



**BETWEEN FICTION AND REALITY: AN INVESTIGATION INTO  
THE ANTI-COLONIAL MESSAGE OF THE BANTU RELIGIOUS  
PRACTICES IN “QUICUMBI ASSANHADA” BY ARNALDO SANTOS**  
**ENTRE FICÇÃO E REALIDADE: UMA INVESTIGAÇÃO SOBRE A  
MENSAGEM ANTICOLONIAL DAS PRÁTICAS ESPIRITUAIS BANTU  
EM “QUICUMBI ASSANHADA” POR ARNALDO SANTOS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the present article is to investigate the linguistic strategies used by Arnaldo Santos to decolonise the Angolan literature through the spiritual discourse of Bantu derivation in the short story “Quicumbi Assanhada”, initially contained in the collection titled *Tempos do Munhungo* (1968) and then included in *Kinaxixe e Outras Prosas* (1982). In the above story, by combining real-life events with elements coming from his imagination as a writer, Arnaldo Santos is able to compose a literary piece that depicts the simple life of the oppressed people from Luanda, hence sustaining an anti-colonial literature that subverts the order imposed by the Portuguese regime, before the independence of the Angolan country.

**KEYWORDS:** Arnaldo Santos; Angolan Literature; Spiritualism; Kimbundu; Literary decolonisation.

**RESUMO**

O presente artigo pretende investigar as estratégias linguísticas usadas por Arnaldo Santos para descolonizar a literatura angolana através do discurso espiritual de matriz bantu, no conto “Quicumbi Assanhada”, inicialmente contido na coleção *Tempos do Munhungo* (1968) e depois incluído em *Kinaxixe e Outras Prosas* (1982). No dito conto, graças à fusão entre eventos da vida real e outros frutos da imaginação do autor, Arnaldo Santos consegue desenvolver uma literatura anticolonial que subverte a ordem imposta pelo regime português, antes da independência do país angolano.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Arnaldo Santos; Literatura angolana; Espiritualismo, Kimbundu, Decolonização literária.

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## **Introduction**

The aim of the present article is to investigate the linguistic strategies used by Arnaldo Santos to decolonise the Angolan literature through the spiritual discourse of Bantu derivation in the short story “Quicumbi Assanhada”, initially contained in the collection titled *Tempos do Munhungo* (1968) and then included in *Kinaxixe e Outras Prosas* (1982). In the above story, by combining real-life events with elements coming from his imagination as a writer, Arnaldo Santos is able to compose a literary piece that depicts the simple life of the oppressed people from Luanda, hence sustaining an anti-colonial literature that subverts the order imposed by the Portuguese regime, before the independence of the Angolan country.

With regards to the presence of the realist element in literature, Schøllhammer considers realism as a strange combination between representation and non-representation, for resuming the historical past in its different expressions, together with the ability of literature to interfere with the perception of reality, through affective and performative experiences that become real (2012, p. 129), tangible, I would add. In fact, if we read closely Santos’s literary piece, we can see how the historical references provided in the opening of his short story, matched with day-to-day experiences lived by the young protagonist in the Luandese market, the traditional beliefs of the Kimbundu-speaking ethnicity “materialise” in the imagination of the reader. The latter, in my opinion, can perceive the events described as plausible, thanks to the wide presence of Bantu culture-bound words related to the female puberty rite, filtered through the emotions and impressions of the protagonist who narrates the whole story, as I will discuss later in this article.

From a linguistic perspective, the use of a specific vocabulary turns this literary piece more expressive, hence conveying a vision of the real world that lies on the impressions of the writer. In this respect, Jakobson states that the use of polite formulae and stock sentences may be replaced by far more expressive common words, that he defines as “right” (1987, p. 21), for the ability to transmit secondary messages, due to the metaphorical or allegorical functions that these words gain in the text. Furthermore, because of the immateriality of the word and the concepts expressed, Castello acknowledges the fact that reality, as we perceive it, is always mixed with immaterial objects, hence the impossibility to make a clear-cut separation between what is real and what is unreal (2020).

In a constant alternation between reality and imagination, the several Bantu spiritual words and coined expressions deployed by Arnaldo Santos are meant to decolonise the Angolan short fiction, by discussing and rewriting the identity of the natives as opposed to the Portuguese colonisers. Through the development of a peculiar form of *crônica*, which includes elements coming from the Bantu oral tradition transcribed in Portuguese and combined with other narrative forms, such as the short story, but also the autobiography, considering the presence of the first-person narrator, the fictional, yet plausible, events portrayed in “Quicumbi Assanhada”

instil a sense of rebellion against the colonial ruler for the layers of interpretations deriving from the close reading of the above literary piece. This relatively recent form of literary expression allows a wide use of words coming from the local culture, with a predominance of Kimbundu terms, as the story is set in the Luanda slum, or *musseque*, where the above Bantu language is spoken. The characters involved in Santos's short stories speak a language that reflects their ethnic origins and social status in a colonised city. Here, the spiritual Bantu heritage is altered as a consequence of the cultural impact of colonialism and is evoked by Santos in order to sustain an anti-colonial message of freedom and nationhood.

