Scenes from an African Lisbon: Selected Chronicles from *O angolano que comprou Lisboa (por metade do preço)*[*]

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The Lisbon of Night-Owls

I wish I'd been a photographer. One thing that struck me most when I moved to Lisbon in the late 1990s was seeing, while walking home after late nights out, the light as it hit the Baixa neighborhood, spilling from the waterfront onto the columns and then all the way to the Rossio district in a lazy, illuminated, morning stretch. The sun has always been generous to this city of seven hills that, for its part, always knew how to welcome it, with the pastel tones of its building facades, the terracotta roofs, and, of course, its Tagus River. Everything seems perfectly set in place for the spectacle that is the Lisbon sunrise. It makes you want to stand and applaud; it even makes you want to be a tourist, snapping hundreds of photos to frame and hang all over the house.

But this moment of light would not be quite so unforgettable, at least for me, if it weren't accompanied by one of the most extraordinary scenes one might witness in a European capital: the enormous contrast between the lyrical cityscape and the hard reality of those who live in it. Something hard to ignore, but still so

[*] The original chronicles in Portuguese were published in Kalaf Epalanga's *O angolano que comprou Lisboa (por metade do preço)* (Editorial Caminho, 2014). The translator of these pieces and the editorial team of the *Journal of Lusophone Studies* express their gratitude to Kalaf Epalanga for permitting the publication of the translations of his chronicles in this issue.

rarely portrayed in the poetry or films that take this city as their setting. Even if they did mention it, we wouldn't quite believe them.

With the first vestiges of light, you would hear the crowd coming ashore in the Baixa, in a rush, running after buses, eyes fixed to the ground. Indifferent to everything, with time measured down to the precise second, and in a funereal silence. The city, with its soft tones, ochre yellow, brick rose, and blues playing with the sunlight, would reveal then its true colors, coming close to the exotic reputation attributed to it by foreign visitors. Lisbon, the city that would wake up Black, become Brown as the day advanced, and then perfectly Nordic as the sun was setting.

That was the Lisbon I came to know; for a long time, only the few very truly bohemian Africans were seen after dark. Very few if compared to the number arriving in the Baixa dawn, coming from the suburbs that surround the city. And as they were so few, they all knew each other; they arrived punctually late, never before midnight, as if partaking in a ritual. They would claim something that was intrinsically theirs, after a week of constant dueling with their marginalized condition as Africans, as immigrants, atop scaffolding, with a bucket of cement and a trowel in their hands, or high up a ladder, aproned, soap and scrub brush in their hands, or in line still at the Borders and Foreign Nationals Service, with no appointment and no idea how or when they might come out of the shadows and become something other than a number or statistic. Those late nights out were a salve, the only possible analgesic so as to survive Lisbon in the 90s with a minimum of dignity.

I wish I'd become a photographer, because the night-owls of the Lisbon I knew, now twenty years ago, continue to cross through my neighborhood, eyes fixed on the ground and steps long, carrying on their backs the Lisbon light, in a unique spectacle that bears as much sadness as it does beauty. It is life as it is, in its grim urgency, running so as not to miss the bus.

The Museum of Kizomba

To ease tensions between Angola and Portugal, I come here to propose, to whomever is reserved the right to consider, promote, and invest in this sort of project, the creation of a Museum of Kizomba in the city of Lisbon. Honorable President of the Lisbon City Council, representatives of the Community of

Portuguese-Speaking Nations, of the Ministry of Culture, of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, ambassadors, consular and diplomatic officials, here is a unique opportunity for us to precisely identify the cultural values that unite the different peoples who speak, sing, and dream in Portuguese. It would be the first, and it would operate along the lines of the Museum of Fado, its objectives being, among others, the documentation and enjoyment of the heritage and universe of fado, as well as addressing the dissemination of knowledge about that musical expression, promoting its study and appreciation. With kizomba, it would be no different, considering the fact that, little by little, dance academies and classes specializing in this musical expression have germinated across Europe. It is what is most heard in the Lisbon suburbs.

And what more opportune moment than this one in which we are now living? Yes, because while the country declares bankruptcy and requests assistance from the IMF, the European Union, China, and Angolan corporations—of which I never grow tired of reminding people—there has never existed in the history of urban music made in Portugal a moment as creative as the one we now witness. Anselmo Ralph, C4 Pedro, Nelson Freitas are just some of the artists from this universe who fill the Coliseu and Pavilhão Atlântico, the biggest venues in Lisbon. At a moment when we need to attract more tourists for this little corner at the edge of the ocean, what greater cultural symbol than the perpetually neglected kizomba? Don't forget that one cannot survive on the sea, golf courses, and fado alone.

Please note that I'm not here advocating for the creation of the Museum of Kizomba out of some cultural whim, because I am African, or because kizomba runs in my blood. To be honest, I'm a quite mediocre dancer, surely an embarrassment to my fellow Angolans. Still, I have to point out how this phenomenon has come to spread. In the last five years, kizomba schools have proliferated, captivating new fans beyond the African community. Today people who have never visited a kizomba club have come into contact with this dance through gyms, dance schools, and dozens of workshops happening all over the place, from Europe to the United States. They are responsible for the revolution that kizomba is experiencing within the universe of ballroom dancing. Did you ever imagine that kizomba would reach the same stature as the cha-cha or the foxtrot?

