

“O Que é que a Bahiana tem”--Carmen Miranda (1939)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Katherine Bishop-Sanchez (guest post)*



Carmen Miranda



Early label

In 1938, the Brazilian actress and popular singer Carmen Miranda (1909-1955) starred in her fifth Brazilian produced film, “Banana da Terra” (Sonofilms) and performed, among several musical numbers, the samba “O que é que a baiana tem?” composed by Dorival Caymmi. This samba would become Miranda’s signature song, indelibly connecting the Brazilian singer to the figure of the *baiana* or Afro-Brazilian woman from Bahia. In Brazil, Miranda recorded the song with Dorival Caymmi at Odeon Records in 1938, and then again with her band, Bando da Lua, at Decca USA, in December 1939.

The title of this song can be translated as “What does the girl from Bahia have?” making reference to the Afro-Brazilian women from Bahia who can be seen in urban centers throughout Brazil selling their savory dishes on street corners. Their typical dress includes a wide, often white, hooped skirt, a loose-fitting cotton blouse trimmed with wide lace, a striped shawl draped over the shoulder or around the waist, a turban, sandals, and numerous necklaces and bracelets. The typical *baiana* dress is a staple of Carnival festivities, candomblé religious ceremonies and other religious festivities throughout Brazil such as the popular festivals of Bonfim in Salvador, Bahia. A large ensemble of women dressed as *baianas* has been one of the most important wings of official samba school Carnival parades since the early 1930s.

Carmen Miranda’s performance of “O que é que a baiana tem?” in “Banana da Terra” became memorable because of the synergy between her costume and the lyrics of the song. The samba is an exaltation of the *baiana*: the beauty of her dress, her sensuality, her jewelry, as the *baiana* heads towards the Igreja do Bonfim in Salvador. Bahia was a recurring motif in Carmen’s songs, both before and after the recording of “O que é que a baiana tem?”, which was her seventh tune

of the genre. Prior to that she had recorded several variants on the theme, such as “No Tabuleiro da Baiana” [“On the *baiana*’s tray”] (Ary Barroso, 1936); “Baiana do Tabuleiro” [“The *baiana* with the tray”] (André Filho, 1937); “Quando eu penso na Bahia” [“When I think of Bahia”] (Ary e Luiz Peixoto, 1937); “Nas Cadeiras da Baiana” [“On the hips of the *baiana*”] (Portelo Juno and Léo Cardoso, 1938), and “Na Bahia” [“In Bahia”] (Herivelto Martins and Humberto Porto, 1938). As can be expected with these titles, the lyrics of these songs depict the movement of the *baiana*’s hips and describe the cuisine of her tray, as would also “O que é que a baiana tem?”, but the novelty of this trademark song is the whole *mise-en-scène* of arm, hand and hip movements that would captivate North Americans and take Miranda to Broadway and on to Hollywood.

The Miranda film-début as a *baiana* in “Banana da Terra,” of which footage has been partially recovered in the documentary “Bananas is my Business” (Helena Solberg, 1995), portrays a *baiana* that distinguishes itself from the traditional Afro-Brazilian costume. Although critics have been quick to comment on the fact that she is “wearing” her performance, on close examination, the lyrics do not correspond to the Miranda *baiana* costume. Miranda’s skirt is distinct from the typical *baiana*: instead of being rounded and starched, she wears a tight wrap-around satin skirt that emphasizes the movements of her hips. The blouse she wears in “Banana da Terra” is neither silk nor embroidered as the lyrics of the song suggest. It is a satin or striped lamé top made out of the same two-tone fabric as the skirt, revealing bare shoulders and arms. Likewise, her earrings, necklaces and bracelets are not golden, and the shoulder scarf she carries over her arm is not “*pano da costa*,” the type of shawl typically worn by the *baianas*. Yet the conclusion of this overall image is the production of a stylized *baiana* model. Despite the disparity between lyrics and performance, which eventually becomes secondary, this song in 1938, marks the creation of the *prototype* Carmen Miranda image.

The song’s inclusion in the film “Banana da Terra” was due to a last-minute substitution of two songs by Ary Barroso, a well-established composer who made an unreasonable request far above the usual royalties. One of the new songs was “O que é que a baiana tem?” by a then unknown composer, Dorival Caymmi.

“O que é que a baiana tem?” is a sort of list song typical of many of Ary Barroso’s songs with lyrics about Bahia and it made for a smooth substitution, especially with Dorival Caymmi recording the playback version for the film with Miranda and assisting her with her costume and choreography (see Castro 169-170). Thanks to these chance circumstances, “O que é que a baiana tem?” became a hit and Dorival Caymmi became a household name. Throughout the end of 1938 and the first part of 1939, Miranda continued to include Dorival Caymmi’s composition as part of her shows at venues around town, including the Urca Casino where she performed the song accompanied by Aloísio de Oliveira and the band Bando da Lua. Most importantly, “O que é que a baiana tem?” was part of the Urca Casino performance that the Broadway empresario Lee Shubert saw on his talent-scouting trip to South America in February 1939. As such, it is not surprising that “O que é que a baiana tem?” would remain part of Miranda’s repertoire for her Broadway début in the Shubert brothers’ production “The Streets of Paris.”

On Broadway, “O que é que a baiana tem?” was one of four songs Miranda performed, the others being the quick-paced embolada “Bambu Bambu,” the Carnival marchinha “Touradas em

Madri,” and the rhumba “South American Way” by the American composers Jimmy McHugh and Al Dubin.

Several years later, after moving to Los Angeles and starring in six films with 20th Century-Fox, Carmen appears in “Greenwich Village” (1944) to give a nightclub, Hollywoodian rendition of “O que é que a baiana tem?” Wearing a full-length, black and hot-pink, feather-adorned skirt bearing a large opening at the front, skimpy black lace flowers covering her breasts, a towering headdress of black plastic flowers, black polka-dot net hose, and long black gloves with pink on the underside, this version of “O que é que a baiana tem?” is an enactment far from the original performance at the Urca Casino.

From the stages of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to Broadway and then Hollywood, Miranda’s performance of “O que é que a baiana tem?” was instrumental in introducing samba to American audiences. Conveyed originally through this song, Carmen Miranda’s *baiana* became an iconic representation of Brazil and by extension the quintessential embodiment of latinidad for a North American public.

Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez is a Professor of Portuguese and Brazilian studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the author of “Creating Carmen Miranda: Race, Camp, and Transnational Stardom” (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2016).

Reference:

Castro, Ruy. Carmen. *A vida de Carmen Miranda, a brasileira mais famosa do século XX*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.