Bandidos de Cristo: Representations of the Power of Criminal Factions in Rio’s Proibidão Funk

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ABSTRACT: This article draws on ethnographic research and theories of ideology to explore the cultural and rhetorical context of Brazilian proibidão funk, or prohibited rap music, and the usage of this music by the Comando Vermelho criminal faction to strengthen its hegemony in the favela of Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Gangsters from this faction sponsor large-scale, outdoor street dances known as bailes de comunidade, and use them as platforms to stage their power. They also promote the production of clandestine rap songs such as “Bandidos de Cristo” (“Bandits of Christ”), which are recorded live at the dances by the drug traffickers and disseminated in the favela on bootleg CDs. Such clandestine songs are not played on the radio or available in stores. Through these dances and songs, drug traffickers in Rocinha represent themselves, with utopian and messianic overtones, as social bandits and the legitimate defenders of their community.

RESUMEN: Este artículo utiliza la investigación etnográfica y diversas teorías sobre la ideología para explorar el contexto cultural y retórico del funk proibidão, es decir, de las canciones raps prohibidas, y los usos que hace de esta música la facción criminal Comando Vermelho para garantizar su hegemonía en la favela de la Rocinha en Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. Integrantes de esta facción patrocinan grandes bailes al aire libre, conocidos como bailes de comunidad, y los utilizan como escenarios para representar su poder. También promueven la producción de raps clandestinos como “Bandidos de Cristo,” que son grabados en vivo en los bailes por los narcotraficantes en CD piratas. Estas canciones no son tocadas en la radio ni son vendidas en las tiendas. Por medio de estos bailes y canciones, narcotraficantes en la Rocinha se representan a sí mismos, con tonos utópicos y mesiánicos, como bandidos sociales y defensores legítimos de su comunidad.
Introduction

As a form of the popular culture of favelas, Rio’s funk music is as multi-dimensional and ambiguous as the social reality of the favelas from which it comes and is often misunderstood by outside observers and vilified in the media. Since its beginnings, its violent reputation and overt sexuality have made Brazilian funk one of the most polemical musical practices in the world. Brazilian funk lyrics treat a diverse range of themes, appealing to violence and raw sexuality one moment, then romance, brotherly love, peace, and faith in God the next. Incorporating countercultural aspects of the international Black movement and world hip hop and fusing them together with the social formation, or culture, of these favelas, Brazilian funk has evolved into a rich musical culture characterized by irony, complex maskings, and subversive messages and practices.1

Since the late 1980s, Brazilian funk has become immensely popular with young people from the favelas, or hillside slums, of Rio de Janeiro and the city’s other poor neighborhoods and has produced many talented artists, vibrant music, dances, and shows. On the surface this somewhat deafeningly loud music—with its heavy Miami bass style sound, cheap keyboards, and low-end drum machines—is deceptively childlike and simple. Vocal delivery is often rough and unpolished. Despite the similarities of funk to hip hop, rapping is actually rare in funk music, and instead funk songs are typically sung melodically in ways approximating, or even in imitation of current pop hits, samba, and forró melodies. Singers either perform alone or in duos, sometimes yelling more than singing, in hoarse throaty voices, chanting out refrains reminiscent of the mass cheers at the soccer games in the Maracanã stadium on the north side of Rio.

Rhythmically, Brazilian funk is comprised of a heavy, bass-driven electronic blend of beats, sound effects, and samples, often borrowing beats from Miami bass, techno, and early hip hop. Indeed, to this day, a vast majority of Brazilian funk songs are based upon the electro funk style created by hip hop progenitor Afrika Bambaataa on his TR-808 programmable drum machine and released on the 1982 single “Planet Rock.” Following the example of hip hop DJs, Brazilian funk DJs sample and borrow sounds of everything from machine gun fire and other explosions, to cows mooing and digitally altered voices. Brazilian funk derives its name from the American funk music of the late 1960s by artists such as James Brown, and of the early 1970s by groups like Parliament-Funkadelic, even though it has evolved over the years into a vastly different style. Over time, Brazilian funk has developed independently of American funk and hip hop, although like the latter it is an almost exclusively electronic style. Brazilian funk, which has developed primarily
in Rio de Janeiro, has also evolved independently of the Brazilian hip hop movement, which is centered predominantly in São Paulo.

In recent years, powerfully armed criminal factions have battled each other and police for control of Rio’s favelas squatter towns. As a result, these communities have become some of the mostly intensely disputed terrains in the growing crisis of crime and violence in Brazil. Rio’s funk dance parties, known as bailes funk and held in favelas, are a vibrant and important part of Rio’s urban cultural scene and places in which a very complex, rich, and empowering musical practice is experienced by thousands of young people each week. At the same time, the bailes funk of the streets and dance halls of Rio’s favelas are intrinsically connected to the realities of the undeclared war between the Brazilian state and organized crime. Frequently, these bailes are sponsored and paid for by Rio’s criminal factions and become places for the staging of the identity of favela gangsters and of the relationship of these gangs to the larger favela communities.

At these dances, a style of funk songs known as proibidão has become popular, in which homage is paid to favela gangsters and their acts and power are glorified. The lyrics of these songs contain complex images and codes that have arisen through the ideological processes that support the governance and power of criminal factions. Proibidão songs are literally “prohibited” and not available in stores nor played on the radio since they are in violation of two laws of the Brazilian Penal Code: Article 286, which makes it illegal to incite people to violence; and Article 287, which prohibits making an apology of crime. Instead, proibidão songs are sung and recorded live at the bailes and distributed on clandestine CDs and tapes throughout the favelas and, to a lesser extent, other parts of the city.