In addition to the above, “Quicumbi Assanhada” shows how the geography of Luanda contributes to the characterisation of the people, as well as the depiction of the events, where the spiritual past is still tangible, despite the societal changes over the centuries. The history and the memories associated with specific parts of the city of Luanda define the identity of the people who live there. Their collection and reinterpretation is meant to decolonise the minds of the readers, who are induced into a constant process of self-interrogation, as a result of the dialogue with the narrator who, in turn, expresses his opinions or even takes part in the events described.

### A sacred geography with its sacred past

“Quicumbi Assanhada” is a short story narrated by a mixed-race boy who speaks in first person about an event that happened to him in the former Xamavo market of Luanda. Like the title suggests, the narration runs around a girl in the age of puberty – *quicumbi* (SANTOS, 1981, p. 95) –, who is the daughter of a street seller from that market. The apparent purity of the girl disguises her disillusion, considering how able she is to avoid a soldier who harasses her in the market, like a respectable adult woman would do in that case.

The story opens with the description of the place where the narration develops. The market described in this *crônica* saw, in the past, a tragedy that had affected the lives of many *quitandeiras* (street sellers, from the Kimbundu *quitanda*, ‘street market’; ‘sale’), as we can see in the extract below:

Antigamente este mercado tinha o nome de Xamavo. É provável que não fosse precisamente neste lugar e que não existisse esta cobertura de ferro e as bancadas de cimento. Lembro-me até que só um céu azul e luminoso cobria as velhas quitandeiras e que, à tardinha, os raios desmaiados dos poentes de *jinzumbi* tingiam os corações crédulos de sombrias apreensões. Lembro-me também que nessa hora as ameaças do temido Chefe do Posto se tornavam mais presentes e ocorriam sussurrantes em todos os ouvidos como um vento de maldição. “Uxa mavu kaxisa muenhu...” (SANTOS, 1981, p. 92)<sup>2</sup>

2 Translation: In the past, the name of this market was Xamavo. Maybe it was not exactly here, or it did not have an iron shelter and concrete benches. I remember that only a bright blue sky covered the old street sellers and that, in the afternoon, the faint rays of the sunsets of *jinzumbi* coloured the hearts believing in shady fears. I also remember that the threats of the feared District Officer became more present and whispered in every ear like

As Mâcedo reports in her study (2017), in 1948, a fatal accident occurred in a place once called Xamavo (or Xa-mavu), when a strong wind made the roof of the market collapse, hence causing the death of several sellers, as well as customers. This event inspired a series of popular versions involving the cursing action of the spirits, or *cazumbis*, as defined by the scholar (2017). In Santos's narration, the *vento de maldição* recalls Ribas's work *A praga* (1978), where the roof is said to have fallen *por causa dos jimbambi*, the latter defined by Chavagne (2005, p. 53) as a sortilege caused by a storm (wind, rain or a lightning) (from the Kimbundu, plural of *mbambi*).

Because of the interference of the supernatural in the above tragedy, documented in literature and journalism, it is noteworthy mentioning the concept of *rumours* as described by Ellis and Ter Haar (2004). According to these scholars, *rumours* are “an attempt at collective conversation by people who wish to enter their sentiments into a public discourse” (ELLIS; TER HAAR, 2004, p. 33). The need to explain facts through the intervention of invisible forces is something that characterises the oral form of communication and is widely documented in the work of the aforesaid scholars. With this regard, they evoke Senghor's statement: “orality is more than just languages” (ELLIS; TER HAAR, 2004, p. 29), to say that the transmission of information by word of mouth, among various ethnicities in Africa, also has a sacred connotation, due to the personal spiritual journeys emerging from the experiences narrated, matched with the ritualistic dimension of the act of storytelling (2004, p. 38-41). These characteristics are maintained in Angolan short fiction and are used in order to build a national fictional aesthetic, as Padilha widely discusses in her book *Entre voz e letra* (2011).

With regards to the above, also Arnaldo Santos's vision of the Xamavo tragedy contains elements coming from the oral tradition and its importance in the transmission of news, between visible, tangible facts, and the immaterial forces of the afterlife. According to Nascimento, the name Xa-Mavu comes from the Kimbundu expression *ixi ya mavu* meaning ‘red clay soil’ (2013, p. 149) because, in Rocha's version of the tragedy of the market, when men were brought to the police station under the order of Chefe Poeira (*temido Chefe do Posto* as in Santos's narration), the car of the chief would leave just red clay (1979, 79). Men would be killed or disappear, that is why the Kimbundu expression at the end of the paragraph wants to recreate the last words of the native men who were deported and killed by the *cipaios*: “Uxa mavu kaxisa muenhu...”, meaning “I leave the earth, but I do not leave life”, as an act of revolt against the colonial physical cruelty. Despite the physical death of the natives due to the oppressive Portuguese regime, the souls of the people are immortal, hence the spiritual dimension of the narration, not only given by the reference to the *jinzumbi*, but also to these Kimbundu words that seem to be said by these spirits. This way, Santos is able to reinforce the importance of the oral tradition and its spiritual dimension, as previously mentioned, filtered through the memories of the narrator who presents the story to the reader.

