



**AN ANCIENT ANGOLAN ZOMBIE: *JUCA, A MATUMBOLA*, BY  
ERNESTO MARECOS**

**UM CASO ANTIGO DO TEMA DO ZOMBIE EM ANGOLA: *JUCA, A  
MATUMBOLA*, DE ERNESTO MARECOS**

*Francisco Topa<sup>1</sup>*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the narrative poem *Juca, a matumbola*, published in 1865. The author of the text was Ernesto Marecos (1836-1879), a Portuguese writer of the Romantic period, who lived and worked in Angola at least between 1856 and 1857. The poem deals with the phenomenon of matumbolas, similar to that of zombies, widely diffused in Haitian folklore. The source for Marecos' poem was an account published in 1859 in the *Boletim oficial do Governo Geral da Provincia d'Angola*, written by someone who, like him, was an official of the Portuguese colonial government. Besides studying the poem and comparing it with its probable source, I will also refer to other occurrences of the theme in modern Angolan literature.

**KEYWORDS:** Zombie; Angola; Ernesto Marecos; Alfredo de Sarmiento.

**RESUMO**

Este artigo estuda o poema narrativo *Juca, a matumbola*, publicado em 1865. O texto é da autoria de Ernesto Marecos (1836-1879), um escritor português do período romântico que viveu e trabalhou em Angola pelo menos entre 1856 e 1857. O poema tem por base o fenómeno dos matumbolas, semelhante ao dos zumbis, amplamente difundido no folclore haitiano. A fonte do poema de Marecos foi um relato publicado em 1859 no *Boletim oficial do Governo Geral da Provincia d'Angola*, escrito por um funcionário do governo colonial português. Além de estudar o poema e compará-lo com a sua provável fonte, farei referência a outras ocorrências do tema na literatura moderna angolana.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Zumbi; Angola; Ernesto Marecos; Alfredo de Sarmiento.

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1 Universidade do Porto. E-mail: [franctopa@gmail.com](mailto:franctopa@gmail.com)



Over the last 50 years, an extensive literature has been published on the zombie, following the metamorphoses of the phenomenon as an element of mass culture, especially after George Romero's now classic film *Night of the Living Dead*, released in 1968. In different fields –from ethnography to cultural studies, passing through film or literary studies – and using various methods, these works have sought to describe the motif and its evolution.<sup>2</sup> Special attention has been paid to its transfer to North-American culture and the subsequent globalization of the phenomenon. In general, the zombie is associated in these essays with Haiti and its traditional religion, vodou, and it has also been claimed, though without concrete evidence, that the belief was brought by slaves from western Africa.

Although the zombie figure has been undergoing more or less profound changes, the definition formulated in 2005 by Karen McCarthy Brown is still valid. According to her, the zombie is “either the disembodied soul of a dead person whose powers are captured and used for magical purposes, or a soulless body that has been raised from the grave to do drone labor in the fields” (Brown, 2005, 9638).

In terms of this definition, it is possible to say that one of the earliest records of this folk motif can be found in Angola at the beginning of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: in the narrative poem *Juca, a matumbola*, published in 1865 by the Portuguese poet and colonial official Ernesto Marecos, who drew, as we shall see, upon a version by another author from six years earlier.

Notwithstanding a considerable and diverse output, Marecos has long been a neglected and forgotten author, being mentioned only in passing among the representatives of the second era of Portuguese Romanticism. As regards his biography, we know that Ernesto Frederico Pereira Marecos was born in Lisbon in 1836 and died in Mozambique in 1879. He attended, without completing it, the law course at the University of Coimbra, and he settled in Angola in 1856. He returned to Lisbon the following year to serve as a clerk at the Ministry of Finance. He later returned to work in the colonial administration: in June 1869, he was appointed director of the customs of Ibo, in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, and in 1875 he was transferred to the customs of Pangim (New Goa).

During his stay in Angola (Marecos, 2018, 14 ff.), the poet held some administrative and judicial positions, founded, with two companions, the first private newspaper of the then colony, and was part of a dramatic group, thus displaying what one might call a ‘civic spirit’. The passage through that territory would leave its mark in a small set of Angolan texts, namely poems and articles in the Lisbon press. The most important of these writings is the one that justifies this paper: *Juca, a matumbola: lenda africana*, considered to be the first narrative poem on an Angolan theme.

