CULTURAL AMBASSADORS WITH A CAUSE: MIGRANT MUSICIANS

FROM LUSOPHONE AFRICA IN LISBON

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Ab*stract*

   Approaching music as a point of social connection in the postcolonial city of Lisbon, I seek to understand how migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking African countries position themselves. Drawing on an ethnography carried out in the last 5 years, I argue that the contribution of these musicians to Portuguese expressive culture has not duly been recognized. However, these cultural ambassadors see music as a way of preserving their native cultural values and languages, and use Lisbon as a communicative space. They appeal to (supra)national institutions and governments for structural support and promotion, indicating that their contribution should be considered as an integral part of the cultural heritage of both Africa and Europe.

   Keywords: Lisbon, postcolonialism, music, migration, discourse, governance

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1. **Introduction**

The lack of integration of African musicians here is the result of lack of interest by promoters of culture in their respective countries. There is an interrelationship between deficits: the diaspora deficit is a consequence of the national deficit." (Aldo Milá, Angola, Interview, Dec. 2009)

"It is more urgent to defend the traditional part of African music than doing what many others are already doing. I'm saying: 'look, make use of me to value this world heritage'." (Costa Neto, Mozambique, Interview, Dec. 2009)

"In my country, culture is the very last of things. The needs that there are in other sectors, such as education and health are such that the budget is never sufficient for the effective development of culture and music." (Tonecas, São Tomé and Príncipe, Interview, Dec. 2009)

"In Guinea-Bissau, being a musician is like being a bandit. This is an old concept: parents used to fight to give their children the chance to study, to be someone, but not in music. One could be an engineer, lawyer, and other professions, all but a musician." (Guto Pires, Guinea-Bissau, Interview, Dec. 2009)

Approaching music as a point of social connection in the postcolonial city of Lisbon, I seek to understand how local migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking African countries

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position themselves. How do they conceive their surrounding community, both in Portugal and their country of origin, and how do they mobilize or question existing structures and resources?

My perspective is based on the work of ethnomusicologists and other social scientists that, in a global context of diaspora and transnationalism, understand that cultural systems may be articulated linguistically rather than geographically. This corresponds to the field of ethnomusicology, which aims to address popular music as a privileged site for the exploration of identity and culture (Arenas, 2011, p. 46).

Music is a social and hence discursive construction that can be better understood when viewed from the networks of exchange, sharing and cooperation established between the various agents interwoven in its production, diffusion and dissemination (cf. Côrte-Real, 2010, pp.11-18; Maciel, 2010, p. 303).

For my master thesis (Vanspauwen 2010) and subsequent doctoral thesis research (ongoing) at Universidade Nova de Lisboa, I have been conducting an extensive ethnography on migrant musicians of Portuguese-speaking countries in Lisbon. This investigation, consisting of interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis, has allowed me to reconstruct a network of musicians, associations, festivals, music venues, cultural entrepreneurs, as well as discographic, media and institutional initiatives that are currently present in the Portuguese capital.

Lisbon constitutes a privileged stage for encounters between Portuguese musicians, resident migrant musicians and musicians on tour from other Portuguese-speaking countries, as may become clear from the documentary *Lusofonia, a (R)evolução*[1]. Lisbon's voluntary cultural associations also work with this human potential, as is exemplified by Associação Sons da

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hFJkc8NkmQ (accessed May 12, 2013).

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Lusofonia (1996)[2], festival Musidanças - 'Festival das Comunidades Lusófonas' (2001) [3] and 'Lusofonias: Culturas em Comunidade' (2008)[4] of Associação Etnia. Finally, CPLP - the political community of Portuguese-speaking Countries[5] that was founded and headquartered in Lisbon in 1996, since 2008 yearly commemorates its Lusophone Culture Week[6] in Lisbon.[7]

It can be argued that the biographies of postcolonial migrants are important tools in building an urban ethnography: they offer an alternative to the global culture concept by means of their transnational cultural practices (cf. Turino, 2003, p. 52). The music performances of these migrants can be seen as a profoundly discursive form of behavior (Guss, 2000, pp. 7-12). By using the ethnography of music performance as a methodological tool, both individual agencies and larger socio-cultural discourses can be mapped out. In this way, obtained research results can help to design or adjust cultural policies.