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a cursed wind. “Uxa mavu kaxisa muenhu...”

In Santos's extract, we can also see, in fact, the importance of the narrator's memory, who uses expressions like *é provável que não fosse precisamente* and *lembro-me*, which emphasise the mutation of historical events in the mind of the author-narrator, but also justify the different versions of the same story transmitted over the decades through popular tales, as well as literary narrations of some of the aforesaid Angolan intellectuals. Furthermore, the uncertainty of the narrator emerges in the following excerpt, where he tries to make the relevant connections between the above tragedy and the market as it appears in the time of the narration. The narrator, in fact, expresses his opinion by making a comparison between the people who used to be in the Xamavo market before the incident and those who were there at the time of the narration. The sufferance and sadness remained, despite these feelings can only be perceived by the narrator who lived there.

Julgo, no entanto, poder reconhecer nestas quitandeiras as populares velhas Vunji, as nganas Kimuezus e nganas Makutos, que durante anos ali venderam os seus produtos da terra. Apenas as sinto mais pobres, sem os seus xales coloridos. Também agora percebo melhor as makas latentes nesta discussão que não acaba e que ensurdece o mercado. Parece-me vê-las denunciadas por imagens com cicatrizes mais nítidas... (SANTOS, 1981, p. 92)<sup>3</sup>

As we can see, *julgo* and *parece-me* give the idea of the relativity of the anti-colonial discourse, which is not black and white, but has nuances that can be perceived only by someone who knows the history of his country. Besides establishing a rapport with the reader by using verbs describing opinions, Santos denounces the colonial discourse by highlighting the fact that the native Bantu-speaking ethnicities had been silenced by the Portuguese invader to the extent that the malaise of the people of the market is latent in the conversations among them. In this context, then, *maka* - from the Kimbundu *maka*, "word" (PORTO EDITORA) – takes on the meaning of quarrel, conflict, a never-ending antagonism between two parts, the sellers and the customers, as a reflection of the Portuguese against the oppressed native people. Because of the aforesaid silent conflict, but also noisy at the same time (*makas* are *latentes*, invisible; however, the *discussão ensurdece o mercado*), those who sell in the market still bear the scars of a sad past that reminds them of the racial and social distinctions between the coloniser and colonised. The author, in fact, could still see the faces of the people who had perished, even after the fatal accident in the Xamavo market. As stated by Macedo, the urban landscape of Luanda is constituted of a conjunction of signs where the sensorial elements, emerging from the written text, serve to convey images, messages and desires (2001, p. 240-241): "a "fala" de cada cidade articula-se a partir de uma semiose singular, de tal forma que os produtos ali produzidos (de sua arquitetura à literatura) podem ser lidos também como os seus desejos e

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3 Translation: Meanwhile, I think I can recognise, in these sellers, the popular old Vunji, the *nganas* Kimuezus and Makutos who, for several years, sold their products there. I only feel them poorer, without their colourful shawls. Now I also understand better the latent quarrels in this discussion that does not end and that deafens the market. It feels like I can see them suffering from more visible wounds.

medos” (MACEDO, 2001, p. 240-241).<sup>4</sup> The street sellers evoked by the narrator still carry the sadness of an inglorious past and deliver further messages to an attentive reader, who can perceive the multiplicity of meanings associated to these characters.

In addition to the above, also the names of the *quitandeiras* mentioned by the narrator participate in the characterisation of the Luandese environment in literature, from a semantic perspective. Across the various native ethnicities of Angola, anthroponyms are accepted in a multicultural context, as a means of sociocultural inclusion, at a macro level, for certain names being widely used by the same members of a specific ethnic community and recognised by the wider majority (ARTES, 2020). With this regard, Ribas carried out a study around the psychology behind the Kimbundu person’s names in his three-volume work titled *Missosso* (1961, 1962 and 1964). Here, the Angolan intellectual claims his interest towards the names of the “naturais de camadas obscuras” (RIBAS, 2009, p. 22)<sup>5</sup>, in a desire to unearth the culture of the colonised people, who have been “obscured”, as a result of the cultural oppression exerted by the Portuguese. In fact, colonialism caused the “despersonalização antroponímica”<sup>6</sup> of the colonised subject, hence causing a sense of alienation, due to the process of assimilation imposed by the colonial regime (ARTES, 2020). Because of the imprecision of anthroponyms in describing each individual (ARTES, 2020), the person’s names mentioned by the narrator-protagonist of “Quicumbi Assanhada”, on the one hand, characterise the cultural specificity of the ethnic group working the market; on the other hand, they gain a collective value for representing all those who died from the accident. The names evoked by Santos in his *crônica* demonstrate a survival of a culture that is still present, despite the colonial attempts to erase the identities of the natives of Kimbundu mother-tongue.

