

# FROM HUT TO MONITOR: THE ELECTRIFICATION OF CHOKWE WALL MURALS IN ANGOLA, 1953-2006

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My concern in this paper is with the continuous reinscription of protocols of access to ghosts and ancestors of a mythic past. The digitization of “African” culture presently thematized by many African artists negotiates communalism in terms of “free” information technology and visibility/access, a postcolonial return to ancestors that overcomes colonial appropriations of “African” creativity.



Fig. 1. Page from José Redinha, *Paredes Pintadas da Lunda*. Lisboa: Companhia de Diamantes de Angola, 1953, n.p.



Fig. 2. Page from Gerhard Kubik, *Tusona—Luchazi Ideographs: A graphic tradition practiced by a people of West-Central Africa*. Wien: Föhrenau, 1987, 49.

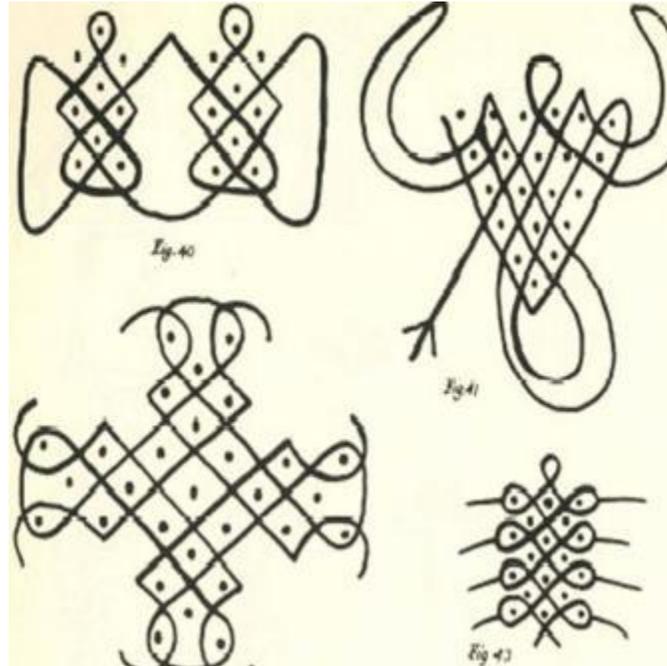


Fig. 3. Page from José Redinha, *Paredes Pintadas da Lunda* (Lisboa: Companhia de Diamantes de Angola, 1953), n.p.

In 1957, the Companhia de Diamantes de Angola [Diamang] completed a hydroelectric dam on the Luachimo River in northeastern Angola, in the Lunda North province. The dam was emblematic of Diamang's monumental presence and technical capacity that it meticulously developed throughout the twentieth century. Diamang was a mammoth diamond extraction company in Angola during the zenith of Portuguese colonial rule. By the 1950s, Diamang provided a large portion of funding to the colonial state seated in the capital of Luanda. It returned large profits to its Portuguese, Brazilian, American, and Russian investors. It was a "state within a state" with its own police force, radio station, museum, health services, and agriculture. Eighty percent of Diamang's workforce in the Lunda region was made up of the ethnic Chokwe group, a once powerful state that was defeated as the Portuguese made their final push into the interior of its massive colony. In this paper, the Luachimo Dam should come to symbolize the activity of mining an area for material and non-material resources, the transforming of matter into information and energy, and as being the catalyst of a disruption and enlargement of a feedback loop. It should represent the dual nature of the media used to inscribe and transmit Chokwe art: electrification and rationalism.

In 1953, Portuguese anthropologist José Redinha published a book on the topic of Chokwe wall murals, *Paredes Pintadas da Lunda* (Painted Walls of Lunda). Redinha was director of the Dundo Museum on Diamang's company compound and had for some time been interested in the murals; he was an artist and was fascinated by the murals' popular execution. He traveled around the immediate region and copied what he saw on the hut walls exactly, choosing paint in order to preserve the colors and even using the same pigments and binders as the Chokwe artists. Bertrand Brothers publishing house in Lisbon then printed the book using offset print and color plates. Since the company had no legal rights to sell the book, it was sent to academic libraries and museum collections worldwide.

