

# In the rhythm of Vagalume: black cultures, dance associations, and nationality in the writing of Francisco Guimarães (1904-1933)

*No ritmo do Vagalume: culturas negras, associativismo dançante e nacionalidade na produção de Francisco Guimarães (1904-1933)*

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## RESUMO

Francisco Guimarães, o Vagalume, foi um dos mais populares cronistas e dramaturgos no Rio de Janeiro da Primeira República. Reconhecido pela posteridade pela publicação do livro *Na roda do samba*, de 1933, nasceu na segunda metade da década de 1870 em uma família de trabalhadores negros. Foi por isso um dos muitos afrodescendentes que, no pós-abolição, tiveram de buscar novos caminhos de sobrevivência e afirmação profissional. Vagalume o fez através de uma produção explicitamente vinculada aos interesses e à linguagem dos trabalhadores negros e mestiços da cidade, cujas práticas dançantes e carnavalescas sempre buscou registrar. Com base em sua trajetória, o artigo se propõe investigar como Vagalume ajudou a definir novas bases para a cultura carioca e brasileira ao longo da Primeira República – em processo que teve na afirmação do samba como ritmo nacional seu resultado mais visível.

Palavras-chave: Francisco Guimarães; culturas negras; identidade nacional.

## ABSTRACT

Francisco Guimarães, known as Vagalume, was one of the most popular journalists and playwrights in Rio de Janeiro during the First Republic. Recognized by posterity following the publication of the book *Na roda do samba* in 1933, he was born in the second half of the 1870s in a family of black workers. Therefore, he was one of the many Brazilians of African descent who in the post-abolition period had to seek new ways of survival and professional affirmation. He did this through a journalistic career explicitly linked to the interests and language of Rio de Janeiro's black working class, whose dances and carnival practices he always tried to register. Looking at his trajectory, this article seeks to investigate how Vagalume helped to define a new foundation for Brazilian culture during the First Republic – a process in which the affirmation of samba as the national rhythm was the most important result.

Keywords: Francisco Guimarães; black cultures; national identity.

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1933 marked a singular moment for Brazilian culture. Under the title *Na Roda do Samba*, Francisco Guimarães, who presented himself as *Vagalume* (firefly), published that year his writings about this music which had already become the favorite of Carioca bars and musical circles (Vagalume, 1933). Although it had been gaining support in Cariocas musical circles since the very beginning of the twentieth century, it was only during the 1920s when that syncopated musicality began to have its value recognized and praised by a large part of the educated world. Vagalume's work represented a landmark in this still recent valorization, capable of helping establish its profile in the middle of a still rapid diffusion process.

Representing, according to the author himself, "a dream turned reality" thanks to the help of a friend, the book was the fruit of Vagalume's familiarity with the African based musicality in the city and its principal subjects. Symptomatically, he opened with "posthumous tributes" to some of the best known names in black cultural production in Rio de Janeiro: the singer Eduardo das Neves, clown and composer who became one of the most famous authors of *modinhas* and *lundus* in the city (Abreu, 2010); the composer Sinhô, whose songs were a great success in bars and carnivals in the 1910s and 1920s (Cunha, 2005); the *carnavalesco* (Carnival artist) Hilário Jovino, said to have the Carioca *ranchos* (Cunha, 2001); and Henrique Assumano Mina do Brasil, an important *alufá* (a type of black Muslim religious leader in Brazil) from the Carioca black community (Lopes, 2004). At a moment when he recognized that samba was being "adopted in *chic* circles," being "tapped out on phonographs," and played on "radio programs," he reflected on its profile based on its direct association with the cultural universe of individuals to whom he intended to pay tribute with his book. Black like them, and with whom he mingled in bars, *terreiros*, and *botequins*, Vagalume thereby gave shape to a book which had the declared "purpose of claiming the rights to samba and paying a respectful tribute to its creators, those who did everything to propagate it" (Vagalume, 1933, p.22).

Although he did not present a history of the musical style, as it was limited to listing a handful of memories and cases linked to black music practices in Rio de Janeiro, Francisco Guimarães proposed to reflect on the process of the formation of samba as a rhythm. This involved differentiating it from the more strictly African musicality of *cateretê*, *batuque*, and *jongo*. Only "after being civilized," he says, would this type of music be accepted as an element of Brazilian culture, capable of presenting the different segments of society. It was

this part of a process of intersecting, of the mixing of different traditions, which Guimarães characterized as the formation of this musical genre.

However, it was not due to Vagalume's work that 1933 deserves to be highlighted in Brazilian social thought. According to the memory projected for decades about national culture, that was the year reflection on nationality would be revolutionized by the young Gilberto Freyre, who published his most important work: *Casa-grande e senzala* (Freyre, 2003). On a path that was different from that taken by many of his predecessors, it was through miscegenation, understood as a positive characteristic of Brazilian cultural formation, that Freyre proposed to interpret the country in his work. It was no longer a stain on the nation, the African and Portuguese inheritance came to be seen by him as a motive of pride, capable of differentiating Brazil from other nations – an argument received with immediate enthusiasm in Brazilian lettered circles, marking a fundamental turnaround in ideas about national identity. As a result, the movement for the construction of what would come to be characterized as Brazilian culture from the 1930s onwards – a *mestiça* or mixed culture, with a strong base of cultural inheritances from enslaved Africans – has been taken since then to be a process of educated discovery. According to this interpretation, intellectuals and literati forged a strong and original image of the nation through the valorization of the supposedly primitive and original elements of its people, in a process in which samba was one of its strongest products (Vianna, 1995; Garramuño, 2007).

