

Engaging colonial sound archives: a comprehensive and shared listening approach to an Angolan folk song

Cristina Sá Valentim

This article draws on anthropology, ethnomusicology, history, sound studies, and postcolonial theory to engage with a Cokwe song recorded in the 1950's in north-eastern Angola. *Muambuâmbua* song addresses desertion from colonial contract or forced labor, a practice often depicted in historiography as a straightforward act of anticolonial resistance. However, by analyzing this song through a methodology that I term “comprehensive and shared listening”, I uncover meanings of flight from forced labor that move beyond this narrow framework. The study combines archival research with multi-sited, collaborative ethnographic fieldwork in Portugal and Angola (2014-2016). The song is examined in dialogue with diverse archival sources and narratives shared by interlocutors. This approach reveals how sensitive experiences shaped by unequal power relations cannot be fully understood through sound recordings or visual and written documents alone. By engaging with sound through alternative modes of listening – the archive itself and to people who inhabit its histories – this article exposes hidden layers of meaning about colonial domination, African resistance, and agency, and contributes to the decolonial reactivation of colonial sound archives.

KEYWORDS: *Cokwe* music – Angola, colonial sound archives, power, forced/contract labor, research methodology.

Investigando arquivos sonoros coloniais: a escuta compreensiva e partilhada de uma canção popular angolana ♦ Este artigo recorre à antropologia, etnomusicologia, história, estudos do som e teoria pós-colonial para analisar uma canção *cokwe* gravada na década de 1950 no nordeste de Angola. A canção *Muambuâmbua* aborda a deserção do trabalho contratado/forçado colonial, uma prática frequentemente entendida pela historiografia como um ato inequívoco de resistência anticolonial. No entanto, ao analisar esta canção através de uma metodologia que designo “escuta compreensiva e partilhada”, a fuga revela significados que ultrapassam este enquadramento restrito. O estudo articula investigação arquivística com trabalho de campo etnográfico colaborativo e multissituado em Portugal e Angola (2014-2016). A canção é analisada em diálogo com diversas fontes de arquivo e narrativas partilhadas por interlocutores. Esta abordagem mostra como experiências sensíveis, moldadas por relações de poder desiguais não podem ser plenamente compreendidas somente quer através de gravações sonoras, quer de documentos visuais ou escritos. Ao envolver-se com o som por meio de modos alternativos de escuta – tanto do próprio arquivo como das pessoas que habitam as suas histórias –, o artigo expõe camadas ocultas de significado sobre processos de dominação colonial e de resistência e agencialidade africanas, contribuindo para a reativação descolonial dos arquivos sonoros coloniais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: música *cokwe* – Angola, arquivos sonoros coloniais, poder, trabalho forçado/contratado, metodologias de investigação.

VALENTIM, Cristina Sá (cristina.valentim@ics.ulisboa.pt) – Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7955-1993>. CRedit: conceptualization, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I extend my gratitude to all the interlocutors for their willingness to collaborate on this study. I also wish to thank the University of Coimbra and the University of Minho for granting access to the archives, as well as the Diamang Digital project for its invaluable support. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues for their thoughtful comments on this paper during the Annual Workshop “From Asia to the Americas” of our research group “Empires, Colonialism and Postcolonial Societies” at ICS-ULisboa, held on December 5-6, 2024, at the Convento da Arrábida, Portugal. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Inês Ponte (ICS-ULisboa) and to the reviewers for the time and effort dedicated to evaluating my manuscript, and to Sharon Ultsch for her generous support with the English revision and for her valuable comments on this paper. This study was supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) of Portugal: SFRH/BD/85530/2012 and 2021.01457.CEECIND/CP1696/CT0010 – Project *Archives of Lived Songs: History, Memories and Legacies of Angolan Colonial Folk Music, 1950-2020*.

INTRODUCTION

Colonial archives produced and reproduced hierarchies between people, cultures, societies, knowledge, territories, and bodies. However, as part of what Valentin Mudimbe refers to as the “colonial library” (1988: 175) – a collection of knowledge that serves to reinforce colonial power structures – these archives are not solely limited to documenting practices of domination. They are important sources for analyzing the anxieties and vulnerabilities of colonial agents, instances of counter-hegemonic expressions, collaboration between oppressors and subalterns, and both subtle and overt strategies of anti-colonial resistance (Stoler 2009; Douglas 2014). Furthermore, the integration of ethnographic fieldwork and oral history with archival research enables us to engage colonial knowledge in alternative ways, uncovering meanings that remain hidden or absent from the archive (Roque and Wagner 2012; Valentim 2022). When archives include sound recordings, they offer access to the voices and soundscapes that reveal the subjectivities of a bygone era.

Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scientific expeditions to sub-Saharan Africa have documented what was then referred to as “native folklore” (Naithani 2010). This term encompassed African songs, dances, languages,

and tales. In Portuguese African territories, these missions intensified after World War II. Driven by the European ideology of a “civilizing mission”, these expeditions served as tools of colonial occupation and legitimization (Castelo 2012; Jerónimo 2015). Currently, these archival recordings and related materials (including text, film, and photographs) remain largely unknown to both academia and the public, as well as to the African people and rural populations from whom these collections were appropriated. Most of these materials are held by museums, universities and other institutions in former colonial metropolises, as well as in other places throughout Europe, the United States, South Africa and Ghana (Agawu 2003). Moreover, academic research continues to privilege visual and written sources over sound. Even in display practices and museum curatorship, these sound materials often serve merely as embellishments rather than being treated as historical documents with distinct meanings of their own.

