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The representation of women in Cape Verdean music: a case study



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I - INTRODUCTION

Music historically has been a medium for human social expression (Adams and Fuller, 2006) and it is a factor of cultural identity, habits, and beliefs. As Tavares (2006) points out, music represents a universe of people and seeks to find the idiosyncrasy of their culture, which is no more than the characteristics of their own identity. Laraia (2004) has referred to culture as the lens through which we see the world and Lima (2010) referred to language as the microphone through which we say the world; therefore, music, being a culture tool, sings its culture ideas, beliefs, and values. Hence, it seems important to analyze the language mechanism and images used to represent culture and its people identities.

Among the many cultural aspects that music can portray, I am particularly interested on how music represents gender, specifically women's role in society. Therefore, this paper will focus particularly on the constructed images of women in Cape Verdean *cabolove* or *cabozouk* genre. In order to perform this study, I have chosen a very famous and renowned Cape Verdean artist: Nelson Freitas.

The reasons for a case study on Nelson Freitas' songs are related to the fact that today he is one of the most known artists in this genre; he has won several awards, including 2014 Cape Verde Music Awards' song of the year, best videoclip, best electronic album, most popular video clip, and best Cabozouk song (www.muzika.sapo.cv, 2014). He is also nominated to 2014 MTV Africa awards for best Lusophone artist. Furthermore, his first solo album in 2010, "Magic", sold more than 70.000 copies while the 2013 album, "My life", sold over 90.000 copies (<http://www.nelsonfreitasonline.com/bio/>, 2013). From this data we can infer that his songs are very influential in Cape Verde and the Lusophone world. As such, I believe the images the songs portray may have some impact on the listeners construction of identity (especially because his public is mainly adolescents) and the message he is singing to the world about Cape Verdean women and their social roles will certainly have repercussion on how others "see" women in/from Cape Verde.

The role of this paper is to analyze the lyrics of Nelson Freitas' songs in regard to women representation and their roles. However, these representations will be related to the ideological nature of culture and music as the vehicle that carries cultural beliefs, values, and learned behaviors therefore, as a subliminal influential factor on how people in a society may see themselves and perform in their society.

In order to accomplish these goals, this work is structured as follows: Chapter one is introductory to the topic and the objectives of this paper; Chapter two focuses on a brief literature review on culture as ideology, music as a cultural influential factor of cultural identity, gender as a social construction, a brief overview on how women are represented on American music and a study on women representation on traditional Cape Verdean music; while Chapter three describes the methodology to analyze the lyrics and the mini research placed on Facebook to gather data on the audience perception of Nelson Freitas' songs as positive, negative or neutral. Chapter four will show the result of the analysis and survey, and discuss the data collected and their implications. This chapter will be followed by Final Consideration chapter (Chapter five), the references (Chapter six) and the appendixes which consists on the English lyrics songs (chapter seven).

II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture in its broader and most common sense has been defined as the norms, habits, art expressions and attitudes that govern human beings' lives. As it differs from country to country (or even group to group), it is not a biological mechanism, but rather a set of learned behaviors (Laraia, 2004). If we notice, even though every human being has the same biological necessities (like eating, for instance), the way these needs are fulfilled varies along the globe and this variation derives from historical values and beliefs of each place. That said, we can say that the way we act and how we see people (life in general) is governed by the cultural rules and beliefs of the place we come from; therefore, a human being is a product of her/his culture, s(he) is the result of the society in which s(he) has been socialized (Laraia, 2004).

Following this line of argument, we can claim that while sex (being male or female) is biologically determined, the concept of gender and the gender roles people play in a society are cultural constructions; that is, "sex is determined biologically, but gender is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity" (Millet, 1970 apud Selden, 1985, p. 132). As Haslanger (1995) points out:

The point is to distinguish social kinds from physical kinds. In the case of gender, the idea would be that gender is a classification scheme based simply on anatomical or biological differences, but marks social differences between individuals. Gender, as opposed to sex, is not about testicals and ovaries, the penis and uterus, but about the location of groups within a system of social relations.

