instruction. Perhaps that's why I hear some stating that "we do not know anything of music". Ensembles like São Sebastião work then as a micro-social structure or, if you want, following Etienne Wenger (1999), as a "community of practice" where people learn the values of participation, the codes of conduct, the lexicon to describe what they do musically, the techniques to tune up instruments, the musical repertoires, the physical skills essential to playing and so on. Everything goes from the most to the least experienced in the very environment where they act, since they seldom rehearse before performing.

The ensemble is led by Jorge Sousa, a 40-year-old man who engaged in Bombos during childhood and whose voice we have just heard. Following arrangements on a virtual Facebook chat, everything starts at Jorge's house. That's the point of departure where bombo players will start bandaging their hands, will start carrying instruments from the basement to the car, and then, all together, will leave to play.

Contexts of playing and musical repertoires: the *Festas* and the *melódicas*

The vast totality of Bombos performances is connected to celebratory events. Although taking place throughout the year, months of June, July, and August are the ones with the

highest number. It is precisely in the summer when the *Festas* take place in Portugal. By *Festas* I mean celebrations dedicated to popular saints coinciding with the return of Portuguese emigrant communities in France or Switzerland. Mixing sacred and secular events, the *Festas* occur during one or more weekends. They're organized by residents who schedule activities of music, dance, traditional games, fireworks, and gastronomical and fashion contests for local communities. Once organizers hire Bombos to play on the streets – bombos on the left, caixas on the right, melodic instruments in the front – they are expected to fulfill at least two tasks:

The first one is to announce the beginning of a new celebratory day. Usually, this is made with an act in front of the village's church. Sometimes, as you can see here, we will find many groups performing, each one playing its music resulting in an impressive polyphonic soundscape.

The second one is to follow organizers as they walk from house to house so they can raise money to finance the *Festa*. Music is a central aspect of this ritual. The sound of drums, because in major number, because easily heard in the distance, works as the signal that "knocks" at people's doors. Residents will come out to contribute with money, and some may invite musicians to come in. A table with beverages and food in the yard will be ready for visitors. This protocol will only end at sunset.

Repertoires in these situations consist of *melódicas*, music with bagpipes and accordions in which percussion has an accompaniment role. These are usually pieces in the major key, in 4/4 or 6/8, divided into AABB sections, each with no more than 4 bars. I will show you a video so you can hear it. [0:00- 0:30]

When playing on the streets, they repeat the same tune dozens and dozens of times. "Repetition is therefore a key element. Watching and listening to the companion walking in front of him, one may get the strokes and the correct body movements. That's exactly what new members have done today. [...] In Bombos, it seems to be not that much about variation, but collectively keeping the groove so the public musical function may be

accomplished", I wrote as a fieldnote on my phone at the end of the 25 kilometers walk we all faced when playing in Perre, Viana do Castelo, on April 2022.

Performing a powerful sound: *pesadas, pancadas, and crescendos*

But there's yet a different situation. When melodic ones do not play, percussionists engage in compositions designed for bombos and caixas. This is a kind of "presentational performance", as stated by Thomas Turino (2008), where musicians intend to exhibit their skills. Let me expand on this point.

In a circle, resorting to strokes they call *pancadas*, musicians submit bodies to limits of pain and exhaustion searching for a "powerful sound" when performing the so-called *Pesadas*. *Pesado*, in Portuguese, means heavy. So, *Pesadas*, in the plural and as a feminine word, refers to the whole set of percussive pieces, techniques, and gestures they share. *Pesada Velha* or *Pesada das duas mãos*, *Pesadas das 3 pancadas*, *Pesada das 5 pancadas*, *Pesadas das 7 pancadas* e *Pesada do Grito*, are the ones São Sebastião de Darque and many others play. Each one is made up of polyphonic patterns named after a recognizable sound fragment. "Das 3", "das 5" and "das 7", for example, indicate the number of sequential *pancadas* all accentuate. Caixas will accentuate while playing buzz rolls they refer to as *rufos*.

