

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Angolan Populist Poetry in Historical Context (1974-1976)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5fx5c0x5>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 16(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Soremekun, Fola

Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/F7161016960

Copyright Information

Copyright 1988 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Angolan Populist Poetry in Historical Context (1974-1976)

Fola Soremekun

During the years of the Angolan nationalist war of liberation from the Portuguese yoke, several literary works were produced by many of those involved in the war. Most of these works were published outside Angola and brought fame to writers like Agostinho Neto, Costa Andrade, Mario Andrade, Luandino Vieira and others. Theirs was essentially a literature of protest against Portuguese colonialism, the evils of which they exposed to the world. These men were prominent members of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (now MPLA - Workers Party). With the coming of the final phase of Angola's road to independence, signaled by the military removal of Caetano on April 25, 1974, a wave of poetry burst upon the country.

For the most part these poems were written by enthusiastic but obscure men and women of all races who were sympathetic to the MPLA cause. Today, in spite of one's strenuous efforts to trace and identify them, many have disappeared or have fled the country. Others have died and were unaccounted for. Most of the poets used pen-names, partly to protect themselves in a milieu of uncertainty and violence. The poems in themselves were not always masterpieces of literary grace and high standard. They were mostly products of spontaneity and political consciousness due to the uncorking of the spirit of freedom of expression long bottled up by fifty years of Portuguese Fascism. This poetry was usually in free verse form, full of mixed imagery and metaphor, and sometimes written in colloquial Portuguese. Occasionally gems appeared. Subject matter varied but usually

showed hints of left-leaning socialist ideology. Some were didactic but most were commentaries upon the unfolding events which culminated in independence for Angola on November 11, 1975.

The commentaries, however, did not end there. Poets continued past independence day through the era of new dispensation into which Angola was thrust.

The purpose of writing this paper is to call attention of scholars of various disciplines to the use they could make of this body of poems. They would be useful for the study of Third World politics, ideology, sociology of change and contemporary African historical studies, quite apart from their obvious use in the study of African literature in Portuguese. While doing research for a book on Angola's transition to independence,¹ I began to find these poems in newspapers such as *O Angolense*, *Diario de Luanda*² *A Provincia de Angola*, and other publications which were ephemeral in nature. These newspapers were based in Luanda, the capital and the main hub of political activities. In my collection there are about 300 poems. And I am convinced there might be more in other newspapers from (then) Carmona in Uige province in Nova Lisboa in (then) Huambo province, and from Benguela and in other areas. Poems in magazines could also merit examination and gathering. I am at present trying to get at these while working on a book of parallel translations of these materials with accompanying analyses and proper contexting. In this paper, I intend to use a few of these poems to illustrate Angola's transition to independence.

The military coup of April 25, 1974 in Portugal was a turning point in recent Angolan history.³ It triggered the search for a new polity, it also triggered black-white racial confrontation in an African country long dominated by a white power structure. That structure began to feel that power was slipping from its grip. The determination of the young Portuguese army officers who made the coup to decolonise quickly was something the Portuguese of Angola could not stomach. Yet authorities in Portugal were in confusion and did not have a clear-cut decolonization policy, a situation which allowed matters to drift while political tension permeated the air and violence engulfed the province of Angola. In all the violent political episodes which ensued

after April 25, 1974, none galvanised African solidarity against the whites in the city of Luanda more than the murder of an African male nurse called Joao Pedro Benje⁴ by a white man. A poetic comment on this was written by Jorge Huet de Bacelar. From the attitude shown in this poem, it would appear that the author was not an African. He was probably white or possibly a mulatto. Let us now consider: "To Joao Pedro Benje".⁵ The poem opens:

I still remain here
 waiting for the occasion
 And while I wait
 I discover in your death
 half the word brother

Bacelar was probably one of those few white men who had not yet left Angola in the mass exodus of whites which the military coup triggered as the country was in transition toward independence. Here we also have a man who was apparently acknowledging the legacy of his community's prejudice against Africans. In reading "half the word brother," one is reminded of Albert Schweitzer's statement that the African was not his brother, but only his "junior brother". Bacelar appeared to be in search of himself and foresaw a bond of suffering, and the need to experience suffering like Pedro before he (Bacelar) could call him "Brother".

The other half
 is only foreseen,
 I will find it
 when the dog catcher
 takes me as it has you...

Benje was a victim of destiny which howled like a dog "to greet you the pregnant purity". And, although Benje died before his time

you are already a flower
 of the country which we'll make
 you are a star
 in these boundaries of night and dawn.