Vagalume's book was also published in 1933, five months before the appearance of *Casa-grande e senzala*, which therefore suggests other possibilities of understanding this phenomenon. Although the attempt to characterize samba as a *mestiço* rhythm, formed in the intersection of different musical traditions, at first sight seems to approximate Francisco Guimarães and the perspectives associated with Gilberto Freyre, it was not through History, or even the discovery of a national identity made abroad that he developed his work. To the contrary, his proposal of interpreting samba, already thought of as one of the first symbols of nationality, was the direct fruit of his long experience in the universe of recreational, associative, and religious practices of black workers in Rio de Janeiro, which he had accompanied as a columnist for decades. While many studies have demonstrated the relativity of the novelty of Freyre's 1933 work (Abreu; Dantas, 2007; Lopes, 2009; Dantas, 2010; Pereira, 2010), accompanying Vagalume's trajectory and production in previous decades, in order to understand the universe of references which gave form to his work, seems a good means of investigating with a new focus the same

process – in order to demonstrate how much the affirmation of a *mestiça* image for national culture during the 1920s, for which samba was one of its principal products, was also linked to the experience and agency of black subjects such as Francisco Guimarães.

## VAGALUME'S INVENTION

This history begins on 10 March 1904, when the readers of *A Tribuna* newspaper found on the third page of the paper a new column entitled *Ecoss Noturnos* (Nocturnal Echoes). Signed by a certain Vagalume, the column established a clear counterpoint with the other series in the paper: *Ecoss*, which occupied the important space on the first page with comments about the important political themes of the day. The actual title of the new section thereby indicated its difference in relation to these writings: instead of the more respectable themes dealt with, such as parliamentary debates or the actions of the municipality, it was the Carioca night scene which would be the concern of the columnist for the new space.

In addition to the title of the column, the meaning of this difference was explained in the first column, traditionally used by columnists to present their program (Chalhoub et al., 2005). While not doing this directly, Vagalume presented instead the profile of his work in the first lines of his opening column, in which he acknowledged that the new column was the direct fruit of his work in the previous months in *Jornal do Brasil*, one of the most popular papers in the federal capital (Silva, 1988). Having started at the newspaper in 1898, the young Francisco Guimarães found himself responsible there for less prestigious sections, such as police reports. Seen by the men of letters of the time as of lesser importance, that would remove them from their pedagogical mission of educating readers – which instead could be exercised in their columns or in-depth articles (Pereira, 2004) –, this work as a reporter of petty daily facts served as a means of defining a field of interests for him and his own style of narration. In 1901 this experience led him to start his own column in the newspaper entitled *Reportagem da Madrugada* (Midnight Report),<sup>1</sup> although it did not carry his name. It was a direct report about Carioca nightlife, with an emphasis on police and criminal questions. Although he was working as a reporter, he marked out a specialty, which would come to define his journalistic profile.

It was based on this experience that Francisco Guimarães transferred in 1904 to *A Tribuna* newspaper, in which he started to sign his own column,

under the pseudonym Vagalume – whose tone and focus purposely approximated that of the light news about the universe of the streets. Looking at the same daily themes of Carioca nightlife, narrated in a direct manner, without any great embellishments, he transformed that journalistic practice into his own style, capable of singularizing his columns in relation to the writing of his peers. It is no wonder that the column adopted the subtitle “reporting from midnight,” which directly linked the reader to his previous work in *Jornal do Brasil* – thereby mixing the subjectivity of the column with the supposedly direct perspective of the issues his narrative was concerned with.

The novelty of this effort in relation to his previous writing would be unveiled in the continuation of his opening column, in which he indicated that the new column would encompass the most diverse scenarios of Carioca nightlife – not only of the police stations he had frequented as a reporter, but also cafés and theaters frequented by high society and the small bars and *botequins*. Not restricting himself to the central region, his reports would deal with a wide variety of neighborhoods: “Tijuca, Copacabana, Cascadura, Todos os Santos, Inhaúma, Engenho Novo, Caju, in all these places we think about at the same time without knowing which to them to prefer,” he explained.<sup>2</sup> Such geographic diversity was associated with a social diversity, which led him to focus on various subjects: police, prostitutes, workers, artists, healers, musicians, amongst many other types of people habitually absent from the important spaces of the mainstream press, appear interwoven in his writings as parts of the urban fauna of the Carioca nightlife.

Vagalume was not at that time the only columnist to try to approximate the reader of the large newspapers of the world with the world experienced by black Carioca workers. In different ways, other Carioca newspapers also tried at the beginning of the twentieth century to incorporate cultural practices associated with Afro-Descendants. No matter how much they adopted the cosmopolitan perspective of the valorization of a univocal model of progress based on a European and US example, the attempt to increase sales meant that many newspapers made efforts to incorporate themes and questions capable of attracting the interest of a wide range of readers – both those who wanted to read about questions of relevance to their daily lives and those who were curious about cultural practices of subjects who were distant from them (Pereira, 1997).

