



**MEMOIRS** - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
**MAPS** - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 8 May 2021



*Banda Maravilha* | Espaço Cultural Chá de Caxinde | Luanda | 2019 | courtesy of the author

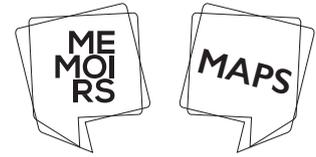
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# IN A SEMBA POEM, IN A SEMBA SONG, IN A SEMBA ACT LISTENING TO SEMBA COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AS INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

André Castro Soares

“The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory”

Andreas Huyssen (1)



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With the inclusion of the pre-colonial cultural landscape of Mbanza Congo on the World Heritage List in 2017, Angola had its first entry into UNESCO's supranational heritage race.

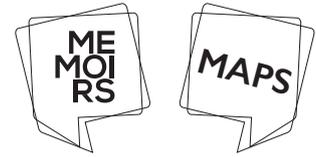
In 2018, the Angolan Minister of Culture stated a desire to begin the process of patrimonialization of semba. This was welcomed in the Angolan press and by musicians and sembistas. Semba is a hybrid musical genre with a rhythm based on combining percussion and guitar. It spread in the 1940s, and can be danced in pairs as well in social and festive contexts.

In my ongoing research on how semba is becoming a form of heritage, one of my interlocutors is the singer Aline Frazão. As a connoisseur of semba's heritage in the Angolan music community, she commented on Angolans' pride, and even vanity, in their music. Semba is a significant intangible cultural asset for Angolans, and was one of the ways in which a feeling of *angolanidade* - understood as a process of identity construction beyond independence - was expressed. Semba was presented, in both musical form and dance, as a way of being. It reveals a spirit that interweaves sets of memories that are claimed as part of Angolan identity. A good example is the song *Poema do Semba* by singer and composer Paulo Flores (recorded in 2000 with Carlos Burity, for the album *Recompasso*).

The idea of intangible heritage emerges particularly from the materiality of musical performances, their taking of place, their repertoires, histories and legacies, all produced by the semba community of practice (2). The challenge is to understand the articulation of memories of semba across the colonial and post-colonial periods. Political and social transformations in Angola in recent decades, have put very distinct memories, often antagonistic ones, into conflict with one another. Andreas Hyssens refers to how "the problem of national identity is increasingly discussed in terms of cultural or collective memory rather than in terms of the assumed identity of nation and state" (3).

The ideas of an imagined community are almost always heroic and fabricated, in a post-colonial context that, in large part, maintains the model of the colonial State as a reference point for the construction of the modern Angolan nation state, its institutions and its most hegemonic and dynamic narratives (4).

It is important to raise a note of caution here, thanks to the presence in power in Angola of the MPLA (the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola). This means we must be circumspect about the participation of everyone involved in the memories of semba as cultural heritage. The collective



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memory of semba corresponds a great deal to that constructed by the musicians involved in the process of Angolan liberation, in particular the Ngola Ritmos and Liceu Vieira Dias. The memory of the musicians and singers of semba has surfaced through innumerable academic works, but also through scattered publications by various authors. Yet its memory lives above all in the lyrics of the songs that salvage memories, forms of being and existing, desires and dreams. We could turn to the cases of the musicians Yuri da Cunha and Paulo Flores, and more recently the return of Conjunto Angola 70.

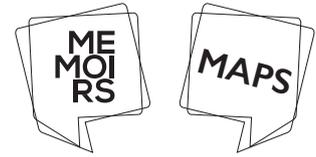
Processes of patrimonialization and inventorying are always selective. The choice of cultural goods for lists of heritage illuminates particular cultural constellations and leaves others in the shadows. A work of research around these processes ends up bringing these disputes over memory into focus.

The lack of synchrony between the fragments of memories of semba among semba communities of practice – singers, musicians, composers and performers – and cultural agents – ministers, cultural directors, academics and journalists – emerges as a familiar debate over intangible heritage as a symbol of modernity.

The process, however, demands dialogue. Above all, there is a need to establish an inventory that respects the spirit of The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, involving “communities, groups and individuals” in the “identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage” (UNESCO, 2003, section 2, line 3).

The negotiations over the memory of semba are haunted by events in the musical field that, after independence, generated mistrust in everyone involved. From the events of May 1977 to the imprisonment of musicians in 2015, a note of fear and distrust is manifest within essential dialogues over horizontal, democratic and participative processes of patrimonialization.

The research that I have developed around semba as intangible heritage has involved listening to the diverse voices involved in the process of constructing the present, past and future of semba. The creation of a website ([www.sembapatrimonioiomaterial.com](http://www.sembapatrimonioiomaterial.com)) has led to important reflections: 1) it functions as a mapping tool in the process of making an inventory; 2) it allows horizontal and participative dialogues with the “makers” of semba; 3) it expands the field of ethnographic work, through the use of



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hypermedia, by enabling us to publish images, sounds and texts online (something that it much more difficult to achieve in monographs); 4) it creates a transparent and collaborative mode of research – the people involved can construct their own research, critique it and debate it; 5) it can help academics and researchers who often come, like myself, from eurocentric institutions and territories, to deliberately develop decolonial research, that generates critical dialogues.

The idea of the processual character of heritage is aligned with what the Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui calls “cosmotechnics”: critical dialogues capable of interweaving distinct worlds and cosmovisions beyond expressive cultural performances like semba (5). Listening to these negotiations of memory and making them explicit in an imaginative way approximates and multiplies dreams, beyond the supposed authenticities and national identities associated with the nation state. It is necessary to listen to what is to come, in a semba poem, in a semba song, in a semba action.

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(1) Huyssens, A., *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. Routledge, 1995, p. 3.

(2) Communities of practice is a concept developed by the education theorist Étienne Charles Wenger (2015): “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”.

(3) Huyssens, A., *Twilight Memories. Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. Routledge, 1995, p. 5.

(4) Malešević, S., “The chimera of national identity”. *Nations and Nationalism*, 2011, 17(2), 272–290.

(5) Huk, Y., *Tecnodiversidade*, Ubu Editora, 2020.

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