Expressing Guineidade Through Lit/Orature: Semedo, Sila and their Meta-Narratives of Orality

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In studying African literatures one is often brought to consider the privileging of scribal, European-rooted literature over African oral culture, the latter of which has often been perceived pejoratively as a survival from a primitive past; the childlike state to the adulthood represented by its European counterpart, the pinnacle of cultural development. Ana Mafalda Leite reminds us of the importance of being conscious that these preconceptions about an inherent inferiority of non-European civilisations, as opposed to the superiority of European cultures, often work latently in our perception of African literatures and may distort our interrogations and conclusions. Further to conscious and unconscious presumptions of inferiority, African producers of literary works face the supposition that they dilute their oral heritage culture – the local – by moulding it to the scribal, global form.

As well as contending with this value judgement of cultures, writers must also broach the language dilemma, which has been most thoroughly discussed by Ngugi wa Thiong’o. He has questioned whether it is at all possible to write and pass on one’s own particular African culture in a second language, above all in the language of the oppressor:

African literature can only be written in African languages, that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class...By our continuing to write in foreign languages, pay homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says African cannot do without European languages?

This article will consider how the prose fiction of two Bissau-Guinean authors, Odete Semedo and Abdulai Sila, works through this cultural conflict to show how they succeed in upholding the local, their guineidade (“guinean-ness”, “guineity”), whilst writing in the “global” Portuguese language and written literary form. In talking of the expression of guineidade in lusophone literature

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4 Throughout this article Guinea-Bissau will also be referred to as Guinea, and its inhabitants as Guinean and Bissau-Guinean. This should not be confused with the neighbouring country the Republic of Guinea, which is not mentioned here.

5 All translations from Portuguese-language texts, unless otherwise stated, are my own.
from Guinea-Bissau one must look first to linguistic techniques, as a text written entirely in a language of which only sixteen per cent of the population are speakers, and far less readers, is a questionable assertion of national identity. This article will argue that these authors reinforce the sense of guineidade carried in their works of fiction not only through linguistic and formal appropriation but also with the structuring of prose as literature to construct a meta-narrative of orality. Existing critical readings of these authors, the primary foci of which have been linguistic and thematic expressions of guineity, will be used as a starting point from which this article will move on to consider their common use of a meta-narrative of the Guinean culture of orality and storytelling.

**Guineidade and Orality**

The most widely spoken language in Guinea-Bissau, Crioulo, often called crioulo guineense in Portuguese globally, was brought about by the colonial contact between Portuguese and African languages, and facilitated communication between lusophone merchants and Africans, as much as between different African groups.⁶ It became widespread during the anti-colonial war, functioning as a unifying force logistically and culturally, bringing communities of various ethnicities closer, and mobilising thousands to the nationalist cause.⁷ It served to support anti-colonialism and guineidade, reinforced by and in turn reinforcing Amílcar Cabral’s National Culture.⁸ Cabral’s ideology was governed by the concept that an oppressed nation’s culture lies at its core, and is ‘the seed of protest’.⁹ He argued that total colonial rule and oppression relied on the destruction of the culture of the oppressed party, yet that that very imposition of colonial culture would eventually be met with rejection. This consequently fostered an increased assertion, by the oppressed, of their own culture – an assertion that preceded liberation struggle. Therefore, Cabral argued, when a population asserts its national culture, those people collectively assert the strength of the nation and may rise with greater force against the oppressor. The function of Crioulo as a symbolic, as well as a highly employable cultural element, became paramount to Cabral’s cultural politics. The linguistic predominance of Crioulo in Guinea-Bissau and the nationalist cause were mutually beneficial. Indeed, Filomena Embaló cites the spread of nationalism as the principal factor in spreading the language as far as possible.¹⁰

According to Russell Hamilton, the influences of Crioulo on Portuguese are most apparent lexically and phonetically, although most Crioulo words do have a Portuguese origin.¹¹ He goes on to explain the functions of the two: ‘a língua portuguesa funciona como um instrumente necesario e útil, perem transatório e sem a capacidade de exprimir os sentimentos etnoculturais inerentes ao crioulo’, (‘the Portuguese language functions as a necessary and useful tool, nevertheless it is

