

Notes from the field: Some reflections on language, voice and political action from the *Yalodês* project

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Introduction

In the very first meeting with the participants of the *Yalodês* project¹ it became clear for *Nupef's* team that a lot of attention should be paid to language, when working with this group. In fact, we were questioned/corrected twice during the meeting due to words that were used. When explaining the objectives of the project, talking about the strengthening of women's political participation and increasing poor and marginalised women's influence over the wider decision-making processes which

1 This was the name chosen by the women for the Brazilian module of the WomenGov project. We'll explore the meaning of *Yalodê* further in this text. The *Yalodês* are a group of women leaders from different communities of Rio de Janeiro and other municipalities in the *Baixada Fluminense*, who have been participating in *Criola's* initiatives for the strengthening of capacities and political articulation. *Criola* is a NGO founded and conducted by black women which mission is "to instrumentalize black women, adolescents and girls to set face against racism, sexism and lesbophobia (discrimination against lesbians), and to the development of actions aimed towards the improvement of the life conditions of black population".

affect their lives, we were questioned: why (do you use the term)marginalised? A bit later, when discussing about how the strategic use of ICTs may enhance the informational, associational and communicative power of women's collectives, we were [correctly] reminded: here, you're talking to **black** women's collectives.

Language, besides being deeply linked with identity, can be a powerful means of exercising social control. It can give people a strong sense of belonging or being excluded. This is brilliantly put in Jurema Werneck's² text – '*De Ialodês e Feministas*', when she affirms that “the capacity of giving names to things refers to a situation of power. So, it's about a possibility of ordering the world according to one's own, singular basis, be it from individual perspectives or from the perspective of collectives, of entire populations. It is thus a position of privilege³”. It became clear to us since the very beginning of this project that language, the power of words and the strength of these women's voices would be one of the pillars of this collective construction.

The question of Afro-Brazilian identity is foundational in this project. The need to differentiate feminism from black feminism has emerged from our observation and praxis – and is one of the most important learnings for the research team. Black feminist movements have been stressing for years that patriarchy and sexism cannot be dissociated from class oppression, capitalism, colonialism and racism – if diversity and inequality are not addressed in feminist political action, there is a risk that feminism itself falls in the trap of repeating homogenising, reductionist approaches that deepens invisibilities. It's important not to forget that hegemonic consensus are intimately bound to silence, to the disregard of differences, to the masking of conflicts. It is in this scenario that the concept of the *Ialodê* emerges.

Yalodês, voice and action

According to Werneck, “the leadership and responsibility of women in dealing with transcendental religious issues, cultural and political issues is a very old reality that precedes the history of colonialism in Africa”. Among the several possible manifestations of the exercise of women's political leadership, is the *Ialodê* (the Brazilian word for the term *Ìyálòòde* in Yorubá language). Werneck points that the

2 Jurema Werneck is one of the founders and coordinators of Criola, the NGO which is Nupef's partner in the WomenGov project in Brazil.

3 Werneck, Jurema. *De Ialodês e Feministas - Reflexões sobre a ação política das mulheres negras na América Latina e Caribe*. The mentions to Jurema's work in this report are freely translated from Portuguese by Graciela Selaimen.

Ialodês have been “confronting the notions of center and periphery”, for centuries - through promoting and being part of “initiatives that have in common the recognition of women's leadership, women's presence in public activities as well as the political role of women”.

“Ialodê is referred also to the woman who represent women, to some kinds of emblematic women, the one who talks on behalf of others and participates in the spaces of power. [...] The ialodês, on the other hand, have been affirming their presence and actuality in the 21 century through bodily and oral narratives, transmitted from the mouth to the ears, to attentive eyes, in the different spaces where the tradition is inherited and actualized. In the Brazilian case, this is seen in any black community, where women, undertaking roles of leadership or collective responsibility, develops actions of affirmation of a future to all the subordinated group. This happens through the struggles for improvements in the material conditions of life, as well as in the development of behaviors and activities that aim to affirm the pertinence and actuality of immaterial life. Thus, not only in the Afro-Brazilian religious communities, where they have a fundamental role in the propagation of the axé⁴, but also outside the sacred spaces, the Ialodê is actualized, necessary and celebrated.” (Werneck, 2007)

It is in this context that we understood, in the first months of the *Yalodês* project, that the most pressing need in terms of qualifying and improving black women's collective participation in local governance is to strengthen and amplify the women's voices, especially aiming for the better recognition of these leaders as legitimate political actors, improving the quality of their interference in the local governance structures and processes. Here, the amplification of voice must be understood in two ways: first, as the re-signification and affirmation of the black women's voice and place in the local institutional ecosystem, what we may help to achieve by supporting them in different practices for discursive and symbolic productions. We believe this will affect the way the *Yalodês* understand and situate themselves in the democratic processes, helping to establish more articulate and sustainable dialogues with state and non-state actors involved in governance processes.