In this article, I explore the cultural and rhetorical context of Brazilian proibidão funk songs in the favela of Rocinha, one of the most critical favelas in Rio, and the usage of this music by criminal factions to strengthen their hegemony in that community. In my analysis, I examine the large-scale, outdoor street dances known as bailes de comunidade, which are sponsored by these drug gangs and used as platforms for the staging of their power. I also offer close readings of the lyrics of some important clandestine songs, such as “Bandidos de Cristo,” “Os Dez Mandamentos da Favela,” and “Cachorro,” which exemplify the representation of favela gangsters in proibidão funk—with utopian and messianic overtones—as social bandits and the legitimate defenders of their communities.

**Studies on Brazilian Funk**

Although Rio’s funk music scene has been studied since the mid-1980s by both Brazilian and foreign observers, little work has been done on
the question of the proibidão subgenre. The first scholarly work done on funk, *O Mundo Funk Carioca*, published in 1988 by Hermano Vianna, was an anthropological study focusing upon the infamous *corredor da morte*, or corridor of death, a practice occurring in bailes funk involving physical confrontations between large groups of young men from different neighborhoods. Although most of the participants of such events were unarmed, gruesome injuries and even deaths sometimes resulted. Such practices are no longer common in funk culture and are strictly prohibited in the bailes de comunidade sponsored by criminal factions in favelas. Since most funk songs at the time of his study were in English and proibidão had not yet appeared, Vianna did not address this type of music or the usage of funk musical culture by drug traffickers in Rio’s favelas.

Another pioneer scholar of funk who explored connections between funk music and violence was George Yúdice. In his provocative thought piece, “The Funkification of Rio,” published in 1994, Yúdice argued that the rise of Rio’s funk culture was indicative of a growing displacement of national identity and of affirmations of local citizenship in subgenres of Brazilian music (197). In the article, Yúdice attempted to establish a connection between the culture of funk music and the famous *arrastões*—the great looting rampages that occurred along the beaches and beachfront neighborhoods of Rio’s Zona Sul in October 1992. Although Yúdice’s work was written before the widespread usage of funk lyrics in Portuguese, and before the appearance of proibidão funk, the connections he makes between the dissatisfaction of the favela youths and the popularity of funk remain relevant today.

The most comprehensive treatment of funk to date has been Micael Herschmann’s work in the area, whether as editor of the 1997 anthology *Abalando os Anos 90: Funk e Hip-Hop: Globalização, Violência e Estilo Cultural*, or his 2000 book, *O Funk e o Hip-Hop Invadem a Cena*. Despite the presence of hip hop in both titles, these works actually treated the style very little, dedicating much more space to the analysis of Brazilian funk. *Abalando os Anos 90* contained a wide range of articles, including two articles related to U.S. hip hop by Olívia Gomes da Cunha and the other by Tricia Rose, and an article in which Livio Sansone compared the Brazilian funk of Rio de Janeiro with a separate musical practice, also referred to as funk, from the Northeastern city of Salvador. The book also includes an article by Herschmann himself which would later serve as the basis for a full-length book, *O Funk e o Hip-Hop Invadem a Cena*, an insightful work that was primarily a communications study of the process of the vilification of funk in Brazilian media sources.

A recent work that does specifically treat proibidão is the thorough and well-written history of the rise and evolution of funk in Rio by journalist Silvio Essinger, titled *Batidão: Uma História do Funk*. In Chapter 11, “Rap das Armas,” Essinger traces the history of proibidão from its beginnings
in 1995 within the context of the rise of Rio’s drug cartels and their presence in the city’s favelas. Essinger emphasizes the point of view that proibidão is more of a representation of the real-life world of Rio’s favelas than an apology of crime, quoting several major proibidão MCs to that effect. Essinger’s treatment of proibidão comes as a sober, poignant exploration of violence and funk more generally, although it is not within his more journalistic purpose to consider the ideological dimensions of proibidão and drug trafficking more closely.

Rio’s Criminal Factions and Favelas

With a diminished presence of state agencies, including police, many residents of the favela squatter towns of Rio de Janeiro take recourse to alternative and even illegal means of meeting their needs. Residents of Rio’s favelas compensate for the insufficiency of the formal infrastructure in their communities through a variety of strategies, such as tapping into supplies of water and electricity from surrounding areas and even organizing their own trash removal services. One of the most notorious and hotly debated aspects of this informal social order is the central role played by factions of drug traffickers in the governance of Rio’s favelas. Much of Rio’s lucrative drug trade is conducted from favelas, and they often become battlegrounds as enemy factions fight for control of them. Conflicts with police are also common—the consequence of the frequent attempts by the Brazilian government to root out the criminal factions and affirm state power in the favelas. Even so, the gangsters’ arsenal of weapons, their intimate knowledge of the labyrinth-like makeup of favelas, and the reluctance of favela residents to cooperate with police have left the city’s drug gangs firmly entrenched in many favelas.