The last line above refers to the transition between colonialism and independence. Toward the last two stanzas of the poem, Bacelar has come to accept Benje as a brother and an eternal figure, who was above color. He looked up to him in admiration.

My black brother wait.
And tell me what is the color
of this distant country
where you went.
Tell me, tell me
you who are eternal now
in the eyes of your people
if the color of this city
where you live
is black, white
or simply nothing.

Eventually, the return of the nationalist freedom fighters and their political parties to the country was guaranteed. This opened a period of active political canvassing throughout the land. Regardless of the differences in "ideology" which these political parties claimed, each as a government in exile believed it had the answer to the nation's problems. The African parties - MPLA, FNLA and UNITA⁶ were united on one point only - that Angola should be independent. MPLA had the political sympathy of most of Luanda, and had infiltrated explicitly leftist literature and ideas into the country. It was the most purposeful party "ideologically" and its sympathisers had little patience for the other parties which were weaker in organization. MPLA labelled the other parties as rogues and "tools of capitalism and imperialism". MPLA supporters believed that their party was the only one that stood for real democracy through people's power (*poder popular*) and collectivism, and that it possessed the proper political line. The truth was "socialism". The other factions, including white political parties, in their turn never ceased to wave the red flag as far as MPLA was concerned. Ironically, FNLA leader Holden Roberto was considered a Zairean and a foreigner who, it was said, could not even speak Portuguese.

Joao Carneiro's poem "To Be Coherent" addressed itself to some of the matters which have just been mentioned. Joao Carneiro, a Black Angolan, then an ardent supporter of MPLA, is now in self-imposed exile in Brazil.

To be coherent is to be serious, honest, sincere,
truthful

To be coherent is to say always the same thing.

To say always YES or to say always NO...

To be coherent is not to be accomodating...

To be coherent is not to allow oneself to be
deceived by

smooth talk of those who want to deceive
the people...

To be coherent is always to have the hand
pointed

to the correct direction of the truth for a
country of democratic and popular
power...

To be coherent is to have an ideal, serve it
and guide oneself by it...

To be coherent is to give more importance to the
community than to oneself...

To be coherent is to build the country.

To be coherent is to be a nationalist

To be coherent is to be ANGOLAN!⁷

On January 31, 1975 , a Transitional Government was installed in the country in which the three nationalist parties were supposed to share power at independence. But this government was shot through with disagreements due mainly to animosities among the parties working it. It was the beginning of another round of violence, murder and assassinations among the feuding parties. All sides claimed that many of their seasoned fighters were killed in this period. So heavy were the human casualties that heaps of cadavers piled up for days all over the country. The following poem by "Madume" pointed to one such tragedy when the FNLA decided to wipe out its archrival-MPLA forces.

"Time of Massacre"

I

Bazookas and cannons thunder
 Pistols and machine guns crackle
 Earth bathed in blood of the fallen
 Huts perforated and destroyed, announce:
 It's time of massacre!

II

Shouts of despair...
 Moans of pain and of anguish
 In the alley, at the corner, in the village.
 In the city and everywhere
 There is massacre.

III

Eh, my son
 Eh, my brother
 Eh, he won't return again
 Here, once again victim of FNLA
 Victim of Imperialism

IV

Today it was Cazenga
 Tomorrow Sambizanga, Quifangondo
 Uije, Huambo and everywhere
 There is massacre...⁸

The Transitional Government staggered on, and by June, it reached the brink of total collapse. The leaders went to Nakuru in Kenya under OAU auspices to patch up their differences. But so deep was the distrust among them that after their return, in spite of having agreed not to resort again to armed conflict, they had only a brief respite.

In early July a "week of National Unity" was proclaimed, and Angolan poet, Pitra da Costa wrote to commemorate it. Let us note that the names Ngushi, Beto and Jonas used in the poem were symbolic referents to the three nationalist leaders - Holden Roberto, Agostinho Neto, and Jonas Savimbi. The writer says that all had been responsible

for fighting for the freedom of Angola, and tries to blur their differences.

UNITY TO VICTORY

People who fought more years
 people who lost the best of your sons,
 people who wept in the hours of despair
 the moment has arrived to shout in chorus:
 - Unity is victory!

You who were called authoritarian,
 you who were the so-called blood thirsty traitor,
 you who were called absolutist,
 forget the insulting songs of the festival
 - because unity is victory!

When the star of our dimension shines,
 when the star of our peace triumphs,
 when the sun of our dawn rises,
 a great country in the world will grow
 - because from unity comes victory!