Secondly, this amplification can be understood in a more concrete way – as the amplification of the reach of these voices, by having them heard in a more wider spectrum of political spaces, through processes that “involve identity and difference, or what Lister refers to as ‘a politics of recognition and

4 “Axé means strength, in an existential sense. This means, axé is the basis of existence, what puts it in movement. Axé may also be understood as power of engendering and realization. Without Axé, existence wouldn't exist.”

respect' (2002: 37). Citizens' voices are derived from identities that are "not recognised, nor indeed respected, are not likely to be heard" (Gaventa, 2002). Among the *Yalodês* there is consensus about the need for more symmetry in their relation with the local powers – even in spaces that were conceived to be 'participatory'- where more deliberative and inclusionary forms of policy making and democratic governance are supposed to take place. Our hypothesis is that empowered voices find it easier to make way and establish the institutional linkages necessary to guarantee their rights and entitlements, grounded "in a conception of rights which, in a development context, strengthens the status of citizens from that of beneficiaries of development to its rightful and legitimate claimants." (Cornwall 2000, apud Gaventa, 2002).

Spaces of participation

Among the wider community of women who responded to the project's survey⁵ it is evident that there exists a huge gap between their acknowledgment about their rights (including the right to assembly and participation) and the actualization of practices for rights affirmation and defence. Although the huge majority of the survey participants think that women should participate in the community decision-making processes (98.2% of respondents affirmed this), their practice of participation is still very much linked to supporting political parties and candidates during election campaigns. This participation is mostly informed by husband or family members (40,0%) or dependent on the information given by neighbors and friends (46,7%). In this sense, the role of the *Yalodês* is significant in terms of the possibility of altering structures of power so that information flows toward and from the periphery, in building a new geography - as stated by Aminata Diaw: "The transition to democracy is a narrative of the exclusion of women. What is needed is a new geography to give women space. This new space which women seek is one where there is negotiation between those with power and those without."

For this negotiation, an empowered, consistent voice is crucial, one which is able to reaffirm black women's identity and assure its inclusion in a multiplicity of spaces. This means not only occupying existing spaces within the present architecture of power and governance, but also creating spaces for articulating new, more inclusive meanings. The survey results show us that this is a most pressing need

5 This survey was answered by 152 women from four different sites: one *favela* in Rio de Janeiro and three communities in the periphery of municipalities of the *Baixada Fluminense*. The participation of these women in the survey was facilitated by the *Yalodês*, who made the invitations and mobilised women to come to their centres or, in some situations, took the research team to the women's houses.

as, in the visited communities, political spaces exclusively for women are inexistent and/or widely unknown by the population. 40.8% of the participants say there are no spaces for the defence of women's rights in their community and 28.6% say they don't know about it. When it comes to the affirmation and defence of women's rights, the most frequently mentioned spaces are the dwellers' associations (44.7%) and the religious groups (24.5%) - which are the spaces where most of the *Yalodês* carry on their work.

The approach taken by Cornwall (2009) in her examination on the kinds of 'spaces' in which participation may occur, calls attention to the need for understanding these spaces in the contexts in which they are created. In particular, Cornwell “[...] *argues for distinguishing, amongst other factors, between ‘invited spaces’ created from above through donor or governmental intervention, and spaces which are chosen, taken and demanded through collective action from below. Whatever their origins, however, no new spaces for participation are neutral, but are shaped by the power relations which both enter and surround them. While attention has been paid to what spaces and mechanisms exist for public participation, more attention, she argues, must be paid to who is creating these spaces and why, who fills them, and how the new spaces carry within them ‘tracks and traces’ of previous social relationships, resources and knowledge. What prevents long-established patterns of power from being reproduced? Who speaks, for whom, and who is heard?*” (Gaventa, 2009)

The reflection on spaces of political participation must be contextualised by examining the political traditions of each place – which makes the concept of 'participation' diverse, with multiple nuances and meanings. In Brazil, new social policy models were initiated with the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution. These models have created spaces for direct civil society-state interaction in the form of local councils and public hearings. “Local councils serve as spaces for deliberation and debate in the design and monitoring of social services. In the area of health alone, there are more than 5,000 health councils, almost one for each of 5,507 municipalities, providing a large-scale case study of attempts to institutionalise direct forms of citizen participation”. (Coelho, Andrade and Montoya, 2009). It's clear for many authors researching the functioning of the councils that the spaces alone do not guarantee voice. “Despite their Constitutional guarantee, there is still the question of whether the most marginalised groups are able to articulate their voice in these arenas, and a question of the alliances and institutional arrangements which help them to do so” (ibid). In these 'invited spaces' for participation not all feel invited – or, at least, not everyone sees meaning in going to meetings where they observe in

silence the decisions being made. As Coelho, Andrade and Montoya propose, for the improvement of citizens' participation (both women and men) in the councils, “broader approaches are needed, which recognise the diversity and identities of local actors and the ways in which they can be pre-empted from claiming rights by forces of social and economic exclusion”. Another important recognition is that in Brazil, politics is a territory of the elites. Until 1930, political chiefs and landowners imposed upon workers their voting choices. Today, the practice of vote-buying is widely spread and common. Votes and voices have been an bargaining chip since the inception of our republic.

This analysis leads us to the reflection on how crucial it is to invest in initiatives that are built upon dynamics inspired by what Freire proposed as a “pedagogy of the oppressed”, which consists of two stages: “(1) the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation, and (2) In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation” (Freire, 1968/2002). The *Yalodês* have made it clear to our team how much they need information, skills and strategic thinking in order to understand and appropriate the political language, so to better communicate with local governance institutions; to raise their voices so to gain greater visibility and legitimacy, especially among the local governance players. Many of the project participants are feeling reassured, throughout the project implementation, on the legitimate political influence they hold as religious and spiritual leaders – slowly perceiving the possibility of acting as role models, of harnessing community knowledge while engaging their communities in the externalisation of issues through information creation and building alternative representations.