Between Genre and Generations: Analyzing Angolan Popular Music

Nina Baratti

> Nothing is cooler than listening to musicians of the new generation rescue songs from the past» I said out loud. Quito heard me and returned another question. «Is *semba* cool?» I hesitated to respond because various currents exist within semba. The semba of the elders, the flag semba, the party semba and the rest where perhaps Toty Sa'med fits. There are people who consider the concept of cool as just associated with an idea of consumption. Perhaps they are not wrong if we think that the idea of cool behavior emerged in a world obsessed with youth and the image. To me what is cool in semba is that through this style, new Angolans are willing to shorten the distance that separates them from their history and languages. Even I, who am only the daughter of Angolans, have this will in me. And is there anything cooler than knowledge? (Kalaf Epalanga, *Também os brancos sabem dançar* [*The whites can also dance*], 2017).

Abstract

This paper intends to offer a contribution to the debate on musical categorization, investigating the relationship between the notions of genre and generation in the context of Angolan popular music. The common etymology of the terms genre and generation – both from the Latin *genus*, "birth, origin, kind" – invites us to take into consideration the intersectionality of the concepts as both social categorizations operating at the level of music and age respectively, within the domains of time and belonging. Relying on (I) ethnographic materials that I collected during my fieldwork in Angola in 2018, (II) the analysis of the evolution of *semba* within Angolan popular music, and (III) theories of musical genre (Brackett 2016, Castelo-Branco 2013, Ramsey 2003, Holt 2007), I will seek to illustrate how the sociocultural construct of generation may provide a valuable tool

to explore the politics of genre categorization in current Angolan society, and vice versa, how the examination of this category's operativeness sheds light on generational conflicts and attempts at reconciliation among social groups in the post-civil war context of the Lusophone African country. Particularly, the focus on the past and present reality of *semba* – the most popular style of Angolan music – will allow me to enquire into whether this genre occupies the space of musical sound or social discourse, approaching an issue at the core of the academic debate on musical categorization.

Tra genere e generazioni: analisi della musica popolare angolana. *Questo articolo intende offrire un contributo all'interno del dibattito sulla categorizzazione musicale, indagando la relazione tra le nozioni di genere e generazione nell'ambito della musica popolare angolana. La comune etimologia dei termini genere e generazione – entrambi dal latino* genus*, i.e. "nascita, origine, genere" – suggerisce la loro intersezionalità in quanto categorie sociali che operano rispettivamente a livello musicale e in relazione all'età, nella sfera temporale e di appartenenza. Basandomi su (I) materiali etnografici che ho raccolto durante un periodo di ricerca di campo in Angola nel 2018, (II) sull'analisi dell'evoluzione del* semba *all'interno della musica popolare angolana e traendo spunto da (III) teorie del genere musicale (Brackett 2016, Castelo-Branco 2013, Ramsey 2003, Holt 2007), cercherò di illustrare come il costrutto socioculturale di generazione possa fornire un valido strumento per esplorare le politiche di categorizzazione musicale nell'attuale società angolana e, viceversa, come l'esame dell'operatività del concetto di genere (musicale) faccia luce sui conflitti generazionali e sui tentativi di riconciliazione tra gruppi sociali nell'Angola del dopoguerra. In particolare, l'attenzione sulla storia passata e presente del* semba *– stile emblematico della musica urbana angolana - mi permetterà di indagare su quanto questo genere possa definirsi secondo parametri sonoro-musicali piuttosto che discorsivi, affrontando una questione centrale nel dibattito sulla categorizzazione musicale.*

Introduction

Music categorization has long been a core subject of the academic debate within the broad field of music studies. As Salwa Castelo-Branco points out in her essay for the *Cambridge History of World Music*, by looking at the politics of categorization scholars may illuminate «the ways through which difference and power are historically recognized and historiographically exercised through music» (2013: 662). Moreover, with the help of ethnographic methods, they can provide bottom-up insights into the complex and intimate politics of music labelling occurring on daily basis, and problematize and overcome standard classifications of musical repertoires based on Western ideals and mainstream criteria.

Over the last few decades, several theorizations of musical genre have been formulated in the attempt to investigate the ways in which we organize music through categorical difference, and to explain consequently the instability of these formulations over time (Holt 2007; Brackett 2016). Multiple factors and conceptions, such as political and religious beliefs, ethnicity, race and gender, have been frequently evoked to explore the articulations between systems of sound, groupings of people and classifications of musical genre.

My work joins this burgeoning field of inquiry by looking at the case of Angolan popular music as a fertile ground for examining these dynamics. In addition to shedding light on a geographical area that has been little investigated in the field of ethnomusicol-

ogy, the present paper aims to expand the pool of conceptions that have been analyzed in genre theories, paying attention to the essential relationship existing between the notion of musical genre and the anthropological and sociological construct of generation in the history and current production of the famous Angolan urban style known as *semba*.

The common etymology of the terms genre and generation – both from the Latin *genus*, "birth, origin, kind" – invites us to take into consideration the intersectionality of the concepts as social categorizations operating at the level of music and dependent upon age respectively, within the domains of time and belonging. Considering that age, as well as gender, continues to be a crucial determinant of musical preferences at the level of genre (Holt 2007: 3), generation – as a group of people born and living at the same time – may offer a fruitful category for understanding the interpretative processes through which individuals attribute meanings to ideologically grounded symbolic constructs of music.[1] In this regard, the Angolan context provides a particular example worth examining in view of the importance locally given to the generational concept as organizing principle of both public and private discourses in the field of popular music.

