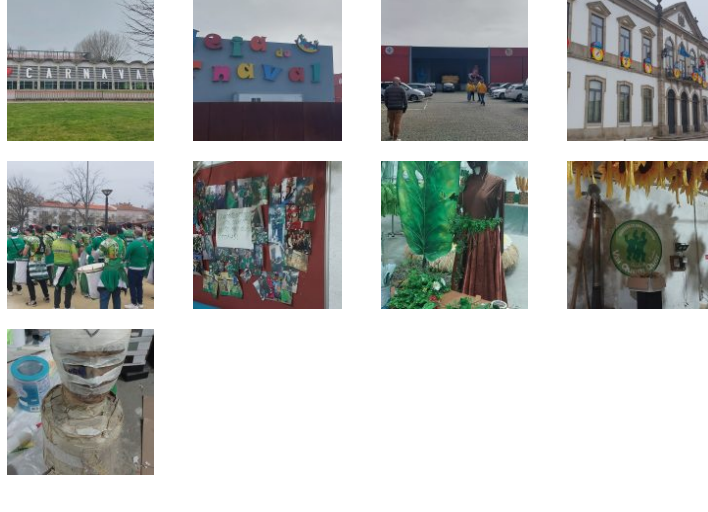
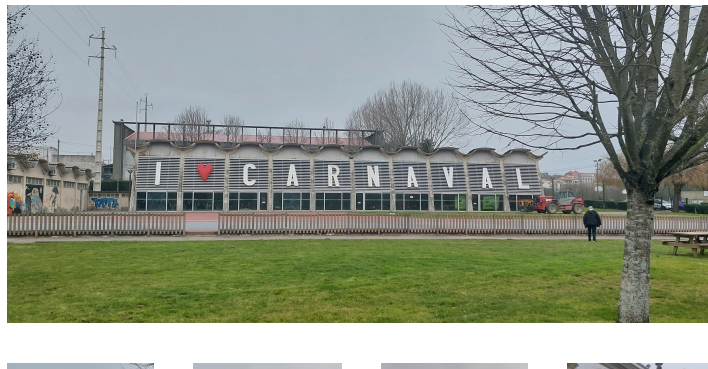




ESTARREJA'S CARNIVAL – PART I: THE REHEARSAL

The Rio de Janeiro Carnival, popularized worldwide by the samba schools, acts as a great symbol of Brazilian culture, as well as serving as a fine example of cultural hybridity, as historians Simas & Fabato (2015, p. 12) point out about its origins:

Few places would be more ideal for the emergence of [samba] schools than the city of *São Sebastião do Rio de Janeiro*, the Oxossi hunter of our *macumbas*. The geography that mixes hills and asphalt, the tensions between a black city – a port of entry for thousands of slaves from Africa and a point of attraction for thousands of freedmen who arrived in Rio in the years immediately after the abolition of slavery in 1888 – and a city that tried to be European (the “Tropical Paris” of the urban reforms led by Mayor Pereira Passos at the beginning of the 20th century) made it possible for cultural inputs of various kinds to circulate and produce a peculiar cultural broth. There’s everything in the Carioca recipe

Even though I’m not a big fan of this popular festival, I was invited by my colleague Leonardo, also a PhD student in Cultural Studies, to research the samba schools of Estarreja, here in Portugal, because the translation of a festivity – so closely linked to our Brazilian national culture – onto Portuguese soil, left us a tad curious to try and understand what this melting pot of cultural hybridity might be. Therefore, under the concept of cultural hybridity (Canclini, 1990; Bhabha, 1998), i.e. a series of socio-cultural processes in which certain structures and practices – unique and distinct – combine into new hybrid structures, practices and objects, we then set ourselves towards the challenge of discovering the Estarreja samba school performances.

It was February 8th and we started our visit in Ovar, after Leo and I had watched previous years’ parades on YouTube and noticed that Ovar’s samba school parades seemed better produced than Estarreja’s, in the sense of having more people participating as audience and parade members. As Ovar was on the way to Estarreja, there was enough time for a brief visit.