2. Contextualization

The CPLP countries and their populations have many historical events and conditions in common, and continue to be linked economically and politically. In practical terms, however, the shift that occurred after 1975 – when Portugal's African colonies declared themselves independent – was substantial: Portugal, that for centuries had projected itself as a nation of expansion and emigration, now received considerable migration flows from its former African

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[2] http://www.sonsdalusofonia.com/SonsdaLusofonia/tabid/58/language/pt-PT/Default.aspx (accessed May 12, 2013).

[3] http://festivalmusidancas.blogspot.pt (accessed May 12, 2013).

[4] http://lusofonias2008.blogspot.com (accessed May 12, 2013).

[5] Today, CPLP reunites 240 million Portuguese speakers in 8 countries: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe and East Timor. http://www.idcplp.net/?idc=30&idi=5623 (accessed May 12, 2013).

[6] http://www.cplp.org/id-2215.aspx (accessed May 12, 2013).

[7] Throughout this text, I will use the word 'lusophone' as a synonym for 'Portuguese-speaking', thus referring to countries or regions that have adopted Portuguese as an official language.

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colonies. This implied two simultaneous realities: the repatriation of the Portuguese former inhabitants, mostly of European descent, on the one hand, and the arrival of migrants of African nationality and ancestry, on the other. In short, the Portuguese colonial trauma coincided with a reversal of migration patterns, as the increasing heterogeneity of the population forced Portuguese society to reflect on a number of issues related to migration, while at the same time continuing to be a country of emigration (cf. Maciel, 2010, pp. 213-214).

Not only did the rapid decolonization process create reserved attitudes toward the migrants from the former colonies, but Portugal's EU membership (1986) also called for a break with its past colonial ties – implying restrictive policies towards African migrants (and others). Thus, on the one hand, the reorientation towards Europe and democracy correlated with the delimitation and exclusion of the former colonies; while on the other, Portugal continued to be a transatlantic country that tried to maintain an equal bond to its former peripheries. In fulfilling both roles, Portugal tended to assert itself as an intermediary between other Portuguese-speaking countries and Europe (cf ibid., pp. 206 and 235-236).

On a social level, the migrant populations from Portugal's former colonies not only increased the country's internal heterogeneity, but these migrants also formed a 'missing link' that justified Portugal's political commitment and the construction of 'special ties' with the Portuguese-speaking countries. However, despite Portugal's official diversity discourse and its institutional migrant reception framework – for which it received international acclaim –, racism, social exclusion and objection to further immigration were not erased from Portuguese society. Furthermore, the emphasis on the affirmation of socio-cultural contrasts of migrants and ethnic minorities may have been a subtle way of stating the superiority of the cultural values of the host society, thus legitimizing existing socio-cultural hierarchies (cf. ibid., pp. 207, 209-210, 213-214,

and 229-230). In general, Portuguese attempts at cultural and racial aperture have often lacked local symbolic and financial support.

This is exemplified by the fact that most migrant musicians from lusophone Africa did not have access to Portuguese recording studios or publishing companies. Without any institutional or commercial framework of support, their musical activity in Portugal remained restricted to live performances through social networks in discotheques with recorded music, in dance halls and in restaurants (cf. Cidra, 2010). The delay in recognition of their work would point these musicians toward commercialization in other European capitals such as Paris, Amsterdam and Berlin. As pointed out by Cidra (ibid., p. 789), this transnational discographic framework paradoxically stimulated Portuguese recognition and visibility for migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking African countries, as it connected Lisbon to other centers with diaspora groups from Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé and Príncipe located in Europe, the USA, or the countries of origin. Under this increasing internationalization, political institutions and cultural entrepreneurs in Lisbon gradually became interested in promoting interaction between Portuguese musicians and migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking African countries, with shared performances at a number of occasions.