Of special importance here are the columns written in *Gazeta de Notícias* from 1903 onwards by the young Paulo Barreto. Under the pseudonym João do Rio, he made a deliberate effort to thematize the world of the streets, whose soul he proposed to look for in columns marked by their “ethnographic

temperament” (O’Donnell, 2008). As was common in other writings of the genre, nonetheless, he adopted a perspective of estrangement, in which he left obvious his distance and judgment in relation to the practices he presented. In an inverse meaning, it was in consonance with the point of view and the experiences of the anonymous inhabitants of the city, especially the *notívagos* (night owls) and *bohemians*, that Vagalume proposed to write his column. Placing himself as part of this social universe which he intended to present, who dwelt in the cheap theaters, the nocturnal cafés, the deserted streets and squares, and the police stations, he described them without either exoticism or prejudice, as he did with the parties and elegant events of Carioca nightlight – a posture which singularized Francisco Guimarães in relation to the other journalists of his time. Therefore, the new column gave itself over to an attempt to treat with equity the different nocturnal spaces of the city, for which it was intended to recognize and valorize subjects and practices which the habitual readers of the mainstream Cariocas broadsheets were used to see as *marginals* or as exotic.

An explanation for this difference can be sought in the actual social origins of Francisco Guimarães. Although he was part of the staff of some of the most important Carioca newspapers, his trajectory did not follow the traditional patterns of the lettered circles of the First Republic, for which reason he was almost forgotten by later studies about the period.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1877 into a family of black workers whom he described as “poor, but hardworking” (Vagalume, 1933, p.241), he accompanied during his childhood the process of the dismantling of the old policies of landed power (Chalhoub, 2003). It was for this reason that many Afro-descendants had to look for new paths of survival and professional affirmation in the post-abolition period.

In Guimarães’ case, this path was paved by the conjunction between luck and the education received in one of the Professional Institutes created to give a future to the young people who benefitted from the *Lei do Ventre Livre*.<sup>4</sup> It was from there that he left to work as an auxiliary on the train on the Pedro II Railway, the current Central do Brasil (Eféghê, 2007). In the middle of the mechanical work he met a journalist covering railway news for a newspaper from the capital. At the indication of the latter, who had recognized the talent of the young man for letters, he managed to start working with the press, helping the reporter with notes about railway events.

Obviously, as was to be expected in a society that had recently escaped from the bonds of landed power, luck or dedication to studies was not enough for an individual such as Guimarães to guarantee his future. He also needed to be able to count on ties of protection which could guarantee that those

predicated could flourish. This was what he achieved in 1893, through his devotion to the republican project of Floriano Peixoto. When the *Revolta da Armada* (Navy revolt) broke out, the young Francisco enlisted as a volunteer in the Tiradentes battalion, which defended the legality of Floriano's rule. After the suppression of the revolt he was appointed an "Honorary Ensign of the Army" (Vagalume, 1933, p.242) – after being awarded the rank of Captain of the National Guard, which he incorporated into his name.

It was as a result of this singular trajectory that in 1896 Francisco Guimarães got a job in *Jornal do Brasil* (Coutinho, 2006), one of the most popular daily newspapers in the federal capital, commencing a trajectory in journalism he would not abandon until the end of his life. Starting with railway news, he gradually assumed tasks in other areas generally considered less important to the newsrooms of the period. He thus moved from the police columns to the section of general news, until he established himself in columns concerned with *Carnaval*, regularly published at the beginning of the year by the newspaper.

Although he arrived in the newspaper world thanks to a combination of luck, studies, and protection networks, it was through his talent as a columnist that he achieved a differentiated space for himself. By singularizing himself in the journalistic scenario of the city, the success of his writings in *Jornal do Brasil* led him to him moving in 1904 to *A Tribuna* newspaper, where for the first time he would have his own column – whose purpose was to make a deliberate effort to translate the practices and customs of the different spaces of Carioca nightlife for the newspaper's well-educated public. From a simple reporter, Francisco Guimarães transformed himself along these paths into an important agent in the process of exchanges and intersections between the world of his readers and the universe of practices and beliefs which he came to represent in his columns – on which, like a *vagalume*, he helped to throw some brief rays of light.

## THE COLUMNIST OF THE SMALL BARS

Among the spaces which he privileged to describe the strengthen and singularity of these practices and experiences unknown in the lettered world, one ended up prevailing over the others in his pen: that of the small dance clubs which had begun to spread through the poor suburbs and neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. Concerned with giving visibility to the recreational and dance practices of black and mixed workers scattered around the city, the

reporter honed himself in the description of dances and *maxixes* held in modest bars of clubs formed by them, valorized in his column as spaces of morality and healthy entertainment.

This was a phenomena which, although still new, could be easily recognized by any contemporary who frequented the Carioca nightlife. At the end of the nineteenth century, Rio de Janeiro was the stage for a powerful dance fever which spread through small clubs and societies dedicated to the organization of dances and parties throughout the city. Based on the elegant model of dance associations represented by large carnival societies, which were located in the central region of the city, these associations proliferated in the poorest neighborhoods, while those with a noted black presence had a special strength. By permitting the local inhabitants to weave and organize their ties of identity and difference, these recreational spaces constituted fundamental elements in experience of many Carioca workers – which made them not only a means of entertainment, but also a channel of expression, transformation, and resignification of their usual customary recreation practices (Pereira, 2010; 2012).