Relying on (I) ethnographic materials that I collected during a period of fieldwork in Luanda, the capital of Angola, in 2018 (II) the analysis of the historical evolution of *semba*, and (III) recent theories of musical genre, I will seek to illustrate how the sociocultural construct of generation may provide a valuable tool to explore the politics of genre categorization in current Angolan society, and, vice versa, how the examination of this category's operativeness illuminates generational conflicts and attempts at reconciliation among social groups in the post-civil war context of the Lusophone African country. In particular, the focus on the past and present reality of *semba*, the most representative styles of Angolan popular music, will allow me to enquire into the often contradictory ways in which a musical genre occupies different spaces – the space of musical sound, social discourse or language, among others – approaching an issue at the core of the academic debate on musical categorization.

For decades, *semba* has been internationally celebrated as the most characteristic music of Angola, thanks in part to the commercial success of artists like Bonga, Teta Lando, and Waldemar Bastos, who were settled outside the country before and after the independence, at the time of the Angolan civil war (1975-2002). However, the term *semba* incorporates a range of different meanings, identifying not only a distinct urban musical genre but also a carnival dance rhythm, a specific dance step (the *umbigada* or "belly touch"), and, in a more popular sense, the large set of Angolan urban musical styles that have been perfected and performed under the late colonial rule, when a new conception of Angolan national identity (*Angolanidade*) spread throughout the country in response to the intensifying of the Portuguese oppression.[2]

[1] Here I am referring to Castelo-Branco's definition of musical categories as «ideologically grounded symbolic constructs that are assigned meanings through interpretive processes» (2013: 661).

[2] Although the Portuguese colonization of Angola began with coastal settlements and trading posts in

The link between this crucial historical era – between the 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s – and the creation and production of *semba* shaped the public discourse on it and marked the musical evolution of the genre that became gradually associated with the practice and expression of those who had fought for independence and had seen the dream of a new democratic country failing under the outbreak of a new violent conflict. Although this music continues to be played and produced in Angola today – alongside other more relatively recent music, such as kizomba, and kuduro, – *semba* is commonly considered the music of the *kotas* (the elders), and the only genre which is uniquely felt as "originally Angolan" (Moorman 2008). Furthermore, *semba* seems to represent the privileged musical arena through which an intergenerational dialogue is effectively occurring. New collaborations between younger and older musicians have been forged in recent years, and a renewed attention among the younger generation of Angolan artists toward the genre has emerged as an essential way to reflect on the past and redeem Angolan history and culture from the presumably political oblivion.

In the following pages, I will first offer a definition of generation as theorized in the field of social sciences in order to situate an understanding and use of the concept which may prove informative in the debate on musical genre. Subsequently, I will pursue a genealogical approach to illustrate the major historical moments in the evolution of Angolan popular music that have been crucial for the affirmation of *semba* as a musical style. In doing so, I will analyze examples of *semba* across different generations of musicians, which will allow me to contextualize the recent musical work of a Luanda-based young artist, Toty Sa'med, whose perspective and experience help to illuminate the kind of generational discourse going on in Angola regarding the production and consumption of popular music. This analysis will contribute to expanding the debate on the politics of categorization in popular music beyond the dominant narratives of the Global North.

On the concept of generation in social sciences

As the social theorist Jonathan White claims in his article *Thinking Generations*, «Often, and increasingly, social and political life is narrated using the concept of generation […] Today's social problems are the problems of *generations*» (2013: 216). From Nietzsche to Hanna Arendt, from Karl Mannheim to Jean and John Comaroff, a great number of influential scholars from disparate disciplines have written about generation, suggesting each time new research directions.[3] On the one hand, *generation* is often evoked to ex-

the late 15th century, it became consolidated fairly late, strenghtening its hold during the Second Portuguese Republic under the dictator Antonio Salazar (1933-1974). For a discussion of the etymology of the term *semba*, see Kubik 1997; about the definition of *semba* as an umbrella term and its various associated practices, see Cidra 2019.

[3] Jean Comaroff discussed this point in a recent lecture she gave at Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study within a conference on the legacy of Nelson Mandela in today's South African society. The title was *After Mandela: Citizenship, Generation, Historical Time*, 18th July 2018.

plain social change over time and to identify differences among members of a society, beyond the racial, gender, religious ones. On the other hand, the word has been used by social scientists to examine the ways people across cultures organize and envision family relationships, the life course, and the social-moral order (Lamb 2015: 853-856). In this regard, I argue that the category of generation can be fruitfully exploited by music studies to explore how people – sharing a temporal and spatial dimension, – experience forms of belonging to a given repertoire, and categorize and perceive music, as well as other expressive practices, in relation to their place in history.

Before embarking on the task of investigating the intersection between generational thinking and the politics of musical categorization in current Angolan society, it is critical to clarify the way in which the concept of generation is evoked in the present work and may theoretically intersect with the notion of musical genre.

