

# The Renaissance of Angolan Cinema<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article offers a critical review of recent Angolan films that together constitute a renaissance of cinema in Angola, thanks to the normalization that has been made possible during the post-war years. The films *The Hero* by Zézé Gamboa (2004) and *Hollow City* by Maria João Ganga (2004) are discussed within the context of the emergence of cinema in Angola, which is indissociable from the larger historical and political context since independence.

The history of Angolan cinema is closely intertwined with the political and historical scenario that involved the liberation war between 1961-75 and the civil war between 1975-2002. At the time of independence, the Portuguese left virtually no film infrastructure behind or trained technicians in their African territories. The fascist-colonialist authorities limited film output to monthly propaganda newsreels.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, according to Diawara (1992), the British and Belgians left production facilities in Ghana, Nigeria, and the Belgian Congo, and even trained African technicians. Thus, “national cinemas” in the case of Angola as well as Mozambique had to be built up as an integral part of the armed struggle and independence movements of the 1960s and 70s, involving initiatives by, and collaborative efforts with, foreign film directors and producers. While the reigning economic, material, and geopolitical conditions at the time of birth and subsequent development of

cinema in the former Portuguese colonies were much more precarious than in the rest of Africa, the experience of armed struggle that marked the origins of cinema in Angola and Mozambique differentiates it even more dramatically from the cinema produced in other African countries in their early years of independence. Hence, the lack of training in filmmaking and infrastructure, on the one hand, and the cohesion and unity of purpose within the MPLA in Angola and FRELIMO in Mozambique, on the other hand, inspired a wave of international solidarity such that filmmakers and activists from France, Sweden, Yugoslavia, Cuba, the US, and other countries aided in the production of numerous films (mostly documentaries). They committed their talent and resources to the liberation movements' emancipatory vision, aiding in an ideologically complex strategy: the use of film as a tool or even as a strategic weapon in order to document, educate, and disseminate information about the war, making it possible to educate the African public about their own historical condition and, at the same time, informing the international community about the anti-colonial wars in Africa.<sup>3</sup>

The most important fiction film to emerge during the liberation war period was *Sambizanga* (1972) by director Sarah Maldoror of Guadeloupe, based on the classic 1961 novel by Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira, *A vida verdadeira de Domingos Xavier* [*The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*].<sup>4</sup> Both the novel and film document the first years of the struggle for independence in Angola through the story of Domingos and his family, highlighting, among other things, the tenacity of Domingo's commitment to the nascent liberation fight. The film, however, expands on Luandino's novel by stressing the politicization of women within the liberation movement through the special attention given to Maria (Domingo's wife) and her unflinching devotion to husband and family and, by extension, to the collective struggle. *Sambizanga* was made under the auspices of the MPLA in exile and the government of Congo-Brazzaville (it was filmed entirely in the Congo), with French subsidies. Critics across the board consider it one of most outstanding films of the early era of black African cinema due to its political potency, wide humanistic appeal, and artistic strengths. It is also remarkable for a relatively early African film to privilege the representation of women's experience in the struggle for national liberation from the perspective of a female director. *Sambizanga* is seldom seen even though it is revered in the context of African film history and criticism, and even more particularly so in Angola. Unfortunately, in spite of its historical importance and aesthetic mer-

its, *Sambizanga* has not yet been released on video or DVD, even though New Yorker Films holds the rights for its distribution and exhibition in the Anglophone world.<sup>5</sup>

Once in power, the MPLA committed resources to film production at the service of a national cause oriented ideologically by a Marxist-nationalist ethic. Hence, dozens of documentaries for internal consumption were commissioned featuring the daily lives and colonial experiences of various types of workers in different regions throughout Angola or heroic accounts of the liberation struggles. Two film directors stand out during this period: visual artist António Ole and poet/anthropologist Ruy Duarte de Carvalho. While both directors initially made documentaries, they gradually moved beyond the mere depiction of events to a more stylized filmic production that evinces heightened aesthetic consciousness and poetic sensibility. While Ole focused on Angolan popular culture, Ruy Duarte de Carvalho problematized the relationship between history, culture, and the nation.<sup>6</sup> Sadly, due to the impending pressures of an escalating civil war, film production in Angola collapsed into a state of stagnation around 1982.