In recent decades, Rio’s principal criminal factions—the Comando Vermelho (CV), or Red Command; Terceiro Comando (TC), or Third Command; and the Amigos dos Amigos (ADA), or Friends of the Friends—have gained an increasingly important role in the city’s favelas (Neuwirth 2005, 256). Continual conflicts between these factions and police in favelas have intensified the debate about the growing crisis of violence and social exclusion in Brazil. Complicating the matter is the fact that the number of favelas in the city is growing; currently, there are well over 700 areas classified as favelas by Rio’s municipal government. In a small number of the city’s favelas, such as the favela of Rocinha, the presence of the criminal factions is so strong that the police do not enter at all outside of the large-scale operations of special forces, such as the Military Police’s BOPE (Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais) and the Civil Police’s CORE (Coordenadoria de Recursos Especiais). These
are often accompanied by armed helicopters, an infamous armored car known as the Caveirão, or Big Skull, and sometimes reinforcements from the Federal Police.⁴

Without overstating their importance in the leadership of favelas or referring to them as “narco-dictatorships,” it can be said that these criminal factions do execute some form of governance in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.⁵ Although this governance may be considerably more limited than is often assumed, the factions do engage in some police work, charitable activity, decision making, and conflict resolution within their communities.⁶ Still, like the social terrain in which they operate, these factions display a highly complicated and ambivalent nature. On the one hand, outside of their favelas they may be involved in heinous crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and bank robbery. In contrast, in their own communities the factions typically impose a strict martial law, prohibiting street crime and brutally punishing those who commit offenses. They also provide some assistance to those in need of food, medicine, or clothing, and may even pave roads, maintain soccer courts, and fund day-care centers in their favelas. Criminal factions often sponsor various social and cultural activities as well, including enormous funk dances that bring together crowds of thousands of people in the streets and dance halls of their communities.⁷

Scholars of crime and poverty in Brazil have sought for years to understand the nature of the power of these criminal factions in Rio’s favelas. It is clear that their governance depends in some way on the cooperation and support they receive from the residents of their favelas and the refusal of these residents to cooperate with police. What is less clear is whether these residents support the criminal factions for fear of violent reprisal or for some cultural or ideological identification, such as the identification of drug traffickers by the population with some notion of the “social bandit,” in the sense used by Hobsbawm.

Hobsbawm argues that some outlaws successfully promote themselves as legitimate defenders of the poor and disenfranchised against unjust and abusive regimes. For Hobsbawm, it is more important that the local population perceive the outlaws as social bandits and as rebels working to right the wrongs of a corrupt social order, and that the outlaws actively pander to this view, than that the outlaws actually have any sort of real commitment to making social improvements. Such a distinction is crucial not only because it allows for a more sophisticated, Machiavellian understanding of politics on the part of the outlaws, but it also indirectly implies some power of the local population to influence the behavior of the outlaws according to the outlaws’ need to successfully sell themselves as social bandits. This argument has important implications for the question of the representation of Rio’s criminal factions in proibidão funk music in
that it emphasizes the perceived—as opposed to the real, objective—relationships of these factions with the populations of the favelas in which they operate and exist.

Anthropologist Alba Zaluar, widely cited as a definitive expert on the nature of crime in Brazil, has argued that, since favela gangsters in Rio have no intention of righting wrongs or making reforms on behalf of the poor and oppressed, they should not be regarded as social bandits. According to Zaluar, the power of the gangsters does not come from the sort of agreement with residents that would be typical of traditional paternalism and would be “...based on a social consensus about who should be obeyed in what spaces and by virtue of what values.” Instead, she argues, the power of Rio’s criminal factions depends upon the force of their arms and the fear they inspire among the residents of their communities.

Despite the thoroughness of Zaluar’s lengthy research and the strength of her argument, I do believe that there is some consensus about the authority of Rio’s criminal factions in favela communities and that their power is not solely based upon fear but rather, like that of all forms of governance, upon a hegemonic process involving specific ideological strategies. Since Rio’s criminal factions are illegal organizations operating in squatter towns, evidence of these ideological strategies is obviously not to be found on television networks like Brazil’s popular Globo or in the country’s newspapers and journals. The text, codes, and cultural artifacts produced by the social order of criminal factions in favelas are available only in practices that, like the gangsters themselves, operate outside the hegemony of the Brazilian state, in some underground and illegal form.

Proibidão Funk in the Favela of Rocinha

Since 1990, I have made frequent trips between my native United States and Brazil, and my stays in Rocinha have added up to over five years. During this time, I have been welcomed into the community as both a neighbor and an educator, and welcomed into its funk scene as both fan and scholarly observer. Such a fortuitous experience has given me ample opportunity to observe the workings of both the culture of funk and criminal factions in that favela from very close up as I evolved from community resident and casual observer into a more formal, academic researcher. Eventually, I began engaging in formal ethnographic research, conducting scores of interviews and field visits to bailes funk and other musical events in Rocinha.

For many reasons, as it turns out, being in Rocinha over the years positioned me in the right place and time in terms of studying both funk
music and the culture of drug trafficking and crime in Rio. Rocinha is home to some of the most influential and important MCs and composers in the history of funk—such as duo Júnior and Leonardo, MC Galo, Dolores, Fornalha, and Cacau—and all the famous DJs and MCs from other places in Rio—such as DJ Marlboro, Catra, duo Cidinho and Doca, and Tati Quebra-Barraco—frequently come to do shows. Also, Rocinha gives host to a wide variety of types of bailes funk, and many fans of funk live in Rocinha. In fact, Rocinha has really been at the epicenter of funk since its beginnings and certainly ever since funk songs in Portuguese came to dominate the scene. Furthermore, just as Rocinha is crucial to Rio’s funk music scene, as one of the largest and most critical favelas in Rio, Rocinha is also a place where the presence of organized crime is extremely strong. According to the article “O Confronto entre o Poder do Estado e do Crime,” Rocinha is one of Rio’s three most heavily armed favelas. Its enormous size and location in the richest part of the city give Rocinha tremendous importance in the Rio drug trade.