Arriving in Ovar, we found that the samba schools and carnival groups were centralized in a single space, which had around 24 sheds, distributed between 4 samba schools and 20 carnival groups. Each shed concentrated items from each school’s parade, with the *samba-enredo* [samba-plot] attached to the walls, and it was clear that there was a gender division in the tasks to be carried out, i.e. the men were concentrated on the more “organizational” tasks (allegories and music) while the women were in charge of the more “performative” tasks (such as the parade and its tempo), although it was possible to spot a few people of each gender moving between tasks – in a 90/10 ratio.



Figures 1 e 2. Ovar’s “Carnival Village”

We took a brief walk around the space and noticed that the atmosphere resembled a club, where the families linked to each group/school gathered casually, always identifiable by the colors of their samba association. It was also possible to see that the daughters were extremely cheerful and always jumping or dancing, while the sons usually followed their fathers in a shy and muted manner – the fathers, in this case, gathered at the back of each shed, where there was a kind of small bar where they enjoyed glasses of Super Bock.

On that particular day, there was to be a parade through the city and, despite our expectation of a space full of music, only the *Charanginha* group was testing their sound car, which almost deafened me. We took the opportunity to briefly talk to a few participants from some of the samba groups, discovering an unexpected pattern: there were hardly any Brazilians in the groups, usually no more than two per group.

Our time in Ovar was quite short, as we had a meeting scheduled with a representative of the *Trepa de Estarreja* Samba School. When we arrived in Estarreja, we noticed that, unlike Ovar, which had a space reserved for all the associations, each association had its own space. In this case, both the *Trepa de Estarreja* samba school and the *Vai Quem Quer* school were located near to each other, in a very rural area and next to the train line, about three minutes’ walk from each other.

We tried to visit *Trepa de Estarreja*, but as it was a day with a big party in the evening, we were unable to contact any representatives, although we did manage to visit the school briefly. The school was empty, except for some workers organizing the party that would take place later. At first, I found it curious that the school had the same colors as *Estação Primeira de Mangueira*, a traditional samba school in Rio de Janeiro and the home of samba singer Cartola. In a conversation with my colleague Leonardo, he told me that, in previous research, he had noticed that almost all the samba schools in Portugal allude to some of the traditional samba schools in Rio’s carnival.

We took a brief walk through the city center, which was very empty. As we passed in front of the City Council, we noticed that all the groups that make up Estarreja’s Carnival had their emblems prominently displayed. I even found it very interesting that there were two carnival groups dedicated to women.



Figure 3. Estarreja’s City Council

In the city center, there was a space dedicated to the Carnival, where the different samba schools and groups held their rehearsals. This same space was where the actual Carnival parade (or procession) took place. In this case, we managed to get there right at the start of the *Vai Quem Quer* rehearsal and, right from the start, I was surprised that the crowd was almost entirely Portuguese. This demographic was also evident in the school itself. Just as in the videos we watched before our visit, it was possible to see that the parade was composed almost exclusively of women *passistas* [dancers], while the men were located almost exclusively in the school’s drums, except for a few male figures who complemented some scenographic elements, such as spaces dedicated to allegorical cars or the figure of the *mestre-sala* accompanying the *porta-bandeira*.



Figures 4 e 5. Estarreja’s Carnival Space

Even though it was freezing cold, all the *passistas* were dressed in shorts and high heels, with a large presence of teenage and young adult women, as well as small children’s wards full of young girls. While they were waiting for their wing to enter the avenue, I noticed some of these children playing with sticks, as if they were tiny witches’ magic wands.

During the rehearsal, the first shock: the entire *samba-enredo* is sung in Brazilian Portuguese, despite the fact that – notoriously – the school has very few members who can be identified as Brazilian, namely 1 couple of black people on the drums. At the end of the rehearsal, which even manages to briefly allude to a universe of Brazil, despite the fact that there are almost no Brazilians in the school or in the audience, everyone present is Portuguese again, i.e. you no longer hear Brazilian Portuguese and you hear Portuguese from Portugal.

Leo and I tried to talk to a guy who we noticed was part of the organizing team and we finally found out: the school has only one Brazilian (the black drummer), which was contrary to our initial expectations. After a brief conversation in which we introduced ourselves and asked a few questions, we were invited to visit the school’s headquarters.

