

# Olelê Maculelê

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## Origins

Maculelê's origin is unclear. Many claim that its roots are African, but cannot trace them to specific ethnicities, mark the date of the art's arrival in Brazil, or confirm whether its original purpose was for fight, dance, or religious celebration. Some say it was a fight of resistance of the slaves against their masters, others assert that it was a folkloric pastime, and "it is even said that, when a slave wanted to flee, his companions immediately formed a maculelê roda to distract the masters and facilitate his escape." Emília Biancardi suggests that maculelê has distant roots in African harvest celebrations.

Plínio de Almeida suggests that the etymology of the word "maculelê" comes from the union of *macum* and *lê*, the names of two African musical instruments. Herundino Leal disagrees, since compound words are virtually nonexistent in African languages.

Maculelê was practiced principally in the town of Santo Amaro da Purificação, in the state of Bahia. One of the earliest written records of the art comes from a newspaper obituary of 1873, which reports the death of Raimunda Quitéria, an African woman who passed away at 110 years old. Despite her age, "she still swept the churchyard of the Igreja da Purificação in preparation for the maculelê celebrations." Besides this brief mention, however, there are few to none written descriptions of the art before the mid-twentieth century. Virtually all the information we have about early maculelê comes from oral histories.

According to the testimonies of old residents of Santo Amaro, the most important mestres of maculelê during the turn of the twentieth century included Barão, Ti-Ajô, João de Obá, Zé do Brinquinho, Zé da Conceição, Marago, and Major. The maculelê celebrations began on December 8<sup>th</sup>, the day of Nossa Senhora da Conceição and ran until February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day of Nossa Senhora da Purificação.

## Mestre Popó

Mestre Popó (Paulinho A. Andrade) is one of the most important figures in the recent history of maculelê. The son of slaves, Popó was born on June 6, 1902 and learned maculelê as a child. He says, "my mother told me maculelê comes from Africa, that on the days of rest, up there in São Bento, in a big senzala, there were celebrations, where the blacks did maculelê, capoeira, bate-coxa, and samba-de-roda. She was eighteen years old." During the early twentieth century, maculelê began to decline as the art's old mestres died one by one. The art was almost forgotten until Mestre Popó revived it in 1943.

Popó began teaching maculelê to his friends and family, piecing together the art from his own memories as well as those of Santo Amaro's oldest residents. Since he didn't remember all the songs and rhythms, he added some from candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian folkloric pastimes. For example, the old rhythms of maculelê included one called Nego – which has since been lost, replaced entirely by the other, called Congo – and Mestre Popó added the candomblé rhythms of barravento (a fast, animated rhythm, used for intense moments in the dance) and ijexá (a slow, relaxed rhythm, used to rest the dancers). The song “boa noite pra quem é de boa noite” also comes from candomblé; Mestre Popó modified the last line to speak specifically of maculelê. Popó died on September 16, 1969, and his work is carried on by his children and students.

## **Presentation**

Mestre Popó's presentation had the following format:

1) The group marches through the streets, dancing and singing the maculelê “hymn”:

Ôlelê maculelê  
Ôlelê maculelê  
Ôlelê maculelê

2) Louvação (Praise):

a) Vamos todos a louvar	Let us all praise
A nossa nação brasileira	Our Brazilian nation
Salve Princesa Isabel	Hail to Princess Isabel
Quem nos livrou de cativoiro	Who freed us from captivity

b) Nós somos negros	We are black men
Da Cabinda de Luanda	From the Cabinda de Luanda
A Conceição vamos louvar	We will praise Conceição
Aruanda ê-ê-ê	Aruanda ê-ê-ê
Aruanda ê-ê-á	Aruanda ê-ê-á

c) If they happened to stop in front of a residence, they also sang:

Ô senhor dono da casa	Oh, Mr. owner of the house
Nos viemos aqui lhe ver	We came here to see you
Nos viemos perguntar	We came here to ask
Como passa vosmercê	How you are doing

3) The bateria begins to play the hot rhythm, called “nego.” The mestre (who used only one stick, while all the other dancers used two) dances and shows his agility, hitting sticks with all the other dancers. The mestre then chooses a partner for a

type of duel with the sticks. After that, he orders the formation of the roda by spinning his stick around at head-level.

4) The dancers go back to dancing normally, to the rhythm of congo or ijexá.

5) The barravento rhythm begins and the *vaqueiro* (cowboy) enters. He attempts to lasso any one of the dancers, and the mestre tries to prevent this by using his body to protect the targets. It is an amazing display of dexterity and ability. Eventually, the *vaqueiro* succeeds and pulls the lassoed dancer to the ground, making him fall spectacularly and provoking laughter from the audience. The group sings a song making fun of the fallen dancer.

