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Report on my trip to Angola

Title: Attend Luanda's annual dance competition, engage with local artists and create new networks.

I spent one week liaising with local dancers, poets and artists and attended Angola's 9th annual Kizomba & Semba competition, the final of which was on the 22nd April 2017. I had conversations pre and post competition with local dancers of different ages and experience.

I was invited to attend the competition by the organizer, Mukano Charles, who has been running this event for 9 years. I wanted to be present at this competition as I perceived a unique opportunity to observe local and regional talent in one place and improve and develop my dance practice on at least three levels: observe the influences on the style at a root level, compare my movement and discuss teaching methods and vocabulary with participants as well as other local dance schools. The competition final happened towards the end of my stay and it was a one of the highlights of this trip.

Purpose and Achievements

I feel this trip has helped me broaden my view on the dance style I practice; be more open about outside influences and trends. It also made me appreciate how African practitioners develop their own methods of communicating the movement, which, albeit with a different approach, have their own choreographic structure. I realised that I may have been arrogant in perhaps believing that my structure ought to be considered first and reflected on my own westernised style of thinking. The local teachers have developed a teaching structure, which, perhaps not akin to a trained dancer's vocabulary but nevertheless effective in communicating patterns, steps and movement choreography. I identified also that this system seemed to be used by most instructors, which led me to believe that, inadvertently or not, there was a teaching structure shared by most. Kizomba and Semba as dance styles have only developed a teaching structure in the last 10-15 years and although debates are intense on and offline as to the best way to instruct, some well known instructors based in Europe, including myself, have developed strong pedagogy that's proven results. It seems though, that perhaps more needs to be done to integrate Angolan values into the dance forms being instructed.

Suggestions for future awardees

My suggestion for any future applicant is to have plan B and plan C in place and look into the legalities of any filming, video or photos you may take.

In an era of instant digital image and social media, fewer and fewer people are concerned with video and image rights, accepting the development of society as a whole. However, in perhaps less digitally influenced societies such as African countries, it can be seen as an intrusion of privacy. There was a wide disparity between the younger and older generations on this issue, which I had to be considerate of and circumnavigate around. It's also important to point out that it may help having a local guide if you are filming outside for safety reasons and to talk with the locals. My other advice is to have the organiser of any large public event/festival you are attending to sign an agreement with all the conditions of your presence clearly stated prior to, or at the start of the trip. My personal experience was of shock and concern once the "well reputed" organiser decided he wanted a large sum of money for my presence, two or three days prior to my departure, even though we had agreed in writing on my presence as a guest. So, make sure you do not depend on one person only to send you travel invitation letters, always be prepared and don't count solely on one event to develop your research goals, which gladly I didn't. Allow enough time to arrange meetings and be prepared to change plans on the go! Also, have a warm and flexible attitude, as people will respond better.

Conversations and impressions

One of the most exciting encounters during my trip was meeting with **Binelde Hyrcan**, a local based artist who exhibits internationally. Mostly famous for his postcolonial reflections on identity via large expressive installations, sculpture works and video. His piece “Cambeck” is a short video exhibited at the Venezia Bienalle 2015. His atelier was located on the “Island”- a short strip of land known for where the Portuguese first ported in Luanda and steeped in cultural history. At this location, facing the sea and with a view of the whole of Luanda’s bay, we discussed the state of culture in Luanda, who promotes it and how does dance play a role through diplomacy and government objectives. Binelde works in partnership with **Francisco Valente** – a local events promoter and ex kuduro dancer. I found the discussion extremely rich. Francisco mentioned how Kuduro as a dance form was attacked and downgraded in the same manner that Semba in the 50’s and 60’s was politicized. Semba as a dance form was a lifestyle and brought a strong sense of identity and unity to local society in pre-independence years. The kuduro movement has provided a similar feeling to the post war youth. More than something separate from daily life, the message is that Semba or Kuduro are lifestyles, strongly integrated with fashion, identity and the notion of “angolanidade” (what defines an Angolan).



Another interesting conversation was with **Fabio Menezes** from Black Chic Dance School. Between eating a local meal of beans cooked in palm oil, fresh fish and cooked cassava, he discussed his teaching method and emphasized that students in Europe ought to learn the ‘root’ of the dance form first, which is Semba, before learning Kizomba or other influences, not the other way around, which is often how it's taught in Europe. When I asked him his thoughts on the Kizomba practised in the west he mentioned that he found it overtly sexualised and that he prefers to dance Semba in terms of skill and values. Fabio also added that he understood that things can be sexy but that the mindset of dance in Luanda was to have fun and be skilled “na passada” more than just learning to dance to find a partner.

