

Anticolonial Narratives from the Africas

An Interview with Vensam Iala of the Visto África Collective

| Brazil | Guinea-Bissau |

translated by Edmund Ruge

Cleber Ribeiro: What is Visto África? How did it come about and what is its goal?

Vensam Iala: Visto África is a project that began in 2012, following my arrival in Brazil. I arrived in Brazil in 2010 and went straight into my studies at São Paulo State University (UNESP), in Assis, where I got a degree in language arts. In my studies, I noted a significant absence of content from the Africas. And when Africa was addressed, there was always a stereotype, one that wasn't the Africa that I live, that I have lived, for example, or that I know. There are various stereotyped Africas in one continent, aren't there? That image that sees Africa as singular. Africa as a country. This began to really bother me.

The curriculum also lacked elements that would have provided the possibility to learn about literature and philosophy from the Africas. It became evident that, within the university, a singular imaginary of Africa was constructed, one that was completely stereotyped. We are talking about people's need to have access to information. People are there in order to build knowledge and this knowledge is not made available in terms of content that comes from the Africas. This really bothered me.

At that point I began to speak about a narrative with African protagonism, one in which we can tell our history based on our experiences. So I launched the Visto África campaign. A civic campaign, one of public conscientization, that seeks to show the other side of the Africas in order to deconstruct these representations — representations reproduced not only by society, but by the academy as well. And Visto África seeks to combat these reductionist visions of the continent and of the people of the Africas. And of Black people in general. So, Visto African came about with the goal of deconstructing Western narratives about the

African continent. Not only deconstruct, but build another narrative. Not a new one but the narrative that was neglected. Show the other side of these Africas in a way that sensibilizes and educates people.

Daniel Martins: Can you talk a bit more about the composition of Visto África? Who are the people involved and what countries are they from?

Vensam Iala: The idea came to me in 2012, but I wasn't able to get it to stick. After I moved to São Paulo, two years ago, I began to work on it. Since I'm president of the Guinea Bissau Community Association here in São Paulo, I have a lot of contact with the people from my community. So it's a project that is constituted primarily of the people of my community, from Guinea Bissau. There are two people from Benin, who are my friends, who help with content. Since it's a space that is in construction, one that seeks out different peoples of the Africas, there are Mozambicans in the project, there is a girl from Ivory Coast. They work together in engagement, building together. The idea is that there are these various Africas inside the same project. We developed various training projects... for conversation, child motivation. Because we have children, the children of African immigrants that dream. Brazilians, actually. They have Brazilian nationality, but they have parents from African countries. In the concrete case of Guinea Bissau, we developed a motivation project, primarily for the arts. Many want to be artists, models, actors.

And, when I speak specifically of this educational question that we have, this pedagogical hallmark that we have too, it is because we believe that any approach that really achieves positive results has to be educational and, primarily, directed towards children. We have many approaches, and also ways of convincing our public. We have a cartoon book with ludic narratives of African immigrants in Brazil, in a format that grabs the children's attention. Because we believe that building the imaginary of this child, creating this empathy, shows the children that there is diversity, that we are plural, diverse, and different, but that our differences must complete us and not separate us. That is how we will be able to achieve a much more effective long term result than if we were to focus on the adults.

Cleber Ribeiro: What sort of care needs to be taken in understanding Africa as a

continent?

Vensam Iala: It is important to understand Africa as a continent beginning with the histories of the various Africas. This means not telling the history of Africa the way it is taught here in Brazil, for example, where it seems that African history began with slave ships. We have to stop with this history and really tell the history of the great African kingdoms, of the empires that, prior to the European invasion, already had a structured society. We want this history to be told because it is important from a historic standpoint but also from a point of view of constructing an ontological imaginary of all Black subjects, because from the moment that a person learns their history, they learn their roots and how to position themselves. They learn how to get to tomorrow. And this recentering of what the African continent is, since the beginning, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, is denied to Black people here in Brazil. We must speak of this pre-colonial Africa, because the history that is told is only colonial history and only serves to reinforce the reductionist stereotype of the African continent, as though it were a singular thing. As though it were created from those images of misery, of poverty, of hunger. All of these images seek to shame not only the people of the Africas, but the Black people that have this descentance, to the point of negating this place. It is important to show the real history of our people because it is a proud history. We believe that recovering this pre-colonial history of the Africas will reconfigure the narrative of the continent.

This is fundamental for us, the people of the Africas. When I say the people of the Africas, I speak not only of the Africans that were born on the continent, but the Africans, the Black people that were born in the diasporas. In Brazil, in the United States, in Jamaica, and so on.

Cleber Ribeiro: I think that point gives us an anchor with which to ask you about the main challenges that immigrants from the countries of the Africac continent, from the Africas, experience here in Brazil.

Vensam Iala: They really are countless.