3. Field research and results

My analysis of *Lusofonia, a (r)evolução* (produced by Red Bull Music Academy, Portugal, 2006), which I carried out during my master's thesis research, shows that this documentary constructs a narrative that suggests that, historically speaking, lusophone populations and their musics have evolved but still belong together. Thus, the documentary promotes musical and multicultural hybrids in an attempt to increase both visibility and professional opportunities for

migrant musicians in Portugal. However, *Lusofonia, a (r)evolução* mostly shows established musicians in the context of the record industry, whereas the underlying migratory contexts where these musicians came from are largely omitted. Therefore, my research hypothesis was that the documentary's representation could be further enriched by including resident migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking countries that perform in the circuit of bars, restaurants and associations. To verify this hypothesis, extensive field research was carried out in Lisbon. This included collective performances announced through the media; individual performances in restaurants and bars; and performances resulting from the initiative of voluntary associations or official institutions, mostly held in public spaces. Ethnographic interviews with and participant-observations of a number of migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking countries were also conducted.

Several criteria guided the selection of interviewees. A first criterion was nationality, given the Portuguese-speaking countries from which many migrant musicians in Lisbon originate. Second, given the similarity of their discourse, singer-songwriters that had largely performed outside of the commercial circuit were grouped together. Third, all interviewees were first generation migrant musicians, maintaining strong (emotional and/or physical) connections with their home countries. Thus, the following musicians from lusophone Africa were selected for conclusive interviews: Aldo Milá (Angola), Guto Pires (Guinea-Bissau), Tonecas (São Tomé and Príncipe), Zézé Barbosa (Cape Verde) and Costa Neto (Mozambique).

This ethnography resulted in a relational understanding of how resident migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking African countries in Lisbon conceive their surrounding community, and how they mobilize or question existing structures and resources. It became clear that each of the interviewed musicians seeks to present the music they know of their own

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country, and that they do not identify themselves as 'lusophone musicians'. In particular, three issues stand out, for which I will initially cite interview excerpts below.

A problematic language connection.

These musicians regard the denomination 'lusophone musics' as problematic, because for them it involves issues of cultural and linguistic domination. Aldo Milá points out that African languages and dialects are the "local cultural support, this means that language is practically an instrument of the specific cultural memory of these people" (Interview, December 2009). So, what are 'lusophone musics', he asks? "Is it the music of the African countries with Portuguese as an official language in combination with their local languages, or is it only the music of these countries sung in Portuguese? The former is experiencing difficulties," he says (ibid.). The other interviewees have similar discourses.

An urgent need for safeguarding and (re)valorization of 'African musics', both in Africa and in Europe.

Guto Pires argues: "For African governments, the area of culture is the last thing that exists: music, poetry, and art in itself. They only pay attention to African culture when things are well in the other levels, when people are not hungry." (Interview, December 2009). This idea is confirmed by Aldo Milá: "The artistic class of the African countries is largely invisible. There are no talent hunters ... if any, they are not really managers, but political agitators that use culture as a factor of political dynamics" (Interview, December 2009). In line with this, Tonecas states that his country has two serious problems. "First, the majority of young people listen to *kizomba* [commercial techno music]. This drives many artists away, and does not help local culture at all. Second, artists experience local difficulties regarding training, technical means and

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dissemination of their projects" (Interview, December 2009). Finally, Costa Neto defends that "it is more urgent to defend the traditional part of music, African music in this case, than doing what many are already doing. I'm saying: 'look, make use of me to value this world heritage'" (Interview, December 2009).

An alleged European bias towards African musics.

Some of the interviewed musicians accuse the Portuguese media of promoting a derivative form of African cultural expressions. As Guto Pires explains, "Portugal automatically demands that Africans whiten their music if they want to make it here" (Interview, December 2009). Aldo Milá argues that lusophone music was created out of a stereotype that was constructed by local radio specialists, an act which he considers to be "an abuse of confidence of African culture" (Interview, December 2009). In those broadcasts, Milá continues, 80% is electronic music, sung in Portuguese. However, "Africans need to be integrated in their own country, with their own instruments, with their proper culture. I don't recognize myself in this Africa [that is mediatized by the Portuguese]" (Interview, December 2009). Costa Neto reasons along the same lines: "Nowadays in Portugal, African music is generally disseminated as a trivial thing, only to jump. I take this very seriously, because in Africa music always served for things that we configured as the most important ones of our lives" (Interview, December 2009).