Probably one of the most exciting conversations came from the young contestants for the Kizomba and Semba competition. They were all between 18 - 22 years old and were very vocal about their opinions on Kizomba and Semba. They were from different local dance schools and some were simply dance crews that got together regularly to develop their craft and have an extra way of income. I had the opportunity to ask them questions as a group and there were a lot of ideas discussed and points of view exchanged. They were very proud of their culture and of the need to improve cultural exchange at the source.

Visits and places of cultural interest

One of the first places I visited was the **Club Marítimo da Ilha**. A semi-abandoned place, hidden behind the “ilha” new tourist builds, it would be easily missed. I heard about this place from my mother and other relatives. The centre was opened on the 5th October 1945 and it's 72 years old. It was the place to be for the socialites of Luanda to go out to dance in the 1960's, so I wanted to find out some of its history. It proved quite difficult to visit, but with some complex phone numbers exchanged with a local contact, we found the person in charge to open it for us to visit. After walking through a dusty path and shantytown style of housing we found it. It was just after sunset and an old neon sign was lit blurring every 20 seconds or so. We went in and the space opened to a grand ballroom with two columns in the middle and a small centre stage. If only the walls could talk... they might mention the sailors, locals and socialites alike mixing in one place, showing off the moves of the time. The place was in need of some tender loving care. Unfortunately it was very difficult to have access to video and photo archives to look at the history of this place. The ballroom is currently used for smaller and local events and I was told there was a plan for renovation and digitalisation of its history, as it seems it played a key part in the political as well as the cultural history of the city. My parents danced in this club so I had to do it too!



We also visited the **Cha de Caxinde**. Founded in 1989 by Pepetela, one of Angola's most well known writers, Cha de Caxinde is a very active and well known cultural association in Luanda. With the tag line “United through culture” it offers dance workshops, concerts, carnival parade, poetry and book events. The association's flag was designed by Jose Luandino Vieira, another great Angolan writer and it represents a Chokwe tribe symbol. In a country heavily marked by the politics of control, this association was initially thought of as a place for independent minds, therefore potentially dangerous. It has fought long and hard to keep its place and it's now an active cultural centre and a very likely place for future exchange and international collaboration.



I also visited some dance schools in the musseque (shanty town) although I wasn't allowed to film or take pictures at the time. I watched local dancers rehearse and decided to immerse myself in the moment, amazed by the talent and dedication these dancers had to their craft. I attended another event called **Kizomba de Rua** (street Kizomba); a brilliant initiative by young local dancers who gather together to practice in the new, smooth floors of the new Marginal (the bay road facing the sea in Luanda). Through this event and the use of social media to promote it, UK and international dancers have been privy to the styles and movement by local dancers and dance schools. It's free and young and old take part in a social, meet new people and try new steps together in the open air by sunset at the bay. It's a very positive space in which to engage locally.

The workshops

The workshops as organized by the promoter of the week event and competition unfortunately were not up to standard. It appeared to me that the promoter didn't have a strong partnership with any local dance school and therefore wasn't able to develop content suitable for a strong cultural exchange. Other international attendees were at times left without any translation support, as most instructors didn't speak English and student level was not accessed. There were no planned workshops regarding the styles or technique used, how to incorporate choreography, musicality or historical background. There was also no discussion regarding teaching methods, something currently being discussed in various channels and platforms on and off line.

The competition

The competition final was without a doubt the highlight of the trip. It was held at a wonderful venue called "**Cine Atlantico**", a run down open- air cinema built in art deco style with amazing acoustics and a very wide stage. I was in love with the venue before anything took place. There was a very high sense of history and heritage all around the building and I felt almost a sense of travelling back in time and being part of what some of my parents social life might have been like.



It was an exciting event mainly supported by the various local dance schools' fans, friends and families who came to cheer their dancers. It had about 500 capacity and was quite full. The organisation was chaotic but somehow it all came together on the night. There were about 20 finalists, plus local dance groups performing traditional African dances as well as modern afro house which is an afro-urban dance very popular amongst the younger generation. Each couple had their own style and exuberance and it was an amazing sight to watch the younger generation re-invent the Semba movement with such flair, technique and creativity. The level was very high between all the contestants and it was simply the most creative performance that won.



The winner used an excellent narrative during his performance, worth mentioning. The story line: he was taking his female partner inside a suitcase, (he actually put her *inside* the suitcase) presumably going abroad, then, he switched it around through the performance where he started getting violent towards her, pretending to slap her while at the same time offering roses, until she couldn't take it any more and killed him (!) Dramatic for sure, but very effective, it had the audience standing in ovation at the end.