Resulting from the collection and analysis of the Kimbundu person’s names studied by Ribas, *Vunji* belongs to the category of tutelary spirits or geniuses and is given to those children whose birth is characterised by the absence of catamenia, after the birth of the previous sibling (2009, p. 28). This name explicitly refers to the female spirit *Nvunji*, administering justice (RIBAS, 1989, p. 186). According to Ribas, this spirit was born from a lagoon and manifests herself in the womb for the lack of menstruations. The justice of the spirit is revealed through the following infirmities: anaemia, sight loss, dry cough or hydropsy (1989, p. 186). *Makutu*, instead, literally means ‘lie’ in Kimbundu, with reference to the incredulity felt by the *quimbanda* (medium) due to the survival of the child holding this name (RIBAS, 2009, p. 30). *Makutu* belongs to the category of “nomes de existência duvidosa”,<sup>7</sup> given to all those children who outlive after the death of their baby siblings (RIBAS, 2009, 22). The cause of these deaths can be related to the anger of a spirit or to the assassination of an individual by an ancestor of the mother of the child (RIBAS, 2009, p. 22).

From the above analysis, we can see how the dichotomic separation between anthroponymy as a sign of cultural manifestation and as a means of expression is narrow from an ontological perspective (ARTES, 2020). In fact, the transcendent character of life and death according to

the Bantu beliefs demonstrates the genealogical and physical stance of anthroponymy and a relation to its physiognomic dimension (ARTES, 2020). The *nganas*<sup>8</sup> called with Kimbundu traditional names by Santos's narrator, in fact, are now sad, as they lost their former vitality (represented in the text with the lack of *xales coloridos*), as well as poorer. In a land where oppression and injustices were dominant, the sentence *venderam os seus produtos da terra* describes the exploitation of the local resources, for the benefit and consumption of the colonial ruler. Unluckily, the result of such trade is not fruitful for the natives, considering the low economic income of these old ladies.

Turning to the following paragraph of the story, the narrator still shows his feelings and suggests the possible salvation from the internal conflicts (the *makas latentes*, now renamed as *dramas disfarçados*) of a land that suffered a foreign invasion, through the rediscovery of the ancestral Bantu spirituality: “Há no fundo de mim, talvez, muita amargura. Isso faz-me ver mais simples atitudes indícios de conflitos, dramas disfarçados. Vou deixar-me aqui, pacificamente, junto destas quitandeiras de milongos da alma, a imaginar a força dos seus recursos mágicos” (SANTOS, 1981, p. 93).<sup>9</sup> Because of the ability to heal the wounds of the colonial violence, the natural products sold in the market are here defined as *milongos*, medicines, remedies. Thus, these old women, connected with the afterlife as their fictional names suggest, are perceived as mediums able to resolve every problem to the living humans, thanks to their healing actions of spiritual connotation. Despite the importance of spiritualism in the anti-colonial discourse, the description above may give us some information regarding the perception of the spiritual them by the author-narrator, who uses the word *mágico*, as if he is not fully introduced into the Bantu spiritualism, as we will see later in this article. Further information about the figure of the image of the *quitandeira* in Santos's literature will be provided in the following section, where I will analyse the culture-bound terms related to the Bantu spiritual practices in Santos's *crônica*.

### **Bantu beliefs and their decolonial charge**

With regard to the presence of elements coming from the native cultures in literature, Martinho (2010, p. 9) states that Arnaldo's works are not just a simple rediscovery of the oral narration and traditional stories, but rather a way of writing the cultures of Angola. In this context, ethnography takes a vital role in building the identity of the native black people of Angola. In fact, this subject provides material to Anthropology and Literature, so, the fictional content takes information from the ethnographic research, in order to observe and study a specific minor reality (MARTINHO, 2010, p. 5). Considering the abundant references to the Bantu spiritual practices in “Quicumbi Assanhada”, with special focus on the Kimbundu

<sup>8</sup> Honorific title used for both women and men (Mrs or Mr)

<sup>9</sup> Translation: Maybe there is a lot of sadness deep down inside. This makes me see simple reactions as signs of conflict, disguised dramas. Standing pacifically by the side of these sellers of remedies for the soul, I imagine the strength of their magic resources.

language, we can see, in this section, extracts where the above references gain a wide range of connotations that characterise the native Bantu ethnicities as a social sign of distinction.

The first example where the use of the traditional element in narration is expressed in the terms above mentioned is given by the description of *milongo*, mentioned at the end of the previous section. The ritualistic and medicinal plants and objects described by the narrator of the story belong to a past that has been kept alive for generations, despite the changes of the times. By reading this and other *crônicas* by Santos, we can understand that there is a predominance of the Bantu spiritual discourse through the perspective of the mixed-race narrator, who has lost part of his Bantu heritage to embrace a Portuguese outlook, despite the implicit condemnation of the colonial violence and oppression, as we saw in the introductory paragraph of this short story. In the following citation, in fact, the narrator describes the power of the aforesaid *milongos da alma*, as told by the believers, the natives who still have a strong bound to the spiritualism of Bantu derivation.