(You) Angolan people who suffered
 force the unity because you won.
 You Ngushi, Beto and Jonas
 fortify your sincerity
 - because only unity will give victory!⁹

The celebration of the 'week' was hardly over when MPLA's left wing made the party take a military offensive, justifying its action as a preemptive strike against FNLA forces. Its aim was to occupy the most strategic positions throughout the country so that it could be in the most advantageous position by independence day. By the end of August the Transitional Government had collapsed in disorder. MPLA drove its archrival FNLA out of Luanda, and UNITA--being so much under pressure--withdrew to the strongholds in the southern highlands. It is not possible in this paper to go into the intricate politics of this period except to note that it appeared impossible to really save the Transitional government, since there was so little goodwill on the part of all the parties. In September, Dr. Neto and his party declared the "Resistance Popular Generalizada"

(Peoples Generalised Resistance). The trigger for this was a punitive action taken against MPLA's so-called 'aggressiveness' by the Portuguese military in Luanda, where several MPLA men were shot to death in suburban Vila Alice.

Launched in a manner not dissimilar to that of the *levee en masse* of the French Revolution, the Resistance started to organise the population for defense of the MPLA's areas of control. Some of the more visible trappings of statehood were encouraged. For instance there were competitions for fashioning the national flag, and for composing the national anthem. The media were pressed into the service of the party. Patriotic songs were played on the radio. Party orators railed against Imperialism. The Resistance gave the MPLA directorate the opportunity to adumbrate publicly its Marxist-Leninist orientation. It portrayed colonialism as the violation of the existing African structures. This violation, it was argued, had provoked "a collection of various forms of reaction... of people's resistance."¹⁰ The Resistance represented the formation of national consciousness and of the structural and organisational forms which national consciousness implied.

By early October, when an OAU delegation went to Luanda to make one more effort to reunite the parties, it was met by placard-carrying, defiant crowds which believed MPLA should go it alone toward independence. Renzo Jorge wrote an open letter in poetry form to the delegation. The letter was first published in *Angolense*, on October 15. Its anti-Western and pro-Socialist message was clear.

Welcome, Gentlemen

Welcome, Gentlemen
To the Land where Men
Do not sell themselves to dollars!

Come and see!
The houses where thousands of sons of the People
Suffered the harshest martyrdom
At the hands of imperialist lackeys!

Depart... and say to the nations of the whole world
That Angolans will never accept
An absurd conciliation,
With those who betray them first!

Come with us to the San Pedro de Barra
And ask the mass graves and the skeletons:
Where are the sons of Our Land
Imprisoned by those devilish lackeys!

Come and visit with us Kifangondo
And let us ask together the witness of the Heavens!
Who massacred Angolan People there
For which Angola raises itself fighting!...

And after all that
Tell us on which side you are Gentlemen?
Reconciling diplomats!
As for the lackeys of dollars
Between us all is said and finished
There is no reconciliation...¹¹

Shortly thereafter, the result of the search for a national anthem was announced.

Eduardo Nascimento, who won the contest with the poem entitled "Avante Povo", was undoubtedly under the influence of the Resistencia. When asked about how he came to submit the winning poem, he declared that he had no great poetic spirit and had never had much inclination for 'letters'.

"However, on the day when I produced this original piece, I felt a strong inner force which is the same force and determination of all Angolan people in this moment... That force of will, and the spirit of combat, together with desire of participation made me to "come out" with that poem... My task was the fruit of a state of spirit and of a moment of inspiration"¹²

Angola's independence day celebration was a mixed bag of joy and anxiety. While Dr. Neto was making his defiant independence day speech as president of the new state, FNLA guns could be distinctly heard in the outskirts of Luanda. Neto was calling for steadfastness and sacrifice from Angolans. He

was also asking for international help and vowing that Angola would not serve the interest of "voracious imperialism". Angolan poets produced poems in praise of Neto as a hero, acrostic poems based on his name, poetic invectives against FNLA and UNITA, war poems and so forth. Let us look at Cafuxi's poem, *Hail: The Day November 11*, to honor the independence day itself.

Referring back to the history of colonial oppression as a basis for Angolan anti-colonial revolt, he saw the independence struggle as anti-imperialist.

Angolans were:

Inspired by suffering of 500 years,
 Unable to bear more the oppression
 We gave everything even our very life,
 Striving to expel the usurper
 To redeem our Fatherland
 And to end the exploitation of man by
 man!