This article proposes a method for conducting ethnography on colonial archives that opens new possibilities for understanding these sound collections. Drawing on the musicological collections from the Dundo Museum of the Diamonds Company of Angola – Diamang –,¹ I argue that colonial sound recordings are vital historical sources that require critical analysis. Recent scholarship in sound studies, ethnomusicology, and postcolonial theory shows that sound archival sources can reveal narratives often absent from written texts or visual media (see Yamomo and Titus 2021; Hilden 2022; Hoffmann 2023). Because sound encompasses acoustic, personal, praxeological, ontological, cultural, epistemological, and political dimensions (Stoever 2016; LaBelle 2018), these archives contain meanings that can both challenge or complement dominant memories of European colonial rule in Africa. They reveal the complex colonial dynamics in which these sound recordings were produced, including narratives of African agency and resistance (Valentim 2022). Therefore, I align with Nancy Rose Hunt’s assertion that the “aural traces” within sound archives enable the recovery of an “acoustic mode of reading” offering insights lost amid the overwhelming visual documentation of violent pasts (Hunt 2008: 242). Moreover, in this article I propose to foreground sound as a privileged source of knowledge, engaging it in dialogue with other modes of listening. My aim is to demonstrate that sound can provide deeper insights than photography and written text, while also functioning in conjunction with

1 The Diamang’s sound collections and related archive are currently held by the University of Coimbra (UC), Portugal. These materials were digitized by the Diamang Digital Project between 2008 and 2012, and some are accessible via the Diamang Digital portal. I used these digitized songs for my research. Available at: < <https://arquivo.pt/wayback/20240608225714/https://www.diamangdigital.net/> > (last consulted October 2025).

these sources and oral testimonies gathered during ethnographic and collaborative fieldwork.

I would like to introduce you to the Cokwe song *Muambuâmbua*. Diamang collected this song in the Lóvua region in 1954 and recorded it on magnetic tape and shellac disc as Collection QUI-185 (figure 1).² I invite you to listen to the song on the CREM-CNRS-MH digital platform.³

This song is usually performed during Ciyanda dances, which are traditional round dances performed at festivals and rituals in villages, as well as during labor activities or journeys. In this recording, Faila leads a choir of female voices, accompanied by men playing various types of *ngoma* (drums).⁴ Similarly to other songs collected by the mission, these recordings were performed by “indígenas” (indigenous people), referring to black Africans under the Estatuto do Indigenato.⁵ Based on the lyrics and summary collected during the campaign and later partially published in the musicological study – made accessible by the *Memórias de África e do Oriente* portal⁶ – we are told that a



Figure 1 – Image of an example of a 78-rpm shellac disc. Source: © University of Coimbra (UC), Diamang Collection, Cultural Services, Sound Archive. This is a digitized image made by the author.

2 Collection QUI-185: magnetic tape no. 1; track no. 2 of disc no. 633. “QUI” means “Quioco”. (Source: UC, Diamang Collection, Cultural Services, Sound Archive). It is the Portuguese term used to refer to the Cokwe people. According to the current spelling of the Cokwe language (Ucokwe), one of Angola’s national languages, I use the term “Cokwe”, which is also known as “Chokwe” in English.

3 Available at: < https://web.archive.org/web/20250324201502/https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_E_1964_011_001_032/ > (last consulted October 2025). Source: *Centre de Recherche en Ethnomusicologie, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Musée de l’Homme*, Paris (CREM-CNRS-MH).

4 Sources: University of Coimbra (UC), Diamang Collection, Cultural Services, 5th Report on the Mission of Folk Music Collection – MRFM 5R (1954: 174).

5 This statute stripped Black Africans of fundamental citizenship rights and subjected them to forced or contract labor. The statute, created in 1926 and legally abolished in 1961, continued to enforce discriminatory practices until Angola’s independence in 1975.

6 Available at: < <https://web.archive.org/web/20250129134609/http://memoria-africa.ua.pt/Library/ShowImage.aspx?q=diamang/diamang-vFMA-1&p=108> > (last consulted October 2025). Source: *Memórias de África e do Oriente* (University of Aveiro). Printed source: Janmart *et al.* (1961: 103). This is the volume I of two bilingual musicological studies (Portuguese and English) developed by the musicologist and Professor Hermínio do Nascimento at the request of Diamang. These books and related recordings only refer to songs collected in the Lóvua and Camissombo regions. They were [continues]

man named Muambuâmbua escaped from coercive recruitment into the *cipale*, the Cokwe name for forced or contract labor in the mines. During my research, I began to consider how this song might celebrate the bravery and courage of a man who resisted the oppressive colonial regime. Historiography, however, has generally portrayed desertion as an unequivocal form of African anticolonial resistance (see Cohen 1980; Varanda 2006; Cleveland 2008; Santos 2016). But by analyzing this song through what I call a “comprehensive and shared listening” methodology, I uncover meanings of flight from forced labor that go beyond the conventional framework of African resistance to colonial oppression. My collaborative fieldwork with Cokwe Angolans revealed that escaping forced labor was not only a form of resistance but also carried wider social and cultural significance.⁷