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¹¹ Hamilton, Literatura.
transitory and lacks the capacity to express the ethnocultural sentiments inherent to Crioulo’), or, perhaps better said, those inherent to guineidade. Hamilton’s use of the word Crioulo to mean Guinean could be said to be problematic. Though the most widely spoken, Crioulo is by no means the only non-European language used in Guinea-Bissau which, Embaló wrote in 2008, is home to more than two dozen autochthonous languages and ethnic groups. As the present article will note in the specified texts, to talk of that which is culturally Guinean is to talk of much more than that which is Crioulo, and the two terms are not interchangeable in referring to the culture, language, and people of Guinea-Bissau. Nevertheless, Embaló greatly values Crioulo as a cornerstone of Guinean national identity, arguing that the language was the foundation of the national identity that brought about the end of colonialism and helped establish the inter-ethnic cooperation and peace that the country arguably enjoys today.

For these reasons I have chosen to discuss the prevalence of guineidade: a web of cultural identities and their respective and combined expressions existing alongside and not threatened by Crioulo, which emerge in the literature studied here.

Within the field of study of Portuguese-language African literatures, Guinea-Bissau has received far less attention than the more literarily active Angola, Mozambique, and Cabo Verde. Several general critical volumes on Portuguese-language African literature have been published since the late colonial period, however they have generally suffered from a lack of available material on Guinea-Bissau. Only a small handful of lengthy works have been published that focus entirely on Guinean literature and bring their predecessors of the wider lusophone community up to date. Most notably, these include the works of Moema Parente Augel, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, and Odete Costa Semedo.

Given the sparseness of the field, Guinea-Bissau fiction has featured more commonly as the subject of journal articles and, increasingly, theses. In their rich potential for interpretation and socio-historical analysis, Sila’s novels, particularly A Última Tragédia, are cited most commonly and are often analysed as narratives of the nation and explorations of national identity through the colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary periods. Nágila Sana and Ana Kaimote begin to explore

12 Ibid., p. 229.
14 Embaló, ‘Crioulo’.
18 F. Frascina, Gendering the Nation: Women, Men and Fiction in Guinea-Bissau, MPhil Thesis (University of
the above-mentioned novel’s qualities of linguistic and historical narrative transgression in their highly interesting but unfortunately brief article. However, discussion on the prevalence of orality in Sila’s novels is limited to this linguistic transgression and his use of unexplained Crioulo vocabulary, as will be evidenced below. The present article will advance from these established points on the guineidade of Sila’s fiction to demonstrate that his novels can also be found to be strongly rooted in the oral tradition through his complicating of the confines of the roles of author and reader with the notions of narrator-speaker and listener-participant, and that, in doing so, they create a meta-narrative of orality.

Regarding the work of Odete Semedo, critical focus has remained mostly on her poetry. Where scholars have discussed her short stories, it is her translation to the page of the formal qualities and narrative elements of the oral tradition within the stories that takes precedence. These important preliminary perspectives will be discussed below, and I will expand upon this established discussion to highlight the significance of what we can read around, as well as within, Semedo’s stories. As I will demonstrate, surrounding her transcribing of stories remembered from and inspired by the Guinean oral tradition, Semedo, like Sila, constructs a meta-narrative of the oral tradition in all its guineidade.

Odete Semedo’s Sonéá: Histórias e Passadas que Ouvi Contar I and Djênia: Histórias e Passadas que Ouvi Contar II are two volumes of a collection with each containing five short stories. The content of the stories, the themes approached, and the linguistic and narrative strategies employed in them are solidly framed within the oral tradition, as the author herself affirms: ‘Os contos aqui apresentados, inspirados, na sua maioria, nos contos tradicionais que ouvi contar, revelam sem dúvida a cultura da oralidade, a cultura do contar e cantar histórias que corre na veia africana em geral, e na guineense em particular’, (‘The tales presented here, most of them inspired by the traditional tales that I’ve heard told, reveal without doubt the culture of orality, the


