

The role of popular music in Angolan freedom movements

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ABSTRACT

Colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century, the area that now exists as Angola became an autonomous country in 1975 after the long independence war started in 1961. This project focuses on these years of conflict to consider the role of popular music in the construction of a new Angolan identity while looking also at the music of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States as a parallel phenomenon. Music has always been an essential element for human societies as a site of expression and cultural identity. Singers can transmit ideas that cannot be easily said, and songs can unite people in ways that texts and speeches simply cannot. Music does not require literacy, and it therefore has the power to engage an audience and elicit their participation. Music moves human bodies and brings about social change. Seeing popular music as a decolonial tool that works to construct cultural identities, I explore what music meant to the people living in these contexts and how it provided a site of freedom. In a time of much uncertainty for Angolans entering a new era of existence, I consider how music gave voice and autonomy to the oppressed and helped promote ideas to shape the country's future. Drawing comparisons from the politically charged music associated with the United States Civil Rights Movement, this investigation aims to better understand the role of music in the social movements of the last century and to demonstrate a larger, transcontinental awakening and revindication of African identities through music.

Keywords: Music, Angola, Civil rights, Freedom.

El rol de la música popular en los movimientos de libertad angoleños

RESUMEN

Colonizada por los portugueses en el siglo XVI, la tierra que ahora se conoce como Angola se hizo un país autónomo en 1975 después de una larga guerra de independencia que empezó en 1961. Este proyecto se enfoca en estos años de conflicto para considerar el rol de la música popular en la construcción de una nueva identidad angoleña, mirando también a la música del movimiento de los derechos civiles en los Estados Unidos como un

fenómeno paralelo. La música siempre ha sido un elemento esencial a las sociedades humanas como un sitio de expresión e identidad cultural. Cantantes pueden transmitir ideas que no se pueden decir fácilmente, y canciones pueden unir personas de maneras distintas a textos y discursos. La música no exige alfabetismo, y tiene el poder de involucrar a una audiencia y provocar su participación. La música mueve los cuerpos humanos y genera cambio social. Viendo a la música popular como una herramienta decolonial que funciona para construir identidades culturales, exploro qué significaba la música a la gente viviendo en estos contextos y cómo proveía un sitio de libertad. En un momento de mucha incertidumbre para los angoleños entrando en una nueva era de existencia, considero cómo la música dio voz y autonomía a los oprimidos y ayudó fomentar ideas para dar forma al futuro del país. Comparando esto con la música políticamente cargada del movimiento estadounidense de los derechos civiles, el propósito de esta investigación es entender mejor el rol de la música en los movimientos sociales en el último siglo y demostrar un despertar y reivindicación transcontinental de identidades africanas a través de la música.

Palabras claves: Música, Angola, Derechos civiles, Libertad.

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And how many years can some people exist
before they're allowed to be free?
—Bob Dylan, "Blowin' in the Wind"

Colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century, the area that now exists as Angola became an autonomous country in 1975 after the long independence war started in 1961. This project focuses on these years of conflict to consider the role of popular music in the construction of a new Angolan identity, looking also to the music of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States as a parallel phenomenon. Music has always been essential for human societies as a site of expression and cultural identity. Singers can transmit ideas that cannot be easily spoken, and songs can unite people in ways that texts and speeches simply cannot. Music does not require literacy, and it therefore has the power to engage a wider audience and elicit their participation. Music moves human bodies and brings about social change. Seeing popular music as a decolonial tool that works to construct cultural identities, I explore what music meant to the people living in these contexts and how it provided a site of freedom. In a time of much uncertainty for Angolans entering a new era of existence, I consider how music gave voice and autonomy to the oppressed and helped promote ideas to shape the country's future. Drawing comparisons from the politically charged music associated with the United States Civil Rights Movement, the aim of this investigation is to better understand the role of music in the social movements of the last century and to demonstrate a larger, transcontinental awakening and revindication of African identities through music.