Culture manifests in several ways: eating style and habits, dressing and clothes, but also in arts: painting, dancing, music, etc. Many times we are tempted to reduce music to simple acts of playing, singing, or dancing; however, its range reaches deeper structures (Tavares, 2006). These deeper structures can be reached through language because if culture is a set of values and beliefs, and music is an instrument to divulge one's culture, then language is the tool used in music to sing a

culture. Since “language cannot exist apart from its speakers” (Macedo, Dendrinos & Gounary, 2003) then the language people use in song lyrics should be a reflection of that culture’s beliefs and values. Therefore, the gender representation and images portrayed in songs are a reflection of a culture’s identity, social practices and values.

Several researchers have focused on the image Media carries about women, specifically, how songs portray women (Dibben, 1999; Glantz, 2011; Adams and Fuller, 2006). The general result is that women are represented in a subordinate position, with sexual references (even when she is portrayed in an innocent girlish look) which, being a cultural expression, music reflect what people belief about the topic in the lyrics.

Glantz (2011) claim that popular music media is “a catalyst for the social construction of gender and sexuality” (p.6) and as such it affects how people understand and live in the modern world. For him, in the media representations women are increasingly encourage to exploit their bodies as a means of capital exchange and there are strong evidences for an increasingly pornographic representation of female sexuality.

Adams and Fuller (2006) focusing more on how women are represented in Hip Hop claim that there is a misogynistic ideology underlying this genre, that is, it reduces women to objects for men’s ownership, use or abuse, [and] diminishes women to expendable things” (p. 939). Furthermore, they advocate that “the gangsta rap is the promotion, glamorization, support, humorization, justification, or normalization of oppressive ideas about women” and what was born as an aesthetic cultural expression of urban African American youth in Bronx, New York, in the late 70’s to fight and criticize social injustice based on race and class became an instrument to “support, justify, instill, and perpetuate ideas, values, beliefs and stereotypes that debase women” (p. 940). They point 6 main themes in Hip Hop music to represent women:

- a) Derogatory statements about women in relation to sex;
- b) Statements involving violent actions toward women, particularly in relation to sex;

- c) References of women causing “trouble” for men;
- d) Characterization of women as “users” of men;
- e) References of women being beneath men; and
- f) References of women as usable and discardable things

Lima (2010) analyzing two Cape Verdean traditional music genres (*Morna* and *Koladera*) has reached similar conclusions. According to her, the representation of gender roles differ greatly for while men are represented with very positive ways, as “lords” of the house, as those who work to provide food for the family, and in the public setting discussing political and social concerns, and somehow in an homogeneous way, women are represented in a variety of ways. Depending on the genre women can be portrayed as lovely mothers and beloved lovers “Kretxeu” (as long as she is obedient to her father and/or husband), as gossipers, poisonous, prostitutes, gold diggers, always looking to “trouble” and tempting men with their body, and always with reference to their sexuality and sensuality to please men.

Since “popular culture works to reflect, drive, and constrain the ways society constructs meaning and values [and] it influences our perceptions of nearly everything from entertainment values to political issues and all of the important ways these different elements intervene” (Glantz, 2011, p. 10), then we must assume that music is not only about amusement, but also about ideological beliefs and a “producer” of behaviors, or as Adams and Fuller (2006) explain music is a reflection of social relations, and culture; thus, misogynistic views have a cultural rather than a musical value. Hence, music not only has social content, but it can also encourage the listener to adopt a position towards this content; since all cultures are ideological, we have to question how ideology is made material in music (Dibben, 1999). Moreover, since people do not seem to pay attention to the lyrics and the possible gender oppression embedded on the lyrics, it is relevant to analyze the lyrics and how the audience perceives the content of the songs.

