

The Conjunto Africa Negra of Sao Tome

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Every Saturday and Sunday evening, during the four months of the dry season (June through September), villages throughout Sao Tome come together to shuffle to the warm pulse of the island's most popular dance rhythms. These weekly dances, or 'fundoes' (which literally translates as 'the bottom', as in the old blues line 'down in the bottom', and refers to the public spaces that were cordoned off for dancing) bring together Sao Tome's different communities; the Creoles, descendants of Portuguese colonists and African slaves, the Angolares, descendants of Angolan slaves who settled in fishing communities, with the descendants of Cape Verdian and Mozambiquan contract laborers who came to work on the island's coffee and cocoa plantations. With no nightclubs or national theatre where they could perform, several generations of Sao Tome's best orchestras built their reputations entertaining the farmers, fishermen, merchants, civil servants and mechanics who crowded these open-air 'fundoes'.

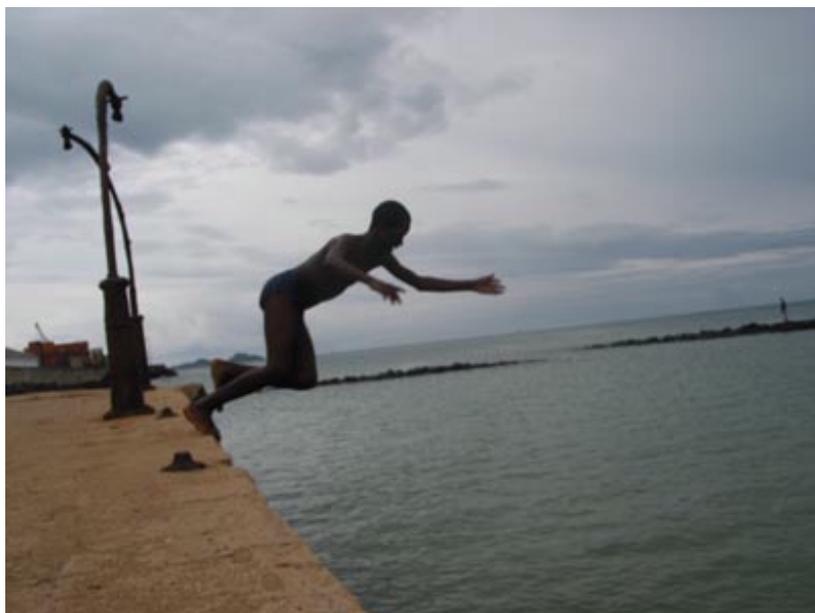
In the early 1970s a butcher from the town of Sao Tome (the capital city) named Horacio, and his friend Emilio Pontes decided to start a music group. Whenever Horacio could get away from his butcher shop, he would meet Emilio in the town of 'San Guembo' (located 3 km from downtown Sao Tome), and the two would kill a few hours playing guitars and writing songs. The two friends quickly pulled together the first lineup of musicians who, in 1974, would officially become known as the 'Conjunto Africa Negra'. The group's greatest hits were built around the melodic and languid lead guitar playing of Imidio Vaz, the steady rhythm guitar of Leonildo Barros, and the raspy voice of Joao Seria. In a recent conversation I had with Leonildo Barros, he reminisced about the hours he used to spend with Imidio Vaz, listening to the latest records from Gabon, Zaire and Cameroun, drawing inspiration and copping guitar phrases from the greats of Central African guitar playing.



The 1980s were the high-water years for the Conjunto Africa Negra. The group performed frequently throughout Sao Tome and Principe, made regular trips to Portugal, visited Angola nine times (touring across Luanda, Benguela, and Cabinda provinces), and were a huge success in the Cape Verde Islands. It was through their constant performing that they perfected their version of Sao Tome Rumba, what their fans call 'MamaDjumba' music. Leonildo Barros explains that their music earned its nickname during a 1981 concert, in Portugal, to celebrate the eighth anniversary of Guinea-Bissau's independence.

Africa Negra was sharing the bill with the great Super Mama Djombo from Guinea-Bissau, with the two bands alternating sets for over four hours. Near the end of the evening, the audience was asked which band they wanted to bring back on stage to close out the show. The largely Guinea-Bissauan crowd spurned 'Super Mama Djombo', and started chanting 'Africa Negra'. Sao Tome's favorite sons obligingly returned to the stage, and to ease the tension with their disappointed colleagues, they started their encore set with a tribute to Super Mama Djombo. Within minutes the crowd was repeating the simple chant 'Africa MamaDjumba'. When the Conjunto Africa Negra returned to Sao Tome, news of their Portuguese triumph had preceded them, and at their next concert they were welcomed to the stage with the same chant, 'Africa MamaDjumba'.

Africa Negra's MamaDjumba sound was immortalized in a series of 40 or 50 songs, that the group recorded at Radio Sao Tome, the best of which were released on 3 lps. In the early 1980s, the broadcast and recording studios of Radio Sao Tome were located at the eastern edge of the capital city of Sao Tome, in a small house overlooking the ocean. The broadcast and recording booths were too small to accommodate a large group of musicians, so Africa Negra would set up in the courtyard, facing the incoming waves, and lay down tracks surrounded by their most loyal fans. Many of these recordings continue to be a staple of Sao Tomean radio broadcasts.