An interesting artifact from the period that connects the two contexts is the record *Angola Freedom Songs Recorded by UPA Fighters*, released by American record label Folkways in 1962, a year after the war for independence began. The UPA (*União dos Povos de Angola* or Union of the People of Angola), created in 1954 as the *União*

dos Povos do Norte de Angola, was an independence movement supported by the United States government. The UPA merged with the Democratic Party of Angola in 1962 to form the FNLA (*Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* or National Liberation Front of Angola). On *Angola Freedom Songs*, freedom fighters sing in Kikongo anti-Portuguese sentiments. There is a unifying feeling in the songs and chants on the record, but the disc has a somewhat propagandistic quality. The final track on the record is an “Eye Witness Account” recorded presumably by one of the American recording engineers while visiting Angola to tape the songs; on the move and short of breath, the speaker describes the warzone and the kindness and strength of the villagers engaged in the conflict. The liner notes of the record also provide the listener not only with English translations of the lyrics but also with some context and history about Portuguese colonialism in Angola and the current state of the revolution. The liner notes end with this supplication:

Right through the world we are appealing to all our friends and the peace loving people to assist us in all our efforts to bring about a climate of peace and security in that unfortunate country of ours.

Peace and security were unfortunately still a long time coming. The UPA, soon to be the FNLA, was not the only organization fighting for Angolan independence. The other major group, the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* or People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), did not receive support from the United States as they followed a Marxist ideology and instead received support from communist countries such as Cuba and the Soviet Union. It was the MPLA that rose to power in 1975, and FNLA support dwindled. No longer fighting the Portuguese, the MPLA mainly fought a third independence movement-turned-political party, UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* or National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), in a civil war—and Cold War proxy conflict—for nearly thirty years.

It is worth noting also that while *Angola Freedom Songs* attempts to raise awareness about the independence struggle in Angola, within the country its purpose would have been to connect UPA/FNLA fighters and supporters with one another. Although copies of the record within Angola would have been scarce to non-existent, these songs could have been heard on the transistor radios that—as Marissa Moorman (2008) demonstrated—became more abundant and popular throughout the sixties. Foreign broadcasts, especially from Congo-Brazzaville and Kinshasa—where the independence movements were based—were popular amongst Angolans during this period (p. 142). Building upon and remixing Benedict Anderson's "concept of print capitalism as the technomaterial engine that drives the imagination of nation through novels and newspapers," Moorman argued "that 'sonorous capitalism,' in the form of radio and the recording industry, was the motor that drove the development and spread of music as a medium for imagining the nation in late colonial Angola" (p. 140). This reconceptualizing and updating of Anderson's ideas appropriately addresses the social and technical aspects of nation-building in the twentieth century.

Marissa Moorman focused her research not so much on the war zones near the borders of Angola, but rather on the capital Luanda. In her book, Moorman examined how music provided the space in which Angolans found and created their identity in the late colonial period, arguing that "Music created an experience of cultural sovereignty that served as a template for independence" (p. 3). She located the golden age of Angolan music as contemporaneous with the war for independence—1961-1974¹—as it was during this time that artists in Luanda created a sense of *angolanidade*, or "Angolan-ness", through their music. Moorman pointed out that the songs did not have to be explicitly "political" to do this:

¹ Frederick Moehn placed it slightly later, from the late '60s through the early '80s (p. 181). Of course, this placement suggests the importance of recording companies, which were almost non-existent in the early 1960s.

For the most part, politically driven musicians did not decide to sing in order to send a message or make a political statement. Rather, they sang about what they knew and what they saw. Under conditions of colonial exploitation, however, that was political, because the impediments to people's aspirations and the hardships they suffered were often created by the colonial state and its lackeys. (p. 111).

Moorman explained that this nationalizing music was created above all in the musseques—or shantytowns—of Luanda. The urban Angolans who inhabited the makeshift homes without running water and electricity lived the hardships created by the colonial system. Music provided not only a way to better their own conditions—both economically and emotionally—but it also allowed the urban African population to construct a national identity that would pave the way for the political changes brought on by independence.

In a similar way, music provided African Americans a space in which to express themselves freely and to connect with one another in both sorrow and joy. As Reiland Rabaka said of the United States context: "*African American movements are as musical as they are political*" (p. 15; emphasis original). The same could be said of all social movements throughout Africa and the African diaspora. Rabaka examined the continuum of black music and its importance in the social advances of African Americans in his book *Civil Rights Music: The Soundtracks of the Civil Rights Movement* (2016). He argued that gospel, soul, blues, and jazz not only expressed the realities of African Americans but that they were also sites of freedom. Rabaka cited Ralph Ellison, who contended in 1964 that rather than "social or political freedom... the art—the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom" (*Shadow and Act*, pp. 247-48). Rabaka defined "Civil rights music" as:

essentially those forms of music arising out of the Civil Rights Movement that insinuated or alluded to many of the dire aspirations and frustrations that African Americans could not

openly express as a consequence of racial segregation and economic exploitation between 1954 and 1965—that is to say, from the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. (p. 17).