Of course, Rocinha is much more than drugs and drug trafficking. A large number of organizations besides the drug gang provide Rocinha with leadership from various sectors, including religious groups, the neighbors’ associations, several NGOs, and a thriving business community that even has its own commercial association. There is also a great amount of government activity and that of relatively big businesses such as Telemar, Light, and TV ROC that link Rocinha economically and politically to the outside city. Also, the entertainment industry in Rocinha is important in its own right, as well as sports and fitness-related organizations. Additionally, there are a Bob’s Burgers, a Deplá Kodak store, and two banks. This broad-based leadership and the multiple layers of the political makeup of Rocinha make it hard for its drug traffickers to establish any sort of “narco-dictatorship.” Instead, Rocinha’s gangsters must operate within a complex social terrain in which their political abilities gain them as much or even more advantage than the force of their arms. If the traffickers are successful at navigating this terrain, they can profit; if not, they will be in danger of being overthrown and replaced.

Rocinha today is in some ways a typical Zona Sul beachfront neighborhood—a place of surfers, weightlifters, groups of jiu-jitsu fighters, women in bikinis and men in sungas (Speedo-type lycra swimsuits)—and there is a constant flow of people walking to the beach to tan, to swim, to roller blade, to jog, and to play futevôlei (a cross between soccer and volleyball) and soccer. With its residents constantly tuned in to TV networks like Globo via satellite dishes and the two Rocinha cable companies, and with its close proximity to the golf courses and elite shopping mall of São Conrado, few favelas in Rio are in closer contact with the Brazilian consumerist dream. Even so, Rocinha still suffers today
from severe inadequacies in urban infrastructure, educational resources, health care, transportation, and employment opportunities, a fact that renders life in Rocinha difficult for the majority of its residents. Additionally, Rocinha is still a generally noisy, overcrowded, and polluted place in which drugs and alcohol are often abused openly in the middle of the streets and alleyways.

Without a doubt, one of the harshest and most traumatizing aspects of life in Rocinha is the constant presence of heavily armed drug traffickers and police and the frequent outbreaks of violence that occur between them. It is not uncommon for battles involving machine guns and even hand grenades to take place in Rocinha, sometimes involving police helicopters and the BOPE’s semi-tank, the Caveirão. One of the most dramatic instances of this violence occurred in 2004 when, in a now infamous turf war that broke out in April of that year, Rocinha switched criminal factions from the CV to the ADA. The change has caused the intensification of violent conflicts in Rocinha between local gangsters, those from the nearby favela of Vidigal, and police that has continued at some level until the present.

The Baile Funk as a Staging of Power

In the favela of Rocinha, the drug traffickers pay for almost all the major weekly bailes funk. Every Friday there is a baile in the street known as the Valão (literally, “large, open sewage canal”) and Saturdays one on Rua Um at the quadra, a sort of gym-like practice area for the samba school, Acadêmicos da Rocinha. For events like New Year’s Eve and Carnival, and on other special occasions, there are dances along the busy commercial street known as the Via Ápia. There are also children’s bailes called matinês on Rua Dois and in the soccer court in Cachopa. The traffickers pay individual equipes, or sound teams, who provide the equipment, DJs, and MCs for the dance. Most favelas have certain preferred equipes that tend to put on the shows, but guest sound teams and even battles of the equipes are commonplace. Each of the major criminal factions in Rio has their favorite spokesperson MCs who can perform at any allied favela but will never perform in a community inhabited by drug traffickers of one of the other factions. In addition to whatever other songs are played at these bailes de comunidade, the MCs that perform inevitably sing proibidão songs about the drug traffickers, even at the children’s matinês. Besides just paying for the dances, sound teams, and MCs, the drug traffickers also support the bailes by personally attending them. They bring their machine guns and a general atmosphere of power, prestige, and danger that is an essential part of a baile de comunidade. Additionally, they
guarantee the protection of the people at the baile, where neither fighting nor harassment of members of the opposite sex is allowed.

By making such a public spectacle of their appearance at the dances, the drug traffickers are able to use them to build legitimacy for themselves. The baile is a platform for the presentation of the discourse of the hegemony of the traffickers, a discourse that unifies the community in racial, class, and geographical terms as it naturalizes and universalizes the rule of the drug traffickers. Not only are these dances free—a present from the boca-de-fumo, or drug strongholds within the favela—they are stages for the power of the gangsters. Drugs are used in abundance—the very product that sustains the whole structure of organized crime in the favela—and guns are brandished, as is the high lifestyle of the traffickers, with their numerous friends, groupies, and gold chains. At a deeper level, the presence of these gangsters at the community dances, attended by anywhere from 1,500 to 20,000 people, is a public affirmation that they are in control and that all is well in the community. In the world of the favela, the drug traffickers and their friends are the rich and famous and their fast lives are necessarily quite public. Even if they cannot leave Rocinha, for fear of the police, the drug traffickers are in their element at the funk dance; they are the warriors of the tribe, the special forces; brave, in charge, sometimes well loved, sometimes hated, and always dangerous to their enemies and useful to their friends.