In 2006, two online heritage projects were launched, both of which presented material digitized from Paredes. The Trienal de Luanda's website scanned the book's image plates as part of the online component of the first major contemporary art exhibition in Angola after the end of a devastating thirty year civil war. ITM Mining Ltd., a diamond company operating in Lunda North, launched [www.culturalunda-tchokwe.com](http://www.culturalunda-tchokwe.com), which used both the scanned images from Paredes and transcribed its text. Angolan artist and Trienal de Luanda director Fernando Alvim authored both projects. Each was presented as a type of heritage project dedicated to disseminating the indigenous cultural production of Angola to a wider public. The Trienal emphasized the artistic merit of the images as such, photoshopping out the characteristic signature that Redinha placed on all of his images, in order to return them to Chokwe authorship. No context was provided for the images other than the project's conceptual essay that proposed to correct the wrongs of Redinha's appropriation of Chokwe art, as he did not include the names of individual artists. ITM presented the anthropological content of Paredes. As the company operates in the Lundas, they declare on their website, "Tradition as we respect cultural values." ITM is of the progeny of Diamang that resulted from Angola's nationalization of the diamond industry following its independence in 1974. Both the Trienal de Luanda and ITM's website had an ethos of participation. The Trienal encouraged public interpretation of Chokwe aesthetics through its gallery, internet, and billboard exhibitions, while ITM's message board and online forum solicited feedback and exchange.

In 1987, Friedrich Kittler wrote his influential essay "Gramophone, Film, Typewriter" on the eve of the internet revolution. Among other things, Kittler describes erasure of distinctions between media types with the transition to fiberoptic cable transmission and the gradual electrification of media. On the issue of how meaning is generated within this relatively new standard of information, he writes, "quotidian data flow must be arrested before it can become an image or sign. What is called style in art is only the switchboard of these scannings and selections." [1] He then describes a type of information hierarchy as a natural outcome of re-mediation, where one medium ghosts another through its obsolescence and related changes to our senses. Kittler's analysis dissects a process that is often regarded as a natural progression: the alphabetic monopoly of print media to the eventual triumph of electricity-based digital information.

I want to bring in a different aspect to Kittler's theory of media, one that accounts for both the historical contingencies of mediation and also to the blind spots in descriptions of its infiltration. In colonial situations, the abstraction of information that develops with mediation is inextricably bound up with extraction of materials such as diamonds, achieved as it was most often through coerced labor and societal violence. Consider, for instance, that one Diamang official could call the project to record folk songs "Song Service" in order to match it with the labels Mines Service, Construction Service, and Health Service. [2] Each of these was a piece of a total project of control over bodies and life in the Lundas. It would be inaccurate, therefore, to claim that the implementation of media conditions were universally experienced or, for that matter, inevitable.

The Dundo Museum was part of Diamang's project termed "Scientific Colonialism". The museum compound was a laboratory of Life found in the Lundas and must be seen as synonymous with Diamang's labor practices. The effort that materialized the diamonds, the book, the museum, the folk music records, and indeed the hydroelectric dam, all capitalized what Diamang extracted from Lunda North. Here, not only were the Chokwe, in the crassest of interpretations, considered matter, or the "real," but the idea of the real was itself developed within the logic of the media they used. The conditions that Diamang established were coterminous with the electrification of production and the ephemeralization of information.