In line with previous research on African songs in rural contexts under Portuguese colonial rule – for instance, the work of Leroy Vail and Landeg White on Mozambique (Vail and White 1978a, 1978b, 1980, 1983), Rui Cidra on Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe (Cidra 2011, 2015), and Jeremy Ball on Angola (Ball 2015) – the methodology I term “comprehensive and shared listening” combines archival research with oral history to interrogate the relationship between African musical practices and systems of forced colonial labor. However, my methodological approach expands on this previous work. In collaboration with source communities and the African diaspora, it seeks to shed new light on the colonial past by reexamining African songs recorded during colonial rule and preserved in the archive. In doing so, I challenge the colonial archive itself, using it as a basis to reinterpret archival data in dialogue with the oral testimonies I collected during ethnographic fieldwork. By treating these recorded songs as historical sources, alongside other archival materials, this method aims to reconnect people with the archive and with colonial past, fostering new interpretations of both the archive and the history. Importantly, as part of participatory provenance research within community-centred frameworks, this decolonial reactivation of sound collections fosters knowledge co-creation with source and diaspora communities (see Lobley 2010; Beurden, Gondola and Lacaille 2023; Hoffmann 2023). This approach also seeks to

donated to prestigious cultural institutions across Portugal, Angola, Europe, South Africa, Latin America, and North America. These institutions include the Musée de l’Homme, which received Volume I (Janmart *et al.* 1961) in 1964 and Volume II (Janmart *et al.* 1967) in 1968. The CREM-CNRS-Musée de l’Homme has digitized these field records, including the *Muambuâmbua* song, and made them available here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250803205149/https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/corpus/CNRSMH_MuseuDoDundo/> (consulted October 2025). For a critical and detailed analysis of these publications, see Valentim (2012). For insights into their production, transnational circulation, and reception, refer to Valentim (2022: 192-200).

7 I have analyzed this song in detail elsewhere – see Valentim (2018, 2022: 417-432) – primarily to underscore the intricate dimensions of colonial domination and resistance through the concept of “concurrences” developed by Gunlög Fur (2017).

rethink research and display practices critically, focusing on how this heritage is historically tied to knowledge-power dynamics, racism and violence (see Basu 2021).

In this article I analyze the *Muambuâmbua* song in collaboration with Cokwe-speaking Angolan interlocutors and integrate various historical sources – including digitized audio recordings, lyric transcriptions, texts, and photographs – with oral testimonies gathered through ethnographic and collaborative fieldwork in both Portugal and Angola between 2014 and 2016. The participants in this study came from a variety of backgrounds and were chosen because of their direct or indirect links to Diamang. These included interlocutors from Angolan source communities, as well as Angolan diaspora members pursuing postgraduate studies in Portugal. Ethnographic fieldwork encompassed informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and sound elicitation techniques using digitized copies of the song. To be more precise, sharing the song’s audio with these interlocutors prompted recollections of the colonial past, and was a vital strategy for accessing memories and post-memories of colonial forced labor. This methodology enabled me to engage with the Diamang archive, adding depth and, at times, raising questions about existing interpretations of the African meanings behind desertions from the *cipale*.

CONTEXT

The Diamond Company of Angola, Diamang, was established in 1917 in the former Lunda District of northeastern Angola and operated there until shortly after the country’s independence from Portugal in 1975.⁸ Among its most notable contributions to colonial science were the museum it founded in Dundo in 1936 and its Mission of Folk Music Collection. These initiatives exemplify the scientific occupation of Angola undertaken by the company (Porto 2009; Valentim 2022). The Dundo Museum’s appropriation of African expressive cultures served as a strategy to preserve an “authentic”, “pure”, and “traditional” African culture, which, in turn, enabled greater control over African peoples (Valentim 2022). By depicting the Europeans as “evolved” and “civilized” and the Africans as “primitive”, “uncivilized”, and “folkloric”,

8 The Portuguese state granted Diamang a concession over part of northeastern Angola, in the former Lunda District. This concession provided Diamang with several privileges, including a monopoly on commercial activities, recruitment of African labor, collection of the indigenous tax, and exclusive work for colonial officials. The company, which had mixed capital from Portugal, Belgium, France, and the USA, was managed by Portuguese executives and had its headquarters in Lisbon, with a delegation based in Dundo, Lunda. Following Angola’s independence, Diamang was succeeded by Endiama – Empresa Nacional de Diamantes de Angola, a state-owned company responsible for managing mining concessions in the North and South Lunda provinces through partnerships with various foreign companies.

Diamang perpetuated the ideology of the civilizing mission. This portrayal legitimized the exploitation of both people and natural resources, reinforcing Portuguese colonial dominance in Angola (*idem*).

The Dundo Museum's Mission of Folk Music Collection, led by Portuguese employee Manuel Pinho Silva, was carried out through a series of expeditions to rural areas of eastern and northeastern Angola during the 1950's and 1960's. The recordings captured songs usually performed by men and women during their labor activities, festivals, or rituals. These songs gave rise to a wide range of collections of shellac discs and magnetic tapes, along with photographs, musical instruments, field reports, and ethnomusicological studies. At the same time, Diamang engaged in extensive propaganda through the international circulation of these collections via exhibitions, recitals, conferences, newspapers, radio and television programs, publications, and scientific collaborations. Diamang used this strategy to promote its supposed positive impact in Lunda and to legitimize Portuguese colonial rule amid rising demands for African independence (Valentim 2022).

One aspect that illustrates the scientific occupation of Angola led by the Dundo Museum is what can be described as a "colonial ear", mirroring the colonial gaze that shaped the visual representation of African colonized peoples. As ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu points out, there is a prevalent notion about black African music that presumes the existence of a distinct African rhythm and views percussion as the defining feature of "authentic" African music (Agawu 2003). While percussion is indeed prominent in sub-Saharan African music, this perspective is rooted in a stereotypical and racialized Western imagination that generalizes specific characteristics to an entire continent, thereby homogenizing its rich diversity (*idem*). Reflecting this acoustic imagery, the Mission of Folk Music Collection prioritized the selection of songs and dances based on the prominence of drumming. Consequently, the lyrics and ethnographic context were only documented after the initial sound recordings were made.

