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BONGA´S TRANSATLANTIC ROUTES

Marissa Moorman

Resumo: Este trabalho constitui um estudo do álbum Angola 74 de Bonga para analisar as relações sobre Bomga e sua música. Bonga observou o cotidiano em Kipiri, onde nasceu, e a experiência do dia a dia nos musseques de Luanda e o impacto da música na região. Suas "raízes" e sua fonte (Pereira, 2018; Eduardo, 2012). Mas a música "Ghinawa" de Angola 74, em sons e história, sugere rotas e não raízes. Ao escutar atentamente, traço uma trajetória urbana transatlântica para o trabalho de Bonga.
Palavras-chave: raízes, rotas, Bonga e música angolana

Abstract: This paper listens to one piece of music from Bonga´s *Angola 74* album to undo assumptions about the musician and his music. Bonga notes the impact of life in Kipiri, where he was born, and quotidian experience in Luanda's musseques on himself and his music. These are his "roots" and his source (Pereira, 2018; Eduardo, 2012). But the music "Ghinawa" from *Angola 74*, in it sounds and history, suggests routes not roots. Listening closely to it, I chart a trans-Atlantic, urban trajectory for Bonga's work.
Keywords: Roots, Routes, Bonga, Angolan music

"I saw him play and he was playing like an Angolan. I asked him to join me." (Bonga on Perazzo)

Bonga is a musician with a long career. He embodies *angolanidade*. "Balumukeno," "Mona ki Ngi Xica," and "Sodade," showcase Bonga's raspy voice keening laments. "Ku tando," "Roça de Jindungo," and "Uengi Dia Ngola," are fast-paced, danceable, and celebratory. "Ghinawa" sounds like none of them. Morabeza records produced *Angola 74* on the verge of Angola's independence.

Here I offer some thoughts on a different way of approaching Bonga and his music by listening closely and thinking around the music "Ghinawa" on *Angola 74*.

This piece is an attempt to take one piece of artistic production and move outward from it. It is an anti-completist move that does not consider the artist's entire oeuvre but instead asks: what can we learn from one work when we look or listen closely? In this case, it is a piece of music that will open some new ways of framing Bonga and his music.

First, the music. Here is a link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2b7ajuyCWwQ or look it up on your favored music service: Bonga, "Ghinawa."

Close your eyes. What do you hear? What does this music evoke? What geographies do you associate with these sounds? These instruments? Does it sound like Bonga?

It is this different sound, a sound that listeners typically do not associate with Bonga and his music, that interests me. To cite Gonçalo Tavares in "moral sonora" from *Breves Notas Sobre Música*: "Decidir a que som dar atenção é, afinal, decidir a que volume colocar as diferentes partes do mundo. É uma decisão importante" (2015, p. 17). I lean into this piece of music, raise its volume, so that we can disrupt the idea of "música angolana de raíz."

I want to pull on this piece of music as if it were a loose thread in a piece of fabric. Pulling on it, we will undo – or at least loosen – the narrow suit of *angolanidade*. Bonga is tightly associated with *angolanidade* and the valorization of Angolan culture. Indeed, Bonga has often been called the "embaixador da música angolana."

I want to open a different conversation about the meanings of music, nation, and *angolanidade*. This gesture is not to criticize Bonga as a musician or his music. I am not calling his authenticity or his *angolanidade* into question. Instead, I want to bring the cosmopolitan nature of national culture back in to view.

Pulling on the loose thread of "Ghinawa," I tug in three directions: (1) roots (2) 1974 (3) sound.

1. Roots

First tug: "roots." As Yuri da Cunha, a young, acclaimed Angolan musician, sings in his song "Obrigada Bonga Kwenda" on his CD *O Interprete*, Bonga is "um angolano de raíz."

What does this mean?