It is no wonder that the subject gradually imposed itself on Vagalume. This is what was clear in the third column of the series, published on 14 March 1904. Amongst other themes, Vagalume dealt with his incursion into Catumbi, where he visited the offices of Yayá me Deixa, one of the many *carnavalescos* clubs formed by low income workers which at that time had begun to proliferate in the city. To the contrary of the coverage of the rest of the press, who preferred to see the activities of these clubs as something for the police columns, Vagalume insisted on showing its integration in the neighborhood. “That *cordão* full of grace, happy, and spirited which during the three days of carnivalesque merriment in honor Momo knew how to conquer the sympathy and applause of the inhabitants of Catumbi,” he explained, acknowledging the support received by the club from the local inhabitants. Similarly, he insisted on allowing the president of the club speak, who insisted on explaining that “the group has very good people as members” – giving the example, to prove this statement, of a newspaper seller who worked on the sophisticated Rua do Ouvidor.<sup>5</sup>

The same type of posture continued to appear in the series of various columns which thematized dances held by other similar small clubs. Visiting two weeks after a party of Paladinos da Cidade Nova, for example, he stated that the dance was “good and warm.” Although he recognized some deficiencies in the musical band which entertained the party, stating that for this reason “the pounding was stronger,” to the great joy of those present. Moving on

afterwards to Club dos Repentinos, in Realengo, he reported that he had also found there “good music, much order, good women, much joy, great jokes and a hearty table.”<sup>6</sup> Days later he talked about the Destemidos Diamantinos, a group organized in the suburb of Santíssimo, described as a “beautiful club” in which he met “very correct” people. What most called his attention, however, was the music played there – which in his words, “would resurrect a dead man.”<sup>7</sup> Writing at a moment when a large part of Cariocas columnists did not tire of criticizing the “immutable melopoeia of tambourines”<sup>8</sup> which characterized black musicality, Vagalume sought to valorize the original syncopated beats which animated these small dances, in which he found a vitality and harmony which owed nothing to the elegant *salons*.

Shown here is the meaning of his writings: approximating readers to practices and customs which they could find strange, due to the equivalence and the integration between them and the cultural forms they sought to valorize. Vagalume made his column a channel of expression in a positive perspective of forms of culture, dance, and music, which began to gestate in the confluence between the sophistication and harmony of the elegant dances of the large clubs and the traditional musical forms of black and mixed workers who frequented the small salons. He thus began to valorize the morality and order of their dances, contrasted in one of this columns with the frequent riots that occurred in the *maxixes* opened by two entrepreneurs. “The *maxixe* is a necessity, but its frequented by an orderly people,” he explained, highlighting that this “was exactly what did not happen in the *maxixe* on Rua do Espírito Santo, because there the owners do not have moral strength”<sup>9</sup> – to the contrary of what was shown in relation to the small dance societies. At a moment in which the republican regime was still trying to exert itself, a process of cultural communication between parts of society with divergent interests and logics was promoted, in a posture which helped to singularize it in the panorama of lettered production of the period.

It was the strength of this singularity, guaranteed by the close relationship that he came to have in his column in *A Tribuna* with this universe of suburban associations, which guaranteed for him for almost two months of daily columns, his success as a columnist. When in May of this year the leadership of the newspaper changed, the prestige Francisco Guimarães had built up allowed him to attempt something more daring. Giving up the newspaper, leaving his column to the care of another columnist, he assumed the role of director of small newspapers aimed at this wide public of the streets – such as *A Trepação*, the first issue of which was confiscated by the police in May 1904, and *O*

*Vagalume*, which lasted longer.<sup>10</sup> The actual name of his longest-lasting paper clarified his connection with the narrative perspective opened by his column “Nocturnal Echoes”: it dealt with the consolidation, as a journalistic program, of the perspective launched in those 1904 columns, which would come to definitively mark the trajectory of Francisco Guimarães.

However, after a few years the difficulties in maintaining these small papers led him back to the newspaper where he had started in journalism. On 22 January 1910, there appeared in the classified ads to *Jornal do Brasil* the announcement of the sale of *O Vagalume*. Although the note stated that the paper was “an extraordinary success, producing a monthly profit of 1:000\$000”, Francisco Guimarães announced that he would sell it cheaply as he “found himself ill.” Nevertheless, his recovery did not last long. Due to his knowledge of the world of the suburbs, he was rehired a little more than four months afterwards by *Jornal do Brasil* to direct its first suburban agency, opened in Engenho de Dentro. With a “popular program,” the aim of the agency was, according to a report in *Revista da Semana*, not just to look for advertising and to collect news in a region often neglected by the large papers, but also to defend its interests – both denouncing the “violence practiced by the authorities in the distant suburb” and to defend “improvements” needed in the suburban area. For this reason it was argued that there was no one better to run the new agency than “this will of iron which everyone knows in Rio de Janeiro with the name of Francisco Guimarães,” a reporter who was then in the middle of “his days of glory.”<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence, *Vagalume* became the legitimate representative of the interests of lower income workers in the suburbs. It was no surprise that he was responsible for writing the sections dedicated to Carnival and the dance clubs scattered around the city. Published daily in *Jornal do Brasil* between 1910 and 1921, his columns systematically brought to the mainstream press, in a manner that was still not very usual, the daily activities of the small clubs and associations from the suburbs and poor neighborhoods. He always opened space for the festivities and parade of groups mostly consisting of black and mixed workers. This was the case of *Macaco é Outro*, a carnivalesque group formed in the house of the famous Tia Ciata, in Praça Onze (Cunha, 2001), whose activities *Vagalume* always made sure to report. In addition to announcing their festivities and meetings, he gave space to the *carnavalescos* from these groups to publish the lyrics of the songs which they would bring to the streets in Carnival – which included verses such as this, transcribed from one of his columns in 1917:

*Há nos fundos de uma gruta  
Um macacão  
Que é nosso chefe, é batuta  
E sabidão*

[Deep in a grotto  
There is a monkey  
Who is our leader, he is tough  
And wise]

*Quando sai a macacada  
O macacão  
Sai na frente da negrada  
O sabidão.<sup>12</sup>*

[When the monkeys go out  
The monkey  
Is in front of the blacks  
The wise]

With allusions that only make sense to those who closely knew the social universe portrayed, verses like these highlighted the conquest of their own space within the mainstream media by those men and women who were part of these small associations. Through Francisco Guimarães' columns, they came to express the force of practices and customs previously invisible to a large part of the reading public of these large papers.

Not limiting himself to reproducing the notes and news he received from these clubs, Vagalume also encouraged and publicized as much as he could their activities – appearing at dances, reporting on their preparations for carnival or announcing all the events linked to it. In 1911 he also held the first *rancho* competition, in order to evaluate, in relation to various items, the beauty of the parades held on the Momo days by these small societies.<sup>13</sup> In addition to giving space to a black musicality which was still not fully accepted by the top of Carioca society, Vagalume showed with this a posture of a sympathetic opening and identification with that universe of practices and experiences he had legitimized and valorized, making himself into an ally of these subjects whose practices and production he had helped to publicize.

Francisco Guimarães thereby defined a model to cover the activities of these clubs which would be imitated by other papers, becoming standard in the large newspapers in the city. Due to this posture, which won him in the

following decades the title “Dean of [Carioca] *Carnavalesco* columnists,”<sup>14</sup> he became one of the best known and most celebrated columnists in the First Republic, counting on the explicit recognition of the members of these small groups. In 1911, the members of Ameno Resedá, one of the best known of these clubs, even released in his honor a song called “Vagalume” – which due to its popularity promised to be “one of the marches of greatest success” that year.<sup>15</sup> Also in 1911, members of the recently created *Carnavalesco* group *Maloca do Tuchá* insisted on hanging a picture of the columnist on their wall – the only one paying tribute to an individual, among others which hailed some of their fellow societies.<sup>16</sup> For having maintained the connection with the social universe in which he praised in 1913 by an editor from the newspaper *A Época* as a “real *caboclo*,” a “great comrade and friend of his friends.”<sup>17</sup> Although columnists like him could be used to receiving tributes from *carnavalesco* clubs and their members, these acts showed that the reception given to Vagalume was very particular, as he was recognized in the clubs themselves as a legitimate representative of their interests.

#### LOOK AT THE SAMBA!

By privileging the activities of these small dance clubs, gradually leaving aside the other forms of journalist action he had done when he first started as a journalist – such as police reports and suburban columns –, Vagalume progressively dived into a singular universe: that of the musicality which emerged out of the modest bars in which he was frequently present. The result is that in his columns Vagalume showed a process of the continuous reworking of musical traditions and beats of an African origin from which the rhythm which years later would come to be consecrated as samba took shape, whose profile he himself helped to shape in his 1933 book.<sup>18</sup> Symptomatic of this is a note published in his column in *Jornal do Brasil* in 1919. It was about a declaration made to him by Donga, one of the composers to whom the invention of samba in Rio de Janeiro was generally attributed. Donga corrected information published previously by the columnist about the influence of Mauro de Almeida, who had been his partner in the production of the song “*Pelo telefone*”:

– *Seu Vagalume*, I am not the son of Mauro, nor is Mauro my father in sambas. He wrote the verses because he wanted to and it is even a really heavy weight, it takes a lot of work to put the music into my head.

You were misinformed when you said that *Maestro* Januário and his nephew the professor instrumented my sambas. It is an injustice to ‘Pechinguinha’.

– So ‘Pechinguinha’..