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2 A good example can be found in Moreman & Rushton, 2011.

The composition is divided into ten parts and uses different strophic, metric and rhymic schemes. After praising the natural splendours of Africa, the narrator places the story in the heartland of Lunda, in a place called Quimbaxi, featuring Juca, the protagonist, and giving an account of the harmony that characterizes her life with her father. In the third part, the theme of love is introduced by means of the representation of nature, though the narrator notes that

Juca, a formosa,  
Indiferente,  
Não vê, não sente  
O que é amor (v. 238-241, p. 57).<sup>3</sup>

The protagonist, in spite of this, arouses passions in all who see her, particularly in Giolo, “(...) o moço valente,/ O caçador de leões” (v. 292-3, p. 58),<sup>4</sup> who, trembling before her, ends up confessing his love for her. Faced with the young woman’s reply that she loves him only as a sister (v. 337, p. 60), the warrior conceives revenge:

Mais um ano, hora por hora,  
Serás de mim uma parte;  
Hei de a tudo disputar-te,  
E em meus braços te hei de ver!  
Um ano, – um século! Embora  
Te vá, no instante aprazado,  
A coroa do noivado  
No cemitério colher! (v. 390-397, p. 62)<sup>5</sup>

Desperate, Giolo appeals to the sorcerer, Quipumo, whose life he had saved three times. The potion which he prepares should provoke Juca’s apparent death within a year, after which he would have to go to the cemetery by night and recite certain prayers to bring his beloved back to life. From then on, she would obey Giolo in everything, though with the peculiarity of her body remaining always frozen.

After some hesitation, Giolo eventually gives Juca the fatal drink, planning to commit suicide afterwards. While the potion is working its effect on the girl, nature accompanies her decline:

Emurhecera o cercado,  
Em torno crescia o mato;  
A natureza despira,  
Com saudades do passado,  
O verde manto de festa,  
E de luto se vestira;

3 “Juca, the fair,/ Indifferent,/ Does not see, does not feel/ What is love.” (Here and elsewhere the translation is my own. All quotations are from Marecos, 2018.)

4 “(...) the brave young man,/ The lion hunter.”

5 “Another year, hour by hour,/ You will be part of me;/ I will dispute you against all,/ And I will see you in my arms!/ A year, – a century! Although/ I’ll go, at the appointed moment,/ The engagement crown/ In the graveyard to collect!”

Nem um som pela floresta,  
Ave, flor ou harmonia  
A doce antiga alegria  
Lembravam ao coração;  
Nem da tarde a viração  
A fina rede embalava,  
E como que soluçava  
Nas secas folhas do chão! (v. 680-693, p. 71-2)<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, her father also dies. After one year has elapsed, Giolo and Quipumo, by night, in the cemetery, resurrect Juca. She invokes her father and immediately lightning strikes, killing the sorcerer, and then Juca also dies. Giolo, for his part, repents of his behaviour, going to his death in a combat with a lion, which shows respect for him as an adversary. The poem ends with a reference to the legend of the reunion of the two lovers on certain nights in the cemetery. There is also a kind of moral:

A história contada de Juca, a formosa,  
Às outras formosas que seja lição.  
Mais val às carícias do vento uma rosa  
Rendida prender-se que ver desdenhosa,  
Que as folhas mais tarde lhe arranca o tufão! (v. 1100-4, p. 84)<sup>7</sup>

Once the argument is laid out, one can easily see that the usual ingredients of the zombie are present: there is a kind of death and resurrection; the process develops through the action of an ‘evil’ sorcerer and a drink prepared by him; the victim is at the mercy of another, becoming in a way his slave; the process embodies a kind of punishment and lesson for the victim.

Another interesting question concerns the source used by Ernesto Marecos: I suppose it would not have been local folklore, at least not directly, but rather a companion during his stay in Luanda, Alfredo de Sarmiento. This is the clerk whom Marecos had replaced in the general secretariat of the Angolan government in June 1856 and with whom he founded the newspaper *A Aurora*. In fact, Alfredo de Sarmiento provides a similar account of the legend in *Os sertões d’África*<sup>8</sup>, based on a journey begun on July 27, 1856.<sup>9</sup> The book, although published in 1880,

6 “The fence had withered,/ Around, the bush was growing;/ Nature had taken off,/ Nostalgic for the past,/ Its green festive cloak,/ And had clothed itself in mourning;/ Not a sound throughout the forest,/ Bird, flower or harmony/ Of the sweet joy of yore/ Reminded the heart;/ Not even the afternoon breeze/ The delicate hammock rocked,/ And it was as if it sobbed/ On the dry leaves of the ground!”