The idea of roots as a cultural foundation is a key component in the discourse of cultural identity. It is a common, widely circulating idea in everyday conversation, in journalism, and in cultural promotion. In no sense is it "made in Angola." It has much to do with the African diaspora and pan-Africanism and it gained new force during decolonization.

Today, however, "roots" can be a caricature of culture. On the African continent and in musical production this can look like animal skin prints and sound like "traditional" instruments. This is part of a larger phenomenon. It is what the cultural theorist Raymond Williams called "selective tradition" (Williams, 1998: p. 56). Selection is a form of interpretation, constantly in flux (Williams, 1998: p. 56). As Williams notes: "the traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its contemporary system of institutions and values" (Williams, 1998: p. 55). In other words, less old than new, though it purports to an embrace of the past. This is not too far then from what historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger famously called "the invention of tradition" (1983).

Bonga has a long career based on the idea of being "angolano de raiz." But even he offers more complex interpretations.

> "P – O semba tem estado a sofrer melhorias técnicas com novas sonoridades e o Bonga mantém-se fiel às raízes. Como é que explica esse fenómeno?
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> B – Explico pela vivência dos primeiros 23 anos, que era o tempo colonial, período caracterizado pela resistência e oposição ao sistema, fazendo de mim o artista que sou hoje, que sempre se empenhou na recolha, no acompanhamento, na ligação com os nossos mais velhos, que eram grandes enciclopédias de informação, coisa que já não existe hoje – temos que dizer. Por conseguinte viver lá fora, onde ainda há preconceito, contribuiu para a sua diminuição. Por isso é que me acompanho com a dikanza, com o hungo, o kissanje e o batuque, a enfim, a tónica fundamental da cadência rítmica que é o concerto, faz de mim um artista singular (Dos Santos, 2011).

What does "roots" mean to this journalist? Repeating what he said: "O semba tem estado a sofrer melhorias técnicas com novas sonoridades e o Bonga mantém-se fiel às raízes." Does that mean

roots are contrasted to technology? That roots are static? They do not change or grow? Or, does it mean that Bonga is true to where he came from? Or is it a certain ethico-political position relative to Angola? In both these senses, yes. And it is this that Bonga confirms. Furthermore, implicit in what he says is that the "roots" of any one person, or of each generation, will be different.

Bonga's response defines "roots," what forms a root, what creates "roots," in a specific experience in space and time. In his case, as in the case of the late colonial period generally, these "roots" were first in Porto Kipiri, Bengo where he was born, in the lifeways of rural life. And then in the musseque, in the Manichean world of sand/cement, Angolan/settler and colonizer. In the period after independence, Bonga's experience is tied to a life in exile, lived outside Angola, laden with European stereotypes about Africans, in a dynamic defined as African/European or immigrant/native or black/white. But for those with a different trajectory? For someone born in 1974? Or 1994? According to what Bonga says, the "roots" grow according to a different dynamic. "Roots" are less about a specific content, than a stance toward experience. "Roots" are historical. The problem Bonga sees is less a problem of technology and technical change in music production than it is a question of changing social life and values.

2. 1974

Bonga launched his international music career in 1972 with the album *Angola 72*, produced in Rotterdam where he lived in exile. Life in Holland followed a six-year residence in Portugal where he worked as an athlete and continued anti-colonial activism that he initiated in Angola (Pereira, 2018). He described *Angola 72* as an album of "política e de informação" for those unaware of what was happening in Angola and in other Portuguese-speaking and -colonized African countries (Dos Santos, 2011). He inserted himself and his music in the multi-national or multi-territorial politics of the period that had developed around the Casa dos Estudantes do Império, but that percolated in other places where Portuguese speaking Africans lived and gathered.