– It is he who has instrumented my sambas.<sup>19</sup>

As much as musicians, composers, and *foliões* could at that moment treat the columnist with reverent respect, expressed in the formal way he was treated by the young Donga to *Seu Vagalume*, also evident in this citation is that they saw in him a reliable and legitimate channel to divulge their musicality. With a detailed description of the characters of the cultural universe permeated by samba, his reports became a means of contact and communication between distinct cultural universes which increasingly intersected in the mesh of the metropole.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than just discussing the practices and experiences of black and *mestiço* workers, Francisco Guimarães helped to forge new meanings for them, capable of transforming them on the basis of symbolisms that were socially broader. In addition to news and reports about black recreational practices included in his columns, they were also reworked in another type of production which help stimulate Vagalume’s popularity: theater plays, which showed the same type of approximation with the interest of the public which marked his columns. This is what can be noted in 1906, when what was apparently his first theatrical composition was presented: *A Filha do Campo*, written in partnership with the well-known black clown Benjamim de Oliveira.<sup>21</sup> It was, according to the advertisement published at the time, a “dramatic farce in three acts... ornated with 17 beautiful songs.”<sup>22</sup> The fact that it was presented in Circo Spinelli, and not in one of the many theaters in the city, indicated that it was aimed at a socially specific public, probably more familiarized with the circus ring than with the dramatic stages. More revealing than where it was staged, was how long it remained open: the play ran in this circus until the end of 1909.<sup>23</sup> As well as encountering success with his columns, he also made a name for himself as a playwright, an activity he would continue to exercise in an occasional manner over the following decades.

While music had already appeared as a striking element in this first composition, in the continuity of his theatrical production Francisco Guimarães would prepare *enredos* (themes of sambas) whose content would point in an ever clearer manner to the black cultural universe portrayed in his columns. This is what happened in 1921 in the play *O capadócio*, in which small dance societies formed by Afro-Descendant workers played a leading role, such as

*Flor do Abacate*, *Reinado de Siva* and *Recreio das Flores*;<sup>24</sup> and *Iaiá olha o samba*, presented to police censorship in the federal capital in 1923, in which other clubs such as *Ameno Resedá*, *Caprichosos da Estopa* and *Mimosas Cravinas* appeared linked to the music style mentioned in the title of the play.<sup>25</sup>

The simple incorporation of these clubs in the theatrical scene did not represent any novelty. Shortly beforehand in 1912, Luiz Peixoto and Carlos Bittencourt, two journalists from the Carioca ‘upper middle class,’ had written the *burleta* (or musical comedy) *Forrobodó*, which was a great success on the Carioca stages. Its theme was centered on a fictitious dance club frequented by workers from a Carioca middle class community, whose forms of talking and enjoying themselves were satirized in the play. Although its authors managed in this way to give form to the “identity symbols and images for a population who did not recognize themselves in the identity projects prevalent among the elites” (Lopes, 2004, p.74), which apparently guaranteed the success of the play, they did this in a specific perspective: laughing at the recreational forms of others gave shape to the play. In the opposite sense, the compositions of Francisco Guimarães dealt with the incorporation of this world in a vision built from within, without ironies or estrangements, in order to show the strength of his singularity. It was thus an attempt to configure a space of effective expression for this black recreation world, in order to highlight its strength, which presented the novelty of Vagalume’s plays.

This difference was expressed in the image of these clubs represented in his plays. He brought to the fore many existing recreational societies, putting their members on stage with their songs and dances – something especially strong at a moment when black characters were still represented by white actors with blackface (Gomes, 2004) –, and made them the climax of his shows, and not just a simple comic ambiance. With this he presented with to a wider audience the strength of cultural productions which were no longer restricted to the space of the exotic, configuring it as the result of an original process of preparation whose strength was hailed in his theatrical compositions. Vagalume thus promoted an operation with a double meaning: while on the one hand he tried to attract and gain the sympathy of those who frequented these clubs for his plays, in order to guarantee their success, while on the other he helped to define for them a positive profile recognizable beyond the social circuits they frequented.

As a result, Francisco Guimarães made these clubs a valuable element not only of the universe of black cultures through which they were created, but also the city itself – which had in carnival one of its principal elements of

identity. “They say and it is a fact, that Cariocas give Carnival the *cavaquinho* [a type of ukele],” said one of the characters in *Iaiá olha o samba*, while Pierrot recognizes that “the Carioca *foliões* are the most devoted admirers of Momo.” The same character proposes for this reason to show in the play “the strength of the marrow of Cariocas, and of the *mocotó* of the creoles” – in a still original association between the black world and the identity of the city itself. Not by chance, Rio de Janeiro had in the play as one of its greatest symbols, one the rhythms forged in these small bars: samba. “Listed majesty and judge the value of this ‘*provocativérica*’ and ‘*molimoléfica*’ dance”, Arlequim asked Rei Momo:

*Iaiá olha o samba...*  
*Tão bom que ele é*  
*Nos faz turumbamba*  
*Na ponta do pé*  
[Iaiá look at the samba...  
So good that it  
Made us *turumbamba*  
On the tips of our toes]

Valorized as an element capable of singularizing Rio de Janeiro in the middle of the empire of *folia*, samba was affirmed as a positive product of Carioca cultural life. To distance it from the danger often associated with the circles which produced it, the lyrics of the song highlighted that it was only in the feet that he caused ‘*turumbamba*’ – a synonym of disorder and confusion in Carioca slang.<sup>26</sup> However, not even for this did it stop being directly linked in the play to the social universe of the small clubs formed by black workers. It was due to the fact that the rhythm was fruit of this world that the play ended with the saluting of some of these clubs, who came on stage in the finale – such as *Ameno Resedá*, which was “the greatest glory of the small carnival”, or *Reinado de Siva*, formed by “brave and wild people.”