Unwilling to continue in the slavery of
 the
 Right, of the Centre or of the Left,
 We raised our hand as sign of protest,
 In this hour of salvation, against
 All imperialists (internal and external)
 And we obtain full and complete
 independence!!!¹³

National anxiety was the topic of Jose A. Neto, who believed that Angola would yet rise from its slough of despondency. There was anxiety not only because the country was already in the throes of a civil war, but also because many of the highly skilled white personnel had fled the country, had sabotaged machines and siphoned millions of dollars out of the country. The economy was in shambles. There was no food and the people were hungry.

The Sun Will Shine

No!
 The Sun is not going to set!
 There will be sunshine for Angola

and her People

In the horizon
Black Clouds
Try to cover the glitter
Of the cutlasses
Shining in the dawn
Of the 4th February

But we are not going to quit!

Angolan People
Will not allow
crazy people and foreigners
decry our struggle.¹⁴

Reflecting upon Angolan history, while the country found itself in what was then called the "Second War of National Liberation", G. Kazela's long and rambling poetry took a defiant stand against FNLA, UNITA, United States, South Africa and other "Imperialist forces".

"... No, a thousand times No..."

the adventure of exploitation
ended on 11th of November
and this Angola is Angola for
Angolans
To the friends of Liberty and of
Peace
not a space of land
not a bag of coffee
not a drop of oil
not a stone of diamond
not copper, gold nor iron...
to imperialism and reactionism¹⁵

Part of the strategy of the MPLA in dealing with the new situation was to revive the economy and develop the country in a socialist direction. From January 1976, Dr. Neto started carrying out his program by expropriating, without compensation, most of the Portuguese enterprises in the

country. There was a concerted drive to get the population to support this program. Angola's socialist path would appear to be set for the foreseeable future. The word comrade (*camarada*), which was unused before April 25, 1974 in Angola, had become a common unisex appellation for members of the society by 1976. Extracts from the poems below show the clear socialist trend.

Come With Us Comrades

Workers, peasants,
Men of calloused hands
United against the bourgeoisie
We shall win comrades!

We are combating for the future
Whatever form of oppression
And never shall we accept
Only crumbs of bread

Come with us Comrades
To greet the Revolution...

With our efforts and sweat
We shall produce riches
Which we want better
Divided on each table...¹⁶

Poem

...Go forward, go forward, brother, comrade
You've got in your hands the seed of the future
united vigilance free and pure
with the gun of happiness o comrade

Drive in the hoe
manure the land
sow the seed comrade
this is cheerful war
pressing

cheerful
pressing...

There is no mourning the dead
they are alive inside us
pure, free and awake
speaking in our voices

Forward, forward, you've got in hand comrade
a new gun, new zeal, new torment
your book is also a gun and a tool
the struggle continues comrade.¹⁷

Poem

Extract...

Think Higher and Higher
Let colourless ideas fall
MOTIVATION OF THE NEW MAN
Feel the people
Dignify the Fatherland with work
MOTIVATION OF THE NEW MAN
Coordinate and adjust all forces
in national development
MOTIVATION OF THE NEW MAN¹⁸

In the building of that socialist future which they envisaged, the role of Cuba was significant. Cuban forces helped to train--and fought side by side with--the forces of People's Republic of Angola. Cuban technicians were also involved in helping to train local technicians in the sugar cane industry, in the public health program, in the school system and in other spheres. Although the role of Cuba has raised a lot of controversy in international affairs, the attitude of the Angolan toward Cuba was different. Without Cuba's help in tackling the real problems of Angola, the country would have probably collapsed. The death of Cuban military leader Anibal Melo and of other Cuban soldiers have remained etched in the memory of many an Angolan. The leadership of Fidel Castro continues to inspire admiration. I reproduce below an extract from a poem by Alves Bernardo

Baptista (Nito Alves), a radical leftist in the MPLA who was later killed in the abortive coup he led against Dr. Neto in May, 1977.

Heroic Cuban Blood

...In Angola, unforgettable Cuban
 companions
 struggled honorably and selflessly
 In Cabinda
 in the highest moments of Kifangondo
 in the memorable battle of Queve
 the internationalism of a people remain well
 registered.