I approach this sociocultural construct according to a culturalist conception: that is to say, by referring to a group of people who live through a time period together and participate in some kind of shared identity, practices, and beliefs.[4] Following Karl Mannheim (1952 [1927/28]), one of the major theorists of generation, I contend that a full understanding of this concept makes reference to interpretive features, and especially shared experiences. According to the German sociologist, «mere chronological contemporaneity cannot itself produce a common generation location» (1952: 297). What does create a similar location is the fact that «individuals are in position to experience the same events and data», which consequently predispose them for certain definite modes of behavior, feeling and thought (*ibidem*). The emphasis on the phenomenological nature of generation recalls the work of music categories, in particular, in regard to their historically-informed, collective, bodily and performative dimension. Shared experiences such as landmark events have commonly been considered the cue of heightened generational awareness. However, how might this understanding be applied to the act of listening to music, which undoubtedly plays a role in the creation of a common experiential horizon, thus contributing to this crucial stage for the affirmation of generational belonging?

Furthermore, the shared etymological origin of genre and generation seems to suggest another important connection. Generation implies relations in time as much as musical genre does to affirm itself as an effective legible category. Alber, van der Geest, and Whyte agree that whether we think of intergenerational links within families or across historical periods, generation is about connections and contrasts in a temporal perspective (2008: 1). This view seems to suggest a parallelism with the principle of general citationality or iterability through which a musical genre operates. David Brackett suggests that «the idea of citationality may help resolve some of the seemingly unresolvable contradic-

[4] For a sociological and historical review of the major approaches to the concept of generation, see White 2013. In this essay, the author outlines the common distinction between the culturalist understanding of generation and the naturalist one which «puts emphasis on material factors such as birthdates, and was the main conception for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries» (*ibidem*: 222).

FIGURE 1. A scene from Ngola Ritmos' performance at the RTP Portugal, 1965 (excerpt available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89JDlmPxfXs>).

tions of how genres function, in particular their instability over time and the different ways in which individuals interpret genre labels» (2016: 13). How could we account for a genealogy of genre without taking into account generational connections and contrasts from a temporal perspective? Thus, how do these connections and contrasts reflect the working of generational thinking about genre? And vice versa, how can musical continuities and changes in a given style at historical level reveal the emergence of different generations? Can the instability of genre find legitimation in generational discourses?

The questions just proposed lead us to reflect on a broader issue, namely when and how a genre actually transcends temporality. In other words: what are the circumstances in which a genre exists beyond time, transcending a particular generation to represent something atemporal or even perceived as timeless? In this regard, the examination of *semba* provides us with a complex case study that illuminates the inherent ironies of the notion of genre. It is the interplay between the contingent and trans-historical nature of a musical genre which emerges from looking at *semba*, whereas the generational divide and the generational link through this musical practice, at once are established in time, and establishing a stable category beyond time. The next session asks the reader to keep in mind all of these issues while focusing his own attention on the analysis of the evolution of Angolan urban style *semba*.

A genealogical approach to *semba*

To understand how *semba* has ended up being commonly identified as the music of the elders (*a música dos kotas*), functioning as a privileged arena for the official celebration of an intergenerational dialogue within the current Luandan society, it is essential to evoke the main phases of the history of Angolan popular music, and retrace the trajectory which *semba* has undergone from its creation to the present time. As it will gradually emerge from this account, language was a critical factor in these developments, both in relation to the process of the genre categorization and in shaping generational divides or commonalities among *semba* producers and listeners. Furthermore, it is opportune to clarify that, despite their association with older generations, songs in the style of *semba* have never stopped being produced by Angolan artists but – as we will see shortly – have apparently lost important traits at the level of music and content, giving rise to a nostalgic rhetoric among the older musicians, on the one hand, and claims of continuity among the younger artists, on the other.

a. The beginnings

From its emergence until immediately after Angolan independence, the production and consumption of Angolan popular music was deeply linked to a political agenda. As the historian Marissa Moorman meticulously documents in her book *Intonations* (2008),[5] Angolan national consciousness was created and negotiated through music and cultural production in general. Recalling the beginnings of the making of popular music in Angola, she says: «Lyrics and music were composed in order to affirm and produce the Angolan identity (*Angolanidade*) […], marking out a culturally autonomous space forged and expressed in African-owned and -operated clubs, in music festivals, in dress and dance and attitude» (2008: 112).

This political intent was inherent to the musical activity of the legendary band Ngola Ritmos, who has been frequently credited with the foundation of Angolan popular music, and as such, *semba*. According to all the oral and written sources on the subject, it was the band leader Liceu Vieira Dias who, at the end of the 1940s, had originally come up with the idea of arranging traditional melodies and rhythms, collected from the interior of Angola, in a Western derived instrumentation and harmony. Indeed, Liceu was trained in Western classical music and most likely belonged, together with other members of his band, to the class of *assimilados*, i.e. mestiços and Africans who were granted the same legal status as a European.[6] In view of their influential social position, yet constantly endan-

[5] Moorman's work is the only publication available on the genre for an Anglophone audience to date. Here the author focuses her attention on the decades of formation and consecretion of Angolan popular music as fundamental stages for documenting a cultural history of the country in the end of the colonial times until 2002.