In my research, I took a different approach to song selection than the Mission. Perhaps because I am not a musicologist, I started with the song's lyrics and stories depicting colonial experiences instead of music. Then, as explained earlier, through shared listening sessions with Angolan Cokwe interlocutors, I explored these songs' deeper meanings. My analysis reveals that certain songs, originally recorded and classified as "pure" and timeless – supposedly untouched by Western modernity –, actually functioned as social commentaries on the changing colonial reality. Furthermore, listening to the songs uncovered interpretations that were missing from the Mission's translations of African languages. The song *Muambuâmbua*, as I will discuss in the following sections, is a remarkable example of how attentive listening can reveal meanings that a straightforward written translation fails to capture.

COERCIVE RECRUITMENT FOR MINING FORCED LABOR

Muambuâmbua escaped the forced recruitment for contract labor in the mines, which took place in his village. During this coercive recruitment process, men were chosen by the Sobas (traditional African chiefs), who were compelled to follow orders from the chiefs of the Posto Administrativo (colonial administrative headquarters), who, in turn, were acting on requests from Diamang. Figure 2 shows company trucks driven by European employees transporting these men to the *cipale*. The African workers are shown mixed in with other goods being delivered to Dundo. Diamang encouraged *contratados* – forced laborers in Portuguese colonial terminology – to be accompanied by their wives and children, who were likewise compelled to work in the agricultural fields.

The mines in Lunda were alluvial, requiring laborers to manually dig deep shafts to remove waste rock. Throughout my fieldwork, numerous accounts surfaced detailing the grueling conditions in the mines, with some men not surviving the harsh labor. The local population's awareness of the violence and brutality associated with mining often motivated men to flee recruitment or adopt other strategies to avoid the *cipale*. For instance, according to the testimony of Father Américo,⁹ a Portuguese Spiritan priest who had lived in Lunda Norte since 1965, many men were excluded from *cipale* recruitment for various reasons, including the following:

“I know that in Dundo, many people fled. But when I arrived in Dundo [in 1965], there were many disabled people. Many disabled people – missing legs, arms, and so on. And I was told... it wasn't that they were born disabled, but that they had become disabled. [...] Then they said, ‘Their parents did this to prevent them from being sent to the mines’.”

Given *cipale*'s impact on family dynamics – transforming parents into oppressors to shield their children from colonial exploitation –, I had no doubt that escaping it was an act of resistance. Indeed, a key aspect of the scholarship on labor under colonial rule concerns the interpretation of desertions from contracted or forced labor as explicit acts of protest and anticolonial resistance, often compared to collective uprisings against colonial regimes (Cohen 1980). In the Lunda region, desertions by contracted workers were frequent and posed a serious challenge to workforce management by both the Diamang and the colonial state (Varanda 2006; Cleveland 2008). These acts were therefore understood as forms of resistance and met with severe repression by the

9 Father Américo was born in 1935, Portugal. He moved to the Lunda District in 1964 as a Spiritan priest, initially stationed at the Catholic Mission in Saurimo to learn the Cokwe language. In 1965, he transferred to the Dundo chaplaincy and later to Lucapa in North Lunda. Interview: August 1st 2016, Coimbra, Portugal.



Figure 2 – Transporting men to the contract work in mines, year 1948.

Source: © Nogueira da Silva Museum/University of Minho, 2025: Diamang Photographic Archive, Indigenous Assistance Folder 15-C, Photograph no. 8138, RTA, 1948. Photographer unknown.

company (Cleveland 2008; Santos 2016). Similarly, “fugitives” from recruitment for contracted labor at the Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel in Benguela were sent to cocoa plantations in São Tomé and Príncipe as punishment (Ball 2015). Flight from forced labor is also documented in the work songs of African laborers in other colonial contexts, such as the plantations in Angola (Ball 2006) and in Mozambique (Vail and White 1978a, 1978b, 1983; Isaacman 1992).

However, when I listened to the recorded song with my Cokwe interlocutors, I realized this song was not a tribute to the courage of the fugitive Muambuâmbua. In other words, local interpretations of this song suggest that the escape was not an unambiguous strategy of African anti-colonial resistance. After hearing the song, musician and journalist José Domingos Mutambi¹⁰ interpreted the lyrics as follows:

“They’re talking about someone who must go for contract work [...] But who ran away. It goes like this: [...] So the others are going to work and

10 Mutambi’s grandfather was a driver at the Diamang, and his father worked in the company’s Post Offices, clothing warehouses, and Buying and Selling Stations (PCV) from 1946 to 1978. He was born in the commune of Caximo, Lunda Norte, in 1964. In 2014, he was a journalist at the Catoca Mining Company and a musician and vocalist in the traditional Cokwe music band he led, *Os Moyowenos da Lunda Sul*, in the city of Saurimo, where he lived. Interview: August 7th 2014, Saurimo, Angola.

you're not? Are you running away from work? [...] Everything was under the control of the prevailing system at the time. So, people had to submit; if you didn't submit... in a way, you were rendered powerless, because there was no escape! How would you survive? You had to play by the boss's game, there was no other way."

I was struck by José's testimony, as I realized he was providing insights into the song that had been missed in the Mission's original translation of the lyrics. After revisiting the song with other Cokwe speakers, I came to understand that the complexity lies in the irony of the expression "*Iátuè ku mahieto txótxo*" (Janmart 1961: 103), which Cokwe interlocutors picked up on while listening. I therefore recommend listening to the song again,¹¹ while following the lyrics.¹² The irony lies in the tension between literal and contextual meaning. A literal translation of *Iátuè ku mahieto txótxo* reads: "That's just the way it is in our village." Yet, when understood within its oral and performative context, the phrase conveys the opposite: "That's not the way it is in our village!" In other words, the apparent affirmation is in fact a veiled critique, signaling that the community did not endorse Muambuâmbua's decision to flee. This brings into focus the importance of understanding what it means to play the boss's rules, as José described it, especially in the context of escape. To fully grasp this, we must first consider the significance and consequences of an unexpected escape.