“Bandits of Christ”

The nature of Rio’s drug traffickers in the city’s favelas is as fragmented and hybrid as the complex sociohistorical terrain in which they have arisen; they can be violent and religious, bullies and protectors, murderers and avengers. Whatever the motives and intentions of individual drug traffickers, and however deplorable many of their actions may be in reality, in the communities in which they operate they have somewhat effectively pandered to the view that they are the heroic and legitimate defenders of the people. Their patronage of the bailes and of proibidão music gives them a stage from which to project this view. Proibidão funk songs written about the criminal factions by the MCs and other composers they patronize often represent them as social bandits, protectors, and benefactors of their communities in the face of government incompetence and corruption. At the same time, most of these songs also emphasize the gleefully violent nature of drug traffickers and their great willingness to resort to murder and torture in dealing with the police, rival gangsters, informants, and people committing crimes against the residents of their communities.
Songs written or performed by proibidão artists typically reflect this ambivalent view of criminal factions, as can be seen in the songs of singers such as MCs Galo, Fornalha, and Dolores from Rocinha, MCs Cidinho and Doca from Cidade de Deus, Catra from Formiga, Duda from Borel, and MC Mascote from Vidigal. Examples of proibidão songs abound depicting favela gangsters as the just defenders of their communities who punish criminal wrongdoers and reward the poor and the weak. Some examples are MC Galo’s “Sou da Rocinha” and “Recordação” (written by MC Dolores), “Rap da Liberdade/Versão Comando,” by Willian and Duda, and “Os Dez Mandamentos da Favela,” by Cidinho and Doca. There are also a number of proibidão songs that make fun of and chide members of the favela gangsters who are abusive braggars, rapists, or self-seeking, lowly hustlers, such as Catra’s “Simpático” and “Prazeres Escondidos,” and MC Galo’s “Tô Bolado.” Because proibidão songs often contain specific references to real figures and happenings in Rio’s crime world, in addition to directly threatening the police and challenging their authority, they are not available in stores or played on the radio. These songs are recorded live at the dances by the drug traffickers and disseminated in the informal market of the favela on bootleg CDs, and for this reason no bibliographical information is available for them.

As considerations of space in this article make it difficult to examine these songs, or the many others that offer examples, I have chosen to limit my comments of lyrics to a small number of songs that typify the representation of favela gangsters as legitimate—albeit terrifying—defenders of their communities. One very succinct example of the representation in proibidão of the legitimacy of the power of the drug traffickers is the song “Os Dez Mandamentos da Favela” (“The Ten Commandments of the Favela”):

Vou falar agora vê se não bate biela
Os dez mandamentos que tem dentro da favela
O primeiro mandamento é não cagüetar
Cagüete na favela não pode morar
O segundo mandamento já já eu vou dizer
Com a mulher dos amigos não se deve mexer
O terceiro mandamento eu vou dizer também
E levar no blindão e não dar volta em ninguém
O quarto mandamento não é difícil de falar
Favela é boa escola mas não se deve roubar
O quinto mandamento, boladão estou
Vou rasgar de G3 o safadão do encharcador

I’m going to tell you how it is, don’t get in a scrape,
The Ten Commandments here in the favela.
The first commandment is not to rat
A rat can’t live in the favela
The second commandment I’ll tell you right now
Don’t mess with the women of your friends
The third commandment I’ll also say
Put the gang first and not to double-cross anybody
The fourth commandment is not difficult to say
The favela is a good school but you can’t rob here
The fifth commandment is that I’m pissed off
I’ll cut down any son-of-a-bitch with my G3

This version was sung live at a baile funk in Rocinha in the Valão area in 2001 and appears on the underground CD titled _Dos Bandy 2_. It is by a very famous duo from the Cidade de Deus—a place like Rocinha (at the time), controlled by the Comando Vermelho. In order to protect them from possible legal problems or reprisals from favela gangsters, the names of the singers of the song directly analyzed in this article have been omitted. The song suggests very clearly the idea that there is a consensus about what should be expected from the governance of the traffickers, some mutually recognized code of conduct or culture of the world of the favela.

While the use of violence hangs over these commandments as the means of enforcing them, the commandments themselves constitute rules that go beyond the business of trafficking drugs. Just as God was represented in the Old Testament as capable of violence but having moral authority beyond this capability, so too are the drug traffickers represented in this song. The use of a religious metaphor for presenting the rules of the favela is typical of the tendency pointed out by Hobsbawm, mentioned above, to equate the outlaw with a traditional order. The performative dimension of the song, which occurs as the drug traffickers and other residents come together in the live setting of a baile funk in a street in Rocinha, is a ritual of power and is critical to its discursive function. The performance of the “Os Dez Mandamentos da Favela” is presented not as a lecture to a group of feeble, repressed residents, but as a celebration of the strength, courage, smarts, and anger of the people of the favela and of the leadership of their drug traffickers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first commandment in the song refers to what is often called the law of silence—the law that a person cannot inform the police or rival gangs about the activities of the local gang. Such a person, referred to as X-9, Mr. M, or a cagüeta, is frequently represented in funk as the public enemy number one of the favela and his or her actions as the ultimate in cowardice and self-centeredness. The negative consequences such informants have on the business of trafficking drugs is obvious; less obvious perhaps is the way in which informing
is seen as damaging to the well-being of the community. The second commandment in the song, the one prohibiting a man’s sexual involvement with the lover of his friend, reflects some consensus about respect in interpersonal relations in the favela, extending beyond an individual’s power based upon the force of his weapons—a limit that applies to both gangster (those in power) and non-gangster (those not in power) alike. In a similar way, the third commandment, that one must respect the other residents and not do them wrong in a more general sense, is also indicative of this understanding of a notion of what is right and fair. The fourth commandment prohibiting theft within the community suggests a sense of loyalty to the favela as a sort of family. The fifth commandment, in contrast, is not really a commandment at all, but rather a warning of what will happen to those that violate the first four. It is interesting to note that the remaining five commandments of the favela are never mentioned in the song and that, instead of finishing the list, Cidinho and Doca proceed with a medley of other proibidão-style songs.