When we arrived, we managed to establish an initial relationship. As the conversation went on, we noticed that the organizers’ domestic relationships showed a high degree of involvement with the Estarreja carnival scene. In this particular case, *Vai Quem Quer*’s *madrinha de bateria* [“drum’s godmother”, who leads the drums] is the wife of the president of the school itself; on another front, *Vai Quem Quer*’s marketing manager is married to the president of the rival school, *Trepa de Estarreja*.

The organizers excitedly shared with us that they had visited Brazil for the first time in November 2024, getting to know some of the samba schools in Rio de Janeiro in more depth. Leo, who worked for years as a *carnavalista* [carnival designer] in Rio de Janeiro, initiated a bonding by asking questions about the organization of samba schools and wanting to know who were the people that the group had met on their visit to Rio. I, on the other hand, tried to get to know a little more about the people who were there with us, discovering that the vice-president, André, was born in 1987 and in the heart of *Vai Quem Quer*, because the studio we were in had been his parents’ home at the time of his birth.



Figures 6 to 8. *Vai Quem Quer*’s Atelier



Figure 9. “Once we plant together, we harvest more than victories”

We tried to understand a little better why so few Brazilians experience the Estarreja Carnival – either in the samba schools or in the audience at the rehearsals, to which they shared with us that “Brazilians here don’t want samba schools and the work that goes into it. They may even open samba and pagode groups, but they don’t open schools”. We also asked whether there was any social and/or conservative taboo about women wearing costumes that might tend towards sexualization, to which we were summarily answered with “no, from here to the South of Portugal there is no such thing as that kind of conservatism”. In response to the small number of men parading, another succinct answer: “that’s true, because we have no interest”. But why is there no interest in men parading? I’m still trying to understand...

Right next door, the playlist in the main room played everything from Brazilian funk to typical Portuguese music. In order to better understand the relationship they had with Brazilian culture, given that samba schools are a typically Brazilian cultural expression, we asked a few questions aimed at understanding whether there was any kind of direct cultural exchange between Brazil and Portugal at the school. The group then told us that the school’s name itself came from a *Turma da Mônica* [Monica’s Gang] comic book and that, at the height of the popularization of the Rio Carnival here in *Purma da Mônica* (Monica’s Gang) comic book and that, at the height of the popularization of the Rio Carnival here in *Turma da Mônica* (mid-1980s and 1990s), in addition to what was being broadcast on Portuguese TV, they obtained cassette and VHS tapes of the Rio de Janeiro parades from friends and relatives visiting Brazil. However, except for a brief, more “professional” contact with Brazilian carnival designers, in which they contact them and invite them to pass on knowledge to the school in the form of workshops, there is no broader cultural dialog, except for the recent visit they made to Rio de Janeiro.

Leo then asked them directly how they see Estarreja’s Carnival and its relationship with Rio de Janeiro’s Carnival. We are also told directly that there is a fascination with Rio’s Carnival and, therefore, they want to “absorb” Rio’s Carnival into Estarreja. However, this vague answer does not explain what the intention is with this kind “emulation”.

Finally, what is most evident is that the social ties and relationships that are created from the samba school, whether due to the level of involvement or the hard work and craftsmanship that is present there, create a great sense of belonging for the members of the school, as Maffesoli (1986/1998) would suggest in his studies on post-modern tribalism. This is made clear in the words of André, vice-president and *mestre de bateria* [“drums’ chief”]: “I can’t leave the school for a moment, that’s why I don’t go to Brazil or see the Rio Carnival in person. I can’t”. Even so, at this first moment, I was very confused by the fact that a popular festival so intrinsic to Brazilian national culture is emulated as a product, to the point of imitating the accent and musicality of Brazilian Portuguese, but without establishing a relationship or allusion to the culture they seek to emulate, or rather “absorb”.