In the Netherlands, Bonga lived amidst the African and, particularly, Cape Verdean community resident in that country. In 1973 he moved to Belgium and then Germany. But it was

still the label Morabeza, owned by Cape Verdean Djunga de Biluca and based in Rotterdam, that produced the albums *Angola 72* and *Angola 74*. Djunga de Biluca, a founder of the Cape Verdean immigrant community in Rotterdam, and a cultural producer, used his music label to support the struggle for independence, and the music practices, of African countries colonized by Portugal (Atlantico Weekly, no date). He describes Morabeza Records as a product of the Cape Verdean struggle for independence. Amilcar Cabral, leader of the Partido Africano para a Independência de Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), asked Djunga de Biluca to represent the party in the Netherlands and to "use culture and music as a weapon to promote our cause" (Atlantico Weekly, no date). This was an explicit embrace of music that did not happen in Angola until after independence (Moorman, 2008, chapter 6).

Angolan musician Mário Rui Silva and Cape Verdean musician Humberto Bettencourt "Humbertona," both on guitar, accompany Bonga on *Angola 72*. If *Angola 72* is a cry of protest, the album *Angola 74*, produced after the democratic Portuguese revolution 25 de Abril in 1974, is music that celebrates and anticipates independence. The album always connotes Angolan music, "música de raiz" precisely because of this relationship to independence. But, having noted that, let's consider more closely some of the production details: the musicians that participated on *Angola 74* included Guinense Jo Maká and Brazilian Sebastião Rocha Perazzo. In fact, *Angola 74* inaugurates a collaboration with Perazzo that lasted at least six years and marks, in a singular way, Bonga's sound and music at that time.

In 1977, Perrazzo invited Bonga to Paris to join the band Batuqui. In 1978 Perazzo, Maká and Bonga produced *Racines du Angola au Bresil*, a work that is explicit in thinking how roots travel. Two years later, in 1979, they formed an Afro-Brazilian duo.

To put it differently, Bonga, with and from the album *Angola 74*, and perhaps most obviously with the music "Ghinawa," begins to explore Afro-Atlantic sounds while based in Europe. A Europe he often calls "europa da vida." "Roots" were also "routes." They resulted from colonization and the countries of the Global South thrust together in those violations of history. Bonga's trajectory here pushed back against a history of violence using the cultural routes, the trans-Atlantic relations forged by a history of enslavement and colonization. If anything, this was

characteristically Angolan. Aniceto "Liceu" Vieira Dias had traveled through *samba* to create *semba* and later *semba* musicians listened to a diversity of music (Moorman, 2008, chapter 4).

At the same time, in Angola, a different political and cultural process was underway. The "revolução dos cravos" in Portugal made Independence in Angola a reality. The nationalist liberation movements returned to Angola. Independence was scheduled for 11 November 1975. A negotiation process ensued but eventually fighting between the three anti-colonial movements broke out.

Musical production in Angola registered significant growth between 1972 and 1974, precisely in the period Bonga became a name in Europe. The music industry in Angola, before 25 de Abril, offered every indication that it would continue to develop. But political change interrupted that development, bending music to partisan ends. Many musicians rallied to and joined the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and produced politically charged music or put their talents at the service of the nation (for example, Rui Mingas, who like Bonga had worked as an athlete in Portugal, returned to Angola to be one of the composers of the national anthem). Other musicians, singers like Urbano de Castro and Carlos Lamartine, traveled the country with MPLA President Agostinho Neto when he returned in 1974, to promote the MPLA's political agenda.

Independence, however, did not promise a return to Angola for Bonga. With the political divisions and his refusal to align, Bonga found a "home" in exile (Lopes, 2015). That said, the exilic, networked life and sound was already a part of how he was in the world. After having his music banned in the colonial period in Angola, independence brought more censorship (Pereira, 2018). After he played for UNITA and Savimbi in the 1980s, there is a period of "Bonga proibido." Exile offered greater freedom to say and play what he wanted.

3. Sound

Let's return again to "roots" and its sometimes homonym "routes." With this shift, we can think about the routes that take us to "roots," to the very idea of it, and we can possibly see other possibilities at work (Clifford, 1997). Returning then to the Bonga of "Ghinawa," to the Bonga that collaborated with Perazzo, and to Afro-Atlantic sounds.