Variations of tempo, intensity, and volume are crucial aspects here. These are parameters impelling further developments. Following sonorous and corporeal indications by the leader, suddenly the circle closes, two or three bombo players go inside, and, by playing with two hands, the sound result is overwhelming. These are the *crescendos*. "At this moment, we are all on the same wavelength. That's our spectacle of sound and movement!", I still remember Jorge Sousa's words highlighting the intent of playing as loud as possible. It all ends when musicians go back to their original positions. But everything soon restarts, following the same arrangement in which exertion and rest, tension and relaxation, pain and relief dictate the success of a collective enterprise.

Pesadas will take place several times in a *Festa*. Sometimes, they will end after 10 minutes; but sometimes it can take as long as 50 minutes, as I experienced playing with my friends.

I will now show you a short video of us at *Festa da Agonia*, one of the biggest events in Portugal we took part in some weeks ago. You will see an excerpt of "Pesada das três" and one of the crescendo gestures. [2:15-3:00 do video] + Grito

Sound, strength, and endurance: internal sociopolitical arrangements

Participant observation has also been revealing how this musical effort impacts internal sociopolitical arrangements. I will give you one example. The prestige one may acquire depends on how much one mobilizes the body. In addition to Jorge Sousa, some will be then known as *chefes*. That's the case of Miguel Rodrigues, *chefe de bombos*, and Diogo Costa, *chefe de caixas*. They're seen as outstanding musicians, having valued performative responsibilities and also teaching youngsters. Three aspects explain this recognition:

1. The number of years participating in *Festas*;
2. The ability to endure in *Pesadas*;
3. And the strength to produce a "powerful sound".

Moreover, it's interesting to see this will determine their positions on the ground, as I show you here, each one occupying a pre-defined and well-respected place.

Before my final remarks, I want to mention one last point you might have already noticed. There's a question of gender here. I often see men enacting a supposedly biological nature regarding the strength to support and play the bombo. That's why in the São Sebastião de Darque, women play the *caixa*, bagpipes, or carry the flag. But taking a look at other groups, we may find different things. Because I've been also working with "Os Figueiras na Rua", I could meet people such as Virginie Esteves, a young woman who plays the bombo in all *Festas*. And that's what she tells us:

Another example is the case of Eugénia Magalhães. Together with her mother, she founded one of the first exclusively feminine groups in the country. You can find them performing on the Internet if it may interest you.

Final remarks

In this paper, I tried to briefly tell you about the historical, social, and musical aspects of Bombos. Pointing out earlier scholarly efforts, I draw attention to the disjunction between the values shaping musicologists' and ethnographers' auditory perceptions and the values justifying the existence of Bombos. Words such as those academics wrote in the late XIX century reflect the essentialist bias that, throughout the 20th century, has not only contributed to the stigmatization of percussion instruments but of personal and collective biographies. I want to believe things are changing. On an academic level, exciting studies have been emerging nowadays (see Bach 2013 and 2015; Castro 2018); we can also see institutional attempts to place Bombos at the center of tourism, economic or educational development strategies. Even a formal application was recently submitted for the Portuguese Intangible Cultural Heritage platform aiming at safeguarding it.

As a drum set player drawn to Ethnomusicology, taking part in a popular drum ensemble of this kind has been quite gratifying. Playing the caixa has been much more than just picking up the correct sequence, the conceptual structure, or the proper articulation of strokes; it has been much more than just understanding corporeal and sonorous gestures or yet the physical requirements my friends consider necessary so their music may be performed and public functions accomplished. Indeed, it's been a matter of experiencing the profound meaning they all attach to the act of gathering to make music collectively, finding their solutions, learning how best to sound *Festa* after *Festa*, maintaining a joyful disposition every time they hold sticks and, as a result, keeping alive a valuable knowledge they see as representative of their identities. Bombos, in a nutshell, is a meaningful illustration of the value that traditional percussion activities still seem to hold in the lives of XXI-century people in Portugal.