By helping to define a positive image of types of music such as samba, Vagalume became a central piece in a growing circuit of cultural communication through which the recreational practices of black workers came to have a greater role in the mainstream media. Although he was no longer alone in this process of the valorization of the rhythm, now being praised by columnists with very diversified social profiles, the singularity of his position, matured since his 1904 columns, was expressed in the active role attributed in this process to subjects who were part of these small dance clubs – who were

responsible in his conception for the invention of those rhythms which re-worked the ancestral musical traditions of Afro-Descendent workers in order to give them a palatable form for other social groups. Far from diluting the strength and singularity of black cultures, the transformation of samba into a musical style capable of representing the city and the country itself thereby represented, in the eyes of Vagalume, a positive affirmation of its vitality.

Without restricting the universe of the music, this was a position matured in other dimensions of his reflection on the social inclusion of blacks. This was what was noted in 1923, when Robert Abbot, editor of the largest circulating black newspaper in the United States, gave a talk in Rio de Janeiro about racial segregation and its problems, at the invitation of the Center of the Federation of Men of Color.<sup>27</sup> Abbot showed interest in Brazil, seeing in the country a racial reality different from the scenario of exclusion and prejudice which marked US society. Even though Francisco Guimarães had felt the power of local racism, having rooms denied to him in some of the largest hotels in the country, he made the Brazilian case a counterpoint to the explicit strength of racism and segregation in the United States (Seigel, 2009). This was what was reaffirmed in the congress held in Rio de Janeiro, whose title pointed to the valorization of something seen from the foreign eye of Abbot as a Brazilian peculiarity: “The true democracy is Brazilian, because it rests on humanitarian principles, established by human equality.”<sup>28</sup> The ambience of integration and intermixing seen in Brazil, defined by one of the journalists who covered the event as an example of “ethnic democracy” was thus the counterpoint to the US example of the radical separation between the races –which “kept the two racial portions side by side and irreconcilable.”<sup>29</sup>

Although they were criticized by many activists at the time, especially those represented by the São Paulo black press, Abbot’s words seem to have been well received by Francisco Guimarães. According to the reports of contemporaries, as well as being “one of those who received Abbot,” he was also “present in all the tributes paid to him” (Efege, 2007) – showing that he was not concerned with the latter’s integrationist position. Actually by valorizing the processes of exchange and sharing among races, Abbot pointed to a path similar to what had been tried previously by Vagalume: the valorization of integration based on intermixing and contacts, which would be a legitimate means of the social affirmation of the strength of black cultures. Although his insistence on valorizing a black culture often attacked by his colleagues in the press showed that he was distant from any conception of ‘ethnic democracy,’ it was through a similar logic that he would help to affirm in his writings the

value of cultural practices which were then hailed by others as an authentic foundation of national culture. It was thereby clear that it was not in an unthinking manner that he incorporated in his columns subjects linked to the experience of black and mixed workers of his time.

It was as a result of this fight in favor of the valorization of the cultural practices of black communities that Francisco Guimarães witnessed in those years the force achieved by rhythms that came from African musical influence. Actually several of the principal musicians who started to have their names associated with the formation of samba in the middle of the 1910s had received their musical initiations in the bars of these small clubs. For example, in a note published by *Jornal do Brasil* in July 1915 about a dance held by *Fidalgos da Cidade Nova*, it was stated that this would be enlivened by a “choro of strings led by the expert flautist Pexenguim and the brace columnist Sinhô on the piano”<sup>30</sup> – a direct reference to composers who would be later recognized as fundamental references for the establishment of samba. Pixinguinha in fact had had his first experience as a musician a few months before at the age of 15 in the carnival parade of *Sociedade Dançante Filhas da Jardineira* in which he played his flute (Cabral, 2007, p.19). As Francisco Guimarães recognized in 1933, it was in clubs such as *Caprichosos da Estopa*, *Flor da Lira*, *Flor do Abacate* and *Recreio das Flores* where the “people of the *roda do samba*” (samba circle) had been trained, who were “serving as a foundation or a mainstay for these small societies” (Vagalume, 1933, p.134).

It thus does not seem by chance that in 1923 Francisco Guimarães celebrated his birthday in a party in Circo Spinelli, in which some of the best known composers associated with samba in this period, such as Sinhô and Caninha,<sup>31</sup> took part. Seen by musicians and the members of the many dance clubs scattered across the city as a legitimate defender of their interests, in the 1920s he would reap the fruits of his long history in defense of the cultural practices of the world of black Carioca workers – which transformed him into a singular columnist in the middle of the lettered Carioca world. At a moment in which men of letters in the federal capital were enchanted by a radical cosmopolitanism based on a European model, which sought in the large European capitals the cultural model to be pursued in Rio de Janeiro (Sevcenko, 1989; Needell, 1993), it was through the deliberate valorization of cultural practices that were often condemned by their peers that Vagalume won recognition.

However, this valorization occurred in a specific perspective. Far from taking these practices and customs as elements of affirmation of an exclusive ethnic identity, with an essentialist nature, he made the strength of dances and

songs, which he did not tire of propagandizing, a means of affirming the legitimacy and vitality of African cultural heritage adapted and integrated in the new times. Vagalume could in this way present them as part of the modern image of the nation which was trying to be built at the beginning of the 1920s, albeit from a very specific viewpoint – at a moment when other actors began to discover in the primitivism of popular traditions the mark of singularity capable of turning national cultures modern (Garramuño, 2007) –, the writings of Francisco Guimarães showed that there was nothing casual about this discovery – it was the fruit of a long struggle for legitimacy waged by him and the men and women of his social milieu.