A song that presents similar themes is “Cachorro,” by a very famous MC from the favela of Formiga, in Tijuca. The song, appearing on the underground CD *O Clone*, from 2001, begins with a short dialogue between a drug trafficker and a police officer who wants more money. The drug trafficker gets angry at the policeman’s request and suggests that, if he really wants some money, the policeman should sell him an informant:

> Policial: Aí, cidadão, é o arrego.
> Policial: Pois o salário tá bravo, né?
> Bandido: Ah, quer dindin, então vende X-9 para mim.

Next, the singer denounces the falsity and cowardice of the informant, who is said to have pretended to be a friend:

> Se faz de amigo, só faz de conta,
> Sujeito safado tem que apanhar,
> Por causa dele o meu mano morreu
> O plantão, todo o trabalho, ele enfraqueceu
> E causou muitas mortes deixando infeliz
> Famílias dos manos que eram raíz
> Os moradores já querem pegar
> Até grampearam o seu celular
> O patrão já tá preso e mandou avisar
> Sua sentença já vamos executar
> É com bala de AK
He acts like your friend, he’s just pretending,
Son-of-a-bitch has got to get whooped,
Because of him my brother died,
The gang, all their work, he weakened,
And he caused lots of deaths leaving unhappy
The native families of the brothers that died,
The neighbors are anxious to get him
They’re listening in on his phone,
The Boss is in jail and sent us the word,
The sentence we’ll execute
With AK bullets

In the song, the singer blames the informant for the arrest of the boss, the death of members of the gang, and the sorrow of their families. Without the boss, the gang is weakened and cannot guarantee the protection of the favela. The peace of the favela has been compromised and the residents are in danger. The blatant implication of this song, like that of the “Os Dez Mandamentos da Favela,” is that the person who has violated the laws of the favela should be punished, not only because he violated those laws and because the gangsters have the power to do him or her harm, but because the laws of the favela are righteous ones that protect the favela community.

One of the most striking and poignant examples of the ambivalence of representations of criminal factions in proibidão music is the song “Bandidos de Cristo,” or “Bandits of Christ,” by a well-known MC from Rocinha. This song, from a clandestine CD titled Raps Proibidos Volume VII, first reached popularity in 2001, during the period in which the Comando Vermelho was still the dominant faction in Rocinha, when versions recorded live at a baile in Rocinha were circulated in the favela. The lyrics of “Bandidos de Cristo” exemplify the complexity of the discourse about drug traffickers in proibidão funk music, starting with the provocative and densely significant central image of the song’s refrain:

Bandidos de Cristo, têm muita fé em Deus,
para esta vida tem que ter muita disposição,
pergunte pro Patrão

Bandits of Christ, have a lot of faith in God,
For this life you’ve got to have courage and drive,
Just ask the Boss

The MC has borrowed the melody of the song’s refrain from a popular religious tune by Padre Marcelo, an enormously well-known and well-liked singer who is a Catholic priest. The mention of “fé em Deus” (faith in God) in the song is a richly meaningful play on words. Besides the
obvious meaning of this phrase as a reference to a religious or spiritual attitude, “fé em Deus” is a slogan of the Comando Vermelho and an expression with which gangsters identify their loyalty to the criminal faction. The mixture of religious elements and references to the world of crime makes for a striking juxtaposition and a supreme exaltation of the figure of the gangster. In practice, the religious inclinations of individual gangsters in favelas like Rocinha are greatly varied, ranging from Christian ones like Catholic, traditional Protestant, and contemporary Evangelical, to Afro-Brazilian beliefs such as *candomblé*, to other religions popular in Brazil like Umbanda and Spiritism. In any case, whatever dichotomy might be traditionally assumed between being a well-armed, violent criminal and a God-fearing religious believer fades away in the Bandit of Christ metaphor, much in the way it overturns the normal distinction between the police and bandits.

In this version of the song, a sort of secondary refrain is included in which the MC expresses deep tenderness for the favela under the just rule of the *Patrão* (Boss) and his righteous “Bandits of Christ.”

Vou subir, vou subir, vou subir o meu morrão  
Com um alô pra os amigos  
E um abraço pro Patrão

I’m going up, going up, going up my big hill,  
With a hello for my friends  
And a hug for the Boss

The remarkably religious dimension of the refrain evident in the image of gangsters as “Bandidos de Cristo” pervades the first stanza as well. The mention it makes of the imprisonment of the *irmãos* (brothers) in some of Rio’s most infamous penitentiaries carries with it the mark of a sort of Babylonian exile. Also, there is something deeply tender, reverent, and even messianic about the singer’s faith in God that the Boss will return one day, a day that will be one of innocence, playfulness and redemption:

Um alô pra Bangu Um, Água Santa e Bangu Três,  
Onde vivem os irmãozinhos, que saudades de vocês  
Quando subo a favela e passo naquele lugar  
Que o Patrão tirava onda dá vontade de chorar  
Mas eu tenho fé em Deus e na pura santidade  
Que em breve eu verei o Patrãozinho em liberdade  
Pra gente zuar juntinho pelas partes do morrão  
Festejando a liberdade dos amigos sangue bom

A hello for Bangu One, Água Santa and Bangu Three,  
Where our brothers live, how I miss you all  
When I go up the favela and pass by that place,  
where the Boss used to hang out it makes me want to cry  
But I have faith in God (slogan, CV) and in all that’s holy
That soon I’ll see my little Boss free
So we can hang out together across the parts of the big hill
Celebrating the freedom of our good brothers.