20 See Augel, A Nova Literatura; Augel, O Desafio; Ribeiro and Semedo, Literaturas.
22 O. Semedo, Sonéá: Histórias e Passadas que Ouvi Contar I (Bissau: INEP, 2000). The second part of this title translates as ‘Stories and Tales that I’ve Heard Told’. The word passada is a Crioulo word.
23 O. Semedo, Djênia: Histórias e Passadas que Ouvi Contar II (Bissau: INEP, 2000).
Francesca Frascina:  
Expressing Guineidade Through Lit/Orature: Semedo, Sila and their Meta-Narratives of Orality

culture of telling and singing stories which runs through the veins of Africa, and of Guinea in particular). Their novels by Abdulai Sila, to be considered here through the lens of guineidade, lit/orature, and the meta-narrative of orality, are A Última Tragédia and Mistida. A Última Tragédia follows the life of a supposedly cursed girl, Ndani, from childhood in service to a Portuguese colonialist couple, through her arranged marriage to an elderly but revered village leader, her ostracism from the community upon his demise for which she is blamed, and on to a briefly happy stage in her life as a mother and wife, before the hand of colonial corruption takes it all away from her. Mistida presents a much more abstract narrative of a post-colonial Guinea-Bissau marred by corruption and greed, its people struggling to see what the bloodshed of the anti-colonial war was actually in aid of. However, it is not the narratives of these novels that are key to the present argument. My concern lies in the epilogue of the former and the conclusion of the latter where Sila intriguingly attempts to alter the way in which the reader might perceive his narrative. He deems it unfixed and even unreliable. He disputes many of the perceived facts of his novel, events that the western reader might well assume to be unchangeable and unquestionable facts purely on the basis that the author chose to record or create them this way.

Guineidade and Lit/Orature through Language and Theme

Within the corpus of critical work on Semedo’s fiction, the highly prevalent traits of orality are the most commonly studied aspect. As Augel affirms in her preface to Sonéá, Semedo has a forceful ability to fuse many aspects of the oral tradition form to the written, employing formal, thematic, and contextual methods of doing so. Moreover, Augel also observes how, although Semedo writes mostly in Portuguese, she avoids the risks of weakening the richness of the tradition she seeks to transmit by including a wealth of vocabulary and expressions from numerous Guinean languages, helpfully assisting readers with an extensive, albeit not all-encompassing, glossary. These range from every day nouns such as ‘kriason – educação; criação’ (education, up-bringing) to familial words such as ‘Garandi – velho; idoso; grande’ (old person, elder, senior), to words denoting flora and fauna, ‘Madronha – raiz medicinal’ (medicinal root), ‘Santchu – macaco’ (monkey, ape). She also informs readers about words for a great range of topics such as foodstuffs, jewellery, onomatopoeic expressions, and proverbs as they appear in her stories. In the Author’s Note, Semedo counts the use of five native Guinean languages in addition to Crioulo. Their inclusion, she confirms, is entirely intentional, sometimes for the pleasure of reading these languages printed alongside Portuguese, in some cases because the power of their usage and the idiomatic value that they bring to her work cannot be translated, and in others because of the symbolic and traditional weight they carry. As a reflection of the deeply interwoven threads of the different ethnicities that make up the fabric of Guinea-Bissau, the languages combine to form a literary picture of the cooperative multi-lingualism

24 Semedo, Sonéá, p. 19.
26 A. Sila, Mistida (Bissau: Ku Si Mon Editora, 1997).
27 Augel, ‘Préfacio’.
28 Ibid.
30 Semedo, Sonéá, p. 20.
present in the country, as well as inscribing the languages with literary potential. Semedo also explains that the names of the characters featured in the stories go well beyond being nouns used to identify individuals but give those who know the language access to additional meanings that form part of the story itself: ‘Amison na Bai é aquele que sozinho consegue os seus intentos’ (‘Amison na Bai is he who goes it alone to get what he wants’); ‘tia Abokubim é aquela que veio sem ter sido chamada’ (‘auntie Abokubim is she who comes without being called’), ‘tio Kilin é único’ (‘uncle Kilin is unique’), ‘Butokan tocaste-me.’ (‘Butokan you touched me’).31 Language and naming thus form further textual strategies of transferring oral features to the scription.