Dizem que o povo os continua a procurar com desesperada ansiedade. Sobretudo as mães sem leite de meninos doentes, as mães sem marido e algumas amantes abandonadas. Compram pamba e ucusso, pequeninas sementes de pepe e sobongo, fitas vermelhas e azuis de Santo ia Kizola e desesperam por não encontrar folhas de mbilu, que muda os sentimentos dos homens... e das mulheres, penso eu (SANTOS, 1981, p. 93).<sup>10</sup>

As we can see above, *dizem* tells us that the narrator heard about the properties of the natural remedies from other people, who desperately search for them to get cured. At the present time of the narration, people seem to search anxiously for those remedies, especially mothers of sick children and without milk, mothers without husband and some abandoned lovers. The spiritual value of certain traditional remedies has remained unaltered through the ages, despite the strong influence of the Portuguese colonisation. *Pamba* and *ucusso* are generally used for the *umbanda* divination to gain the divine grace; the former is a white clay used to trace the vertical line of a cross, whereas the latter is a red pigment deployed to trace the horizontal line (RIBAS, 1989, p. 56). Also, *pepe* and *sobongo*, respectively a seed and fruit used for medical purposes (SANTOS, 1981, p. 93), are desperately searched for their medical as well as spiritual properties.

These two items are mentioned in Rocha's short story (1979, p. 78) to describe the tragedy of the Xá-Mavu market, but they are spelt in their Kimbundu plural form, preceded by the prefix *ji-*: "As kitandeiras ficaram sem o negócio, sem o dinheiro, muitas mesmo sem a vida. Naquele dia, rios de sangue correram no meio do peixe, dos kiabos, da takula, do jipepe e jisobongo, os gritos não calaram na boca dos feridos" (ROCHA 1979, 78). In here, the blood of the deceased

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<sup>10</sup> Translation: They say that people continue searching for them with desperate anxiety. Especially milkless mothers of sick children, mothers without husband and some abandoned lovers. They buy *pamba* and *ucusso*, small seeds of *pepe* and *sobongo*, blue and red ribbons of Santo ia Kizola, and feel hopeless for not finding the *mbilu* leaves, which change the feelings of men... and women, I guess.



killed by the fall of the roof of the market contaminates the products; the street sellers who remained alive lost their jobs, while their products went wasted. As we can see, the sense of the desperation is reflected in both narrations and these references to the local plants tell us about the loss of the spiritual Bantu legacy, ‘killed’ together with the people who inherited it over the centuries.

In his work, instead, Santos also mentions other representative elements of the Bantu spiritualism, such as *mbilu*, a wild bush, whose leaves are not easy to find any more, and which is useful for the solution of sentimental issues. In his short story, we can also see mention of the red and blue ribbons given to the *Santo ia Kizola*, the god of love (SANTOS, 1981, p. 93). With regards to the latter, Ribas (1958, p. 100) refers to it as *Santo de Cazola*, for which the ceremony requires the preparation of three cups, one for the initiate and the other two for the parents, containing *pemba* or rice powder, incense, cowrie, a silver coin and a crucifix tied with a blue tape.

Another passage of the story which is worth being mentioned here describes the moment when a customer speaks with the *quitandeira*. The whole scene is reported by the narrator through his perspective as it follows:

A conversa entre as duas mulheres decorria num tom entrecortado de subentendidos e com algumas frases em quimbundo que não entendia. Mas apreendi vagamente que a mãe da quicumbi pusera mesa a Lemba e Hitu para limpar o futuro da sua única filha. E se eu me aproximasse da própria mãe da quicumbi? (SANTOS, 1981, p. 95)<sup>11</sup>

As we can see above, the narrator does not understand fully the conversation between the two women. The mixed-race narrator is able to make out certain parts of their dialogue, not only because of the implicit references to facts the women were aware of, but also because of the language used, a mixture of Portuguese and Kimbundu. Even though the narrator is not entirely familiar with the local language and spiritual practices, he understood the most important part of the conversation between the two ladies. This tells us more about the narrator, his cultural background and his dominant Portuguese upbringing, in a country where the local cultures tend to be seen as foreign in the eyes of a mestizo, as it will be discussed further in the next section.

The narrator understood that the *quitandeira* was the mother of the girl, who was there, defined in the story as *quicumbi*. According to Schiffler, this term comes from the North-East region of Angola, *Cucumbi*, where the traditional initiation of the young girl during puberty took place for the first time (2015, p. 43-47). This scholar also mentions Ribas, who refers to the *Kubala o Kikumbi*, ritual of the “transgression of the first rule” (1975, p. 91). During her

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<sup>11</sup> Translation: The conversation between the two ladies occurred in a tone interrupted by allusions and some Kimbundu sentences that I did not understand. But I vaguely comprehended that the mother of the *quicumbi* prepared the table for Lemba and Hitu to clear the future of her only daughter. What if I get close to the mother of the *quicumbi*?

period, the mother of the initiated needs to make sure that the *quicumbi* refrains from any sexual act, otherwise the spirits *Hito* (spelling provided in Ribas's study) and *Solongongo* harm the girl during the procreation, causing the death of the foetus or the premature death of the child recently born (RIBAS, 1975, p. 91). In Santos's *crônica*, the mother of the initiate prepares her for the adult life, by following the rule explained by Ribas (1975, p. 91), hence the reference to *Hitu* and *Lemba*, the goddess of procreation. The Ambundu people of Kimbundu mother-tongue need to satisfy the requests of the superior beings in order to gain their grace and these rituals cannot be ignored if they want to provide a good and healthy life to their children.

