



NKISI SOCCER DUAL GAME AND THE EMPIRE’S CONQUEST

Currently, the work that greets us at the atrium of the National Museum of Ethnology in Lisbon, right on the ground floor, is a white marble sculpture from 2023 by the Mozambican painter, sculptor, essayist and researcher Lívio de Morais (1945-). Entitled *Grito de Liberdade. Não vamos esquecer o Tempo que passou* [Freedom’s Scream]. Let’s not forget the Time that has passed] (a title inspired by one of Mozambique’s most famous revolutionary songs), this work sets the tone for the exhibition that we find on the first floor (Fig.1). Created in 1965, the then *Museu de Etnologia do Ultramar* [Museum of Overseas Ethnology], and now named *Museu Nacional de Etnologia* [National Museum of Ethnology], was largely the result of the work of anthropologist Jorge Dias and his team of collaborators, specifically a campaign to Mozambique, carried out as part of the *Missão de Estudos das Minorias Étnicas do Ultramar* [Mission for the Study of Overseas Ethnic Minorities] (1958-1961).

Skipping the permanent exhibition *O Museu, muitas coisas* [The Museum, many things], I quickly went upstairs to the temporary exhibition *Desconstruir o Colonialismo, Descolonizar o Imaginário. O Colonialismo em África: Mitos e Realidades* [Deconstructing Colonialism, Decolonizing the Imaginary. Colonialism in Africa: Myths and Realities]. Organized by the *Centro de Estudos Sobre África e Desenvolvimento* [Centre for African and Development Studies] (CESA/ISEG-University of Lisbon) and the National Museum of Ethnology, the exhibition is curated by historian Isabel Castro Henriques and is currently being held as part of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of April 25th – Carnation Revolution.

The centerpiece of the exhibition (and of the National Museum of Ethnology) *Nkisi Soccer Dual Game* (2019), a sculpture by Congolese artist Hilaire Blue Huyangiko. This work of art combines elements of Congolese ancestral culture (Nkisi as “sacred” or “divine”) with references from contemporary Afro-global popular culture. It reappropriates symbols, reconciles hybridity and destabilizes identity. With a soccer ball covered in computer keys as its head, a wooden body nail-studded (each of which usually signifies a conflict, a dispute, a divorce, etc.), and a blue referee’s whistle with a United Nations inscription, the sculpture has the head that no longer is at its base (Fig.2). There is a text explaining the piece, and after the sculpture by Lívio de Morais, this choice for the center of the world is fortunate.

Starting from this core, the exhibition develops along seven axes (or six myths and a promise), which make up the various paths of the empire’s founding myths. These routes, all of which radiate from Huyangiko’s work, are built with pieces from the National Museum of Ethnology’s collection, alongside graphic materials, which are intended to contribute to the deconstruction of the imagery of Portuguese colonialism: ‘I – We’ve been in Africa for 500 years’; ‘II – Civilizing Mission and Progress’; ‘III – Colonial Vocation and Historical Mission’; ‘IV – The Others (Savages) and Us (Civilized)’; ‘V – Portuguese Africa’; ‘VI – The Greatness of the Nation and the Armed Struggle’; and ‘VII – Decolonization, Independence and Legacies of Colonialism’. The approach to these themes, in this particular museum, is important, but navigating through these axes, as in the physical navigation, is difficult and sometimes confusing. On the one hand, the space is clearly too small for the quantity of materials on display and the size of the graphic materials. On the other hand, I wonder if visitors (and there is a great diversity here), however interested they may be in these themes, will read this amount of text, pay attention to the films projected on the walls, and linger over the collection displayed in the showcases. Nonetheless, despite no great novelty for those more informed, there is some care in the graphic materials chosen, balance and quality in the textual analysis, and it is with pleasure that one goes through the attempt to destabilize the nation’s founding myths.