[6] According to the colonial policy called *indigenato* system, any African or mestiço could qualify as *assimilado* based on specific cultural and economic requirements, e.g. the ability to read, write, and speak fluently Portuguese, to demonstrate standard style of living and customs similar to European way of life,

gered due to the massive Portuguese migration which in the 1950s intensified the racial tensions, assimilados would play a major role in the establishment of independentist and revolutionary groups, such as Angola's New Intellectuals Movement – MNIA, linked to the slogan *Vamos Descobrir Angola!* (Let's Discover Angola!).[7] The goal of the movement was to celebrate the Africaness of Angolan identity through the rediscovery of the texts of Angolan nationalism that had been written between 1870 and 1930. It was an act of pride and at the same time resistance to the colonial agenda which strongly aimed at the "Portugalization" of the colonized (Gomes 2014). If the performances of Ngola Ritmos wearing indigenous clothes, singing in the autochthonous language of Kimbundu, and playing local drums and traditional rhythms, were considered in Portugal an expression of Angolan folklore, across the country, via radio, and in the *musseques* (Luanda shantytowns), their activity fueled sentiments of solidarity and rebellion against colonial oppression, especially through the circulation of subtle critiques of the regime that were collocated in the lyrics.

The analysis of one of the few Ngola Ritmos recordings may give the reader an idea of the project behind the group and the music that they used to play. The song in question is entitled *João Domingu* and was recorded by the Portuguese label Valentim de Carvalho in 1965.[8] It presents a series of traits that were typical of the style of *semba* at its early stage and that have persisted over time. First of all, the ensemble is made up of a low- and a high-pitched drum – the so-called *ngomas*, – a *dikanza* (similar to the Brazilian *reco-reco*), two guitars (a soloist and rhythmic) and three male voices. The simplicity of the harmony – mostly based on the alternation of tonic and dominant chords – as well as that of the melody, recalls the oral universe of Angolan traditional music, an aspect also stressed by the lack of a formal structure.

The song's arrangement emphasizes the high frequencies of the percussion, characterizing also the *sembas* of the 1970s. The high-pitched *ngoma*, in general, reinforces the rhythmic cell of the dikanza, occupying all sixteenth notes within a duple metre. In contrast to the dikanza, whose character is more improvisational, the *ngoma* is more attached to the rhythmic pattern. Instead of the bass guitar in use in later sembas, *João Domingu* presents the low-pitched *ngoma* marking the down beat and emphasizing the bass line – a subtly western move. This treatment of the entire set of percussion recalls the typical sound of Luanda's Carnival dance known as *kazukuta* that was one of the main stylistic references for the creation of *semba* (*semba kazukuta*).[9]

etc. Officially, assimilados had access to secondary schools and could run for specialized professions, but also for employment in the public administration. For an analysis of Portuguese colonial ruling in XXth century Angola and the *indigenato* system, see Bender 1978.

[7] This movement was founded in 1948 counted among its members, the first president of independent Angola, Agostinho Neto, and several other important intellectuals who would later join to form the major ruling party known as People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola MPLA.

[8] The song features in the compilation album attached to Moorman's book *Intonations: A Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times* (Moorman 2008). For the translation and the analysis, I referred to the recent work of the ethnomusicologist Mateus Berger Kuschick (2016).

[9] The style of *semba* has been shaped constantly by a wide range of urban musical styles whose inter-

At a textual level, *João Domingu* exemplifies that kind of subtle critiques that Ngola Ritmos used to formulate through their compositions and that would become more explicit in the following decades, with the intensification of the anticolonial struggle (1961-1975). According to the Angolan ethnomusicologist Jorge Macedo (1989), the song, in a playful tone, invited Angolan people to take agency over their own history through the spread of literacy that was seen as a powerful weapon of liberation.[10]

João Dumingu yo, João Dumingu yo	That João Domingu, that João Domingu
Wambele jente ye	He told his people
Ngwetu konfiyansa ni mesene jyamukumu	That he wants no confidence from masters who bother him
Ngibanza hanji mu ngongo mwene muwala	I still think in the world where you are
Ngasumbo metulu	I bought a meter stick
Metulu waisunona	You broke it
Ngasumbo nivele	I bought a leveler
Nivele waisunona	You lost it
Tala dyala dyayibha kutobha	See how the stupid man
Dyandakufila ku kimbangula	End up dying in the contract

The musical abilities of Liceu Vieira Dias and his colleagues, together with the skillful use of the Kimbundu language, allowed the group to avoid censorship during the first years of activity, even though it did not prevent them from being imprisoned.[11] It has to be mentioned that already at that time, during the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, assimilado families banned their sons from speaking local languages as a consequence of the feracious colonial policy which prohibited the use of indigeneous languages to any individual who aspired to be a citizen. Although Ngola Ritmos sung in Kimbundu, only few of them were able to speak it. This explains the revolutionary dimension of singing in Kimbundu, but also the solid bond between the local tongue and *semba* which was originally established at the time of the genre formation.

As we will see in the next sections, the use of Kimbundu would become an essential trait of *semba* in the following years, but it would also shape the sentiments of generational

actions problematize, rather than simplify, the definition of *semba* as a defined musical genre. These styles show, moreover, the limitations of the adoption of early Western conceptualizations of music categorization in theorizations about Angolan musical categories; see Kuschick 2016.