At this stage, another question arises: 'What if I get close to the mother?', asks the narrator to himself. He likes the young girl and would like to become the future husband of the *quicumbi*, but her mother is against it, she perceives that an *assimilado*, who is not introduced to the spiritual practices of Bantu origins, may corrupt the girl's purity: "Ela estava limpa e pura sob a proteção dos espíritos. E ali incredulo e desenganado era contaminação!" (SANTOS, 1981, p. 96).<sup>12</sup> The narrator, in spite of not being Portuguese, but born and bred in Luanda (we can assume this from the opinions of the narrator, as well as from the fact that Santos focuses on the mixed-race Angolans to discuss their social status in many of his *crônicas*), is like a threat to the local cultures, as it brings negative consequences to the girl, in this short story, and to the natives who practice the Bantu spiritual beliefs, if we see it with a wider perspective.

However, the young girl, who is advised to leave the market because of the presence of the narrator, showed her true colours when she stumbled across a soldier who tried to seduce her, in fact she showed her disdain by making loud *muxoxos* and giving an angry answer, as she did not want to be harassed by strangers. The way she replied to the pestering man surprised the narrator, as the girl demonstrated to be more mature and shrewder than her age would suggest. Hence the reaction of the narrator: "Ah! Quicumbi assanhada! A sua vida verde mas já dessacralizada experiência seria a melhor garantia para lhe assegurar um futuro menos cruel. Embora isso, com sacrifício evidente do respeito pelas miondona" (SANTOS 1981, 96).<sup>13</sup>

In her study about the figure of the woman in Santos's literary production, Ribeiro points out the fact that the de-characterisation of the figure of the *quitandeiras* and change in the behaviour of the *quicumbi*, occurring in his short stories, reflect the societal changes of the contemporary times of the writer (1992, p. 88). Contrarily to what is stated by the researcher, this investigation has showed a characterisation of the *quitandeiras* by giving them names coming from the Bantu spiritualism and the concept of justice to develop a decolonising discourse through language. In addition, the previous section demonstrated that these street sellers are defined by the author-narrator as *quitandeiras de milongos da alma*, hence emphasising their

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12 Translation: She was clean and pure under the protection of the spirits. And I, disbelieving and disillusioned, was the contamination!

13 Translation: Ah! Irritated *quicumbi*! Her green life but her profane experience would be the guarantee for a less cruel future. However, with evident sacrifice of the respect for the *miondona*.

ability to mediate with the invisible world and communicate with the spirits in order to solve the physical and spiritual discomforts of every-day life. On the other hand, Ribeiro's comment perfectly describes the loss of innocence of the *quicumbi* as she is able to cope with an adult man who wants to seduce her in the market. The aura of spirituality described by the narrator prior to that event suddenly vanishes to give place to the true side of this young girl, who even disregarded the respect towards the tutelary spirits (*miondona*, without the Portuguese ending -s for the plural) - defined by Ribas as "guardian angels", transmitted through the paternal family line (1989, p. 34) - who should have protected her, especially at this young age.

As we can assume from the analysis carried out so far, the importance of the local spiritual belief of Bantu heritage in this *crônica* shows how the spiritual discourse can be used in literature as a means to counterattack the colonial power, from an ideological standpoint. With this regard, Paradiso claims that the postcolonial African writers gains the role of neo-historian, neo-anthropologist and neo-ethnologist, for advocating the positions of their people, from an ethnic, national and continental standpoint at the same time (2015, p. 271). By incorporating elements coming from the native ethnicities described in their literary pieces, these writers discuss the oppositions between coloniser and colonised at the same time (2015, p. 271), hence the adaptation of the ancestral legacy of spiritual derivation to the written pieces in European languages. Even though the analysis carried out by Paradiso refers to Kourou, Achebe and Couto, the above observation matches perfectly with the profile of Santos, considering that the Bantu rite of passage of the *quicumbi* is rewritten in order to sustain an anti-colonial message of self-recognition and national identity. In fact, the young girl of the *crônica*, the holder of an old tradition passed down through generations, shows the strength to face and reject the Portuguese soldier who wants to "conquer" her heart. Thus, we can see how the survival of ancient spiritual practices can serve to support a sense of nationhood, thanks to the *miondona* spirits who legitimise the existence of a culture that existed even before the arrival of the coloniser. To recall, once more, the contribution of Paradiso: "neste mundo da religiosidade animista pós-independência que o autor africano cria o seu projeto de descolonização literária" (2015, p. 272).<sup>14</sup> Even though the above scholar refers to the independence of the African countries, in my view, this project of literary decolonisation is also visible in works written prior to the birth of Angola, and Santos's *crônica* clearly demonstrates it.