Furthering her stories’ sense of orality, Semedo inserts short refrains of song or poetry, some in Crioulo followed by Portuguese, which mimic this facet of oral performance. The young girl of the title story of the second volume, Djênia, who is buried under a tree by her fairytale-esque wicked stepmother, is discovered by her father when he hears her singing from under the ground.32

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cavalinhu di nha papé</th>
<th>Cavalinho do meu pai</th>
<th>Daddy’s horsey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ka bu nhemen nha kabelu</td>
<td>Não comas o meu cabelo</td>
<td>Don’t you eat my hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreza nteran bibu</td>
<td>Andreza enterrou-me viva</td>
<td>Andreza buried me alive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabia di un figuera</td>
<td>Por causa de um figo</td>
<td>Because of a fig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasarinhu já levô...</td>
<td>Passarinho já levou...</td>
<td>Little bird already took it...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levô... levô...</td>
<td>Levou... levou...</td>
<td>Took it... Took off...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another story, “Aconteceu em Gã-Biafada”, tells of the elopement of Saliu and Lamarana who must listen out for the following song to be called by the messenger bird Se n’ah n’ah:33

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Se n’ah... Se n’ah, Se n’ah...</th>
<th>Se n’ah... Se n’ah, Se n’ah...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Este é o meu destino</td>
<td>This is my destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantar na calada da noite</td>
<td>Singing in the hush of night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrego nas asas</td>
<td>I carry on my wings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O peso da desgraça</td>
<td>The weight of shame</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This inclusion serves as more than a nod to oral performance because it encourages the reader to alter the way they read the text. Reading song or poetry as an interruption to prose can bring the reader to instil their internal reading voice with rhythm and even their own imagined tune. It can have the effect of slowing down their reading and adding to the atmosphere built up by the prose.

Oliveira cites Doralice Alcoforado’s doctoral thesis in identifying five key narrative elements of the traditional conto (story, tale) which all feature in Sonéá and Djênia: 1) The changing of people into animals, anthropomorphism of animals; 2) the use of behavioural models such as the wise elderly person or the impatient youth; 3) the expression of moral values; 4) The use of people as analogies for values such as the bourgeois, the European, the African, the young or the old, etc.; 5) that action predominates over description.34 Lilian Serra e Deus further expands upon the cultural

31 Ibid., p. 20.
32 Semedo, Djênia.
34 D. Alcoforado, Belas e Fera Baianas: Um Estudo do Conto Popular (Salvador: Fundação Pedro Calmon, 2008),
significance of certain narrative aspects: “Dois Amigos”, she notes, celebrates the value of ancestry, a theme similarly featured in “A Morte do Filho do Régulo Niala”, which principally communicates the weight of premonition in the Guinean oral tradition. Furthermore, the cultural significance of relationships between the living and the dead is explored while the unfamiliar reader is introduced to many aspects of traditional Guinean culture. Semedo uses her plots to describe in great detail the ceremonies, sacrifices, foods, special fabrics, and social expectations of funerals – including interaction between catholic, colonial remnants, and traditional practices – without ever appearing encyclopaedic or overly factual.