[10] «Talking about *João Domingo*, this music configures the union of the aesthetic and the political message, reaching two achievements, that of art and that of revolution, something that is rarely accomplished». Translated by the author from Macedo 1989: 32.

[11] Because of his political activism, Liceu Vieira Dias spent almost ten years at the famous prison of Tarrafal, Cape Verde. Also, other members of Ngola Ritmos suffered from being imprisoned or constrained to be exiled. See Macedo 1989.

belonging in post-independence Luanda, paving the way for the emergence of the strong connection between genre categorization and generational thinking in the Angolan context.

b. The golden age of Angolan popular music

The years 1961-1974 represented, in the words of Moorman, the "Golden Age" of Angolan popular music. It was during this period that Angolans developed the nation and created expectations about nationalism and political, economic and cultural sovereignty through popular music produced in Luanda's musseques. As Stefanie Alitsch underlines, it was also at this time that the MPLA's radio programme *Angola Combatente* (Fighting Angola) was broadcast from Congo-Brazzaville. She writes: «at both sides of the Congolese-Angolan border people would absorb its political and cultural messages. Through the airwaves people in the musseques were emotionally united with the guerilla fighters at the front of the liberation war. Thus, Angola's self-perception gradually changed from being a mere appendix to Portugal, an overseas province, to that of a country in its own right. In this process music served as a template for independence».[12]

Combining international trends of popular music, like Latin-American and Caribbean rhythms, with Angolan traditional songs and Luanda's Carnival dances, bands like the Negoleiros do Ritmo, Kiezos, Jovens da Prenda, pushed forward the project of the Ngola Ritmos and forged the classical imaginary of *semba* – the *semba* featured in most of the records of the 1970s. In this period, the flourishing of the music industry was a crucial factor for the consecration of *semba* as the most emblematic popular music style of Angola. Indeed, after the independence, due to the departure of the Portuguese, music production would suffer its most difficult moments because of the closing of all the record labels and the nationalization of the cultural industry.

Lemba by the Negoleiros do Ritmo (1967) represents a good example of the transformations that affected *semba* between the end of 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.[13] The song presents a different sonority and some of the features of the *semba* of this period: the bass guitar and the congas (tumbas) replace the *ngomas*, giving the style a more Cuban flavor and distancing from the acoustic sonorities of Carnival urban rhythms; the acoustic guitars are replaced by the electric ones whose way of playing was highly influenced by the neighboring Congolese guitar style. On the other hand, the vocal arrangement seems to celebrate the collective character of the music of that time, which, alongside with the festive tone, was to become a distinctive feature of the *semba* of the golden era.

Other features are similar to those that have been observed in the analysis of *João Domingu*, among which: the emphasis of the high frequencies of the percussion and its treatment aiming to create a saturated mesh of percussive sounds, with the addition of the mukindu (Brazilian bate bate); the simplicity of the melody and the harmony re-

[12] Available at: <https://norient.com/academic/kuduro/> (last access: 2nd October 2020).
[13] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ng9MXrTCt8o> (last access: 2nd October 2020).

FIGURE 2. *Negoleiros Do Ritmos'* (1967), Album cover.

sulting from the alternation of chords of tonic and diminished seventh (in place of the dominant). In contrast to other *sembas* from the 1970s, the lyrics of *Lemba* do not seem to indicate any political meaning but a more generalized condition of suffering. Indeed, the song talks about a man who suffers because he is about to lose his beloved wife Mena as he was discovered in a betrayal that caused him shame in his community.[14] We read:

Mukonda dya Lemba (2x) *Wangite o fuma sé* *Mukonda ngi dikanza*	Because of Lemba You made me famous because I'm married.
Ngana nzambi ngiitalele *Mukonda dya fuma* *Mena lelu wandala kungixisa*	God, look at me Because of the fame Today Mena wants to leave me.
Oh oh oh oh oh Kingibhita kwa sanzala	Oh oh oh oh oh when I walk through the village
O yiyi divuwa dyami *Nzambi angixilemene*	My bad luck God, reassure me

[14] Another interpretation of the song lyrics might consider the loss of the beloved wife as a reference to the breach with Angola, once beloved before the period of resistance.

Although according to several old musicians whom I interviewed, the great characteristic of *semba* from the 1970s was the political charge of the lyrics in Kimbundu, the references to daily situations and personal relationships were also common themes that appeared in the songs of the time, as in this example.

The few observations about *Lemba* heretofore proposed already help to illustrate some gradual transformations that shaped *semba* from its creation through the end of the 1970s. Of course, this study could include several other examples that unfortunately cannot be taken into consideration due to the constraints of this essay. However, both *João Domingu* and *Lemba* constitute two important stages of the history of *semba*, revealing a gradual evolution of the style that would be suddenly halted by the turn of events after the independence: the outbreak of the civil war and the establishment of a socialist regime.

c. The musical hiatus

In the years following the end of the Portuguese domination, music would become essential for the propaganda of the new socialist state. With the rise to power of the MPLA-Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (1975), music became one of the tools for the political and ideological legitimization of the party and for the construction of a national project for the country. While it had been used over the previous decades to fuel anticolonial sentiments, music now was mainly employed by the young Angolan state as a nation-building tool. The change in circumstances was accompanied by significant shifts in the music itself. Not only did the songs lose their revolutionary character in favor of a celebratory and pamplethary tone, but they privileged a form other than *semba*, i.e. *trova*, which it better suited the serious purposes of the socialist state through its simple acoustic guitar accompaniment.[15]