By being unaware of the misogynistic image expressed in the songs and the reduction of women to a group, women are being reproducing, valuing, and accepting oppression. The term “oppression” is not used here in the physical sense, but rather as “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people” (Young, 1990, 4). So, as Macedo (2001) shows, while women see the world through the lens of this misogynistic and patriarchal culture, they will assume this culture and images it portrays as natural and not as an ideological construction, therefore women are silenced, they do not have the chance to represent themselves using a language of their own and this is silencing is the cause, not the consequence, of the oppression. The claim is that by listening to these songs without questioning their content, as products of their cultures, Cape Verdean women are lead to reproduce and naturalize concepts that oppress, silence, diminish, and represent them in negative and passive roles.

III – METHODOLOGY

This paper is an analysis of Nelson Freitas' songs regarding how gender, especially women and the roles they perform are portrayed. In order to understand the images expressed I will be making a critical analysis of the songs, pointing, and exemplifying the images with the lyrics. I will use one of the songs (Simple girl) as a guide and exemplify the images with other songs.

Since this paper also aims to examine the audience (both men and women) perceptions of the content of the songs, a mini-survey was placed on Facebook in 7 groups: Volei em Cabo Verde, Class 8, Atlético Volley Club; UniCV 2013/14, Clube da Meia Noite, Volei Club Sport Mindelense, and Nha cabel eh afro & i ♥ it. The question was “Manera k bo ta classifica imagem/representação de amdjer na musika de Nelson Freitas?” (How do you classify women's image/representation in Nelson Freitas' songs?). People could answer with positive, negative or neutral. 110 people answered the survey, being 70 female and 40 male individuals. Their age ranges between 18-40 years old.

Instead of presenting the results and then make a discussion of the data, I will do both simultaneously, that is, while I present a data I will discuss it right after.

IV – RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Simple girl is a much appreciated song in Cape Verde. Many interpret its lyrics as positive because the chorus, disconnected from the rest of the text seems positive; as one of my colleagues pointed out in class while presenting this paper, sometimes we just pay attention to the lyrics and since this one seems positive we do not even listen to the other parts of the song, therefore, we may misinterpreted the lyrics. An analysis of that song shows that the man is in the club and he seems to be rich for he is in the club with “*Moët & Chandon in my cup*” and women are around him like decorative objects to please him: *Beautiful ladies all around me/ all of them calling me ‘papi’*”. This representation of beautiful women as objects surrounding men for his pleasure is recurrent and is also present in American Hip Hop music. The use of the word ‘papi’ the girls use to address the man also seems a Hip Hop genre influence because in Cape Verde this is not common and we actually see it more in American videos or movies.

Another recurrent portraying of women is as disposable objects that are good for one night stands and nothing else. In *Simple Girl* this idea is explicitly stated: “*I’m not looking for love/ A one night stand’s more like it*”; also in *Rebound Chick*: “*I’m off to the club tonight / To find me a one night thing*”. This sexualization of the female body is not only for one night stands, it is also easy to get. For example in *Na bo kaza*, the boy is at home and wants to go out, but he called his friends and no one answered so he entered the internet because he was feeling bored and he finds a “sexy girl” and they chat. The song explicitly says that although they did not know each other, the girl invited the boy to her place to spend the night with her:

"Bu convida-m pa-m passá ês notê má bu
You invite-me to-me spend this night with you

Although the girl invited him, it seems that the only purpose is to pleasure the boy. Women seem to have a very passive role in this songs and their job is to provide sexual satisfaction to men.

In *Na bo kaza*, it these roles are very explicit when the boy says that the “baby” wants sex without love, so he tells her to start her engine and warm **his** body like a heater:

Es baby cre sex sem amor (ainda melhor) / This baby wants sex without love (even better)

Unton rancá bu motor / So start your engine

Ê aquece nha corpo / And warm my body

Cima aquecedor / like a heater

Another important aspect to discuss in the lyrics is the use of verbs. In *Simple Girl* there seems to have a very positive image of a girl who just needs a flower because she is a simple girl, however, when we interpret the whole song we can see that this girl is actually trying to deceive the boy for she is at the club surrounding the man just like the other girls, but she wants the man just for herself. So she starts “**actin’ up**” and telling that she is not a fool (it is implied that the other girls are fools). Furthermore, this girl is “**playin’** hard to get” meaning that she is as easy as the other, but she is trying to fool the man. I do believe it is implied that the other girls are only interested on the man’s money and what he could buy them, but this girl is playing smart and pretends to be interested on simple things and not his money because all she wants is a single rose. Moreover, we can clearly see that this girl will be a passive subject because “all I need is a single rose and you can run my world”, also, we can notice that the girl will be **taken** home. It does not seem that she has any word to say in that matter.