4. Argumentation and suggestions

Although the performances of migrant musicians from lusophone Africa occur in a European context in which cultural entrepreneurs deploy a variety of labels to promote postcolonial mixtures, there still seems to be a tension that is manifest in the lack of cultural integration of

migrants, as is signaled by the interviewees above. The origins of this Portuguese counter-discourse to migration can possibly be exposed through Almeida's assumptions of what he calls 'PostLusotropicalism' (Almeida, 2008, n.p.), meaning that Portuguese institutions and society had their proper representations of colonial miscegenation, tolerance and exceptionalism challenged by the flux of migrants from ex-colonies in Africa after the respective African independencies (ibid.). This gave rise to a covert racism, resulting from the cognitive tension between hegemonic discursive statements on the historically non-racist character of Portuguese society on the one hand, and the social, professional, legal and geographical exclusion of migrants, on the other (ibid.). This idea aligns with Sanches' thoughts (2010, n.p.) about the integration of migrant populations from Portuguese-speaking African countries in the old colonial metropolis:

> [Blacks seem] to be accepted in Lisbon in order to market the city as part of a cosmopolitan global space, characterized by the juxtaposition of the exotic and the familiar […]. Although seen as the result of the mixing of African origins with Brazilian sounds and transatlantic travels, the Atlantic still seems to resist the adjective of Black, in consonance with other narratives in Portuguese imperial histories (ibid.).

There are indeed still little institutionalized narratives that represent the influences and experiences of the former colonial territories in Portugal (cf. Cabecinhas et al., 2006, p. 1). This leads us to Madureira's 2006 question, 'is the difference in Portuguese colonialism the difference in Lusophone postcolonialism?' Or, put in another way, "after centuries of colonization, and in a globalized world, to who belongs this [African] cultural heritage?" (Roubaud, 2012, n.p.). As Almeida (2008, n.p.) indicates, "it is as if the Lusotropicalist narrative were about spreading Portuguese cultural products around the world but never about the return journey, about the

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African and other cultural products in Portugal". Incorporating migrant cultures from Portuguese-speaking countries is hence required, in order to tell a new story of nation-building and (trans)nationalism in Portugal.

Postcolonial migrant communities in Europe, that have traditionally been overlooked both in academia and in terms of institutional action, are now becoming increasingly visible on political and cultural agendas, implying a revision of their relationship to the reference values of the host society as well as their social incorporation and social participation. In the case of Portugal, which hosts a diversity of lusophone migrant populations in its capital, it seems fruitful to reflect on what this entails with respect to a lusophone community (cf Maciel, 2010, pp. 207 and 216). Beyond seeing these migrants as mere economic agents, whose performance at cultural and artistic levels has long been underestimated, in-depth studies need to be carried out on basic questions such as the role of music in the construction and maintenance of identity in multicultural contexts, both on the historical and synchronic levels (Castelo-Branco, 1997, p. 41; Maciel, 2010, p. 216). The performances and opinions of the interviewed musicians should hence be understood as important sites of socialization and negotiation that transcend national boundaries.

My ongoing PhD research indicates that Lisbon hosts many manifestations with migrant musicians from lusophone Africa under a variety of labels (such as *lusofonia*, interculturality, *criolidade*, fusion, world music, diversity). These labels may represent various things: e.g. cultural affirmation of the presence of a specific migrant community; a contribution to the idea of Portugal as a multicultural country; or a practical perception on how to build a lusophone community (cf. Maciel, 2010, pp. 230-232). The underlying base of human potential that powers the events to which these labels are applied, however, is always the same, as the majority of

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migrant musicians play at all types of events, regardless of their specific discourse and framework. In general, one can say that these fusion practices appear to intersect with the phenomenon of 'positive ethnicization' (cf. ibid.):

> In a reflection on the lusotropicalist roots of the ideology of 'interculturalism' that now dominates the official Portuguese discourse, fusion draws attention to how segments of migrant populations take advantage of the celebrations of diversity and hybridization to renegotiate identities in the context of broader belonging (ibid.).