But there are two major issues in these routes. On the one hand, the connection between these decolonization journeys and the museum artefacts remains to be made, and many of them, without enough contextualization, continue to be exotic, beautiful, commodified objects. If *Nkisi Soccer Dual Game* is explained, as well as, at one end of the exhibition, the pen with which Ernesto Melo Antunes signed the Alvor agreement, in the Algarve, in 1975, between the Portuguese government and the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA, the other pieces silently accompany/embellish the various routes. I return briefly to an analysis of the permanent exhibition *The Museum, many things*, and I see some common traits. The permanent exhibition is static, not stimulating any kind of critical thinking or dialogues with the past or future, with the objects anchored in their own aesthetics (Sarmiento & Moisés, 2020). They are still there, fixed, silent and without agency, and one must wake them up.

On the other hand, the last theme – “VII – Decolonization, Independence and Legacies of Colonialism” – deserved a broader treatment. This, I believe, is where the heart of the matter lies and where the exhibition should be centered, just as the sculptures *Grito de Liberdade* [Freedom’s Scream] and *Nkisi Soccer Dual Game* had promised. With the decolonization process, the national liberation movements, the new independencies and the “returnees” as sub-themes, there is little discussion of the prevalence of a racism denial in Portugal. This end of the exhibition touches on several key contemporary themes, such as the peripheral neighborhoods of metropolitan areas, social and racial discrimination, and the absence of public memory spaces that combat the silences of Portuguese post-colonialism. Several interesting projects are mentioned and briefly shown. Due to a lack of space, I’ll highlight just a few here. The first is the photographic installation that Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda made in 2006, creating a movement of Africans at the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* [Monument to the Discoveries] that is dissonant with the stone heroes that are there, suggesting the arrival in the metropolis, rather than the departure, of a diverse set of archives, memories and experiences. The second, by the same author, is an image from the project *Plantação: Pesadelo e Prosperidade* [Plantation: Nightmare and Prosperity]. This memorial to enslaved people, made up of hundreds of aluminum sugar canes, is the result of a winning proposal made by Djass, the Association of Afro-descendants, as part of Lisbon’s Participatory Budget in 2017. Symptomatically, around seven years later, the place of the memorial, as well as the necessary legal opinions for its installation, is still being discussed in the bureaucracy corridors.

The exhibition also includes two photographic works by Angolan Portuguese visual artist Mónica de Miranda (*An ocean between us*, 2013 and *Hotel Globo*, 2016), complemented by a wooden sculpture by the same artist (*Casa Portuguesa* [Portuguese House], 2020). It lacks framing and ends somewhat rushedly. The photographic work *Hotel Globo*, for example, focuses on a building in Luanda, taking us back to modernist architecture overseas, to colonial memories and their intertwining with the present. It explores the appropriation of the building and fictionally recreates fragments of the contemporary experiences of the new guests, in their resistance to real estate and financial speculation in Luanda. The work *An ocean between us*, also a film, is an emotional exploration of an entity that separates Portugal from its former colonies, a liminal space that hides centuries of terror and which has swallowed so many African lives into anonymity. The models *Casa Portuguesa* appear almost decoratively, and it’s not evident that they were made after a work that consists of photographic documentation and a video piece (2016, 4’3”), which aimed at questioning the right to housing, the right to build and live in a house.

Museum collections and exhibitions are an important starting point for discussing new forms of global knowledge production (Muller & Langill, 2021), and for debating the process of recognizing historical power imbalances that continue to have an impact today. But there was a need for more space, interpretation and signposting, so that a wider and less specialized audience could interact with these materials, which would surely make up an eighth axis, thus fulfilling the objective of *Deconstructing Colonialism, Decolonizing the Imaginary*.



Figure 1. Grito de Liberdade. Não vamos esquecer o Tempo que passou [Freedom’s Scream. Let’s not forget the Time that has passed] (Lívio de Morais, 2023)

Figure 2. Nkisi Soccer Dual Game (Hilaire Blue Huyangiko, 2019)



Figure 3. An ocean between us, (Mónica de Miranda, 2013); Hotel Globo (Mónica de Miranda, 2016) and Casa Portuguesa [Portuguese House] (Mónica de Miranda, 2020)

Text and Images: [João Sarmiento](#) (CECS/Universidade do Minho), December of 2024

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References

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Map

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