Lisbon is a mestizo city, it's mixed, it's Moorish, it's African, it's the world, and the solution to the crisis, I believe, will come from our reconciling with the

history of this unique place, geographically positioned right at the center of the triangle connecting the Americas, Africa, and Europe beyond the Pyrenees. This is the place we call home, a place that is economically failed but culturally rich, a place with a horrible marketing strategy, but with content and a history to tell. Why not begin with a few dance steps?

From Benguela to Lisbon

When I moved to Lisbon during that difficult phase of late adolescence, I took on some odd jobs at an African nightclub in the Marquês de Pombal neighborhood in order to make a bit of cash. The location was nothing extraordinary; in fact, it's already closed down. Truth be told, it was an unassuming place, where old Africans would go to drown their *saudade* in whisky and dances to the tempo of "Cherry," by Paulo Flores, in the arms of some of the most beautiful women Lisbon has ever seen. Rather, I doubt Lisbon has ever truly seen them, because their sort of beauty is revealed only after midnight.

In my country-mouse innocence, I was so completely fascinated with those daughters of the moon that I began to frequent the place even on my days off. "Dude, don't be so obvious," the always sensible bartenders would tell me—they were all on-call psychologists, true graves for the craziest secrets that the Lisbon wee hours ever produced, secrets that, if ever revealed, would cause the most depraved beings, even the devil himself, to blush. In my eyes, those women took on the same stature as a monument placed in a rotunda. They were beautiful, but it wasn't just their beauty that transfixed me. Rarely would I hear them utter more than a half-dozen words: "whisky and cola," when I took down their orders, "more ice," or sometimes "give me a light?" What I really knew of them was their blood-red lips and teeth that sparkled like disco-balls. This and the swaying of their hips when they danced kizomba, oh how they danced!

Every Angolan knows: to really go dancing, clubs aren't the ideal place. Backyard parties and weddings, those are in fact the best places to get your groove on. I was sure of this until I started that job. That club wasn't just a sanctuary for the nostalgia of fifty-something-year-old Africans marooned in Lisbon, in a sea of whisky and stunning women. It was where the best kizomba dancers Lisbon has ever seen chose to go before ending the night in Mussulo, which, at the time, was the most happening club.

The best I ever saw grace that dance floor wasn't Black or African. She was a blonde from Loures, drop-dead gorgeous, who danced like a goddess and could make even the most mediocre, like me, look like the late, great Mateus Pelé do Zangado. I exaggerate, but the truth is that, in her endless generosity, she bestowed upon me the honor of holding her in my arms and practicing the most basic of steps, "one-two, one-two," that she somehow made magical, making me feel like the best dancer in the world, vying for first place in the "África a Dançar" International Kizomba Competition.

Lisbon is, undeniably, one of the most African cities in the world, and in the last few years it's been fascinating seeing the prominence that kizomba has taken on in this city. Today, wherever you turn, it's there. But it's not just in Lisbon. Other European cities have begun to jump on board. Paris, London, Brussels, and Rotterdam are, as could be expected given the African presence visible among them, places where kizomba, beyond the Luanda-Lisbon axis, has come to claim ever more relevance. The biggest surprise though is the number of kizomba classes, gatherings, and festivals that have begun to pop up all over the place, from Eastern Europe to the United States, from Australia to South America. Who would have ever thought that kizomba—today the greatest symbol of Angolan culture—would travel so far. Not even I, who enjoys imagining the impossible, could have imagined this. Not even Pelé do Zangado or his dance partner Joana Pernambuco could ever have imagined that so many of the steps they created would inspire so many different people.

As far as the blonde from Loures, I lost track of her. It seems she married an Angolan soccer player and moved to Spain. . . .

My Political Color

It was a few days ago, in the middle of the night. The telephone rings, I answer, it was a call from across the Atlantic. I celebrated the event with the sort of clamor with which we Black people toast to one another when we encounter a friend or relative we haven't seen for years.

And, in fact, it had been years since I'd seen him; hearing his voice, even at that late hour, was cause for celebration. I rubbed my eyes, shook off the sleep, and jumped out of bed. Yeah, I'm the sort who can't manage to have a conversation lying down and in my underwear. Maybe because I'm from that distant time before

cell phones and when answering the phone involved moving to wherever the phone was, generally in the living room. That's what I did, getting dressed and sitting on the sofa.

After the usual greetings, my interlocutor left no space for even a bit of light chitchat before throwing out the question: "Who are the Black Portuguese?" I confess that I wasn't at all expecting to be pulled out of bed in order to identify or trace the profile of an ethnic group, even if it was one I belonged to. The response naturally requires some careful reflection, dodging and keeping at a distance the platitudes that we almost inevitably bump up against, before diving down and recovering, amid all the prejudice, repression, and social stigma, the true face of the *negro luso*.