Having enjoyed much wider publication, Abdulai Sila’s novels have received much more critical attention than Semedo’s short stories, yet very little of that focus has centred on orality or the related guineidade of the texts. The novels are imbued with such figurative and allegorical depth, containing such a wealth of social and historical comment, that the few scholars who do work on Guinea-Bissauan literature have so far, understandably, been otherwise preoccupied. This lack of criticism on the orality of the text could, on the other hand, arguably be an example of the western privileging of written literary culture discussed above. The novel format may trick Eurocentric critics into slipping into a certain comfort zone where consideration of the orality or non-classically novel-esque elements of literature are unconsciously overlooked when that literature comes in the novel format. Then again, these aspects are not as forthcoming as they are in Semedo’s collection. In considering the prevalence of orality and the prominence of Guinean culture in Sila’s three novels, Augel has examined the very natural way in which Sila peppers the prose and dialogue of the novels with Guinean vocabulary and expressions, although A Última Tragédia is interestingly the only novel of the three to have a glossary for the international readership. Many of the chapter titles in the novel Mistida are in Crioulo and go untranslated – Timba, Muntudu, Kambansa – to name a few. Furthermore, Augel notes, Sila makes great use of both modern and traditional cultural references that link the text to Guinean culture, even where no country is referred to and which in order to understand one must be ‘a par do código da cultura guineense’ (‘privy to Guinean cultural codes’). He talks of djambakus and yrans – important references to traditional medicine and faith – whilst moving toward the present through frequent reference to Volvo cars, as cultural symbols of power, and to Cicer, a national beer manufacturer founded by the Portuguese. Augel explains that klandô was the name for a local bar in the immediate post-liberation period and that soco de baixo is the Portuguese pronunciation of the Crioulo expression suku di bas, meaning money exchanged for corrupt ends. This linguistic lilt, an accent to the prose and dialogue in Sila’s novels, grants prestige to the common language of Guinea-

cited in Oliveira, ‘Sonéá: Exaltação’.
35 Semedo, Sonéá.
36 Ibid.
37 L.P. Serra e Deus, A Língua, pp. 81-82.
38 Augel, Nova Literatura.
39 Ibid., p. 354.
40 Djambakus – traditional healer, medicine man, witch doctor; yrans – ancestral spirits.
41 Augel, Nova Literatura, p. 354
42 Ibid.
Bissau by subverting the formal Portuguese in which he was educated and of which he makes use. Thus, Sila firmly and proudly foregrounds the guineidade of his work and culture.

Expressing Guineidade through Lit/Orature: Meta-Narratives of Orality

As this article demonstrates, within Guinean oral literary cultures, stories do not have owners, fixed titles, set endings, concrete beginnings and conclusions, or set chronologies – their flexibility is an accepted norm, if not an inherent characteristic. Conversely, western fiction is historically rooted in the idea that a work is a fixed, unchangeable piece belonging to one author; a masterpiece over which only he or she has rights.

What the author writes the reader has traditionally accepted as an intrinsic, unchangeable part of that authored work and if one wishes to adapt, contradict, or renew it, the work is recreated and attributed to a new name; thus authorship has historically functioned. Only within the last half-century with the emergence of post-modernism and reception theory have western novelists begun to question the concept referred to by Barthes as ‘the Author-God’, interrogating this notion of the written word as a fixed truth – and the contributions of African writers to this process should not be underestimated. The steadfastly oral root of African literary culture allows this questioning to be a much more accessible and recognisable, indeed expected, concept. The interrogation of the narrator is a common facet of oral literature and performance across Africa, though the transfer to print may appear to dilute this. As Finnegan affirms:

> It is true that many collections of African stories give the impression of fixity just because they have been written down and printed. But in fact, in most African cases that have been fully examined, this variability of tales according to the teller and the occasion is one of their most apparent characteristics.

In her introduction to Semedo’s collection of short stories, Augel explains that in Guinean oral tradition, ‘As estórias nunca são repetidas de forma rígida ou fixa, havendo sempre algum toque pessoal ou imprevisto, dependendo do momento e da personalidade de quem as conta e do próprio público, indispensavelmente interagente’ (‘Stories are never repeated rigidly or in a fixed form, always including some personal or improvised touch, depending on the situation and the personality of the storyteller and their audience, who play a fundamentally interactive role’). Every person who tells a story must tell it differently or, as they say in Guinea-Bissau, they must ‘pôr sal’ – add salt.

Semedo expands this in the Author’s Note to both volumes, explaining the term used in their title: ‘Ouvi Contar’ stems from the Guinean culture of ‘N obi kuma’ (‘ouvi dizer’ – ‘I heard [it] said’; ‘I heard [it] told’), which enables the telling of stories, gossip, and rumours to be a passive, receptive act in order that the story’s author remain anonymous. These stories are often to do with

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44 As a European scholar considering the ways in which these African literary texts carry the mark of oral literary culture, it is important to acknowledge the cultural constructs that have shaped one’s reflections as an outsider.
mythical happenings, creatures, and foretelling yet their equal power to disseminate gossip, rumours, and anecdotes of a much more personal, every day nature is not any less significant, nor any less a part of the oral tradition. This fluidity and non-fixity of stories is foregrounded by both Sila and Semedo in the texts studied here. Both authors build around the narratives of the stories an additional, meta-narrative of the context in which the stories are, have been, or once were told.