7 “The story told of Juca, the fair,/ Should be a lesson to other fair ones./ It is worth more to the caresses of the wind for a rose/ To be taken in surrender than to see, with disdain,/ That the typhoon will later tear off her leaves!”

8 *Os sertões d’África (Apontamentos de viagem)*. With a prologue by Manuel Pinheiro Chagas. Lisbon: Editor Proprietario – Francisco Arthur da Silva, 1880. The account in question can be found in chapter VI, “A embaixada. – Uma linda gentilica” [The embassy. – A gentile legend], pp. 42-6.

9 Sarmiento writes that he was taking part in the “expedição que no reino do Congo ia tomar posse das minas de malachite, situadas nas serras do Bembe” [expedition which was to take possession, in the kingdom of Congo, of the Malachite mines situated in the Bembe mountains] (p. 15). According to

fifteen years after the poem under analysis, brings together articles previously published in the *Diario da manhã*. In addition, an identical account had appeared in 1859, in the May 28 issue of the *Boletim official*,<sup>10</sup> with the same title later used by Marecos: *Juca, a Matumbolla. (Lenda africana)*.

The most important elements of Mareco's poem were already present in the 1859 narrative, which is more detailed (and also more neutral in so far as it avoids commenting on the beliefs at issue) than the version included in the 1880 volume. In the version published in the *Boletim*, in an indefinite space and time, and within a circle of travellers formed around a bonfire at the beginning of the night, the narrator yields the floor to a captain, whose name he does not reveal, presenting him as "as on of the country." This man tells his companions, who had been talking about "coisas extraordinárias – de ladrões e assassinatos, de bruxas e feiticarias" (p.144),<sup>11</sup> a story of *matumbolas*, whose definition is identical in both versions:

Matumbolas são pessoas a quem os feiticeiros tiram a vida, pelo poder diabólico dos seus feitiços, para satisfação de ódios próprios, ou alheios, quando lhes pagam, e que pelos mesmos meios ressuscitam, a fim de fazer delas o que bem lhes parece. Depois de ressuscitados andam, falam, sentem, como os verdadeiros vivos; somente conservam sempre o frio próprio do cadáver. (p. 144)<sup>12</sup>

The first-degree narrator describes the speech of the intradiegetic narrator as having a "tom que denotava a mais inteira e robusta fé" (p. 144).<sup>13</sup> Herein lies one of the most important differences between this version of 1859 and that of 1880: in the latter, the second degree narrator – who is identified precisely as Major André Pinheiro da Cunha, a native of São José de Encoge – is subjected to a prior disqualification by the extradiegetic narrator, who depicts him as "supersticioso como são todos os filhos do país" (p. 148).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the secondary narrative is now presented as "uma lenda gentílica" (p. 148),<sup>15</sup> while its narrator is referred to as "crédulo major" (p. 149),<sup>16</sup> instead of the more neutral "nosso bom capitão" (p. 144).<sup>17</sup> In the 1880 text, there is a further detail which precedes the narration of the story and which, perhaps unintentionally, contributes to further discredit the second degree narrator: "E o major, depois

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Frederico Antonio Ferreira (2015), the exploitation of these mines had been entrusted to the Western Africa Malachite Copper Mines Company Limited, which belonged to the former Portuguese-Brazilian slave trader Francisco António Flores.

10 No. 713, pp. 5-7.

11 "extraordinary things – of thieves and murders, of witches and witchcraft."

12 "Matumbolas are people whose life sorcerers take by the devilish power of their spells, to satisfy their own hatred or, when they are paid, that of others, and who, by the same means, resurrect them, so as to do with them what they wish. Once resurrected, they walk, speak, feel, like the real living; only they always preserve the characteristic chill of the corpse."

13 "tone that denoted the most complete and robust belief."

14 "a superstitious person, like all the natives of the country."

15 "a gentile legend."

16 "credulous major."