In the case of colonialism in Africa, the ghosting of indigenous media practices was not an unfortunate consequence of colonial rule, as most scholars of the time understood it, but rather an intentional divestment of indigenous populations of power by participation. The now common knowledge that Europe created the notion of Africa as practicing unchanging traditions amounted to the limited definition of medium in Africa to that of objects and performances as emblems of superstitious practices. Under that logic, they had to remain static. One must look no further than the statement by Julio de Vilhena, who claimed that the Chokwe had a tendency to adopt music “other than the traditional, and withhold from the traditional the value and importance attributed to it by his ancestors.” [3] He goes on to argue that Diamang must “[show] him the value of his folklore, by inducing him to cultivate it regularly” by providing them with positive encouragement. [4] Vilhena even suggests that the whites clap for the natives after performances, a type of feedback that indicates paternalism, where Chokwe art and performance is not an open system, but rather artifactual data in a control system. There were, then, implications of the process of etching voice into “fragile stock[s] of virgin discs...in the tropics” beyond just ghosting certain sense perceptions through transformations in media. [5]

One such mnemonic and oral practice based on participation and permutation with the Chokwe is called “sona,” a type of drawing that appeared in the murals that Redinha copied. Authors variously define lusona (plural of sona) as mnemonic devices, symbols, pictograms, ideograms, and mathematical formulae. Chokwe terminology for the practice has not allowed for an open interpretation for outside scholars, either as a matter of fact or because of purposeful concealment of specialized knowledge. That is, sona is a code. In its formalized practice, only the male elders had the specialized knowledge of the algorithms and knew their relationship to the various tales, figures, and behavioral instruction. Therefore, within Chokwe society, lusona represent the hierarchal structure of access to knowledge, resources, and contact with the ancestors.

The word sona can indicate the name of the practice or the finished visual symbol. The process by which lusona are drawn in the sand is formulaic, as is the format of the resulting images, though they can be embellished. The akwa kuta sona, the elder maker of the drawing who is usually in his fifties or sixties, finds a patch of ground and smoothes it to make a clear drawing surface. He begins the drawing by impressing dots with the tips of his fingers. These dots form a grid structure in which the dots are carefully plotted equidistant from one another, measured by the distance between the fingers. (see fig. 1)

After the akwa kuta sona has plotted the grid specific to the sona, he begins to draw an unbroken line around the dots. He circumnavigates each of the dots quickly and precisely, creating an even and symmetrical lattice pattern. [6] They can be enlarged or diminished according to the operating algorithm. Given their performative nature, there is great pressure on the akwa kuta sonas to execute the drawings perfectly. Mistakes are often marked by laughter or a quiet sarcasm. [7] For that reason, sona is a popular pastime for Chokwe and a favorite activity as men pass through each other’s villages. It is a social event, a conventional way to disseminate information and to reinforce the social code. Crucial for the current discussion, however, is that sona allows for innovation based on new iterations of standard algorithms.

Increasingly, scholars of lusona have explicated the range of algorithmic operations involved, concluding that it is at once a specialized mental activity, a body of shared knowledge, and a recursive operation. They are not only, as Redinha constructs them in his book, a repository of forms. The morphing of resulting figures and images is facilitated by the simplicity of sona’s building blocks, the line and dot. The drawing’s value lies in the mastery of an operation that lays bare a clear binary code by which the resulting image, whether representational or not, is an outcome of an operation and is not *a priori* visual.

Thus, sona involves both mnemonics for the memorization of form and also the development of operational logic. Because of this, sona performs a social function in excluding certain members of the community from restricted physical and intellectual spaces, while it can also be a purely ludic activity. It was this ludic aspect of the images that Redinha was interested in, as he was driven to discover the “soul” of the Chokwe people.

Redinha’s *Paredes Pintadas da Lunda* compiled the finished visual figures of sona that were painted by non-practitioners on the huts. (fig. 2) Redinha found vernacular interpretations of lusona, the optical “interface” of lusona. Because of his interest in non-professional art and his preconceived social biases, he ignored the operational aspects of sona drawing. Redinha’s book, its format and its logic, re-semantized the symbols to act as identifiable cultural characteristics. The Social Darwinist model through which Redinha reads sona drawing, from rock art to ethno-cultural symbol, speaks to the ultimate irrelevance of Chokwe logic within Portuguese colonial occupation.