From the interviews above emerge some suggestions for this renegotiation.

Firstly, the migrant musicians themselves have to be aware of their protagonism; in Costa Neto's opinion, "migrant musicians from Portuguese-speaking African countries often forget what their main function is: 'before being musicians, they are cultural agents'" (Interview, December 2009). In addition, local policy makers should invest in their civic responsibility to promote migrant cultural expressions and implement African elements in their country's cultural and civic education. Portugal may miss out if it does not embrace its historical ties, argues Costa Neto. "Note, who loses with all this? Above all, the Portuguese, who know less and less about their own history. The history of the Portuguese-speaking countries is part of Portugal's history" (ibid.).

Secondly, there should be a change of mentality with hindsight to the signaled absence of local cultural promoters, both in the country of origin and in Portugal. As Aldo Milá indicates, "cultural policies need to be modernized. In Lisbon we have a consulate, an embassy, human resources, artists, an artistic community. What is missing? Cultural promoters" (Interview, December 2009). Tonecas points to the need for sustained structural funding: "there should also

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be a budget for the development of our African culture in parish councils, town halls, the ministry of culture, the presidency of the Republic" (Interview, December 2009).

Finally, (trans)national institutions should give more support and visibility on a regular basis. Aldo Milá in this sense makes a plea for daily continuity through the idea of what he calls 'cultural embassies', using a focus that is "cultural, not geographic" (Interview, December 2009), consolidating the cultural and historical ties between Africa and Europe. In addition, all interviewees argue that the CPLP – based in Lisbon – should have an important role in supporting this transnational cultural recognition through financial efforts (cf. francophonie, where every country has to pay a yearly contribution, the total amount being divided over all regions.). In their opinion, the CPLP should also foster music preservation strategies towards archiving the existing cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

How do migrant musicians from African Portuguese-speaking countries position themselves in Lisbon? How do they evaluate their position in a context of conflicting discourses in which Portugal's national music, *fado*, seems to be an enigmatic emblem of cultural tradition? Are racial issues or former colonial representations still influential?

In general, research results show a lack of recognition for the contribution of these musicians to Portuguese expressive culture. Although their performances occur in a European context in which cultural entrepreneurs deploy a variety of labels to promote postcolonial mixtures, all interviewees connect their music directly to their home country. They consider themselves cultural agents that use music as a way of preserving African tradition. Most of all, they want to safeguard 'traditional music', promoting their native cultural values and languages,

by using the Portuguese capital as a communicative space. In addition, they indicate that there is a direct relation with regard to lack in cultural support here and there.

Offering practical policy suggestions from lived experiences in both Portugal and their African countries of origin, these cultural ambassadors appeal to transnational institutions and national governments for a sustainable cultural policy in order to promote and develop the expressive culture of Portugal and their native African countries, indicating that their contribution should be considered as an integral part of the cultural heritage of both Africa and Europe. Specifically, they protest against the instrumental use of culture by institutions and media for the sake of local governmental agendas that promote diversity (thus somehow homogenizing difference), instead making a plea for a cultural essentialism approach (that acknowledges them professionally as international musicians that are linked to the cultural heritage of their countries).

That being said, there seems to be an increasing space for the affirmation of a migrant community within the lusophone old center as well as other spaces of the lusophone world. This community references Africa (not defined solely according to racial criteria, but including the Portuguese former inhabitants of former colonies) which increasingly visualizes the African presence in the city beyond a focus of exclusion and stigmatization. In addition, governmental institutions, voluntary associations and cultural entrepreneurs seem to be increasingly interested in financially supporting events that include local migrant populations. If this trend continues, then Lisbon's African presence may be on its way to finally be fully acknowledged.

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