The year 2004, however, was marked by the renaissance of Angolan cinema with three films released: *O herói* [*The Hero*] by Zezé Gamboa, *A cidade vazia* [*Hollow City*] by Maria João Ganga, and *O comboio da Canhoca* [*The Canhoca Train*] by Orlando Fortunato.<sup>7</sup> All of them took between ten and fifteen years to be completed and they are a testament to the unflinching perseverance on the part of film directors working against overwhelming obstacles. Since the war ended in 2002, the Angolan Ministry of Culture and the reactivated Angolan Film and Multimedia Institute have modestly funded film production, small scale amateur and professional video and film festivals, as well as film exhibition throughout the country. Both *The Hero* and *Hollow City* focus on the topic of the civil war and its survivors struggling to refashion a tenuous existence in the frightening yet fascinating metropolis of Luanda. While *The Hero* takes place after the war, *Hollow City* situates its story during the conflict. In both cases, the utopian time of Marxist-nationalist independence is over and the people of Angola are confronted with the tragic legacy of war in a nation-state that nearly imploded. As the protagonist of *The Hero* says, “the war destroyed our country and the dreams of our entire generation.”

Angolan filmmaker Zezé Gamboa is based in Lisbon but most of his films focus on Angolan reality. He received his early training while working for Angolan national television in 1974, where he directed newscasts until 1980.

After studying film sound engineering in France, he made several documentaries in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> Documentary filming constituted his training ground before making his first feature film, *The Hero*, which according to Gamboa was inspired by a Reuters photograph of a wounded Angolan war veteran who was homeless. The film took ten years to be made, partly due to the war that raged until 2002 and partly due to the difficulty in securing funding for the picture. *The Hero* involved a multinational crew and cast featuring Senegalese actor Oumar Makena Diop as the title character (dubbed into Portuguese), the celebrated Brazilian actors Maria Ceíça and Neuza Borges (who, as Afro-Brazilians, are increasingly cast together with Zezé Motta in Lusophone African films, while they struggle to switch from their Brazilian accents to the Angolan or Cape Verdean ways of speaking Portuguese), in addition to numerous Angolan actors, including Milton Coelho, who plays the boy Manu. *The Hero* won the Sundance Film Festival Prize for World Cinema and had the honor of opening the 34<sup>th</sup> New Directors/New Films series in New York in 2005.

*The Hero* opens and closes with superb aerial shots of the city of Luanda featuring an urban geography that is saturated with shantytowns (or *musseques*) while dotted with small pockets of middle- and upper-class wealth. The early sequential shots provide the viewer with a spatial sense of the dramatic socio-economic chasm that pervades throughout the film where the various social classes intersect. *The Hero* is a multi-layered film that portrays the myriad social spheres affected by the catastrophic effects of war through its three primary characters, whose lives crisscross to a greater or lesser degree amid the cruel and violent, but also exuberant and even hospitable, urban chaos of Luanda. These characters are: Vitório, the homeless war veteran whose prosthetic leg is stolen; Maria Barbara, the bar girl who has lost her twelve-year-old son to the war; and Manu, the mischievous orphaned schoolboy who lives with his grandmother. Vitório and Maria Barbara could be long lost spouses and Manu their son, but they are not. Yet they must all forge bonds of solidarity and create new forms of sociability and ethical responsibility in order to rebuild their lives after surviving the seemingly endless cycle of war in Angola. *The Hero* can be characterized as a contemporary Angolan parable, punctuated by deep-seated tragedy, cruel irony, social criticism, along with moments of humor, tenderness, and hope. The pivotal action in the narrative that unleashes the dramatic sequence of events in this film is the tragic irony of a gang of shantytown boys stealing Vitório's prosthetic leg and war

medal to be sold on the black market. In his review of *The Hero*, Rodrigo Brandão interestingly describes the junkyard where Vitório's prosthetic leg and war medal end up as a "site for trade and negotiation" that is emblematic of Gamboa's articulation of the project of postwar Angolan society, where "rebuilding the whole (...) involves uncovering, reassessing and reincorporating used (i.e. historical) parts" ("Bringing It All Home"). While such articulation entails the possibility of reconciling a fractured (or amputated) society, as occurs idealistically in *The Hero*, the junkyard can (and must) also be read as emblematic of an economy—driven by the predatory greed of the Angolan elites and foreign allies—that permeates to a degree the social interactions among the majority poor (as witnessed by the actions of the young shantytown bullies) and that also, above all, forces them to trade in "scraps" and "residues" in the black market in order to creatively survive.