An analysis of “*N kre sabe*” (I want to know) also confirms this idea of women as greedy and shallow passive creatures whose only interests are material things. In this song the boy asks the girl if she would like him to **take** her to Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), to buy her things and massage. However, what I would like to highlight is the fact that the girl seems more like a doll who can be taken everywhere or to whom he can use as he pleases and she does not have a word to say. It seems that is played. For example, he wants to know if she would like to go for a walk; however, the language structure used to make this pretense question is passive:

Se N ta do-b um volta na praça dze-m se bo ta gostà
If I would give-you a walk at square tell-me if you would like

It is also important to discuss the sexual representation of women in practically all the songs, even those where the girl seems to be more than just a night stand. It seems that women are described only in terms of their beauty, physical appearance and sex appeal. There are several songs that can elucidate these images, as for example in *Simple girl* when he says “*Damn the girl's so sexy / Beautiful from the head down to her feet*”, in *Deeper*: “*the most beautiful girl I have been with so far!* Also in the song “*Ela é*” (She is) where the girl is described as beautiful, dangerous, hot, sexy, sweet and a cute little thing:

Ela é gostosa / She is hot
Ela é perigosa / She is dangerous
Ela é fofa / She is tender
Ela é doce / She is sweet
Ela é tão linda / She is so beautiful
Cusinha bonitinha / cute little thing
Makes every head turn, where she goes
Ela é sexy, so sexy / She is sexy, so sexy

Another clear example of the sexualization of women in Nelson Freitas’ songs is the use of words with food connotations like “delicious”, or “bo tem mel” (you have honey – literal translation) meaning that the man finds the girl to be so sweet and tasty so he feels she is so attractive and delicious that he cannot help following her and to like her, that is, because this girl is so sweet she is causing trouble to the man for he cannot think of anything else and she is turning his head and his world upside down.

This idea of women as troublemakers and the cause of men’s problem is also explicit in *Rebound Chick* where the man chooses to use women for sexual pleasure only because a girl has

deceived him and made him suffer: *“Cause when you left / You broke my heart / But time heals all wounds/ And now / I’m looking for my rebound chick / Girl could you be it / I’m not looking for Love...”*. Women as being the one who causes pain is also in *I just want my baby back* lyrics: *It used to be all about you love / With the blink of an eye i was dead love / I loved the way you used to hold me / And now the two of us spoke so freely / Nothing could come between us / At least back in the days that i told / But i was wrong, dead wrong / Cause now you’re gone / Cause when you changed I changed...”*

These images are just a few examples of how women are portrayed in Nelson Freitas’ songs, and since he is very influential in the Cape Verdean musical context because of his songs popularity, it seemed relevant to me to question how people, especially women, perceived his songs. That is, if people interpret the lyrics as being positive, negative or neutral representations of women’s roles. 110 people participated in the survey being 70 women and 40 men.

Figure 1 shows the results of the survey in terms of population. It shows that from the 110 people who answered the survey, 65 considered that women are positively represented in the songs, while 28 answered negatively and 17 said neutral.