Here is the zone in which we can trace some of the connecting lines not of a tired, maybe even used up idea of linkages between "roots" based cultures (or of a diasporic culture, the child of a Mother Africa) but of "routes" between and of the movement of people, sounds, and spaces. This is scholarly terrain well-tred by scholars like Paul Gilroy, J. Lorand Matory, Christabelle Peters, James Sweet, and Micol Seigel.

Here I only offer a small thought experiment. I suggest that instead of Angolan roots, authenticity, and tradition, we might look instead at historical connections between two cities (Luanda and Rio), their rhythms, and various people acting consciously as they cross oceans and meet in Paris or Rotterdam or wherever. And what about European cities and the ways they shaped these albums? Could we hear Paris in this or that piece of Bonga's work too? An African Paris as much as postcard Paris? Or Rotterdam? Would that make it any less Angolan? Could we perhaps also try to hear Luanda – the cosmopolitan Luanda of different centuries? How would we develop a methodology and a practice of hearing to this end?

When I listen to "Ghinawa" I hear cultural exchange and "routed-ness." Sure, it's polyrhythmic, a stereotypically "African" musical characteristic, but there are other distinctive sounds too. The rhythm is held first by the drums and then by the guitar. Jo Maká's sometimes propulsive, other times high jumping and low diving saxophone makes its way over and under that beat. It is a sound that dips to pool below the rhythm and then screams high above it. Sometimes it is discordant and urgent, at other times harmonious and smooth. The music is energetic, forward-looking, the perfect sound for the dawn of independence. Yet it does not sound typically Angolan. It is not a semba. And because it is instrumental, we do not hear Bonga's characteristic, raspy voice.

Bonga's roots, historical, linked to space and time, and to a certain political position, may offer a more radical, contingent, and historically resonant kind of "roots" than many assume. Listening closely both to the music and what he says about his music, his collaborations, and production history bears this interesting fruit. While Bonga does not speak much about those travels, Paris holds a larger place in how he charts his musical trajectory these days (Pereira, 2018). Brazil mattered at the very least at the sonic level but more broadly and deeply too.

Such connections should also remind us of the otherwise forgotten Projecto Kalunga (Barros de Castro 2016a & 2016b). In 1980, the União de Trabalhadores de Angola (UNTA) invited a group of sixty-some musicians and cultural producers to visit Angola between May 2-18 (Barros de Castro, 2016a: p. 101). Some experienced "uma familiaridade pertubadora" and others were struck by the differences in the sound of the music hearing Caribbean tones where they thought they would hear samba in semba or the root of semba that some claimed generated samba (Barros de Castro, 2016a: p. 104).

Returning to Gonçalo Tavares, such an approach requires a decision, a chosen aural disposition, and an openness to new thinking. Perhaps the best model to follow comes from "music geeks" who buy and sell old albums online. They are consumers and not producers of music or musicians.

On amazon.com Bonga's albums, re-issued by Tinder, fall in the "world music- africa" category. This is not so surprising. But if you look for these albums on purchase sites dedicated to music, a different set of criteria emerges. Written by music listeners, we find tags like "Afro folk funk music." This may be a better, more embracing description of the sound and the politics of that period. This then can lead us to other sounds and music from the same period that we would not normally line up alongside Bonga, though perhaps we should. So, here, by way of conclusion, a different piece to think with Bonga's oeuvre, or at least, with "Ghinawa."

The Headhunters – "If you've got it, you'll get it" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz4kUvHAIBg

Released in 1975 on Arista, The Headhunters, produced by Herbie Hancock, *Survival of the Fittest*, is considered "jazz/funk-soul." It resonates with "Ghinawa," reaching south to Brazil and East to the African continent.

If we think through and with sound, different politics, maybe more of an ethics than anything else, can inform our analysis.

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