Once again, the assertion made by the singer that “eu tenho fé em Deus” (I have faith in God) should be understood as a double entendre referring to the slogan of the CV mentioned above.

In the second stanza of the song, even the trafficking of drugs, conventionally seen as abominable, is portrayed as a supreme redemptive gesture that unifies the city of Rio and the people of Brazil independent of their race and even social class. This portrayal involves a play on the words black and white, which, in addition to their racial connotations, are slang references to marijuana and cocaine respectively:

Um alô para os fregueses do meu Rio de Janeiro
Vai de preto ou vai de branco é do puro brasileiro
Pra quem são da Zona Norte, Zona Oeste ou Zona Sul,
Zona Leste também vem, pelo jeito vai dar um
Um abraço pros amigos que protegem as favelas
Obrigado pela força que vocês dão para ela
O vapor, o fogueiro, o gerente e o ladrão
E a todos os soldados que protegem o Patrão

A hello for the customers of my Rio de Janeiro
Whether black (marijuana) or white (cocaine) it’s pure Brazilian
For those in the North City, West City or South City,
East City also, the way things are going there will be one,
A hug for the friends who protect the favelas
Thank you for the help that you give to them
The dealers, the fireworks alarm guys, the managers and the thieves,
And to all the soldiers that protect the Boss.

By thanking the drug traffickers and in a song that refers to them as “Bandits of Christ” and in such an adoring, fraternal spirit, MC Dolores, as the gangsters’ spokesperson, elevates them to the status of spiritual servants of a higher good and a social order not racially polarized or class-stratified.

In the last stanza of the song, the favela crime boss is referred to by the nickname Rebelde (Rebel), a name that directly parallels Hobsbawm’s notion of the social bandit. In some versions of the song, Rebelde is instead referred to as the Patrão, or Boss. In either case, he is presented as a universal drug trafficker and crime boss who embodies the legitimacy and righteousness of the gangsters as the loving and just protectors of their communities:

Rebelde ficou bolado, fez uma reunião
“Quero todo mundo armado lá no alto do morrão
Fogueiro de AR-15, o gerente de G3,
Rebelde vem no comando de AK-47

Rebel became angry and called a meeting
“I want everybody armed
and at the top of the big hill (a reference to Rocinha.)
Fireworks alarm guys with AR-15s, the managers with a G3,
the dealers with pistols, I’ll only say it once.
The soldiers of my gang come with 762s
The watchers with tracer bullet, the signal is two by two.
When the gang is good, the community knows it.”
Rebel comes at the lead with an AK-47.

The verses of this stanza suggest a deeply nostalgic flashback to a time when this Boss had not yet been arrested and was not yet in prison. It was a time when he was still able to dutifully carry out the task of serving and protecting the community as a warrior chief who was wise and capable on the one hand, and dangerous and violent on the other.

The motive of Rebelde’s anger, the reason he has called his men to arms at the top of the hill, is irrelevant in the song. The implication, especially considering the overall context of “Bandidos de Cristo” is that Rebelde is an authority; symbolically, he is at the top of the social structure of the favela, as he is physically “at the top of the big hill.” He paternalistically and righteously prepares his men to come down like a storm, or a plague, on the unidentified guilty party and take whatever steps necessary to correct any wrongs done. The detailed mention of the names of the guns used by the various types of gangsters in his group suggests his willingness and power to undertake this vengeance, even though as a just leader his power and authority do not stop at the barrel of his gun.

Line seven of the stanza is ambiguous; on the one hand, it can be taken as coming from Rebelde who, by saying, “O contexto quando é sangue os amigos reconhecem” (When the gang is good the community knows it), is thus portrayed as appreciating the worth of the support of the residents. On the other hand, this verse can be understood as being in the voice of the singer/composer and as merely pointing out what is portrayed to be an objective truth about the unity between the drug traffickers and the community. Either way, the word sangue in this verse is a use of a heavily loaded slang expression of the culture of funk, sangue bom, literally “good blood.” Sangue has a certain racial connotation very important to the construction of a subaltern favela identity and to the idea that the gang is one with the people it rules and protects. The implication of being sangue in this case is that the gang is fair and righteous, not selfish or abusive. Whether the words are understood as coming
from Rebelde himself or the narrator, a certain consciousness is implied of some mutual advantage between the gang as sangue and the residents as “amigos.” In this sense, the mobilization that Rebelde has called of his warriors and the unspecified violent actions they are about to take are clearly portrayed as part of Rebelde’s role as protector and champion of the people of his tribe.

This final stanza of “Bandidos de Cristo” is steeped in nostalgia and that ever so Brazilian quality of *saudades* (something akin to a sad, nostalgic longing) as it recalls a time when the Boss was not in prison. Back then, he was powerful and just and was a friend of the other people of the favela. When understood in the light of the whole song, this stanza becomes a longing for the “peace, justice and liberty” of the CV’s slogan (“paz, justiça e liberdade”), a utopian hope for people living in the harsh reality of the favela and one that can only be made reality by the good *Patrãozinho*, the good and beloved Boss, together with the power of the Comando Vermelho.