These songs were composed mainly in Portuguese, which was elected to be the national language, deemed capable of unifying all the ethnic groups. Ironically, the language of the colonizer was taken as a marker of independence, increasing the process of alienation of Luanda inhabitants and their subsequent generations from the use of national languages.[16]

A look at the most famous records that were produced immediately after 1975 easily illustrates the situation. The songs that became popular were those which taught moral values in war times, exalted the party or supported the armies.[17] In this climate, musicians

[15] In this period, Angolan music was highly influenced by Cuban music, and especially the Nueva Trova movement. This phenomenon could be seen as a result of the deep involvement of the Cuban government in Angola civil war. On the sociocultural impact of the Cuban cooperation on the nation-building process of independent Angola see Hatzky (2015).

[16] According to definitive statistical data from the General Population and Housing Census conducted in 2014 by the National Statistics Institute (INE), 71,5% of the Angolan population speaks Portuguese despite the great variety of indigeneous languages. Among these, Umbundu (32%), Kimbundu and Kikongo are the most widely spoken, in the capital city.

[17] Just to mention some titles of songs produced immediately after the independence: *Progresso, disciplina, produção, estudo* (Progress, discipline, production, study), *Rumo ao socialismo* (Towards socialism), *Cada*

were no longer free to exercise their artistic profession. Playing music was subject to strict censorship. The drastic change of the cultural environment in Luanda, dictated by the ideological agenda of the new regime and the dramatic effects of the war, precipitated the voluntary emigration – or at other times obligatory exile - of many artists abroad. In this context, the production of *semba* would be further impacted by a specific historical event.

In 1977, three famous popular artists of *semba* were killed during a retaliation following an alleged *coup d'état* (27 de Maio).[18] This event, one of the most violent massacres of Angolans, played a crucial role in the history of *semba* and Angolan popular music as well as in the oral narratives and individual memory of many older artists. One of them is the internationally acclaimed singer Waldemar Bastos. He claimed that «a gap situation exists in the specific Angolan context. The artists who were holders of – what we may call – the "Angolan soul" and who carried on this legacy died on 27th May 1977. Since then, a great lacuna begun and the following generations resulted orphan».[19]

The artist subsequently argued that this gap was not only the result of this nefarious historical event but also of the spread of foreign music in the country, especially from the Antilles. According to him, this music would become hegemonic, paving the way for the creation of kizomba music, a danceable genre free of any socio-political message. In the same interview, Bastos recalled a personal anecdote that resonates with the common opinions that I frequently heard among artists from the older generation in Luanda:

> One day I had a revealing conversation with a waiter, who talked about the music that was listened in Angola: people dance this music but they did not listen to it – he said. The difference in relation to the "root" music produced by the artists who had disappeared was this: this music had also been danced at their time, but it had been listened with more depth. This feeling of passing the baton to the young generation that we register today, ends up being natural. When one is young may play the most diverse modern music – I started in dance group to do rock – but sometimes, you have to drink water from the source and it is this that they are doing, showing respect and devotion for whom came before. (*Ibidem*)

This account reflects common opinions of older performers who still vividly remember the golden age of Angolan popular music and the difficulties they faced, following the independence, to express themselves and perform genres like *semba* which sung about daily adversities and people's life. On the other hand, it also registers positive signs among young artists who want to approximate their musical past by learning from the elders. Bastos' words recall a widespread renewed attention that has recently emerged among Angolan youth to rescue Angolan history, languages and cultural heritage in

cidadão deve sentir-se um soldado (Each citizen must consider himself a soldier), *Avante Poder Popular* (Let's go Popular Power), *A Luta continua* (The struggles continues).

[18] The artists were Artur Nunes, David Ze, and Urbano de Castro. Their music was banned from the radio for over a decade (Moorman 2008).

[19] Interview available at: <https://www.publico.pt/2016/06/24/culturaipsilon/noticia/waldemar-bastos-em-angola-querem-calar-a-musica-da-alma-1736135> (last access: 2nd October 2020).

order to claim their own local identity – an identity that centuries of colonialism, decades of war and a negligent government have opposed in favor of cosmopolitan values and Western life styles.

From looking at the historical trajectory of Angolan popular music production, it emerges the gradual generational breach which develops across the decades since the colonial time, and results not only from a linguistic divide but more generally from a different way of dealing with the past and experiencing crucial historical events such as the independence, the 27 May, and decades of internal armed struggles. Regarding the force of historical events in shaping generational consciousness, the sociologists Edmunds and Turner have showed the ways in which the effects of World War I in 1920s/30s Europe accentuated time-based social differentiation, producing a separation between those who experienced conflict first-hand and those who knew only the postwar settlement (2002: 7). As in post-WWI Europe, the dramatic events of Angolan history have had similar effects on Angolan society, increasing the generational divide and the fragmentation of views of the past, present, and future.

Semba music has gradually epitomized this fragmentation, representing today a genre associated with a particular historical phase of the country, a style linked to the elders' practice, but also at the same time, one that may transcend temporality providing the youth with a bridge to dialogue with the old generation as a carrier of such important and complex memories.