The movement was fluid and sharp and told the story without skipping a beat. The use of props was very good and didn't hinder their movement or the overall performance. A very inspiring showcase worth appearing on a TV programme such as So You Think You Can Dance. It's worth noting that all of these contestants were between 18-22 years of age and most rehearse in the most poor conditions, sometimes at night, with no light or any mirrors. I actually witnessed a rehearsal of one of the groups, where, for a good hour they didn't have any electricity, hence no music to practice with and they were rehearsing together, no specific

person was singing, yet they were in synch. It was as if they were all dancing to this inner rhythm they all could hear and share clearly but no one else could. For a dancer observing the complexity of the movement required, it was spellbinding.

I was told how, so many times some of these contestants practised during the night hours, with little sleep, only to get up the next morning to go to school, work little jobs after school and all with very basic nutrition. Their ability to adapt to their conditions and dedicate themselves to become better dancers and performers is worth praising.

Conclusions and reflexions

The information regarding Kizomba and Semba in Angola is disparate and not easily accessible. Dancers and choreographers rely on body memory, personal experience and youtube videos. There isn't a strong body, company or structure that documents these dances, their current re-surgence or their impact on local society. In some ways dance is still seen as soft entertainment unless more contemporary styles are used. The National contemporary dance company (CDC) led by **Ana Clara Guerra Marques** is the only company that officially represents Angola's dances in International congresses and festivals followed by **Ballet Kilandukilo** – a dance company that specializes in traditional Angolan dances. This leaves no space for the study or development of social dances which have impacted this society by and large and interspersed their lifestyles in Angola as well as in the Diaspora for at least two generations.

The International Kizomba and Salsa festival circuit has opened new opportunities to dancers skilled in Semba, Kizomba and Kuduro to travel internationally and consequently developed the sector tremendously. With this development, other challenges have arisen, specifically with historical and music content. Unfortunately, visa procedures and the monopoly at local level its curtailing the potential for growth in the sector.

The dance sector has little support by the state and events are mainly self-produced. Dancers are mostly recalled on special commemorative and national occasions. In this way the business of dance isn't looked upon as a career or as a true skill worthy of research, support or discussion. I found this aspect a complete mirror opposite to the diaspora communities living in the UK or in Portugal who consider the importance of practising Kizomba or Semba as a symbol to their identity as whole and something they engage with as a lifestyle, despite living abroad.

I feel that through my conversations with the local dancers, event promoters and cultural practitioners, I have developed real connections and new networks that I'm currently following up to plan new creative projects.

The trip has truly enhanced the authenticity of my work and has inspired me to take new chances and new perspectives on the work I'm trying to develop and it provided the necessary inspiration to the authenticity of my current practice. It also confirmed some of my assumptions, while causing me to question others. While observing the competition I didn't fail to spot how much influence from Europe was in fact in place. The same contestants that were defending their "original" style so strongly were performing with clear, strong stylistic choices imported from abroad. The Semba/ Kizomba style is defined by a fluidity of movement, the "passada", which consists of utilizing a couple of basic steps together in different directions and combinations, conveying a sense of sliding through the floor. While this was present, there were also plenty of "tricks" and "dips" and "stops" which created less of a flow during the dance. This "start and stop" is a characteristic mostly adopted by western dancers to showcase this dance form.

Currently the discussion of cultural appropriation is rife in social media due also to global political and economic changes and awareness. While I believe that there is a place where one needs to ensure that cultural influences must be identified and communicated through artistic work, it's important not to take this idea to an extreme, as it may prevent people from experiencing other cultures. Many ethnic minorities feel the use of their art without acknowledgement offensive, so it's important to give credit to what influences our artistic expression, and if inspired to change/fuse what we learn with other styles, to communicate

that clearly to our audience. I believe dance culture is strongly linked to ethics and consequently communities feel “used” and dis-respected by the lack of credit given in artistic work on a small or bigger scale.

Considering the above, there is a strong need to document, in writing or visual form the Kizomba and Semba dance history which, by its own nature, is quite ephemeral. There are other issues however: challenges will arise as to who determines a panel of cultural leaders based on knowledge and/or experience in a society mostly based on oral tradition? At the moment many competition panels are based on sponsorship and local patron and popular figures.

Despite all of these considerations, what became very clear to me in this trip, is that while any trend has its time such as Kizomba & Semba, or carries a more aggressive message like the Kuduro movement, there is a deeper need to ensure that the efforts of dancers, choreographers, cultural leaders and trendsetters are documented, if the idea of cultural identity in dance is to be procured to establish a foundation for reference and pride as a people, especially in the precarious life of a country still at war with itself.



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