THE DRAWBACKS OF UNEXPECTED ESCAPES FROM COERCIVE RECRUITMENT

According to the campaign's internal report, one consequence of an unexpected escape from coercive recruitment was the random substitution of the fugitive by another man: when Muambuâmbua fled, "another man had to go in his place".¹³ This sheds light on why this crucial detail was omitted from the musicological study that published the lyrics and story of the song. Highlighting such information would have exposed the severe impacts of Portuguese colonial occupation on the everyday lives of Africans. The need to

11 Available at: < https://web.archive.org/web/20250324201502/https://archives.crem-cnrs.fr/archives/items/CNRSMH_E_1964_011_001_032/ > (last consulted October 2025).

12 "Uó brother Muambuâmbua é/ Brother Muambuâmbua é/ On the recruitment day to the *cipale*/ He fled é/ Oh my brother Muambuâmbua é/ That's just the way it is in our village/ He fled é/ Oh my brother Muambuâmbua é [...]". The Ucockwe original lyrics and their Portuguese translation are available at: < <https://web.archive.org/web/20250129134609/http://memoria-africa.ua.pt/Library/ShowImage.aspx?q=/diamang/diamang-vFMA-1&p=108> > (last consulted October 2025).

13 Source: UC, Diamang Collection, Cultural Services, 5th Report on the Mission of Folk Music Collection – MRFM 5R (1954: 174).

replace Muambuâmbua had damaging consequences for the political, social, and economic stability of his village. According to several Angolans I spoke with, the prolonged absences of men recruited for the *cipale* – sometimes lasting up to two years – caused a ripple effect: the reduced male population led to a decline in birth rates, fragile marriages, disruption of the subsistence economy, women being overburdened with agricultural work, and a decrease in harvests and hunting.

Furthermore, as journalist Domingos Cutwnga¹⁴ notes, the fugitives' wives "[...] remained in the neighborhood without being able to express themselves to others. They had no status. [laughs]" His testimony highlights how flight impacted gender dynamics and social differentiation. When husbands fled, their wives became increasingly vulnerable, burdened not only with the responsibility of a fugitive but also subjected to persecution, punishment, and even imprisonment, along with the rest of the family and the Sobas. Consequently, "[...] the women preferred that their husbands go to contract work and return, so they could live in peace in the village [...]" Because of the impact of individual escapes on the whole village, several of my Angolan interlocutors recalled that, in such cases, a collective escape of the entire village was organized at night. This decision would be made in advance through consensus and unanimity. Researcher Catele Jeremias¹⁵ remembers his grandmother describing this act as one of solidarity and collective survival: "If you don't go, someone else will go in your place. If you don't go, your village will face reprisals. There's an implicit 'we' that will suffer. [...]" In villages where no one wanted to go for contract labor, the entire community would leave and move to another place. Everyone."

Desertion from contract labor carried heavy costs, with entire villages at times compelled to flee in solidarity. Such consequences underscore the broader social disruptions triggered by unexpected flight from recruitment. Yet, beyond these drawbacks, one must also ask: what potential benefits might have accompanied going to the *cipale* – benefits whose loss perhaps explains why Muambuâmbua's flight was not supported by his community? The next section addresses this question.

14 Cutwnga's father was a Cipaio (a black African colonial police officer), and his uncles worked as contract laborers in the Diamang mines during the 1950's and 1960's. He was born in Cacolo, South Lunda, in 1965. He is a journalist, and in 2014 he worked as a broadcaster at Rádio Nacional de Angola (RNA) in Saurimo, South Lunda. Interview: August 17th 2014, Saurimo, Angola.

15 Jeremias's grandfather served as a Soba during the 1950's and 1960's. He was born in Saurimo in 1984. He holds a master's degree in Linguistic Translation (Cokwe-Portuguese) and, since 2015, he is a PhD student in Linguistics at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. Interview: April 15th 2015, Lisboa, Portugal.

RETURNING TO THE VILLAGE AFTER THE *CIPALE*

Ethnographic data collected by Pinho Silva on another song, *Salukombo*,¹⁶ shows that local terminology differentiated between men based on their involvement in contract labor. Men who left the village to start contract work were called Phembe, meaning “goat” in Ucockwe. Those working in the mines were known as Mwkua-*cipale*, while men returning after completing their contract were called Salukombo. Pinho Silva explains that Salukombo means “mister” (Sa) “broom” (Lukombo) and comes from the rubber trade, referring to those who were very successful, as if they “swept everything”.¹⁷ The difference between Phembe and Salukombo is clear: a first-time contract worker is “inexperienced, like a boy starting military service, but upon return, he is seen as smart and knowledgeable”.¹⁸ According to professor and researcher Mateus Segunda Chicumba,¹⁹ the term Salukombo can also be interpreted as a paternal name: Sa (a prefix denoting the father) and Lukombo (the name of the son). This term implies “a father who has stopped having more children”, meaning men returning from the *cipale* have earned their community’s respect, gaining stability and social prestige like a father. This respect reflects their resilience and strength in overcoming forced labor hardships.

Salukombo represents a marker of social status. As my Cokwe interlocutors explained, the term refers to men who survived the *cipale* and returned with their wives (if they had accompanied them) and some material possessions (see Figure 3). This photograph depicts the return of a *contratado* (and presumably his wife) to the village in 1935. As musician and farmer Lucas Kasoma²⁰ recalled when discussing his father’s return from the *cipale*:

“[...] he brought everything: ‘So-and-so, here is a shirt; so-and-so, here is a cloth; so-and-so, here is a skirt, and so on [...] There were even others [...] [who stayed there to] sign a new contract. [...] So that, on the return day, [...] instead of bringing one suitcase, you bring two because you stayed there longer. It’s all about suffering. It’s real suffering.”