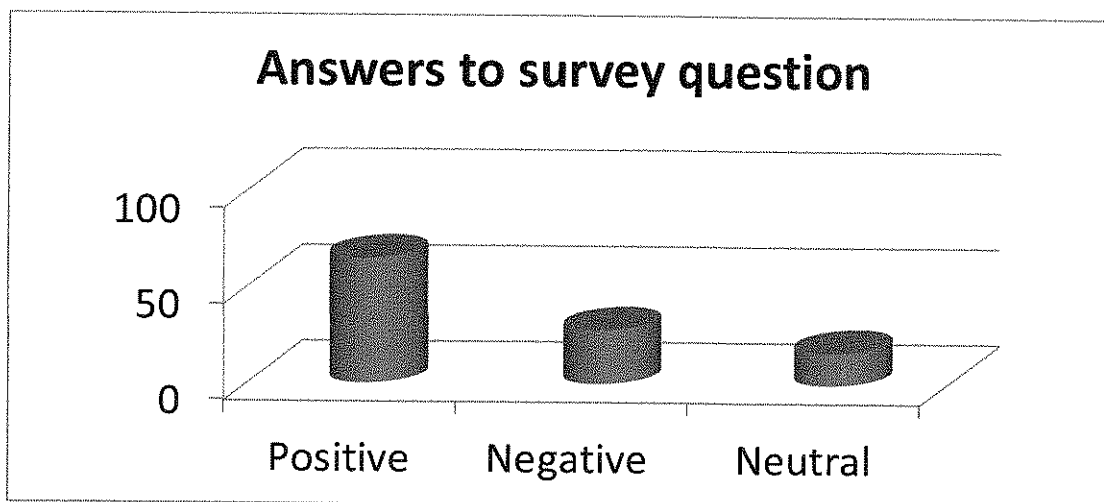


Fig. 1 – Survey results (overall population)

As we can see the majority of people considered the song positive, from this we can imply 2 things: either people do not pay attention to the lyrics or they are so used to these representations that they became natural and considering women only in terms of their body is considered a compliment.

Since my interest is specially on women's perception of the lyrics, fig. 2 shows that from those who answered positive 35 were women and 27 were men. While 19 women and 7 answered negative, 16 women and 2 men answered neutral.

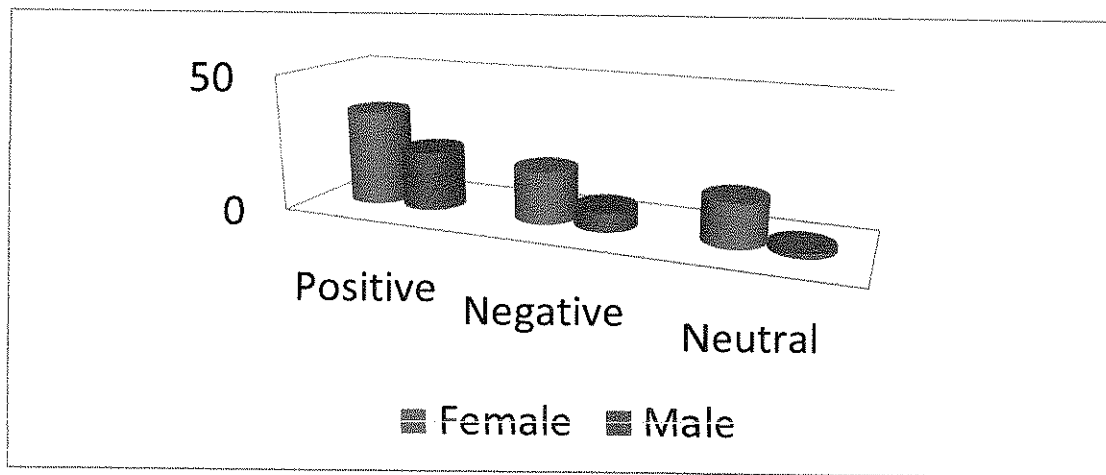


Fig. 2 – Survey population and answered divided by gender

Although the groups where I have placed the survey are mainly constituted by women, proportionately, we can see from the results that in general women agree or find natural and have no concerns about their representation in these songs.

I believe that these results are a consequence of a lack of awareness of how important language and its use are to people's cultural behavior. Even if people do not pay much attention to the interpretation of the lyrics, subliminal consciousness and ideas about women are seed and they can influence how people behavior, identify and portray themselves.

V – FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Music can be considered a social practice that contributes to the construction of knowledge, and people's identities and relationships (Lima, 2010). As Macedo, Dendrinis, and Gounary (2003) advocate, "meaning is always historically constructed, and it is a phenomenon of culture, a product of culture that is inherently ideological, and thus political" (p. 31), therefore, by failing to acknowledge or recognize the language and power relations embedded in cultural expressions, and as product of their culture, women are perpetuating their own oppression and silencing, as a result, they end up reproducing and valuing concepts, ideas and attitudes that debase, devalue and diminish them. Hence, I do agree with Talbot (1998) when she says that "Being male or female has far-reaching consequences for an individual. It affects how we act in the world, how the world treats us. This includes the language we use and the language used about us [women]" (p.3).

Thinking about the Cape Verdean school context specifically, I wonder if this lack of awareness on the importance of language in establishing relations of power may not be due to the teaching methods and approach because I do not recall critical thinking or text/language interpretation as being part of the curriculum. That said, I believe to change this current panorama of women representation in CaboZouk genre and the way women feel the songs, teaching approaches have to be questioned. I would even say that it is necessary to prepare lesson plans that could incorporate this kind of music and explore their message regarding gender and social roles in our culture. As a Cape Verdean woman singer writes in one of her songs:

"Ah Konsiênsia!
 Nha konsiênsia ka-bu durmi más ki si
 Djuntá-nu pa nu buli mundu!
 Ka-bu dixâ-m sima saku baziu,
 Sima pedra paradu na fundu d-es riu,
 Toma-m konta-kabesa
 Pa sangi subi-m na korpu!
 Nha gritu pa justiça
 É kanta pa igualdadi,
 S"é pa-m tchora injustiça
 Xa-m kanta pa igualdadi
 I manifesta pa liberdadi..."

Oh consciousness!
 My consciousness, do not sleep anymore
 Joint us to shake the world!
 Don't let us be like empty bags,
 Like stones at the bottom of the river
 Spread in my head
 Make the blood boil in my body!
 My scream for justice
 Is to sing for equality,
 Instead of crying the injustice
 Let me sing for equality
 And manifest for freedom...

VI – REFERENCES

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VII - APPENDIXES

Appendix 1: Lyrics of Simple Girl

by Nelson Freitas adapted and retrieved April 13, 2014 from: <http://letras.mus.br/nelson-freitas/>

Simple Girl

Nelson Freitas

I'm in the club
Möet & Chandon in my cup
Beautiful ladies all around me
All of them calling me 'papi'
I'm not looking for love
A one night stand's more like it
'til I started gettin' all excited
A loads and she will be so ...

Then she started actin up
Telling me she ain't no boobie
Hatin all the ladies that's around me
She told me she's not feeling my music
I almost gave up
But damn the baby got bootie
Baby I wanna take this girl home with me
She told me if you wanna seduce me
You just

Just bring me a flower cuz I'm a simple girl
All I need is a single rose
And you will run my world
Just bring me a flower cuz I'm a simple girl
All I need is a single rose
And you will run my world

I want to make you come
Your juicy's flowing over my body
Damn the girl's so sexy
Beautiful from the head down to her feet
And she can be the one
I'm feeling her style
A beautiful smile
And god she is playing hard to get
But that's how I love her

So so bring it

Then she started actin up
Telling me she ain't no boobie
Hatin all the ladies that's around me
She told me she's not feeling my music
I almost gave up
But damn the baby got bootie

Baby I wanna take this girl home with me
She told me if you wanna seduce me
You just

Just bring me a flower cuz I'm a simple girl
All I need is a single rose
And you will run my world
Just bring me a flower cuz I'm a simple girl
All I need is a single rose
And you will run my world

Now it seems she's coming home tonight
And she will be with me until the morning
light
Now it seems she's coming home tonight
And she will be with me until the morning
light

Just bring me a flower cuz I'm a simple girl
All I need is a single rose
And you will run my world
Just bring me a flower cuz I'm a simple girl
All I need is a single rose
And you will run my world

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN7p1zi7DpA>