Generational dialogues through music

In the summer of 2018, during what would be my initiation into field research in Angola's hectic and expensive capital city of Luanda, I would conduct numerous interviews with *semba* musicians, attending popular weekly musical gatherings in the historic Rangel neighborhood, as well as participating in the more intimate *rodas* that spontaneously occurred in the backyards of my friends' homes.[20] During these occasions, it was common to hear musicians recall the 1990s as the decade during which the country was invaded by foreign music (mostly from the Antilleans, but also US and Cape Verde), due to the limited production of Angolan popular music. During the second part of the civil war (1992-2002), the new generation of musicians in fact grew up with very limited opportunities to perform, a scarce availability of musical instruments, and problems of communication due to their speaking a different language than their elders. As such, artists who were born in the 1980s through the beginning of the 1990s experienced serious difficulties in having musical exchanges with the old generation who had experienced firsthand the formation

[20] In 2018, I spent a total of six weeks in Angola, from 12th June to 23rd July. Being my first time in the field, I dedicated myself to learning about the music scene and doing interviews with historical figures and groups of the *semba* scene. Key interlocutors in this research phase were Banda Maravilha, Jorge Mulumba & Nguami Maka, Dom Caetano and Banda Movimento, to whom I am deeply grateful.

and consecration of Angolan popular music. This situation clearly affected the trajectory of Toty Sa'med (born in 1988), singer, composer and multi-instrumentalist, known as one of the new and promising voices of Angolan urban music. I met Toty at his place, in the Bairro of Vila Alice, a quiet residential neighborhood in the city center of Luanda, in a mild and sunny afternoon of July 2018, for a long conversation in which several central themes I discussed above would emerge, inspiring the elaboration of this essay.

In 2016 Toty launched his first solo album, *Ingombota*, a record of six tracks in which the musician, a brilliant guitar player, pays tribute to the old repertoire of Angolan Popular music.[21] The album opens with an instrumental piece originally written by the musician (*Kaluanda*), followed by three songs in Kimbundu all dating back to the 1970s (*Kizua Ki Ngi Fua*, *Mona Ki Ngi Xica*, *Hoola Hoope*), and two songs in Portuguese that are two famous Angolan poems, composed in the 1960s. All the tracks feature Toty's solo guitar and voice without any further instrumental accompaniment. Talking about the genesis of the project, Toty explains:

> I was in Portugal when I recorded *Ingombota* [the name of the album] I did not have many sources or people to whom I could ask. I wrote down the lyrics that I heard from the old records. I went to sing and record them. Then I played the new tracks to a friend of mine and he encouraged me to produce the album. I was not aware of the mistakes that I have could made in Kimbundu. I did not ask because I did not care about it. *I was not concerned about the language at that time*. (Personal interview, Luanda, Angola, 12th July 2018)

Toty is referring to one of the critiques that have been formulated towards his project. Indeed, despite discrete international success, the album disappointed some musicians of the older generations because of the singer's incorrect pronunciation of the lyrics in Kimbundu. By acknowledging that singing correctly was not his primary concern at the time of the launch of the album, he reveals a distance from his original position that particularly resonates with his recent statements published online, some months later, in an Angolan national newspaper.[22] On this occasion, in a playful and bold vein, he asserted that he would continue to sing the wrong Kimbundu until he improved, since every time he sings badly, he is lucky enough to be corrected by someone. At the end of the article, he publicly admitted that he had recorded an album in badly spoken Kimbundu, though adding that it was all because his mother did not learn the language «for supposedly believing it to be an ugly dialect».

Inadvertently, his statements shed light on generational issues. In particular, they illustrate one of the ways in which Toty's parents as well as other Angolan people of their generation were deeply shaped by the colonial attitude, according to which Kimbundu was considered an inferior language and not worth speaking. After producing the album,

[21] Full album is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU4J1gAWECU>.

[22] Interview available at: <https://banda.sapo.ao/musica/novidades-musica/artigos/toty-samed-vou-cantar-kimbundu-errado-ate-acertar> (last access: 2nd October 2020).

the critiques he received made him realize the importance of learning this language, in which an entire repertoire of Angolan popular music had been composed in a crucial moment for the history of the country.[23] Afterward, Toty enrolled in a Kimbundu language course, together with other friends, as a sign of openness towards the older generations and genuine interest in the language of his ancestors.

In our conversation, he stressed the political value of his project. He aimed to learn and sing in Kimbundu as against the Angolan state whose politics had never systematically supported the teaching of the local languages and had never showed any intention to preserve and valorize Angolan cultural heritage and practices like *semba* that were so important at identity level. This is the reason why he viewed the *Ingombota* project with optimism. During our dialogue, he emphasized the importance of embracing "the old *semba*" since «through this, a group of young Angolans are willing to know their history, its poets, and their languages, and there's nothing cooler than knowledge». In reality, however, Toty uses *semba* here as an umbrella term to refer to different urban styles of the 1970s, despite being also aware of the definition of *semba* as a genre. A closer look at his project is telling, for it presents just one *semba* song, *Hoola Hoope*, along with boleros and more popular ballads that were nonetheless popular during the golden age of Angolan music. *Hoola Hoope* is a traditional song with a strong humoristic character that used to be performed in the style of *semba*. The only version available on the internet, other than that of Toty, is the acoustic interpretation of the song by the famous Angolan artist Rui Mingas (Temas Angolanos, 1995), in which strong importance is devoted to the use of the percussions as a typical feature of the old *semba*.[24]