It was thus at the beginning of the 1930s, in the middle of controversies which tried to defined in a univocal manner the form and origin of the musical forms by then consecrated as the national rhythm, that Francisco Guimarães decided to defend this history with the book *Na roda do samba*. Fruit of a long history of cultural connections and clashes which had one of its principal agents and witnesses in Vagalume, the book was concerned with valorizing the agency of blacks in the configuration of that musical style capable of representing nationality. Far from seeing himself as a unique subject in this process, as if he were a type of cultural mediator redefining the directions of nationality, it was the many musicians, dancers, and anonymous *foliões* who participated on a daily basis in the dance universe portrayed in his columns and plays to whom the credits for the creation of the rhythm were attributed. Vagalume's writing permits us to understand how, from the point of view of the black and mixed men and women like him, the process of the affirmation of this new image of connected nationality occurred from the 1920s onwards – which had as one of its supports the syncopated musicality gestated in the small bars, whose echoes we can still try to hear beyond the filters of modernist memory.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Reportagem da madrugada”, *Jornal do Brasil*, 9 abr. 1901.

<sup>2</sup> “Ecos noturnos”, *A Tribuna*, 10 mar. 1904.

<sup>3</sup> One of the rare exceptions in this sense is the book by COUTINHO (2006), which focuses on the emergence of carnivalesque columns linked to the ‘popular’ world.

<sup>4</sup> According to SCHUELER (1999), “the concern with the education of poor children and, consequently, proposals for the creation of schools, agricultural colonies, workshops, and professional institutes, were products of discussion and of the search for alternatives to resolve the problem of the so-called ‘transition from slave to free labor,’ especially in the post 1871 context.”

<sup>5</sup> Vagalume, “Ecos noturnos”. *A Tribuna*, 14 mar. 1904.

<sup>6</sup> Vagalume, “Ecos Noturnos”. *A Tribuna*, 4 abr. 1904.

<sup>7</sup> Vagalume, “Ecos Noturnos”. *A Tribuna*, 18 abr. 1904.

<sup>8</sup> Américo Brasiliense, “O carnaval no Rio”. *Kosmos*, fev. 1907.

<sup>9</sup> Vagalume, “Ecos noturnos”. *A Tribuna*, 21 mar. 1904.

<sup>10</sup> *Arquivo Nacional*, GIF1 6c 127; e *Gazeta de Notícias*, 24 nov. 1904.

<sup>11</sup> “Vida suburbana”. *Revista da Semana*, 1º maio 1910.

<sup>12</sup> “Macaco é Outro”. *Jornal do Brasil*, 2 jan. 1917.

<sup>13</sup> “Carnaval”. *Jornal do Brasil*, 12 fev. 1911.

<sup>14</sup> “Morreu Vagalume, o decano dos cronistas carnavalescos”. *A Noite*, 10 jan. 1947.

<sup>15</sup> “Notas Diversas”. *Jornal do Brasil*, 7 jan. 1911.

<sup>16</sup> “Grupo Carnavalesco Maloca do Tuchá”. *Jornal do Brasil*, 7 jan. 1911.

<sup>17</sup> “Notas carnavalescas”. *A Época*, 30 jan. 1913.

<sup>18</sup> In relation to the analogous processes of “intermixing and cultural creation” through the African musical inheritance, see MARTIN, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> “Indiscrições”, *Jornal do Brasil*, 11 jan. 1919.

<sup>20</sup> Without being limited to samba, this impulse is present in various other subjects dealt with by Francisco Guimarães in his writings – as in the case of Afro-Brazilian religiosity analyzed by him in January 1929 in the newspaper *A Crítica* in a series of stories entitled “Mistérios da mandinga”.

<sup>21</sup> In relation to Benjamim de Oliveira, see SILVA, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> “Circo Spinelli”. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 10 maio 1906. Then on stage in Largo da Pólvora, Niterói, the play reached the federal capital the following year, when the same circus performed in Boulevard São Cristóvão. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 18 abr. 1907.

<sup>23</sup> *O Paiz*, 15 dez. 1909.

<sup>24</sup> *A Noite*, 30 ago. 1921; e “O capadócio”, *Arquivo Nacional*, Serviço de Censura e Diversões Públicas, n.343.

<sup>25</sup> “Iaia olha o samba”, *Arquivo Nacional*, Serviço de Censura e Diversões Públicas, n.433.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. PEDERNEIRAS, 1946, p.64.

<sup>27</sup> “A verdadeira democracia – Uma conferência do Dr. Robert Abott”. *Correio da Manhã*, 6 mar. 1923.

<sup>28</sup> “Vida social. Conferências”. *O Paiz*, 13 mar. 1923.

<sup>29</sup> “Democracia Étnica; mas politicamente uma ficção democrática”. *ABC*, 17 mar. 1923.

<sup>30</sup> *Jornal do Brasil*, 3 jul. 1915.

<sup>31</sup> *O Imparcial*, 26 jan. 1923.

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