Like twins of the same revolution
 Cuban soldiers and soldiers of FAPLA
 shot from the same trenches
 militarily maneuvered in the same
 armored vehicles
 equally shared the sacrifice of battle
 toasted in the magnificence of their
 modesty
 the same overflowing cup of victories

The bright and heroic days of Playa Giron
 were republished in the Fatherland of
 Commander Henda
 to end the exploitation of World
 proletariat
 Cuban blood irrigated the battle fields in
 Angola...

in the fulfillment of a sacred duty
 they struggled for our independence
 they who have the just pride
 of having as Commander in Chief
 Commander Fidel
 living symbol of proletarian imperialism of
 our time!...¹⁹

Many Angolans who had any inclination for writing poetry have commented on the momentous events in the recent history of their country. These bards of the Angolan Revolution should be viewed essentially as one would view the griots of Senegal or the family raconteurs, singers and drummers common in Africa. In spite of the time of tension and difficulties in which the poems were written, when the future looked bleak, these poets dared to hope. Here we have another common characteristic of African poetry in general, shown by this body of Angolan works. That these writers wrote in Portuguese did not matter much. The richness of the Angolan material may well have been due to the high drama and emotions aroused by the events surrounding independence. Observers and writers about African affairs ought to pay more attention to this type of material, and thus, gain more insight into their subject matter.

¹ Fola Soremekun, *Angola: The Road to Independence*. Ife-Ife Nigeria, University of Ife Press 1983, 252 pp.

² Bonaventura Cardoso (now Undersecretary for Culture in Angola), edited a series of poems in *Diario de Luanda* starting from September 1975 under the title of "Resistencia: Pagina de Artes e Letras" and also "Participacao: Cultura e Convivio". The latter in particular inspired many unknown writers. These poems were usually published without comment. But the uneasiness of the editor concerning their value as literary works was not masked. Note for instance his comment in the edition of December 12, 1975. The basic aim of the paper was to help galvanise the people and inspire them to write and hence feel they were participating in the momentous events taking place in their country.

O Angolense was a weekly paper edited by the late M.M. Brito Junior. It ceased to be published in 1977 after the abortive coup of May that year. It could in fact be said that *Angolense* began the acceptance of these varieties of poems before *Diario de Luanda* did.

Mario Antonio de Oliveira Fernandes, "A Poesia Imprensa Nos Jornais de Angola no 1 Ano da Independencia" *Estudos Afro-Asiaticos* No. 3, pp. 90-100.

³ Lisboa: *Expresso* April 26, 1974.

⁴ Soremekun, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

⁵ Jorge Huet de Bacelar, "To Joao Pedro Benje" *O Angolense* Octo. 11, 1974.

⁶ FNLA National Front for the Liberation of Angola
UNITA National Union for Total Independence of Angola

⁷ Joao Carneiro, "To be Coherent" *O Angolense* October 4, 1974.

⁸ Madume "Time of Massacre: *Diario de Luanda* "Participacao" May 12, 1976. The poem was dated 1975 although it was published later. Madume was the name of the

view of the Arab world which views it as lacking respect for
 chief of the Kwanhama who was in lone resistance against the Portuguese in late
 19th Century in Southern Angola.

9 *O Angolense*, July 11, 1975.

10 *Resistencia Popular Generalizada*, Luanda: Ministerio da Informacao, 1975,
 preface.

11 Renzo Jorgo, "Welcome Gentlemen" *O Angolense*, October 15, 1975.

12 *Diario de Luanda*, Nov. 6, 1975.

13 Cafuxi, "Hail the Day November 11" *O Angolense*, Nov. 21, 1975.

14 Jose A. Neto "The Sun Will Shine" *O Angolense* Nov. 24, 1975.

15 G. Kazela, "Reflection" *Diario de Luanda*, July 14, 1976.

16 Kidi Muene, "Come with us Comrade" Written Dec. 1974; published *Diario de
 Luanda*, May 19, 1976.

17 Anon. Poem *A Voz do Trabalhador* No. 7, 19-26 Feb. 1976.

18 Sogie Thomas, Poem, Written Dec. 11, 1975, published in *Diario de Luanda*,
 Jan. 10, 1976.

19 Nito Alves, "Heroic Cuban Blood" *Diario de Luanda*, March 13, 1976.

Being concerned about stability, he covers the Islamic
 revival in North Africa. There are some problems with
 Parker's definition of stability and with his account of Islam.
 Parker's conception of stability in North Africa is very much
 colored by American interests in the region. When he
 illustrates the possibility of military coup in Morocco, he is
 also quick in relating it as a just reoccurrence because
 military help is never a sign of stability. However, he
 acknowledges the possibility that the United States may get
 along with a conservative group of military officers if they
 have over in a coup. (page 161)

As for Parker's account of Islamic revivalism, he gives a
 general overview of the reasons for Islamic revival but does
 not dwell on the religious ideas pronounced in each of the
 three decades of some action and counter action by the
 Muslim groups and the governments in the three states of
 North Africa. His main point of the chapter, I take it, is that
 Islam and modernization are incompatible. Parker's concerns
 were modernization and westernization. Islamization
 may have tried to display the original positions that North
 African Muslim ideologists have on socio-economic issues that