In order to draw this portrait, we might even begin with the Discoveries and affirm that the Black Portuguese were the ones who revealed the maritime route to India and who also discovered Brazil. If it weren't for the late hour, which I already mentioned, we might talk about astronomy and the invention of the caravels. But not in the timid and superficial ways in which we consider these historical aspects, so Lusitanian, so Moorish, so Black. So few Black people are interested in these issues that we continue to sail upon this sea of monochrome silence, convinced that the very first thing that Black Portuguese experienced in this land were the dungeons at the port of Lisbon where, after disembarking, they were examined, separated into lots, and sold at auction.

We learned the mannerisms, the language, the saints, and we even learned to speak softly and to walk with our eyes to the ground. With exemplary conduct, avoiding basic questions, such as "Who are the Black Portuguese?" Portugal was isolated until 1974, and Black people, in the shadows of empire, were completely forgotten, subject to a solitude so violent that the few points of pride, such as the extraordinary football feats of Eusébio, were celebrated without the euphoria with which today we celebrate the feats of some patrician. Being conscious of the color of one's skin and celebrating that fact was always regarded as a political act, being Black is a political act, and because Black people don't "think," having a political conscience is dangerously frightening.

Translator's Note

These translations are published here in memory of Fernando Arenas, who was my advisor and dissertation director during my doctoral studies at the University of Minnesota between 1997 and 2003 and who remained a dear mentor and friend in the years since. The translations were first drafted in early 2019, some months before his passing, but Arenas was very much the impetus and inspiration for them, as the mediating figure through which I came to know of Kalaf Epalanga's chronicles and engage with their broad historical and sociocultural contexts and resonances. Though I had been a casual fan of Epalanga's music, I first became aware of his work as a writer at the University of Michigan, where he was one of the keynote speakers at the 2018 APSA conference organized by Arenas.

Inspired by that encounter with his work and further spurred by an invitation from a colleague to teach a class on Lisbon for an interdepartmental colloquium on global cities, I translated three of Epalanga's chronicles so as to make them available for Anglophone students. I took advantage of the occasion of the invitation to renew my engagement with Arenas's research and writing, determining to define the parameters of the class by approaching Lisbon as an African city, or, as Arenas himself termed it, the rise of African Lisbon. Arenas thus introduced me to Kalaf Epalanga as a writer, and Epalanga's writing in turn provided me with the welcome, even if bittersweet, opportunity to return to Arenas's work during the months before and after his passing.

Kalaf Epalanga was born in Benguela, Angola, in 1978 and moved to greater Lisbon during his early adolescence. He was a columnist for the Portuguese daily *O Público* and has published two collections of chronicles, *Estórias de amor para meninos de cor* and *O angolano que comprou Lisboa (por metade do preço)*, and a novel, *Os brancos também sabem dançar,* which is to be published by Faber and Faber in an English translation by Daniel Hahn. In the early 2000s, he cofounded A Enchufada, a record label dedicated to promoting around the world new musical styles from Portugal, and he is a founding member of the award-winning music group Buraka Som Sistema. He currently lives in Berlin.

The chronicles here are from *The Angolan Who Bought Lisbon (at Half-Price)*, published in 2014. This wide-ranging collection of more than fifty short chronicles touches upon everything from soccer, to Zouk Bass and Kuduro music, to memories and experiences of Angolan and African culture and daily life in Lisbon,

and Epalanga's travels to other cities—Paris, Berlin, New York, Huambo, and Benguela. My selection among these chronicles was shaped by what I thought might convey to Anglophone students and readers most clearly visions of Lisbon as a dynamic, multiracial, multiethnic, postcolonial, and, ultimately, African city. Epalanga's portrayals of Lisbon are both nostalgic and celebratory, embracing a fado-like mournfulness while also dislodging it, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, with the festive sensuality of the kizomba as a better symbol today for the social and cultural identity of the city.

Epalanga's and Arenas's respective works coincide and cohere in terms of their thematic concerns and range of cultural interests and mappings. They also, in my estimation, echo each other in terms of a particular affective range, one that, while engaging in critique of enduring racisms and colonialities of power structuring the postcolonial present, leans in the direction of joy and hopefulness, at the discovery of creative responses and aftermaths, at the possibilities of reconciliation, at the utopian potentialities of engaging with otherness. In short, in these chronicles, I find—or hear—a kindredness of spirit between Epalanga and Arenas. In turn, Arenas's work can help us to read more deeply and situate Epalanga's chronicles within a longer historicization and typology of African migrations to and Afro-Portuguese presences and protagonisms in Lisbon.[1]

Works Cited

Arenas, Fernando. "Migrations and the Rise of African Lisbon." *Postcolonial Studies,* vol. 18, no. 4, 2015, pp. 353–66.

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[1] One might begin with Arenas's 2015 article in *Postcolonial Studies*, "Migrations and the Rise of African Lisbon," which presents a compact yet highly detailed roadmap—including a remarkable sixty-three endnotes detailing a vast corpus of primary and secondary sources—for his third book project, with the working title *The Rise of Afro-Portugal: From Migration to European Citizenship*, well underway but sadly unfinished at the time of his passing.