As a matter of fact, the ideological contraposition between coloniser and colonised emerging from the lines of "Quicumbi Assanhada" is expressed through a language that evokes ancestral practices, not for a mere aesthetic sake, but, most importantly, for inducing the reader in a deeper reflection around the concept of identity. With this regard, the following section will show, in more detail, how Santos manages to stimulate an ideological debate thanks to the figure of the narrator-protagonist, who constantly shows the cultural tensions between the coloniser

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<sup>14</sup> Translation: In this world of post-independence animistic religion, the African author create his project of literary decolonisation.

and colonised, hence contributing to the creation of a realistic fiction meant to decolonise the minds of the reader.

### **Questioning identities in a colonial environment**

In the previous two sections, we saw how the tragedy of the Xamavo market and the Bantu beliefs are filtered through the memories and personal impressions of the narrator-protagonist, in order to portray the daily life of the colonised people from the *musseques* of Luanda and sustain an anti-colonial discourse of identity and freedom. Because of the constant interventions of this character in the description of facts, I believe that it is important to dedicate a separate section to the figure of the narrator of “Quicumbi Assanhada” and discuss the constant tensions between oppressor and oppressed, coloniser and colonised, in Santos’s literary piece.

When the protagonist is observing the items sold by the *quitandeira* (the *quicumbi*’s mother), he clearly manifests his opinions towards the Bantu spiritual practices and their role in the solution of the physical and spiritual issues. In the citation below, we can read how the perspective of the mixed-race character questions the validity of such rituals, due to his Portuguese cultural influence: “Não estou nada convicto das soluções mágico-religiosas para as doenças físicas, mas lamento que já se não possa ir ao mato buscar mbilu. As coisas do amor vivem de dadas tão misteriosas que pergunto a mim mesmo se não se deve acreditar em mbilu” (SANTOS, 1981, p. 93).<sup>15</sup> As we can see, the narrator is not sure about the magic-religious solutions adopted by the native Angolans of Bantu origins but, at the same time, we can also perceive the sympathy felt towards those people who believe in the above practices, thanks to the verb *lamento*.

These contrasting feelings between the potential effectiveness of traditional medicine of religious inspiration and the covert rationality of the narrator-protagonist, remind us of Pesavento’s study regarding the presence of the realistic element in literature between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the following one (1995). According to this scholar, the devaluation of the power of imagination associated to the appraisal of rationality and the scientific vision of the world, typical of the western countries, coexisted with the opposite tendency of breaking with the Cartesian rationalism (PESAVENTO, 1995, p. 10). In fact, if there was, on the one hand, a misconception about everything that was not scientifically proved to be valid, on the other hand, the contributions given by psychologists, such as Freud, or social anthropologists, like Malinowski, Dumezil and Lévi-Strauss, undermined the certainties established by a rational approach (PESAVENTO, 1995, p. 11-12). With this regard, if we look at Santos’s character, we can perceive this sense of uneasiness deriving from two different cultures, the one of the coloniser and that of the colonised, as he defines the Bantu medical

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<sup>15</sup> Translation: I am entirely unconvinced of the magic-religious solutions for the physical pains, but I am afraid that I cannot go to the forest searching for *mbilu*. Love affairs live on such mysterious blessings that I ask myself if we should not trust in (the power of) *mbilu*.

remedies as “magic”, hence diminishing, from my understanding, the religious charge of the *milongos da alma*, as well as their effectiveness in curing the physical and spiritual diseases.

On the other hand, even though the protagonist of Santos’s *crônica* is not introduced to the Bantu spiritual practices, he questions (*pergunto a mim mesmo*) whether he should not believe in them, instead, considering that the language of love is mysterious, in his perspective, regardless to the faith that people have. This continuous investigation into the Bantu spirituality, characterised by references to superior beings, matched with historical facts and filtered through the memory of the author, at times seems to discredit the value of the spiritual practices. However, the curiosity of the narrator also gives the readers the benefit of the doubt, leaving them to think over it, in a cathartic process of self-analysis that eventually leads to the acceptance of their own cultural heritage, for the reconstruction of both personal and national identity. Why not trust the curative properties of the *mbilu* leaves? Is there anything wrong with it? These are the implicit questions that, in my view, Santos seems to ask his potential readers, whose identities have been profoundly affected by colonisation. As stated by Hamilton, Santos’s stories are authentic *crônicas* for the presentation of daily life of the middle-class Luandese mixed-race, where ironic references to the absurdities of his society are melded within philosophical reasonings, hence giving a subversive tone to his literary production (1981, p. 137). In my perspective, by posing the above implicit questions, Santos initiates a philosophical debate with his readers, to instil a process of self-acknowledgment, starting from the most intimate and basic feelings, such as love, which are intrinsic to all the human beings, hence deconstructing the stereotypes rooted in people’s minds, as a consequence of colonialism.