While the main plot of this movie as well as the subplots are all fictional, they could easily have been extracted from the same real-life experience as the Reuters photo that inspired Zezé Gamboa to make this movie in the first place. In fact, in one of *The Hero's* most poignant sequences, the reality of postwar Angola invades the actual filming, as Gamboa points out in interviews. The crew of *The Hero* stumbled upon an outdoor film session of the Angolan TV public service program called *Ponto de Reencontro* [*Reconnection Point*], where hundreds of men, women, and children stand in line waiting for their turn to make a plea on air in search of relatives who have disappeared during the war, in some cases, for many years. Gamboa asked the producers of this program whether one of his actors (Maria Ceíça—the Maria Barbara character) could also stand in line and make her plea in search of her twelve-year-old son, to be subsequently incorporated into the *The Hero* screenplay. This request was readily granted, adding a significant amount of texture to the film, where fiction intersects with reality.

The experience of civil war is a central point of reference in order to understand postcolonial Angola and Mozambique and this reality is vividly reflected in the films made by Zezé Gamboa, Maria João Ganga, and Brazilian-Mozambican director Licínio Azevedo.<sup>9</sup> In the Angolan case, the war contributed to a siege mentality that led to obstacles in the development of a truly democratic political culture in spite of the multiparty system in place since the early 1990s. Furthermore, the effects of a war that was largely fueled, especially during its final years, by the wealth produced through oil and diamond exports fostered a culture of corruption, where lack of govern-

ment accountability and transparency was and continues to be an Angolan trademark.<sup>10</sup> In spite of the multibillion-dollar oil boom experienced by Angola in the mid- to late 2000s, there are still huge socio-economic gaps,<sup>11</sup> an outrageously high cost of living, dismal basic services for the majority of the population (particularly for shantytown or *musseque* dwellers), reflected in the lack of an adequate water supply and sanitation, wretched living conditions, and a vastly deficient health system, which in addition to government incompetence and inefficiency have facilitated the massive spread of preventable diseases.<sup>12</sup> Gamboa's *The Hero* aims to expose the lack of responsibility on the part of the Angolan government in addressing urgent social issues. There is an important narrative sequence that functions as a meta-commentary regarding the film's main problematic: the plight of war veterans. Manu's schoolteacher, a sensitive upper-class *mestiça* who stumbles upon Vitório in the hospital, is moved by his situation, while seeming to be fascinated by him. She convinces her upper-class *mestiço* boyfriend, who has just arrived from graduate school in the US and is guaranteed a job at the Ministry of Interior, to help Vitório. She conjures up a plan featuring Vitório on a radio program where he shares his tragic story with the audience. During the same program, the Minister of Interior is interviewed, and he makes a plea for solidarity as well as "Angolan hospitality" towards war victims. At the end, he promises Vitório a job. Subsequently, the minister is literally mobbed by journalists and war victims. The former bombard him with questions regarding concrete measures to help war victims, while the latter with their presence bring to bear the drama of the situation. The minister answers evasively with generalities and platitudes, revealing his political opportunism, but also the government's deficiencies in coping with the aftermath of war in its staggering human and infrastructural dimensions.