The music was born out of a certain necessity. The content of the songs cannot be removed entirely from the context—even though many songs may have been taken from older traditions either entirely or in part. Rabaka pointed out that:

the Civil Rights Movement enabled its participants to not only imagine themselves as part of a larger community, but to actually create art, culture, and communities of struggle. As a result, the movement produced a sense of collective identity, as well as collective agency. (p. 49).

The imagination of community—echoing Anderson yet again—along with the creation of collective identity and agency, is at the heart of the struggles both in the United States and in Angola. Where African Americans employed gospel, rhythm and blues, and jazz in this collective imagining, Angolans turned to semba in the '60s and '70s. Although, as Moorman explained, “ethnomusicologists, musicians, and astute music lovers define semba as the unique beat that gives this music its distinctive Angolan sound,” semba is more generally used by Angolans as “an umbrella term that gathers other musical rhythms and covers them with its imprimatur of authenticity: ‘made in Angola by Angolans’” (p. 7). Suffice to say that in both countries, musicians built upon existing musical traditions while also innovating and expressing the realities that they were living.

In addition to the musical aspects such as beat, Moorman spoke of the predominance and importance of the Kimbundu language in Angolan music. Even though Portuguese was the lingua franca of Luanda, she noted that “many musicians learned Kimbundu as adults and used it only in song and not in conversation” (p. 113).

Kimbundu, she explained, “allowed for the subversion of meaning because [...] state agents relied on Angolans for translation and interpretation” (p. 126). The translations provided to the PIDE (*Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado* or International Police and Defense of the State) were often literal and did not convey the nuances found in the original. Beyond simply safeguarding censorship, singing in Kimbundu further “Africanized the music, valorizing local cultural expression that had been derided” (p. 126). Music is and has always been about expression; the power of language cannot be overstated. Singing in Kimbundu was not about hiding but proclaiming a collective identity. Nonetheless, citizens could be prosecuted by the colonial regime, and to be overtly pro-independence could be dangerous. Music, therefore, provided a safe space in which to proudly sing their *angolanidade*.

Music is almost inherently political, and its power is far greater than any pamphlet or political text. Music can be felt in a nondiscursive manner of transmission, and it does not even require literacy to be accessed by the public. Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1995) discussed how popular music effectively powered the social movements of the 1960s in the United States:

In both form and content, popular music in the early to mid-1960s functioned as another kind of social theory, translating the political radicalism that was expressed by relatively small coterie of critical intellectuals and political activists into a much different and far more accessible idiom. (p. 464).

Likewise, in Angola, the musicians that played in the musseques of Luanda were not all sitting around reading Marx and picking up arms against the colonial regime. They were, however, creating a sense of Angolan identity and empowerment that revindicated their autonomy and independence. So, too, were the concertgoers, dancers, and radioheads doing their part in a collective movement through their

continued interest and support. The relation was symbiotic: the musicians needed the public as much as the public needed them.

Moorman discussed how the folk she interviewed in Luanda in the late 1990s reflected with nostalgia on the club scene of the days before independence. The music and the dancing—the movement—were all so alive during the late colonial period, and it is strange that with independence came a hiatus to the scene. Music then had to support the ruling MPLA party more directly, and it lost its collective liberation quality as the country sank into a civil war. That is not to say that music disappeared entirely or that it would not rise again with renewed zeal in succeeding generations, but independence and the ascent of the MPLA did mark, according to Moorman, the end of Angolan music's golden age.