In addition to the above implicit questions, we can also see other questions, explicitly asked by the narrator to investigate the role of certain habits related to the Bantu spiritual practices. For instance, when the narrator speaks to the *quitandeira*, described as *de boa muxima* (good-hearted), he stumbles across certain items contained within a *quinda* (basket) and wonders about their “magic function”, in order to understand better this culture. The woman is initially willing to clarify the doubts of the narrator, but then becomes suspicious about all those questions being asked, so she asks herself: “Para quê que este quer saber isto? Ele não é do musseque e talvez ate não acredita. P’ra que que aquilo lhe ia servir? Ou era um fiscal da Câmara e ainda lhe iam trazer no posto como muloji?!” (SANTOS, 1981, p. 94).<sup>16</sup> In the perspective of the narrator, the lady tried to figure out why he was so curious. The narrator, in fact, *pressentia as interrogações*, for her having noticed that he is not from the *musseque* and maybe he is not even a believer. Maybe the woman thought that he was someone sent by the local council to work as a *muloji*, a sorcerer who is dedicated to the deployment of evil practices, and whose knowledge is defined as *uanga* (RIBAS 1989, p. 45). This spiritual function is not manifested to the wider public but is rather assumed by other people to have been assigned to selected individuals to act against someone in particular (RIBAS 1989, 45). In Santos’s narration, being unfamiliar with certain culture-bound references is seen as a threat,

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<sup>16</sup> Translation: Why does he want to know all this? He is not from the slum and maybe he is not a believer. What does he need that for? Or was he a Council Inspector brought here as a jinx?!

hence denouncing the contraposition between different cultures and induce a self-interrogation within the readers.

With these regards, Bhabha mentions the concept of ‘fixity’ as an important element of the colonial discourse for the description of the indigenous cultures of a conquered land. It consists of the rigid construction of a reality, without possibilities for change. Close to this concept, stereotypes play an important role in the definition of the Other, in the way that certain perceptions of a specific culture are constantly repeated, hence encouraging marginalisation (1983, 18). The narrator, a mixed-race, unnamed individual representing the category of the *assimilados*, interrogates certain practices that are unfamiliar to him, as he describes them as “magic”, thus diminishing their spiritual value and importance among Bantu ethnicities – in this case Ambundo. On the other side, the *quitandeira*, who tries to figure out the reason of all those questions being asked, thinks that the narrator is an evil sorcerer, a *muloji*, due to her cultural upbringing. All these doubts and questions emerging from Santos’s work reveal a constant tension between different cultures, as a reflection of the multiculturalism of the Angolan society. As we can see in the above examples provided, the act of questioning and perceiving the ‘Other’ through certain fixed images and stereotypes is used in the colonial literature, as discussed by Bhabha (1983, 18). Santos re-uses this strategy to start an anti-colonial discourse, by exploring the Bantu spiritualism with the eyes of a person who is not entirely familiar with it, in spite of being part of his cultural background. Anti-colonialism in Santos literature can be seen as a process to question the way the ‘Other’ is represented, even when the ‘Other’ co-exists with the ‘Self’ within the assimilated, colonised narrator.

## Conclusions

The analysis carried out in the present article demonstrated how Santos’s fiction is able to bring to life imaginary, yet plausible facts, thanks to the combination of historical events, such as the tragedy of the Xamavo market, with elements coming from the local spiritual practices of the Ambundo people of Kimbundu mother-tongue, as well as the impressions and memories of the narrator, who relays the whole story through his perspective. As we saw especially in the last section of this study, the denigration of the Bantu legacy by the *assimilados* is constantly questioned by the protagonist who sometimes takes part into the narrated stories and is on the side of the conformists, who are afraid of being judged according to the standards imposed through colonisation. As a mixed-race writer born and raised in Luanda, Arnaldo Santos transfers part of his racial and cultural heritage onto the characters and stories of his books to analyse the weaknesses of the mixed-race people, as well as the black natives.

In addition, spiritualism and everything related to it promulgates a message of resistance and opposition against the colonial regime but, at the same time, is denigrated as a consequence of the stereotypical commonplaces associated to the people who adhere to a certain faith. Some of the characters of Santos’s stories refuse their identity to embrace the dominant culture; on the other hand, some others still rely on them, as a solution for the physical and spiritual pains that can be cured only through *milongos da alma*, like those sold by the *quitandeiras* of the

Xamavo market.

As we have seen throughout this article, the spiritual-related words of Bantu derivation provide several interpretations of the different aspects of the native cultures of Luanda that had been marginalised for centuries. The author, in a constant act of self-interrogation that brings to the definition of a national culture that cannot erase its ancient past and spiritual legacy, deploys a wide range of terms coming from the Kimbundu to redefine the identity of his people and discuss the importance of such heritage, that needs to be preserved for the future generations to come.

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