Throughout Semedo’s stories in Sonéá and Djênia, there is an undoubtedly oral literary element that has been somewhat neglected by other critics. Semedo is able to construct a contextual meta-narrative of orality by using authorial paratexts, physically and figuratively providing an additional narrative which surrounds and intermingles with three of the contos. These paratexts consist of elements that are extraneous to the narrative of the stories themselves and add nothing to them but which allow the reader to associate the text with a specifically oral literary culture. The term paratext was coined by Gerard Genette – and most thoroughly explored in his aptly named 1987 volume Paratexts – to create a term with which to discuss ‘the liminal features that surround and cover the text’. Genette found these features to be important to public and readers’ perception and reception of texts – hence his description of them as thresholds rather than sealed borders – although they are often not the work of the author of the text itself. Although the second party paratexts of Semedo’s volume, such as the preface, introduction, and cover work, are important to consider and are made use of here, the present focus is the authorial paratexts that surround certain individual chapters of the collection to provide a narration of their telling; a meta-narrative of orality.

For the global readership this meta-narrative allows an introductory submersion into the tradition of Guinean orality, to the very social context in which we can expect these stories to have been voiced before their transfer into print. Through them the scene of storytelling is set. His context is key to communicating the guineidade of the stories. Indeed, Finnegan confirms in relation to the broader African context:

> Questions about the circumstances in which the narrations take place, their purpose and tone, the type of narrator and audience, the publicity or secrecy of the event, and, finally, even the style of the narration may be more crucial than questions about content and characters.

“Aconteceu em Gã-Biafada” begins with the author’s recollection of the context in which she used to hear this story told: “Naquele tempo...” começou a minha mãe a contar às crianças que estavam à sua volta. Eu fazia parte desse grupo', (“Once upon a time...” my mother began to tell to the children around her. I was one of that group’). The story proper then begins again, ‘Naquele tempo...’, (‘Once upon a time...’), and ends after five pages in the tragic death of a pair of young

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50 Genette, Paratexts.
51 Finnegan, Oral Literature, p. 366.
52 Semedo, Djênia, p. 20.
53 Ibid.
lovers escaping from the girl’s forced wedding. On the next page we return to the scene of an infant Semedo and other children listening to her mother, ‘Quando a minha mãe deu por terminada a história, reparou que estávamos todos com as faces molhadas de lágrimas’, (‘When my mother finished telling the story, she realised that all of our faces were wet with tears’). Her mother then gives the children the alternative ending to the story of Saliu and Lamarana, wherein the couple escape and go on to live happily ever after. As well as demonstrating the influential participation of the audience, the alternative ending also features a much longer narrative than the first and provides many more references to oral literary elements; the young couple come across a mysterious and magical old woman, they go through trials and must then await the messenger bird with the decision on their fate. This second version of events includes yet another traditional tale which explains the history of the messenger bird, Se n’ah-n’ah – whose song features above – a prince who was turned into the omen-bringing bird as a punishment for not keeping his family’s secrets and ruining their honour. Rather than conform to a rigid mode of storytelling and to one short story at a time, Semedo allows more than one version to combine fluidly, subject to the wills of their third party active audience. Encasing stories within stories, she brings together all these elements of the oral literary culture in one “chapter” of a written text, imbuing her writing with orality and guineity.

In two further contos of the collection, the voice of the active audience is presented as contextual paratext to the stories. In both cases, there is some squabbling between female speakers of varying ages over the telling of the story, and this might have varying intentions, depending on the readership one considers. For readers accustomed to the African oral tradition, Semedo simply places these written stories directly into the logical, traditional, social situation where they would originally have been told. For other readers, especially the foreign readership, these paratexts allow a glimpse into the tradition of African orality, to the very social context in which we can expect these stories to have been voiced before their transfer into print.