Just as the majority of the powerful nationalizing Angolan music was created by the working poor of the musseques, Rabaka reminded us that “black ghetto youth historically have been, and remain, [the] primary producers and practitioners” of the African American popular music tradition (p. 150). In both countries' contexts, the voices most heavily oppressed by the system are thus better equipped to express themselves and create cultural identities with agency outside of the subordinated roles assigned to them by the hegemonic powers that be. And just as the music of the musseques was often not explicitly political, so too were the subversive songs of the African American context. As Rabaka pointed out:

if one really listens and hears classic rhythm & blues and carefully considers the racially segregated and economically exploitative conditions under which it emerged, it is almost impossible to miss its multiple meanings, double entendres, and cultural codes, as well as the fact that *it was incredibly political by appearing to be apolitical and utterly unconnected to the Civil Rights Movement.* (p. 161, emphasis added).

When an individual or a group is disenfranchised, it is often the simple act of self-expression that is political. Nonetheless, in the United States and in Angola we can find examples of explicitly political songs that drew people together both physically and emotionally. One of the most powerful of these in the United States was “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke. Released in 1964, Cooke’s song speaks of his personal experience as a black man in a way that also speaks to the collective, offering hope and solidarity to all the listeners also struggling in the unfair and racist conditions of 1960s America.

The music of Angola, however, was subject to a higher degree of censorship, and explicitly political songs did not abound in the musseques. Artists who did write highly political songs did so usually in exile. Such was the case of Bonga, who recorded his seminal *Angola '72* while exiled in the Netherlands. Bonga Kuenda—“he who gets up and walks”—has created inspiring music about Angolan identity since the early 1970s. On *Angola '72*, Bonga released the track “Mona Ki Ngi Xica,” (*The Child I'm Leaving Behind*), which became an anthem of the Angolan liberation movement. An arrest warrant was issued for Bonga as a result of his strong political lyrics, and he was not able to enter Portugal or Angola during the final years of the Salazar dictatorship.

Another important artist who found himself in exile was Teta Lando, although his exile came after independence because of his ties to FNLA. Releasing only one record in Angola before a long exile, Teta Lando returned in the 1990s, re-editing and releasing much of the music from the '60s and '70s on his label Teta Lando Produções (Moorman, 2008, p. 19). The record that he released in 1974, *Independência*, went gold in Angola. Songs like “Angolano segue em frente,” “F.N.L.A. M.P.L.A.,” and “Irmão ama teu irmão” spoke hopefully of the country’s new beginnings, urging Angolans to live peacefully with one another. In “Angolano segue em frente,” Teta Lando sang:

Angolano segue em frente, o teu caminho é só um (repeat)

Esse caminho é difícil mas dá-te a felicidade (repeat)
Esse caminho é difícil mas traz-te a liberdade (repeat)
Se você é branco isso não interessa a ninguém
Se você é mulato isso não interessa a ninguém
Se você é negro isso não interessa a ninguém
Mas o que interessa é a tua vontade de fazer Angola melhor
Um Angola verdadeiramente livre, um Angola independente²

The hopefulness of the song unfortunately did not reflect the reality to come. Fearing for their safety, Teta Lando and his family would seek exile in Zaire and later in Europe for many years while the country sank into civil war.

In 2002, the MPLA and UNITA forces would cease fire after Jonas Savimbi, leader of UNITA, was killed in conflict. The last twenty years have seen new styles of music that express the realities of Angolans. Hip-hop, rap, and the Angolan-specific kuduro music now provide young musicians with new styles and formats to move and define themselves in an ever more planetary context. News reporters Ndaba Lungu and Ana de Sousa have noted the importance of Angolan hip-hop music in the youth protests of 2011 and in the continued critique of the government. Likewise, in the United States, the last sixty years have seen many new styles of music emerge from young, working-class African Americans. In neither country have the signs of oppression completely disappeared, but we can see how music remains an important outlet for collective identity formation and individual expression, as well as a tool to decolonize. While the club scene of the musseques and the civil rights rallies may no longer be the venues where songs are shared in a collective imagining of community, the legacy of the music created remains in the original recordings, in the memories, and in the music of

²Translation by the author: " / Angolan continue ahead, your path is one. / This path is difficult but it will bring you happiness. / This path is difficult but it will bring you liberty. / If you are white, nobody cares. / If you are mixed, nobody cares. / If you are black, nobody cares. / But what matters is your desire to make Angola better. / A truly free Angola, an independent Angola.

the newer generations that sample or cite the old tunes. Music will not cease to be a motor for social change as long as there are voices that are being silenced.

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