Sona is also the Chokwe word for writing and likewise a code that enacts a bi-directional mediation with the real, of which the ancestors are a part. Sona mediates access to their power, the acknowledgement of their continued presence in the world, and the methods to influence their decisions. Sona incorporates feedback into its political and cultural message, but also refers to itself as a system. Additionally, sona is a medium with its own history of imperializing previous media. Representational and mediatic colonization, in fact, was integral to the Chokwe 19th century expansion.

Diamang’s by then anachronistic project of Scientific Colonialism not only codified life itself in Chokwe territory, but its policies also forced a separation between their intellectual and physical labor. As water passed through the Luachimo Dam, the Chokwe body passed through Diamang’s health services, educational reform, sports, and displays of culture. Both the dam and book conceptualize Africa as a resource holding energy that can be used, circulated, and stored, much like the raw diamond is transformed into a financial commodity. The electrification of lusona rerouted their feedback loop across oceans and into global finance, discourses of Africa, primitivism, anthropology, and art history.

Kittler writes of the societal correlations of media logic: “Mouths and graphisms dropped into prehistory. Otherwise, events and their stories could not have been connected. The commands and judgments, the announcements and prescriptions that gave rise to mountains of corpses—military and juridical, religious and medical—all went through the same channel that held the monopoly on the descriptions of those mountains of corpses.” [8] Kittler’s “channel” emphasizes the specificity of the mode of transmission and the type of information suited to the communication circuit. Algorithms animated by the dam and the division of labor in Diamang’s production line were of the same order that Redinha’s book was published under: typeset, offset printing, serial pages, etc.

The Luachimo hydroelectric dam in the 1950s in many ways already prefigured the death of mechanization and of Redinha’s book. As an effect of electricity, hardware, and code, Chokwe art is information within the Trienal de Luanda Lunda Tchokwe and ITM Cultura Tchokwe re-mediation projects. The death of Redinha’s book performed by the websites is analogous to the transition from archive to database. Chokwe art so configured is morphological and, accordingly, can be directed to very different ends. One site thematizes a correction of the wrongs of Angola’s colonial past through aesthetic participation. The other declares a diamond company’s dedication to its neighbors and workers, which only thinly veils the continued violence of the industry. Given my previous argument that colonialism is embedded in the very DNA of media, what are the protocols of power and access to the ancestors (read history) today?

Both sites share the same author, code, basic format, and mode of transmission. Both depend on a functional electric grid, hardware, and access to Redinha's book and the web, all of which are tenuous in Angola. The images and text on both sites are syntactically propelled forward as they were in *Paredes*. The hypertextual progression through the images and information has no direct indexical relationship to the sand or hut, and serves to veil the relationship to its infrastructure. The images and information on both websites are purely optical manifestations of labyrinthine protocological operations. As Redinha's book displayed the optical effects of sona, effectively veiling the protocols of sona production, so does the monitor embody ludic capitalism, spectrifying the bodies and matter on the other side of the electrified interface.

### **References and Notes:**

1. Friedrich Kittler, "Gramophone, Film, Typewriter," *October* (Summer 1987): 104.
2. Julio de Vilhena, "A Note on the Dundo Museum of the Companhia de Diamantes de Angola," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* (1955): 42.
3. *Ibid.*, 41.
4. *Ibid.*, 41.
5. *Ibid.*, 43. In a topic for further discussion, it should be pointed out that Africa has continued to feel the effects of the globalization of information and media in the extraction and disposal of raw materials for hardware. Among other examples, see the impact of coltan mining in the Congo and computer waste disposal in Nigeria.
6. The type and existence of symmetry in lusona can vary according to the type of drawing. See Paulus Gerdes, *Sona Geometry: Reflections on the Tradition of Sand Drawings in Africa South of the Equator* (Maputo, Moçambique: Instituto Superior Pedagógico Moçambique, 1994).
7. Paulus Gerdes, *Sona Geometry: Reflections on the Tradition of Sand Drawings in Africa South of the Equator* (Maputo: Instituto Superior Pedagógico Moçambique, 1994): 14.
8. Friedrich Kittler (1987), 105.