One of the group's biggest hits was improvised live on stage. As the band was preparing to take the stage one Friday evening in the suburbs of Sao Tome, Leonildo Barros was approached by a desperate young man who needed a favor. The young fan explained that, on his way to the 'fundoes', he had gotten into a fight with his girlfriend that was serious enough to end their relationship, and he needed Africa Negra's help to win her back. The only solution, he told Leonildo, was for the group to sing a love song for Alice, his now ex-girlfriend.

Leonildo protested that they were just about to go on stage, had no lyrics, and no time to put together an arrangement. The now frantic suitor persisted and promised to buy a round of beers for the entire orchestra if they could help bring her around. Near the end of the set, Leonildo mentioned the request to his bandmates and told them to follow his lead. His opening guitar riff brought the band in nice and easy and Joao Seria, to kill time as he waited for inspiration to strike, starting repeating the phrase 'Alice, remember, Alice', and the drummer Olinto took it from there, answering Joao with 'oh, how can things be this way?', or 'what could I have done to you to deserve this?' After a couple of minutes of this, Joao backed away from the microphone and let the guitar players wrap things up. No one can remember whether the young lover won Alice back that night, but the group did get their case of beer, and two days later they went to Radio Sao Tome and recorded 'Alice'.

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Alice'](#)

The song 'Carambola' was written by a songwriter named Horacio from the village of Trindade, and rearranged by the group. Joao Seria sings, 'Carambola (a female nickname) from the village of Nova Moca (a town 15 km from the capital city) told all of her friends that she was going to the city to make a name for herself, to show off what she has, now everyone is playing her, kicking her back and forth like a ball'.

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Carambola'](#)

My favorite Africa Negra track, 'Bô Lêgo Caço Modebô', or 'You let the dog bite you', tells the story of a young woman who unexpectedly became pregnant. Seria sings, 'Oh Mama! What are you going to do? Since the very beginning we have tried to warn you to be careful, to always study the tides before you dive in the ocean. You let the dog bite you and now how are things going to be?'

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Bô Lêgo Caço Modebô'](#)

Most of the group's songs use metaphors to sing about mores and social dilemmas.



In 'Minô bô bé quacueda', Joao addresses his friend Mino. He sings, 'Mino, my friend, you saw what happened. You threw the rock but tried to hide your hand and now see how much you suffer. When the sun rises, we don't want to listen to you cry. We warned you, but you threw the rock, and tried to hide your hand'.

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Mino Bô Bé Quacueda'](#)

The lyrics to 'Quà na bua ne ga fa' are more abstractly metaphorical. 'You can't deny what has happened; you ran from the spear but were killed by the knife. You can't run from the truth. Me, I am like the barking dog, I make noise but I don't have the courage to bite. You decided to befriend the worms because they don't bite, but they urinated on you and now you run all over trying to find a cure'.

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Quà Na Bua Ne Ga Fa'](#)

In a similar vein, and equally abstract is 'Nao Nao Senhor'. Joao Seria sings, 'No, No, Sir. My neighbor, what is this? You slept out in the fields, rolling in the dew; there is no cure for you. You did everything to make this happen; if you only do what you want, we are not going to worry about you.'

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Nao Nao Senhor'](#)

This final track is a bittersweet homage to Sao Tome, one of a number of politically engaged songs the group recorded. 'Sao Tome is a little island that is full of riches; all that is missing is self-control and discipline. Sao Tome is a little island rich in cocoa and coffee; all that is missing is control'.

↪ [Conjunto Africa Negra 'Que San Tome'](#)

These golden years of Africa Negra came to an end when the group toured the Cape Verde Islands in 1990. The tour was so successful that it tore apart the Conjunto Africa Negra. When it came time to return to Sao Tome, the lead singer Joao Seria, who was one of the founding members of the group (but not, as many believe, the bandleader), along with the bass player Pacheco decided to stay in Praia. Without their front man, Africa Negra started to slowly drift out of the limelight.

Today, the group is still together, and last year they released a CD of new songs called 'Cua na Sun Pô Na Buà Fa', or 'Even if you think it is worthless'. In spite of diminishing interest in live bands in Sao Tome—one of the group's current singers complained that audiences today prefer to dance to DJs—Africa Negra continues to perform several times a month in Sao Tome, but they no longer are invited to perform abroad. The only 'original' band member still in the group is the lead guitar player Imidio Vaz.



For many of the musicians who were part of the group during the 1980s, the decade remains a source of treasured memories. I asked Leonildo Barros to share some of his most memorable experiences with Africa Negra, and he told the story of a 1985 music festival in Luanda, Angola. The group's flight to Luanda had been canceled and Africa Negra landed in the Angolan capital the day after they were to perform. As they got off the plane, they were told that the music festival was closing, and that most of the public had already left the stadium.

Determined to make an appearance, Africa Negra nonetheless headed downtown, and as they worked their way through Luanda traffic, they started to notice a large crowd following them to the stadium. A local radio had announced that Africa Negra had finally arrived in Luanda, and were making their way to the stadium; the group's fans started to head back towards the stadium, and escorted the band-bus the final half mile to the show. The group played for over four hours, to a packed crowd of thousands.

This post is based on interviews with Leonildo Barros (who joined Africa Negra in 1978 , and was with the group until he moved to Portugal in the early 1990s) and Antonio de Menezes, who has been a member of Africa Negra for the past fifteen years. Special thanks to my colleague Sosimo Leal for his help with the research and for translating, and to Nico Colombant for sharing his beautiful pictures of Sao Tome (I love the barbershop picture!!).