Text and images: **Lucas Novais** (CECS/University of Minho)

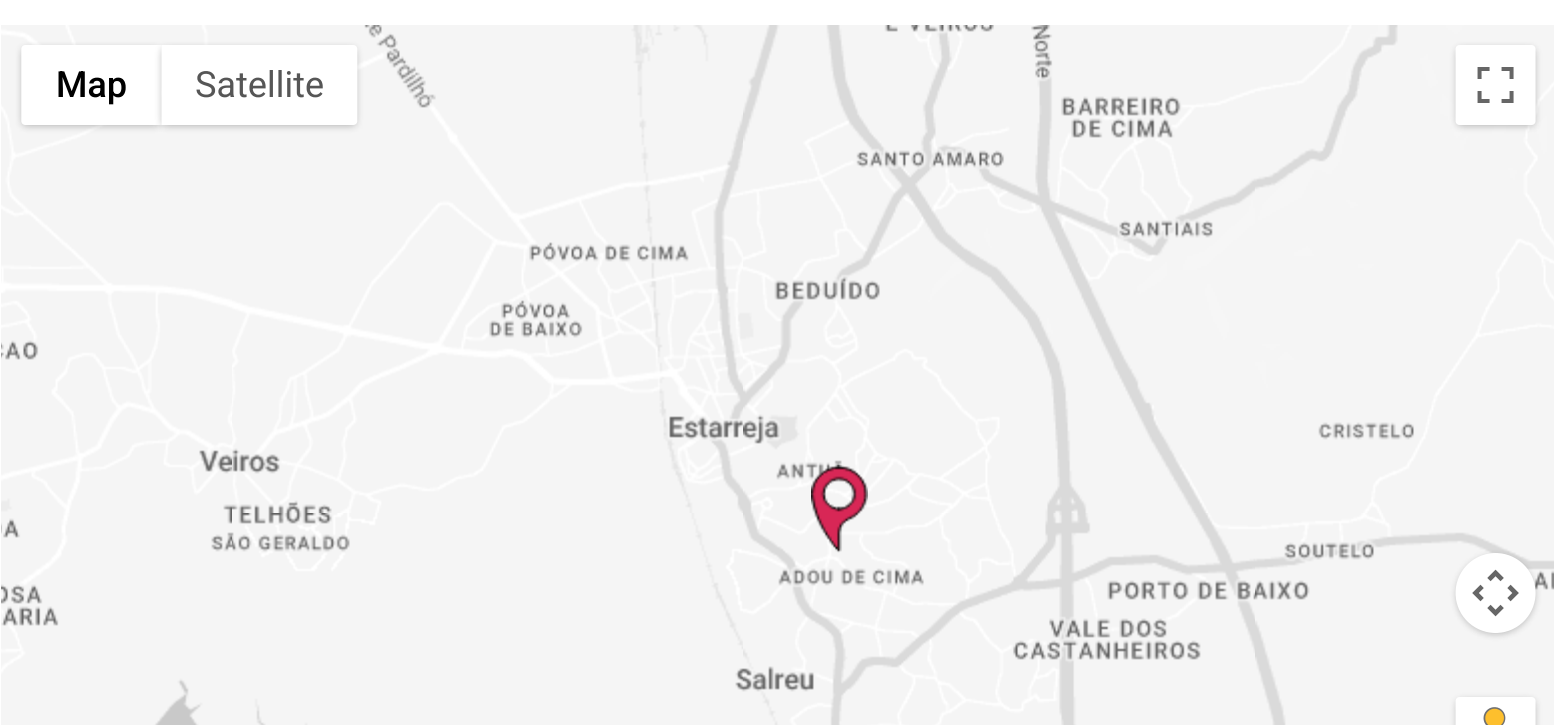
Published in May 30, 2025

This micro-essay is the first part of a duology entitled “*Estarreja’s Carnival: A Third Space created by the Samba Schools*”. The second part can be read [here](#).

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1998). *O local da cultura* (P. A. Nascimento, Trad.). Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG.
- Canclini, N. G. (1990). *Culturas híbridas: Estratégias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*. México: Grijalbo.
- Maffesoli, M. (1986/1998). *O Tempo dos Tribos. O declínio do individualismo nas sociedades de massa*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária.
- Simas, L. A., & Fabato, F. (2015). *Para tudo começar na quinta-feira: O enredo das enredos*. Módulo Editorial.

LOCALIZAÇÃO



< PREVIOUS POST

NEXT POST >