16 Source: UC, Diamang Collection, Cultural Services, Sound Archive – QUI-220 collection, disk n.º 651, track n.º 1. This song describes a festive gathering between two groups of contract workers traveling between their villages and the mines (MRFM 5R, 1954: 274-279).

17 Source: UC, Diamang Collection, Cultural Services, 5th Report on the Mission of Folk Music Collection – MRFM 5R (1954: 276-277).

18 *Idem*: MRFM 5R (1954: 277).

19 Chicumba’s uncle worked in the Diamang mines during the 1950’s and 1960’s. He was born in Luau, Moxico, in 1965. He is a university lecturer in Angola. In 2015, he was a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at the University of Lisbon, Portugal. Interview: April 14th 2015, Lisboa, Portugal.

20 Kasoma’s father worked as a contract laborer in the mines during the 1960’s. He was born in the municipality of Muconda, South Lunda, in 1967. By 2014, he was a farmer on the outskirts of Saurimo and a musician and composer with the traditional musical and dance group *Tchaco Tcha Lunda*. Interview: August 20th 2014, Saurimo, Angola.

Because of the harsh labor conditions and social challenges faced by the *contratados* and their families, their return to the village was celebrated with music and dance. The musician Xavito Mwana Kakolo²¹ recalls hearing the elders say: “[...] the person would bring some money and also some goods with them. [...] So it was a reason for a celebration that could last two or three days, [...] and neighboring villages were also invited because so-and-so from a certain neighborhood had returned from the *cipale*.” Reflecting on these celebrations and the songs recorded by the Mission, former *contratado* António Cilongeno²² mentions the expression *kana muhanganyisa* which, according to Catele Jeremias, means “They’re making you dance”.²³ This phrase underscores the healing, cathartic nature of these festive events, where the *contratados* were encouraged to celebrate the end of grueling contract labor. These testimonies show how returning workers were recognized for their courage, resilience, and ambition to bring back goods and money for their families and village, fulfilling the customary logic of reciprocity. Given the benefits for families and the village, Domingos Cutwnga’s observations become clearer: the status of “contract worker’s wife” contrasted sharply with that of “fugitive’s wife”, a distinction important for women who stayed in the village



Figure 3 – Indigenous worker, returning to his village after the end of his contract, year 1935. Source: © Nogueira da Silva Museum/University of Minho, 2024. Diamang Photographic Archive, Indigenous Assistance Folder 15-C, Photograph no. 4482, RTA, 1935. Photographer unknown.

21 Kakolo’s father and brother were contract workers in the mines during the 1960’s. He was born in the municipality of Cacolo, South Lunda, in 1978. He is a musician, vocalist, and leader of [continues] the music band *Minungu Kufunga Tchako*, Xavito Mwana Kakolo, based in Saurimo. Interview: August 30th 2014, Saurimo, Angola.

22 In the 1960’s, Cilongeno was a contract worker at the Fucaúma mine, where he stayed for two years. He was born in 1949 in a village near Muriége, in the municipality of Muconda, South Lunda. In 2014, he was a farmer on the outskirts of Muriége. Interview: August 15th 2014, Muriége Angola.

23 Interview: March 12th 2015, Lisboa, Portugal.

and those who accompanied their husbands. This testimony helps us understand the importance of facing *cipale* instead of fleeing from it, as revealed in the *Muambuâmbua* song.

These memories also illuminate the meaning of the name *Muambuâmbua*. According to the Cokwe-Portuguese dictionary and Cokwe grammar, the term *mbwa* (in Ucokwe) can be interpreted as “disdain, contempt, mockery”; it can also denote a “sound of shock or fall” (Barbosa 1989: 322) or signify “irony” (Barbosa 2012: 135). When used as *mbwà-mbwà-mbwà*, it emphasizes “repetition, hurried or noisy action” and can imply “nothing, empty hands” (Barbosa 1989: 323). Additionally, my interlocutor Mateus explains that “*Muambuâmbua* is someone who talks a lot but does nothing. When it’s time to act, he ends up running away [laughs]”.²⁴ In this song, the name *Muambuâmbua* seems to depict a cowardly individual who causes trouble and lacks social recognition – someone who lacked the courage to go to the *cipale* and whose actions created significant problems for the village. As the name *Muambuâmbua* suggests, the song that appeared to celebrate the courage of a fugitive man was, in fact, advising men not to flee to contract labor – not to normalize oppression, but as a strategy to mitigate the multidimensional negative impacts of such flight on local populations. Simultaneously, as also observed in the Mozambican colonial context, African resistance to colonial rule led to actions that, rather than fostering pre-colonial modes of living, ended up encouraging African participation within the capitalist social and labor structure (O’Laughlin 2002).

During a shared listening session in the village of Muriége, near Saurimo – where many *contratados* left for and returned from the mines more than six decades ago – farmers António Cilongeno and fellow former *contratado* António Luciano²⁵ reminisced about how they expressed their emotions upon returning to the village:

“Luciano: *Cipwe muze muthupwa cipale hica hwa himutwiza...* [On the way back, the image of the suffering endured during the *cipale*...]

Cilongeno: *Amuze mwemuze mwamba kanawa ngwo hinasamba... kwimba Kanawa...* [Remembering the suffering we endured there [in the mines]... we sang with our comrades...]”²⁶

24 Interview: April 15th 2015, Lisboa, Portugal.

25 During the 1960’s, Luciano was a contract worker at the Chitotolo mine, where he stayed for two years. He was born in 1940 in a village near Muriége, in the municipality of Muconda, South Lunda. As António Cilongeno, in 2014, he was a farmer on the outskirts of Muriége. Interview: August 15th 2014, Muriége, Angola.