Maria João Ganga's *Hollow City* has been acclaimed by critics and has circulated worldwide at various film festivals, garnering prizes at the festivals of Paris, Milan, and Créteil (France). While *Hollow City* is her feature film debut, Ganga has directed and written for theater over a number of years. She has also worked as assistant director on several documentaries, including Abderrahmane Sissako's *Rostov-Luanda* (1998). She wrote the screenplay for *Hollow City* in the early 1990s inspired by the victimization of children as a result of armed conflict. However, due to Angola's civil war and consequent lack of funding for cinema, it took her almost fifteen years to make the film. Most of the actors in this film hail from the Angolan theater scene, while the

children actors were chosen through local casting efforts. In essence, *Hollow City* offers a devastating portrayal of the effects of war on the lives of children that is at the same time tender and unsentimental. Maria João Ganga situates the story in 1991, the year in which the MPLA and UNITA signed a peace agreement that allowed for the first multi-party elections to take place in Angola in 1992 and offered a brief respite from the civil war.<sup>13</sup> It was a moment of hope in the history of the twenty-seven-year-old armed conflict. That hope was shattered by UNITA's refusal to accept defeat in what international observers at the time declared fair elections. It would take ten years more and the death of Jonas Savimbi for the war to truly end.

The protagonist of *Hollow City* is Ndala (played by the amazingly expressive Roldan Pinto João), a twelve-year-old orphan from the central Angolan province of Bié who has arrived in Luanda as a war refugee with a group of orphans under the supervision of a Portuguese nun. Ndala surreptitiously runs away from his group as the orphans and soldiers are leaving the aircraft shortly after landing. Suddenly, he finds himself wandering aimlessly through the menacing streets of downtown Luanda, pulling a little tin car that he has built. Early on, there are poignant scenes with Ndala exploring the city amid roaring traffic and imposing high-rises. At times, the camera provides a point-of-view shot of the city, conveying Ndala's sense of awe and fascination. In one visually arresting scene, there is a close-up image of Ndala while the overpowering traffic lights appear out of focus in the background, then suddenly, in a seamless transition towards the following scene, there is a clearly focused high-angle long shot of Ndala standing alone and vulnerable in the middle of the street with cars approaching and honking at him. Afterwards, along the way he encounters three different individuals who will provide support as well as guidance: Zé (the talented Domingos Fernandes), a fourteen-year-old school boy who plays the character of Ngunga in a school drama based on Pepetela's classic children's novel, *As aventuras de Ngunga* (1977) [*The Adventures of Ngunga*], written in 1972, which functions as a key symbolic intertext throughout the film; an old fisherman, who lives on the *Ilha de Luanda* (by the ocean, across the bay from downtown) and who may become a much-needed father figure; and Joka (played convincingly by Raúl Rosário), a lively, bragging trickster in his twenties or thirties, whose flashiness seduces little Ndala to the point of choosing him as a role model. The buddy, the father, and the older brother figures offer Ndala life-lessons as well as options that may lead the intelligent yet impressionable and immature

young boy to his survival or demise. Meanwhile, the Portuguese nun spends most of the time searching frantically for Ndala all over Luanda. In fact, the climate of uncertainty regarding Ndala's fate provides the dramatic kernel of this film. In spite of its tragic premise, *Hollow City* also displays an exuberant city, bursting with life, where the dilapidated and grim quotidian reality of Luanda is tempered by a certain *joie-de-vivre*, human warmth, pulsating rhythms, in addition to the playfully melodious Portuguese spoken in Angola. In fact, it can be argued that as the setting for both films, *Hollow City* and *The Hero*, Luanda plays a significant role, given its status as a microcosm of the Angolan nation that grew exponentially in large part due to the war, which created a mass exodus from rural areas into the capital city and stretched Luanda's infrastructure to capacity as well as exacerbating socio-economic hardship for many.<sup>14</sup> In *Hollow City*, Luanda at times displays a militarized environment due to a strictly enforced curfew during the time period in which the film is set, lending added tension as well as meaning to its title given the desolate nocturnal urban landscape and the myriad dangers haunting its lonely and vulnerable young protagonist. Meanwhile, *The Hero* portrays a climate of uncertainty in postwar Luanda during the months immediately following the war's end, where thousands of people desperately search for loved ones who disappeared during the war. Nonetheless, *The Hero* ends with a hopeful note that is reflected in the closing scene featuring a stunning view of downtown Luanda from the *Avenida Marginal* along the bay, while playing Paulo Flores's anthem-like song *Poema do Semba*, which is a tribute to Angola's national music as well as to the people of Angola.