17 "our good captain."

de levar à boca o frasco com aguardente que segurava na mão direita, e beber um bom trago, começou a seguinte narrativa” (p. 149).<sup>18</sup> Finally, the later text adds at the end, in a humorous tone, that “o narrador desta lenda gentílica, ficou sendo conhecido pelo *major Matumbola*.” (p. 151)<sup>19</sup> This change in the narrator’s representation is certainly a sign of the distance created between the author and the space he speaks about, but it must also be related to the target audience, which is now a metropolitan one and not that of the colonial workers and the small local elite who would read the *Boletim*.

Along with these differences in the narrator’s evaluation of the history of matumbolas, the two accounts converge as to the characterization of his vision of the Africans, marked by a pattern that is already very European. In fact, although – as we have seen – the second degree narrator is not considered *one of our own*, his appraisal of the inhabitants of Quimbaxi is a European one in as much as he says of them that they “conservam quase todos os hábitos gentílicos do comum das raças africanas, não tendo tido ocasião de os modificar sensivelmente pelo trato aturado com os europeus.” (p. 144 e 149)<sup>20</sup>

The same attitude underlies the presentation of Juca’s father as a “nigger” (“*preto*”) and a “savage”. A similar European perspective can also be seen in the description of the beauty of the protagonist – as in this passage from the issue of the *Boletim*:

*Juca era um dos mais notáveis tipos de formosura africana, que se realça principalmente pela regularidade das formas. A cor negra retinta do seu rosto insinuante, a alvura de seus belos dentes, a viveza de seus rasgados olhos, que se fixavam penetrantes como se uma viva chama os iluminara, e sobretudo os admiráveis contornos do seu corpo airoso e flexível, apenas coberto com um amplo pano, a tornavam digna de inspirar o cinzel de um grande artista. (p. 144)*<sup>21</sup>

More explicit in terms of its European bias is his condemnation of the sensuality ascribed to African women in the following passage of the *Boletim*: “Por uma rara exceção nas mulheres da sua raça, *Juca* queria conservar-se pura.” (p. 145)<sup>22</sup>

In Ernesto Marecos’ poem, Juca’s story is not presented at a second level and its narrator, although in various ways revealing an affective and/or ideological positioning as regards what is

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18 “And the major, after putting to his lips the brandy flask which he held in his right hand, and taking a good swig, began the following narrative.”

19 “the narrator of this gentile legend became known as Major Matumbola.”

20 “conserve almost all the gentile customs of African races in general, not having had occasion to modify them significantly through continual contact with the Europeans.”

21 “*Juca* was one of the most remarkable types of African beauty, which is marked above all by the regularity of forms. The deep black colour of her insinuating face, the whiteness of her beautiful teeth, the liveliness of her slanting eyes, which stared penetratingly as if a living flame had illuminated them, and above all the admirable contours of her graceful and supple body, covered only by a wide pano, made her worthy of inspiring the chisel of a great artist.”

22 “As a rare exception among the women of her race, *Juca* wanted to keep herself pure.”

narrated, does not distance himself from the universe of beliefs that underlies the narrative. As for the narrative elements, the comparison of the poem with Sarmiento's versions shows that the spatial location is the same, as are the names, the family situation and the depiction of the protagonist. In these and other respects, however, we can detect some differences, which result from the expansion of the basic framework and from the introduction of new elements or the modification of some details. One of these cases concerns Juca's father: in Sarmiento's versions, he had become crippled due to old age, whereas in the poem he is blind; on the other hand, those versions do not indicate his name, whereas in Marecos's poem the character is referred to as Tope.

Likewise, the hunter who falls in love with Juca is also called Giolo in both versions by Sarmiento and he also appeals to a sorcerer – whose name is not explicit – to convert Juca into matumbola. In the 1859 publication, Giolo hesitates in deciding, being dominated by contradictory feelings which the narrator interprets in the light of a European morality:

Longo tempo vacilou em tomar esta suprema resolução. A compaixão lhe abafava por vezes o sentimento do crime, quando via *Juca* tão inocente, tão desprecatada do mal que a ameaçava. Então ele a venerava como à estrela da sua vida, como ao génio bom que lhe presidira ao nascimento e o guiava na senda do mundo. Mas logo tornava a reparar quanto ela era bela, e o aguilhão dos desejos brutais o incitava mais do que nunca. *Giolo* era um selvagem; na sociedade em que existia não tinha aprendido a moderar-se. (p. 145)<sup>23</sup>

This less Manichean representation of Giolo will later be drawn upon and developed by Marecos.