I would like to talk a bit about the foreigner statute. The foreigner statute here in Brazil sees the immigrant as a dangerous person. But what immigrant is this? We know as well, this is a fact that, historically, there was a policy of sanitization here in Brazil that allowed for the entrance of Europeans in order to whiten Brazilian society. And the entrance of peoples coming from the Africas was denied. They tried to whiten this society. What does the statute say? That immigrants are dangerous, but not all of them. Just the African immigrants that come from these countries, just the Black immigrants that pay so much for this.

So you get here, as an immigrant from an African country, and you begin to have a tremendous difficulty with the issue of documentation.

I think it was last year, 2019, the statute of the new immigration law, Law 13,445/2017. This new immigration law tried to be a bit more malleable, but even so it did not remove this concept of danger. And this always comes up for African immigrants, because it is linked to the history of slavery, because the very Black people that were born here did not receive respect or consideration, and are also seen as dangerous people in this society.

Imagine the Black person that not only carries the burden of being a Black African, but also carries that of being the 'other,' the foreigner, the outsider, you understand? It's like, we arrived here as African immigrants, we embraced the causes of struggle of our Black brothers that were born here, and we have yet another struggle, which comes from the fact that we are not from this land.

We are constantly being pointed to as the other, being reminded that we need to return to our own country, that we are not from here. This comes from looks, conversations, in the most diverse forms of society. So, it is a tremendous challenge for us to occupy this space, but we want to be in this space of human dignity that not even the Black people that were born here have been allowed. So the work is double. I think that for us, as African people, the Blacks that were born in the diasporas, just as those that were born on the African continent, our challenge is to unite our struggles.

We know that, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 70% of Brazilian municipalities have a significant immigrant population. But only 5% of these municipalities have a policy for receiving and attending to immigrants. But there are organizations. There are always initiatives coming from immigrants themselves in order to redress this situation. There are immigrants creating companies, giving employment not only to immigrants, but also to Brazilians. That is to say, they're driving the national economy.

Cleber Ribeiro: What is it like becoming Black in Brazil, for you? How do you see this process?

Vensam Iala: I really like the term that you used, that of 'becoming Black.' This is really important to say because, I, as a Guinea-Bissauan subject, as a Balanta subject, which is my language as a subject from the Kuntoé/Nhakra clan, these are the qualities that represent me as a subject. In fact, this is very important to say, because I don't introduce myself as Vensam from Guinea Bissau. I introduce myself with my last name, which is the last name of my lineage, and that already says a lot about who I am. I was shaped in that social environment, in that form of interpersonal relationship with people. Here in Brazil, I have to arrive in a different way.

I had a bit of an identity crisis because I recognized myself as Black here in Brazil and, as if that was not enough, I recognized this as a problem. In my country, we never stop to think about this. There is the fact that the country is made up of Black people, completely Black, so, after our independence, all of the institutions were occupied by Black people. With this, the power-making decisions concerning Black people were also taken by Black people. My references are Black people, different from the process that you see here in Brazil. It's that I am here in a country where I have come to recognize myself at the same time that people's looks tell me that this place may not be mine.

And I come from a place in which my self-esteem, and I mean in a general form, is very high.

It is very forward. I am a person that looks forward and goes. I was educated in this logic of seeking out what I want. But Brazilian society, in my experience, does not permit my people the right to be just a person or a boy, because they will always add that you are a person or a boy, but you are Black. This, obviously, brings us to a different place.

Cleber Ribeiro: What is the importance of the right to housing for immigrants from African countries?

Vensam Iala: This question of housing is very important because it is one of the central points that afflicts the immigrants here, together with the question of documentation and work. For the majority of immigrants, it seems that we live at the margin of society. I say at the margin of society because if you do not have work, you do not have documentation and it is difficult to find work. And it goes without saying that without work you end up living in vulnerable situations.

Our community, that of Guinea-Bissauans, the majority live in peripheral zones, far from the center of the city, because that is the condition that many find. I have been through situations in which I have called an owner and attempted to rent a house, in the city center, in a central area, and have heard “no,” because they didn’t want an African immigrant. An imaginary has been built that created this immigrant, this African subject in a place of danger, of fear. People have a double fear of the guy that is Black and African.

There are many protests for policies that seek to concede documentation for immigrants that are said to be illegal. This is so that they may find work, but that they may also find housing. Many African and Bolivian immigrants — and I even think that Bolivians are the largest immigrant community here in Brazil — are in occupation movements. It seems that that’s what’s left.

There is a movement of groups of immigrants from the University of São Paulo (USP), that’s called Fronteiras Cruzada. There is ProMigra, the Project for the Promotion of Immigrants Rights, and the extension courses at the USP Law School.

The other week [July 15, 2020], we were at an occupation at the Popular Housing Collective (COHAB) of Carapicuíba and had brought food parcels that came from the Landless Workers Movement (MST). In this community, there were Bolivians, Guineans, Angolans, Haitians. There really is a network in motion, but these networks need to be strengthened. And we decided there that this government is not one that gives us hope for this to happen.