As mentioned earlier, the classic Angolan novel *As aventuras de Ngunga* plays a key symbolic role in Maria João Ganga's *Hollow City*. In essence, it constitutes a fable that has served an exemplary function for children in the formation of post-independence Angola under the tutelage of the Marxist-nationalist project of the triumphant MPLA. It tells the story of a thirteen-year-old orphan boy who has lost his family to the war (in this case, the liberation war against Portuguese colonialism) and ends up living in the villages controlled by the MPLA in the Angolan hinterland. Forced by the circumstances of war, he becomes a young soldier engaging in combat alongside adult soldiers as they fight against the colonialist forces. At one point, Ngunga is held captive by the Portuguese (since he is a boy soldier he is used as a servant instead of being held in prison) but he is able to outmaneuver his captors and kill a Portuguese secret police chief (or PIDE), therefore becom-

ing a hero. Ngunga is an intelligent, curious, independent, and courageous boy, representing an archetypal figure—a heroic model to be imitated in order to build the new Angolan nation. While Ndala shares Ngunga's primary traits, he represents an archetypal young refugee victim who may or may not endure the battle to survive a war that destroyed the utopia for which Ngunga and his contemporaries so valiantly fought. The scene in which Ndala wanders the streets of Luanda while the Angolan national anthem plays in the background brilliantly projects an acute sense of irony with regard to his life. The national anthem, which is in reality the MPLA anthem, is a tribute to those who “fell” during the struggle for independence, while celebrating Angolan history and the collective aim of creating “the New Man” through dedicated work.<sup>15</sup> The tragic irony expressed through this scene in view of Ndala's (and Angola's) life circumstances as well as the insurmountable gap between the ideals expressed in the Marxist-nationalist anthem (now historically anachronistic), and the heartrending reality that befell Ndala and the Angolan nation as a whole cannot be more startling.

The final moments of *Hollow City* entail a sequence of cross-cutting scenes of the dramatized version of Ngunga's story and the final scenes of Ndala's odyssey. Not only does Maria João Ganga masterfully succeed in creating a highly suspenseful climate leading to the film's *dénouement*, but she also establishes a partial analogy between both interrelated stories whose outcomes are radically different. Both stories represent the socio-historical as well as human dimensions that are constitutive of Angola's postcolonial predicament: the utopia of a unified, egalitarian, and independent African nation-state and the dystopia of civil war caused by a staggering complex of internal and external factors that led to the near-implosion of the national project of Angola.

The Angolan films *The Hero* and *Hollow City* focus on the extensive “collateral damage” caused by war where lives are destroyed, families are torn apart, the ties to the ancestral lands are severed, and where infrastructural damage together with climatic misfortune lead to ecological disaster and massive human suffering. Even though the films featured here are based on the specificities of the Angolan experience of civil war, they also speak to a universal human victimization caused by the ravages of armed conflict. The psychic, social, and material aftereffects of war last a very long time, with profound consequences for those victimized. In the case of Ndala, the orphan boy featured in *Hollow City*, his chances of survival and of being afforded a dignified existence remain uncertain at best.

The renaissance of Angolan cinema with films that have been acclaimed internationally is an auspicious sign of the normalization of life in postwar Angola, with welcome effects in the realm of cultural production, more particularly for a medium as costly as cinema. The MPLA government is well aware of the symbolic capital behind cultural manifestations such as cinema, popular music, as well as soccer, as they have recently garnered prestige for Angola on the global arena. According to the director of the Angolan Film and Multimedia Institute (IACAM), Miguel Hurst, only time will tell whether Angolan cinema will continue to be an object of attention on the part of public and private institutions in order to continue developing into the future.<sup>16</sup> Here's for hope!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of an extensive chapter focusing on Lusophone African cinema from my forthcoming book, *After Independence: Globalization, Postcolonialism, and the Cultures of Lusophone Africa*.

<sup>2</sup> In an interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma* published in 1977, Ruy Duarte de Carvalho mentions the advent of television during the final years of Portuguese colonialism in Angola with two broadcasters (public and private) in their early development stages. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information regarding the development of cinema during the colonial period in former Portuguese Africa. See Manthia Diawara for limited information on this time period (1992).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the history of the first years of film production in post-independence Lusophone Africa, see José Mena Abrantes, Manthia Diawara, Frank Ukadike, Claire Andrade-Watkins, José Matos da Cruz and José Mena Abrantes.