26 In 2014, simultaneous translation into Portuguese was conducted in Muriége by Julião Mário Txinhama, the deputy administrator of the commune. This translation was subsequently reviewed by Catele Jeremias during fieldwork in Lisbon.

Singing during these travels likely reflects the subalterns' triumphs over the hardships of the *cipale* and reinforces their shared identities. This contrasts sharply with the public and institutional portrayal of Portuguese colonial rule as more benevolent and less violent compared to other European colonial systems. At the Lundas region, however, the *cipale* is remembered as a time of profound suffering, which many Africans endured and resisted through various complex strategies, while also giving rise to new ambitions and desires.

FINAL REMARKS

This article has demonstrated how the significance of “archived” sound arises from the integration of fieldwork and archival research. By combining oral testimonies with colonial archival sources – including the digitized *Muambuâmbua* song – we can gain a deeper understanding of the violence of Portuguese colonial rule and how Africans navigated and exerted power in nuanced ways within this oppressive system. The interpretations of this song reflect a complex set of sensitive negotiations with broad social implications, balancing the advantages and disadvantages of the colonial system. Moreover, this song serves as counsel from the voices of women to the community, conveying that individual acts of escape from colonial labor could lead to other forms of subjugation. Within African communities, the song acted as a collective consciousness-raising tool, memorializing the violence inflicted by colonialism and sharing strategies for coping with its local impacts. It underscores the necessity of addressing the multifaceted and intertwined nature of colonial violence. The concept of “playing the boss’s game”, as José Mutambi describes it, reflects a subversive appropriation of the Portuguese colonial system. Paradoxically, choosing to go to the *cipale* rather than fleeing can be seen both as a reinforcement of the capitalist labor system and as a form of resistance against it. These seemingly contradictory approaches highlight the need for methodological attentiveness to understand the complexities of colonial power dynamics, as emphasized by the notion of “concurrences” (see Fur 2017).

This song exemplifies the complex entanglements between colonial power, labor violence, and African music, agency, and resistance. This song reveals the performative dimensions of both domination and resistance, while recognizing power as opaque, invisible, and omnipresent. Domination is not always manifested through overt violence; rather, resistance can take diverse forms, encompassing a range of strategies employed by those who insurgently and subversively challenge dominant power structures. This form of counter-insurgency primarily enacts changes at the micro level of daily life, enabling the fight for greater respect, dignity, and justice. Thus, critical historical and anthropological research is crucial for dismantling simplistic dichotomies in the analysis of colonial processes. Such collaborative research should reveal

how subalternized black Africans were not passive victims in the colonization process. This article demonstrates that, despite being subjected to dehumanizing Portuguese colonial rule, these individuals were active agents with their own subjectivities, capable of self-expression and agency that extended beyond mere protest and victimization.

Sound archives are invaluable historical sources that enable us to listen to hidden meanings through a nuanced and collective engagement with their recordings. This article demonstrates that, in conjunction with diverse sources – such as digitized recordings, photographs, written texts, first-person memories and post-memories, and the interpretations offered by various interlocutors – sound recordings can recover important sensitive lived experiences and narratives. Through comprehensive and shared listening to this song, we have uncovered oral and sonic memories, as well as intentions and irony, that the transcribed and translated lyrics alone could not convey. Consequently, there is an urgent need to digitize these archives for preservation and accessibility by researchers, the public, and source communities. This approach represents an inclusive and decolonial methodological strategy, contributing to cognitive justice and historical reparation.

REFERENCES

- AGAWU, Kofi, 2003, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. London: Routledge.
- BALL, Jeremy, 2006, “‘I escaped in a coffin’: remembering Angolan forced labor from the 1940s”, *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* [online], 9/10, 61-75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cea.1214>.
- BALL, Jeremy, 2015, *Angola's Colossal Lie: Forced Labor on a Sugar Plantation, 1913-1977*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- BARBOSA, Adriano C., 1989, *Dicionário Cokwe-Português*. Coimbra: Instituto de Antropologia, Universidade de Coimbra.
- BARBOSA, Adriano C., 2012, *Noções Básicas de Gramática Cokwe*. Lwena: Edição da Diocese de Lwena.
- BASU, Paul, 2021, “Re-mobilising colonial collections in decolonial times: exploring the latent possibilities of N.W. Thomas's West African collections”, in Felix Driver, Mark Nesbitt and Caroline Cornish (eds.), *Mobile Museums: Collections in Circulation*. London: UCL Press, 44-70.
- BEURDEN, Sarah Van, Charles Didier GONDOLA, and Agnès LACAILLE (eds.), 2023, “(Re) Making collections: Origins, trajectories & reconnections / La fabrique des collections: origines, trajectoires & reconnections”, *Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 37 (1): 207-208. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhc/fhae034>.