It is important to note, as a postscript, that all proibidão songs in the favela of Rocinha had been associated with the Comando Vermelho criminal faction up to April 2004, when the infamous Dudu (Eduíno Eustáquio de Araújo) and fifty men invaded Rocinha from the favela of Vidigal. After police killed Dudu’s rival, Lulu (Luciano Barbosa da Silva), who had been the head of the gangsters in Rocinha, practices of proibidão underwent some important changes. Once the leadership of Rocinha’s gangsters made the decision to switch their allegiance from the CV to the ADA, the slang phrase “É nós!” (or, “It’s us!”) associated with the CV was banned in the favela. Much of Rocinha’s proibidão lyrics involved references to the CV, either through the mentions of names and places or similar slang references associated to it. Immediately, proibidão songs from other ADA favelas were brought in and distributed to Rocinha gangsters and their friends on pirated CDs. In a short amount of time, MCs from Rocinha itself were creating new proibidão lyrics for Rocinha supporting the ADA. Strikingly, many of the same MCs who had championed the CV, some of the most popular MCs in the history of funk, were amongst the first to begin making music for the new faction.

Conclusion

The representations of the power of Rio’s criminal factions in the space of the baile funk and in the lyrics of proibidão songs comprise a discernible discourse about drug traffickers. The existence of such a discourse suggests that their power is built upon more than the threat of violence. Undoubtedly, fear certainly deters some residents from opposing them, even in secrecy. Still, any system of control works better when
those in power convince the controlled that their governance is morally grounded and legitimate. The difficulty of convincing favela populations of the legitimacy of the governance of gangsters in their communities, given the ambiguity of the nature of Rio’s drug gangs and the less-than-desirable social order they provide in favelas, makes the effectiveness of images in funk music especially noteworthy. Certainly, despite the prohibition on crime in the community, abuses do occur and gangsters do sometimes exempt themselves from punishment. In any case, few of these criminals, even those with good intentions, have sufficient training and educational background to adequately rule over the large populations of Rio’s favelas. Yet significant numbers of favela residents persist in idealizing the figure of the gangster, understanding the gangster in a somewhat sympathetic light and believing that the criminal factions administer justice in their communities according to fair rules.

Proibidão funk, produced and consumed at community dances sponsored by Rio’s criminal factions, provides a powerful means for the dissemination of the image of the drug trafficker as a figure of abundance, energy, intensity, and community, in contrast to the scarcity, exhaustion, and dreariness that characterize a life of poverty. The insecurity and danger of everyday life in favelas like Rocinha, as well as the general scarcity of wealth and resources found there, leads many of their residents to seek for, and indeed find, leadership among the criminals who live there. Aware of the social exclusion of their communities from the larger Brazilian society, Rio’s drug traffickers actively seek to legitimize their control over favela communities by embracing an image of themselves as saviors and protectors. The reality of the hegemony of Rio’s criminal factions in favelas is in many ways proportionate to the indifference, incompetence, and aggression with which favelas are often treated by the larger Brazilian system. As long as the residents of Rio’s favelas face the epidemic scarcity of resources in education, health, transportation, and employment, and are the victims of abusive police tactics, gangsters wishing to employ funk music as a medium for glorifying themselves as heroes will have an easy task.

Notes

1. I explored the meaning of the culture of funk as a utopian practice within the experience of peoples of the African Diaspora and the applicability of Paul Gilroy’s theories on Afro-Diasporic cultures to funk in my doctoral thesis (Sneed 2003).
2. A detailed account of the living strategies of squatters in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro is shown by Robert Neuwirth (2005).
3. In 2003, the official number of favelas recognized by City Hall in Rio de Janeiro went up from 603 to 752, as reported by Selma Schmidt, “Estudo Aponta Mais 49 Favelas na Cidade-Novo Levantamento Aerofotogramétrico da Prefeitura Mostra que o Rio Já Tem 752 Comunidades Carentes,” O Globo, April 20, 2003, 2nd ed.


5. The term “narco-dictatorship” is used to describe the governance of favelas by criminal factions by Percival de Souza in his book Narcoditadura: O Caso Tim Lopes, Crime Organizado e Jornalismo Investigativo no Brasil (2002).

6. Two scholars that emphasize the limited role that criminal factions play in the de facto power structure of Rio’s favelas are Corinne Davis-Rodrigues (2002) and Enrique Desmond Arias (2001).

7. Mention is given to such a practice in Gerard Béhague’s article (in Olsen and Sheehy 2000, 272–87).

8. Condomínio do Diabo (1994), 113. The English translation, like all others appearing in this article, is my own. The original Portuguese reads as follows: “...baseado em um consenso social de quem deve ser obedecido em quais espaços e por virtude de quais valores.”

9. Questions concerning hegemonic processes and the workings of ideology have been central to cultural criticism for decades. My argument is informed by an understanding of the relationship between culture and ideology developed by theorists writing in the Gramscian tradition, such as Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. The specific ideological strategies I have in mind are those listed by Eagleton (1991, 33–61). These are legitimation, naturalization, rationalizing, universalizing, and orientation to action.


11. Transcriptions of these and other lyrics can be found in the appendix of my dissertation (Sneed 2003), in which 26 proibidão songs by nine different artists are listed. See also note 13.

12. The clandestine nature of proibidão songs makes them different from songs of other musical genres associated with the glorification of crime, such as the Mexican narcocorrido, which are often played on the radio and sold in stores. For a history of the evolution of the narcocorrido, see Ramírez-Pimiento (2004).

13. These contrasting sets of terms come from the work of Richard Dyer (in During 1999) on the workings of utopian cultural practices.
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