<sup>4</sup> The screenplay of *Sambizanga* was written by Angolan intellectual and nationalist leader Mário Pinto de Andrade.

<sup>5</sup> While numerous critics refer to *Sambizanga*, the most nuanced and detailed analyzes have been written by Dembrow, Moorman, and Gugler.

<sup>6</sup> See António Ole's documentaries on popular culture, *Carnaval da vitória* [Victory Carnival] and *O ritmo do N'Gola Ritmos* [The Rhythm of N'Gola Ritmos], both released in 1978, in addition to Ruy Duarte de Carvalho's ethnographically inspired documentary series and fiction film, *Presente angolano, tempo mumuila* [Angola Present, Mumuila Time] and *Nelisita*, released in 1979/81 and 1982, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Among the three Angolan titles released in 2004, Orlando Fortunato's *O comboio da Canhoca* has not circulated as widely as the films by Zezé Gamboa and Maria João Ganga nor has it received much critical attention. *O comboio da Canhoca* is a historical film based on a real-life atrocity committed by Portuguese colonial forces in the 1950s involving a mysterious case of asphyxiation experienced by dozens of political prisoners arrested under suspicious circumstances, who are transported on a train from Malanje to Luanda. In 2006 it was released in DVD form in Angola.

<sup>8</sup> See Gamboa's documentaries: *Mopiopio de Angola* (1991), *Dissidência* (1998), *Burned by Blue* (1999), and *O desassossego de Pessoa* [Pessoa's Disquiet] (1999).

<sup>9</sup> See the films *A árvore dos antepassados* [*The Tree of Our Forefathers*] (1995), *A guerra da água* [*The Water War*] (1995), and *O acampamento da desminagem* [*The De-mining Camp*] (2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Tony Hodges's *Angola: Anatomy of an Oil State* for one of the most incisive analyses of contemporary Angolan society.

<sup>11</sup> In 2006, the Angolan government released statistics pointing to a total of 62% of the population living in poverty and, of those, 27% living in absolute poverty (as broadcasted by Radio France International's Portuguese Language Service to Africa and Europe).

<sup>12</sup> In 2006, one of the worst cholera epidemics to hit Africa in a decade broke out in Angola, with Luanda's infamous shantytowns as the epicenter. The massive health crisis has been widely reported in the Angolan and world media, but what has greatly astounded observers is the fact that an entirely preventable disease could spread so rapidly in a country awash in oil and diamond wealth. Even though government corruption—where high-ranking officials are believed to hold multimillion dollar Swiss bank accounts—is largely to blame for such a crisis, the civil war destroyed key infrastructure throughout the country and “eviscerated the government's corps of competent managers, leaving disarray,” according to Dauda Wurie, project officer for the UN Children's Fund (qtd. in LaFranière's *New York Times* article, “In Oil-Rich Angola Cholera Preys Upon Poorest”).

<sup>13</sup> The 1988 tripartite peace treaty signed between Angola, Cuba, and apartheid-era South Africa led to the complete withdrawal of Cuban and South African military forces from Angolan territory, opening the path towards a first ceasefire and peace agreement between UNITA and MPLA in 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Hodges points to statistical estimates provided by the Angolan INE (*Instituto Nacional de Estatística*) that calculate the total population of Luanda (and environs) at more than 3 million (about a quarter of the nation's population) during the late 1990s (22). INE data for 2001 cited by Hodges (35) estimate that 60% of the Angolan population is now concentrated in urban areas.

<sup>15</sup> The first stanza of the Angolan national anthem, written by Manuel Rui Monteiro, reads thus: “Ó Pátria, nunca mais esqueceremos / Os heróis do 4 de Fevereiro / Ó Pátria, nós saudamos os teus filhos / Tombados pela nossa independência. / Honramos o passado e a nossa História, / Construindo no Trabalho o Homem Novo” [Oh Fatherland, we shall never forget / The heroes of February Fourth / Oh Fatherland, we salute your children / Who fell for our independence. / We honor our past and our History, / Through Work in the pursuit of the New Man].

<sup>16</sup> Based on conversations with him in Luanda in May of 2006.

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