6) The *vaqueiro* removes the lasso, and the group sings:

Você bebeu jurema	You drank jurema
Você bebeu jurema	You drank jurema
Você se embriagou	You got intoxicated
Com a flor do mesmo pau	With the flower of the same tree
Vosmercê se levantou	You stood up
Com a flor do mesmo pau	With the flower of the same tree
Vosmercê se levantou	You stood up

Jurema is a plant with hallucinogenic effects, it is used in worship ceremonies of native Brazilian Indians. During this song, the fallen dancer gets up and dances as though he were drunk.

7) The *vaqueiro* ties the lasso around the dancer's left ankle, obliging him to dance with only one foot. He dances around the roda and asks for donations from the audience, which he collects in a hat or scarf. Mestre Popó removed this part from official maculelê presentations, saying that it was "ugly to ask money from important people." In thanks for the donations, the group sings:

Deus que lhe dê	May God give you
Deus que lhe dá	May God give you
Lhe dê dinheiro	Give you money
Como areia do mar	Like the sand of the sea

8) Despedido (Farewell):

Adeus pessoal baiano	Farewell, Bahian people
Ao povo dessa cidade	The people of this city
Adeus pela madrugada	Farewell early in the morning
Nos vamos levar saudade	We'll miss you
Quando eu for embora, olé	When I go away, olé
Todo mundo chora, olé	Everyone cries, olé

## **Uniform**

In the days of the old African mestres, the typical outfit for maculelê consisted of a red hat, a red handkerchief around one's neck, and capri pants (alternatively, *abadá* pants or loincloths were also used; anything that left the dancers' legs free to move). Maculelê was always danced barefoot, and the dancers' feet and upper bodies were painted with black soot. *Urucum* seeds were used to paint the face and forehead with red stripes in the form of a fan. The dancers sported exaggerated lip makeup, and some also powdered their hair with flour. The *vaqueiro* wore regular pants, a leather jacket, a cowboy hat, and a lasso. After Popó, maculelê dancers began using blue or white pants, shoes, and a shirt, though they continued to use a red hat and handkerchief (and sometimes belt). Popó's group stopped using the traditional body paint, since during street performances the audience tended to stay away if they did.

## **Instruments**

Mestre Popó and his predecessors used small, common drums, as well as the ganzá, agogô, reco-reco, caxixi, and sometimes pandeiros and 12-stringed guitars. The change from the small hand drums to the large atabaques occurred in recent decades, most likely with the spread of maculelê in folkloric shows.

According to Mestre Popó, maculelê sticks can be made from any wood that doesn't splinter and that has a good sound. However, they should not be cut green, and they should be cut on a moonless night, because if not they will splinter and get termites. Zezinho, one of Mestre Popó's sons, introduced the use of machetes in 1963, as a way to make performances more spectacular.

## **Dance**

The dance was simple; it was danced with light turns and spins, discreetly lifting the feet. The sticks were hit three times at stomach level, and the fourth hit was high. With time, dancers began to hit the sticks on the ground or on parts of their body, and perform exaggerated spins and movements. Today, maculelê has suffered a huge influx of movements from capoeira, candomblé, and samba.

## **Maculelê de Cana**

Mrs. Tecla de Almeida Leal, a lifetime resident of a mill in Santo Amaro, described maculelê de cana (sugarcane maculelê) in a 1963 interview. She was 96 years old at the time, and claimed to have seen maculelê de cana when she was a child. Maculelê de cana began with the entrance of men carrying torches in order to light up the canefield. The instrument players and dancers then entered and danced in pairs. One person in characteristic dress played the role of the *feticeiro* (sorcerer), who performed spells and 'reanimated' fallen dancers. The sugarcane

was then cut to the rhythm of the instruments, and maculelê was danced with pieces of sugarcane. Following this, maculelê was danced with machetes. Finally, the dancers and torch-bearers left the canefield. Mrs. Tecla described maculelê de cana as a dance of thanks for the harvest. Of all the people interviewed in Santo Amaro, she was the only one to sing the song:

Olelê maculelê	Olelê maculelê
Vamos vadiar	Let's play
Olelê maculelê	Olelê maculelê
Lá no canavial	Out there in the canefield

### **Other**

Maculelê was historically a masculine pastime. However, Popó taught the dance to his female relatives, and his niece Agogô was especially known for the beauty of her maculelê dancing ability.

Some researchers have suggested that maculelê was a fragment of or related to the dance known as *cucumbi*, which is now extinct. However, the oldest members of Santo Amaro claim that maculelê existed at the same time as *cucumbi*, but was distinct from it. Cucumbi was linked to Cosme and Damião, while maculelê was linked to Nossa Senhora da Purificação and Nossa Senhora da Conceição. Also, in *cucumbi* the use of sticks was optional, not obligatory as it is in maculelê.

There is one story that maculelê is the worship of serpents or a serpent-god. This is totally false; Mestre Popó's son Zezinho made it up in order to mislead curious people who wanted to make a poster commercializing the traditional art.

The *vaqueiro*, before entering the dance, mixed with the audience and served as a spy/lookout.