Caritas here in São Paulo developed important work for receiving immigrants. The city of São Paulo also concentrates 50% of the immigrant population in Brazil.

Cleber Ribeiro: How do you see the right to health for immigrants from the Americas in the context of the pandemic?

Vensam Iala: I think that everything is only getting worse in the context of the pandemic. There was one very symbolic case of an immigrant from Haiti that was pregnant and went to the hospital and was not attended to. They just wouldn't give her care, despite all of her documentation. Her husband recorded a video denouncing the case, but the person, the nurse, simply did not want to attend to her because there were Brazilian people to attend to. The SUS public health system is the system that practically all immigrants use here. And it is a health system that needs public policy to strengthen it, because SUS has saved the lives of many people.

If I don't have the right to come here, to have documentation here, to find housing here, to work here, imagine my right to health. Health, housing, and access to work are basic rights. And it is this that the system denies us. Because they are white people that are occupying this place. So they don't accept offering care to Black people, to immigrant people who have come from the Americas. A great deal of medical negligence has taken place during this pandemic.

We had one case of a girl that had obstetric negligence, and there we can bring in another element of what happens, historically, here in Brazil. Obstetric negligence of Black women in this country. It happened with a woman at the moment of birth, and she was not given anesthesia, which complicated the process. Now she can't even walk. It is a very, very

complicated case and there is no documentation. She could have brought it to court, but she would need immigration documents to make an official complaint.

I think that it is important to say in this context of the pandemia, that “Africa is not a test lab.” Historically, the African continent, the peoples of the Africas, were literally used for testing. We have reports of histories of many other viruses that were created in European labs and were brought to the African continent. It is not by chance that a French doctor suggested testing Africans to find a vaccine for Covid-19. This has happened since the turn of the 20th century. This needs to be said, because this issue of the pandemic, what is happening at this moment, they are using peoples from the Africas to test their vaccines. This is happening even in Guinea-Bissau. Miguel de Barros got into this fight with the Guinea-Bissauan government when they permitted research for the polio vaccine. It is important that we talk about this, really, because the West sees an African continent. It sees Blacks as animal subjects, animals that only serve for their research. Now, it is important for us, as Africans, to begin to think about our agenda. How do we confront this?

We have to begin to give value to that which we produce, to think about our health through the ancient forms that we have forgotten. They destroyed them. They said that our ancient ways of treating ourselves were outdated. I believe wholeheartedly that we can treat all illnesses with natural medicines. This was the way of life for the peoples of the Africas.

Daniel Martins: Zukiswa Wanner, founder of the AFROLIT Sans Frontieres Festival, often speaks about how Africa is read around the world and what is being written. There is a universality in the writing in the Africas, which is enormous. Ben Okri said that “Africa is writing and Africa is prospering.” So what is the message that you would transmit to the African immigrant community and to Brazilian society so that they reconsider their perspective on what they do not know or they ignore?

Vensam Iala: I’d like to bring up a few of the thinkers that did so much before me so that I could be here today. I wanted to bring up the thoughts of Nah Dove, of Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Julius Kambarage Nyerere of Tanzania, Samora Moises Machel of Mozambique, and Abdias Nascimento, Dandara, and so many others. Many allowed me to be here today in this conversation. That is to say, these people are not here in this physical

field with us, but spiritually they are. Their ideas are here with us. There is nothing new about what we are doing. We are only pushing, resisting with these ideas that they planted, brought from their ancestors, their past, that we are now continuing. That is to say: these Africas exist in us. All of us. *existem em nós, todos nós.*

And this Africa has not died. This Africa lives and produces. As you said so well, we need to show, to expose, to permit that these Africas flourish. So, there is a message from Padre Antônio Vieira in the context of Brazil, he said that “Brazil has its soul in Africa and its body in the Americas. As long as it does not permit its soul to flourish, it will not be the Brazil that it wishes to be.” I think that this is very important. In the context of Brazil, it is necessary to really contemplate this concept of universality that we have. This universal concept that Africa has its place.

In this context of the pandemic, everyone needs to be at home and everyone needs to take great care. We have to think about each other, about our neighbors. And this, for us, is nothing new. This is the African way of life. This is the way of living in the Africas. This is Ubuntu. And Ubuntu is not just “I am because we are,” though the philosophy often ends up being reduced to this philosophy. Ubuntu is one of the African philosophies that is most known in Brazil and the rest of the world, but it is one that needs to be fully explored — not just conceptually, but in practice.

My self-care, the way in which I see myself... I will only be able to see myself once I am able to go further and see others. That’s the practice. A well-being, a self-care that works for the collective well-being. So, I no longer do things for me, I do things because, beyond me, there are many others. I will only act, and my part will only be effective from the moment in which I think about others, and not the other way around. That is what the pandemic is teaching us. To see one another.

transcription:
Cynthia Rachel Pereira Lima