The rest of the intrigue is similar, including the scene of the graveyard and the lightning that strikes the sorcerer. There is a difference, however, as regards the fate of Giolo, who disappears after having been seen “a embrenhar-se nas mais fundas espessuras” (pp. 147 e 151).<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the narrator says nothing about the legend of the reunion of the two lovers on certain nights in the cemetery.

In view of this, I believe that Ernesto Marecos' point of departure has been demonstrated: instead of having directly collected the material in Angolan folklore, our author found it ready for use in a written source by someone whom he had contacted for some time. But this does not detract from the merit or meaning of the poem, which presents itself as an inaugural text, for various reasons: for being, as far as we know, the first narrative poem of an Angolan theme; for using traditional material from the local culture; for representing Angola and its inhabitants in

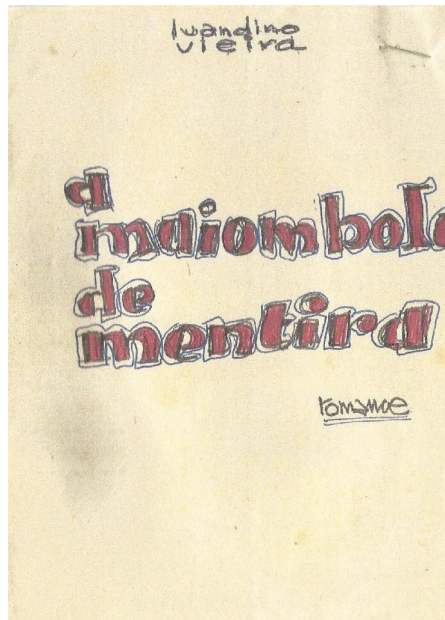
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23 “For a long time he hesitated in taking this supreme resolution. Compassion sometimes smothered in him the feeling of guilt for his crime, when he saw Juca so innocent, so unaware of the evil that threatened her. In those moments he worshiped her as the star of his life, as the good genius who had presided over his birth and led him on the world's path. But soon he again noticed how beautiful she was, and the sting of brutal desires stirred him more than ever. Giolo was a savage; in the society in which he lived he had not learned to moderate himself.”

24 “plunging into the most profound depths.”

a favourable way, despite yielding to a romantic vision and to exoticism. Moreover, and despite what has been said above, Marecos' version differs from that of Sarmiento in an essential question: the focus of the poem is not on the phenomenon of matumbolas but rather on love, represented as being inscribed in the order of nature and in the divine order, and as something that one cannot, ought not, resist. We should also note that the outcome is a different one: the couple's happy reunion in a post-mortem life. On the other hand, and regardless of the title, the protagonist is less Juca than Giolo.

In addition, this is one of the earliest examples of literary treatment of the zombie motif in a West African context, although this fact has not attracted interest from anthropologists and other specialists.<sup>25</sup> In spite of this, the theme continues to recur in modern Angolan literature, namely in two works by José Eduardo Agualusa.<sup>26</sup> But there is also Luandino Vieira, who recently told me he had had a project for a novel about this theme in the early 60s: the title was *A maiombola de mentira* [The fake zombie]:



But that would be the subject for another paper.

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25 With the exception of a passing reference in a book by Óscar Ribas (1967), I have found no work on the subject, and the inquiries I made to some anthropologists whose work concerns Angola and other African territories were unsuccessful.

26 See the chapter 'A longa insónia do padre' [The priest's long insomnia], from *A feira dos assombrados e outras histórias verdadeiras e inverosímeis* [The Fair of the Haunted and other true and improbable stories], or the following passage from *As mulheres do meu pai* [My Father's Wives]: "(...) o Faustino inventou toda uma história segundo a qual o meu contrabaixo, o Walker, estava assombrado pelo espírito do Sylvester Page e que quem quer que o tocasse se transformava numa espécie de matumbola, num corpo vazio, de que o espírito de Page se apropriava para voltar a tocar o instrumento." [(...) Faustino invented a whole story according to which my double bass, Walker, was haunted by the spirit of Sylvester Page and that whoever touched it became a kind of matumbola, an empty body, which Page's spirit appropriated in order to play the instrument again.] (Agualusa, 2007: 339).



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