- CASTELO, Cláudia, 2012, “Investigação científica e política colonial portuguesa: evolução e articulações, 1936-1974”, *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 19 (2): 391-408. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702012000200003>.
- CIDRA, Rui, 2011, *Música, Poder e Diáspora: Uma Etnografia e História entre Santiago, Cabo Verde, e Portugal*. Lisboa: Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, PhD thesis.
- CIDRA, Rui, 2015, “Politics of memory, ethics of survival: the songs and narratives of the Cape Verdean diaspora in São Tomé”, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 24 (3): 304-328. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2015.1070677>.
- CLEVELAND, Todd, 2008, *Rock Solid: African Laborers on the Diamond Mines of the Companhia de Diamantes de Angola (Diamang), 1917-1975*. Twin Cities, MN: University of Minnesota, ProQuest, LLC, PhD thesis.
- COHEN, Robin, 1980, “Resistance and hidden forms of consciousness among African workers”, *Review of African Political Economy*. Special Issue: Consciousness & Class, 19: 8-22. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3998119>> (last consulted October 2025).
- DOUGLAS, Bronwen, 2014, “Introduction: indigenous presence to the science of race”, in Bronwen Douglas, *Science, Voyages and Encounters in Oceania, 1511-1850*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 3-35.
- FUR, Gunlög, 2017, “Concurrences as a methodology for discerning concurrent histories”, in Diana Brydon, Peter Forsgren and Gunlög Fur (eds.), *Concurrent Imaginaries, Postcolonial Worlds: Toward Revised Histories*. Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 33-57.
- HILDEN, Irene, 2022, *Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive: Dealing with the Berlin Sound Archive's Acoustic Legacies*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- HOFFMANN, Anette, 2023, *Listening to Colonial History: Echoes of Coercive Knowledge Production in Historical Sound Recordings from Southern Africa*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien.
- HUNT, Nancy R., 2008, “An acoustic register, tenacious images, and Congolese scenes of rape and repetition”, *Cultural Anthropology*, 23: 220-253. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20484503>> (last consulted October 2025).
- ISAACMAN, Allen, 1992, “Coercion, paternalism and the labour process: the Mozambican Cotton Regime 1938-61”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18 (3): 487-526. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079208708325>.
- JANMART, et al., 1961, *Folclore Musical de Angola*. Volume I: *Povo Quioco (Área do Lóvua)*. Lisboa: Publicações Culturais da Companhia de Diamantes de Angola.
- JANMART, et al., 1967, *Folclore Musical de Angola*. Volume II, *Povo Quioco (Área do Camissombo)*. Lisboa: Publicações Culturais da Companhia de Diamantes de Angola.
- JERÓNIMO, Miguel Bandeira, 2015, *The “Civilising Mission” of Portuguese Colonialism, 1870-1930*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- LABELLE, Brandon, 2018, *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: University of London, Goldsmiths/MIT Press.
- LOBLEY, Noel, 2010, *The Social Biography of Ethnomusicological Field Recordings: Eliciting Responses to Hugh Tracey's ‘The Sound of Africa’ Series*. Oxford: University of Oxford, PhD thesis.
- MUDIMBE, Valentin Y., 1988, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- NAITHANI, Sadhana, 2010, *The Story-Time of the British Empire: Colonial and Postcolonial Folkloristics*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

- O'LAUGHLIN, Bridget, 2002, "Proletarianisation, agency and changing rural livelihoods: forced labour and resistance in colonial Mozambique", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 8 (3): 511-530. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/823429>> (last consulted October 2025).
- PORTO, Nuno, 2009, *Modos de Objectificação da Dominação Colonial: O Caso do Museu do Dundo, 1940-1970*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, FCT.
- ROQUE, Ricardo, and Kim A. WAGNER (eds.), 2012, *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- SANTOS, Maciel, 2016, "Capital e trabalho em Angola: as 'relações industriais' da Diamang durante a década de 1960", in Francisco Topa (ed.), *Manuel dos Santos Lima, Escritor Angolano Tricontinental*. Porto: CITCEM / Afrontamento, 45-79.
- STOEVER, Jennifer L., 2016, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press
- STOLER, Ann L., 2009, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- VAIL, Leroy, and Landeg WHITE, 1978a, "Plantation protest: the history of a Mozambican song", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5 (1): 1-25. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2636763>> (last consulted October 2025).
- VAIL, Leroy, and Landeg WHITE, 1978b, "'Tawani, Machombero!': forced cotton and rice growing on the Zambezi", *Journal of African History*, 19 (2): 239-263. Available at: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/181601>> (last consulted October 2025).
- VAIL, Leroy, and Landeg WHITE, 1980, *Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique: A Study of Quelimane District*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- VAIL, Leroy, and Landeg WHITE, 1983, "Forms of resistance: songs and perceptions of power in colonial Mozambique", *American Historical Review*, 88 (4): 883-919. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1874024>.
- VALENTIM, Cristina S., 2012, "A exclusividade e a exceção: uma análise da relação entre seres e saberes na Lunda colonial", *Cabo dos Trabalhos – Revista Eletrónica dos Programas de Doutoramento do Centro de Estudos Sociais*, III (8): 23-62. Available at: <https://cabodostrabalhos.ces.uc.pt/n8/documentos/Cristina_Valentim.pdf> (last consulted October 2025).
- VALENTIM, Cristina S., 2018, "Entangled voices, lived songs: Mwambwambwa, a cokwe song recorded in 1954 at colonial Lunda, Angola" in Ngambouk Vitalis Pemunta (ed.), *Concurrences in Postcolonial Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, and Engagements*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag Press, 221-264.
- VALENTIM, Cristina S., 2022, *Sons do Império, Vozes do Cipale. Canções Cokwe e Memórias do Trabalho Forçado nas Lundas, Angola*. Luanda: Fundação Dr. António Agostinho Neto (FAAN).
- VARANDA, Jorge, 2006, "A Bem da Nação": *Medical Science in a Diamond Company in Twentieth-Century Colonial Angola*. London: University College London, PhD thesis.
- YAMOMO, meLê, and Barbara TITUS, 2021, "The persistent refrain of the colonial archival logic / colonial entanglements and sonic transgressions: sounding out the Jaap Kunst collection", *The World of Music*, 10 (1): 39-70. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27032505>> (last consulted October 2025).

Receção da versão original / Original version

2024/09/20

Receção da versão revista / Revised version

2025/09/05

Aceitação / Accepted

2025/09/19