Toty's interpretation of *Hoola Hoope* is distinct from both an old style of *semba*, and the kind of more contemporary *sembas* frequently released in today's market.[25] The latter's instrumental arrangement favors the association of congas with the modern drums and half-moon tambourine (instead of the dikanza), and introduce the Casio keyboard and its effects of wind and string instruments. This style of *semba* seems to contrast with Toty's aesthetics. Although his choice to record *Hoola Hoope* with a solo guitar could be explained as an attempt to adhere to the conceptualization of the album, this aesthetic decision also reveals his personal preference towards a more intimate, acoustic *semba* that reminds one of the *semba* of Liceu Vieira Dias (Ngola Ritmos), whom Toty explicitly mentions as his major influencer. The sound of his guitar and the way in which he marks the rhythms recalls the *semba* style that was played at the end of the 1950s with only

[23] Similarly to what happened in the Angolan context, Adelaida Reyes argues in her influential work *Songs of the Caged, Songs of the Free* that in Vietnamese music in the post 1970s diaspora, the presence of a Vietnamese text identifies a song as Vietnamese, whatever its musical style (Reyes 1999).

[24] Available at: <https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/muximangola/episodes/2007-01-03T02_48_25-08_00> (last access: 2nd October 2020).

[25] Examples of contemporary *sembas* are those realized by Matias Damasio, known as one of the new generation's *semba* singers, who has become even more famous internationally for his *kizomba* songs. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJLK3CbFbTE> (last access: 1st February 2021).

acoustic guitars and percussion, the *semba* of the *assimilados* who were aiming at rescuing the alleged Africanity of the colonized society. According to Toty, this style is the only one that can be considered "the truly authentic *semba*".

Claims of authenticity towards a genre like *semba*, which originates from the fluid interaction with many other styles, may sound bizarre, but they help illustrate the intention of the young musician. It is interesting to note that Toty acknowledges the fact that his generation (the one born at the end of the 1980s and beginning of 1990s) always has listened to *semba*, albeit without understanding its political dimension. Thus it was, he claimed, that he and his colleagues cultivated an interest for the aesthetics of *semba* more at a musical than semantic level, a taste for the pure sound of the oldest records.

Once again today, Toty's goal remains to introduce his younger generation to the sounds of the old *semba* and the classics of Angolan popular music, which he considers an effective tool to valorize Angolan cultural heritage and to celebrate the Angolan local languages that otherwise have been forgotten. Nonetheless, he is aware that talking of generation underscores an important distinction at stake in Luanda society, that of class. Cognizant of this social divide, he affirms that he is trying to perform in places unusual for concerts, such as Luanda's *musseques* (shantytowns), in order to circulate his messages and share the repertoire with youth who do not have the same resources he does.

Like Toty, other young musicians in Luanda are engaged in similar projects in which they confront the *semba* of the *kotas*. These young artists seem to benefit from the openness of the older musicians to transmit their knowledge, to collaborate with the new generation, and to express more explicitly a long-repressed concern with the State's negligence towards Angolan expressive culture. It is interesting to note the different ways in which each of these young musicians is inventing his/her own way to deal with the past and to rescue the old *semba*, or rather, the set of Angolan popular music styles that together made up *semba*.

Conclusion

The genealogical approach to *semba* has helped us to understand how *semba* has been historically shaped by a close relationship with politics and how the historical circumstances of the country affected the emergence of Angolan music categories. Moreover, by looking at the history of Angolan popular music, it has been possible to understand the way in which the genre of *semba* became commonly associated with different generations of artists. These musicians lived important moments of Angolan history together. Yet most of them ended up being totally neglected during the decades after the independence, not only because of the civil war and the consequential collapse of the music industry, but also because of the ruling party's nationalization of music and its reluctance to rescue the memory of the past, and preserve local culture and traditional expressive practices. Still today the colonial mentality seems to have a strong impact on Angolan society, one

that makes the investigation of the politics of musical categorization in the country more important than ever.

In this context, numerous artists have decided to produce again semba in the traditional ways in order to cultivate a dialogue with past, to recuperate the use of traditional instruments, and define an Angolan urban identity. The case of Toty Sa'med is just one among others. In his words the insistence of the use of the category of generation to think about Angolan popular music recalled a much larger public debate that makes the relationship between music and generational thinking in Angola explicit and powerful.[26] Through generation we can understand the politics of musical categories as well as investigate the genealogy and functioning of musical genres like semba. Vice versa, as the trajectory of Angolan popular music demonstrates, discourses on genres may illuminate the ways in which music sheds light on generational narratives and social changes over time.

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[26] It is particularly emblematic to this end that in the summer of 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, RTP Africa, the official Portuguese TV channel available in the PALOP, organized a concert entitled *3G do Semba* (meaning "three generations of *semba*"), featuring three of Angola's most famous singers, Paulo Flores, Yuri da Cunha and Bonga. Publicly broadcast on national and international TV channels and YouTube, the show was going to be remembered as a milestone in the recent history of Angolan popular music for gathering both a massive audience and acclamations.

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