Moving on to “As Peripécias do Doutor Amison Na Bai”, one observes the importance of fluid genres to the Guinean oral story. In “Literatura, Língua e Cultura da Guiné-Bissau”, Hilder Honório do Couto and Filomena Embaló explore the fluidity of genre as an important element to the culture of storytelling in Guinea-Bissau. They examine the significance of rumours as a facet of Guinean culture where, when a story is told it mutates as it passes from person to person and village to village by word of mouth, its origin and verity equally lost in time. Semedo presents this fluidity of genre as a facet of Guinean oral literature as rumours, gossip, and anecdotes can equally become stories that people gather round to hear just like the more stereotypical tales of crafty, deceptive animals or messenger birds, which have been evolving for innumerable generations.

Parenthysising “As Peripécias do Doutor Amison Na Bai” is a discussion between two young women, Carla and Midana, who are disputing the verity of the story, in this case what one might refer to as an anecdote. Midana insists she heard it directly from o senhor administrador Candoncítio Québom – one of the people who feature in this story. Meanwhile, Carla doubts this. She thinks she may have heard it all before and worries that her friend might repeat it in exactly the same way, thus ‘correria o risco de [a história] ficar sem sal’, (‘she would run the risk of [the story] having no

54 Ibid., p. 27.
extra salt`). Semedo then interjects jovially, ‘Aliás, ficaram as duas furiosíssimas...Mas como nada pode impedir quem quer contar passada de o fazer, eis que...’ (‘So, the pair was furious...But as nothing can stop someone who wants to tell a passada [Crioulo – story] from doing it, here it is...’) and the story begins. Later in the story Semedo brings the reader back to the contextual narrative by letting the reader know that Midana has continued to speak as their friends were eager to listen to her.

A similar sort of discussion is presented as paratext to another conto of the collection where again two female speakers are quarrelling over the telling of the story. “A Lebre, o Lobo, o Menino e o Homem do Pote” (“The Hare, the Wolf, the Little Boy and the Pot Man”) is introduced by dialogue between two little girls, Kutchi and Cici, who are bickering over the title of the story, what happens, and who will get to tell it. Semedo’s paratextual narration then explains the prevalence and mutations of this tale, ‘Esta é mais uma das dezenas de histórias de lubu ki lebri que já ouvimos contar’. (‘This is yet another of the dozens of stories of lubu ki lebri [Crioulo: the wolf and the hare] that we’ve heard told’). She provides further social context explaining that the two girls have come to adore telling stories through listening to them, this particular one being heard at a djumbai (Convívio, serão, reunião – social gathering) in a village called Manganásia, ‘uma tabanca onde o passatempo dos mais velhos, ao cair da noite, é contar histórias às crianças’, (‘A tabanca [Crioulo: village] where at nightfall the elders always tell stories to the children’). At the end of Cici’s telling of the story Kutchi begins to argue with her again, and here Cici succinctly but most effectively summarises the philosophy of Guinean orature: ‘cada uma de nos ouviu como quis e conta como quer’, (‘Each of us heard it how we wanted and tell it how we want’).

In talking of the anthropological transcription of oral literature, Finnegan argues, ‘No written version, however accurate in language or translation, could hope to reproduce the real atmosphere of the actual narration’. However, as it has been shown here, these literary paratexts furnish this collection with a capacity that reaches much further than the fundamental recording of told stories, to provide a meta-narrative of orality: a narrative of the numerous elements of the oral tradition itself, of which the individual stories are just one feature among many, including the context of the telling, audience participation, the fluidity of the content, and a lack of ownership.

In the epilogue to A Última Tragédia and the final pages of Mistida, Abdulai Sila writes a meta-narrative of orality by drawing attention directly to his presence as the author-narrator who is also the storyteller, simultaneously rooting his novels, albeit written, internationally published novels, within the distinctly oral literary culture of Guinea-Bissau. In doing so, he relocates the author to be an intrinsic part of the story, as is the case in oral contexts with the telling of stories as

57 Semedo, Djênia, p. 40.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., p. 112.
62 Semedo, Djênia, p. 112.
63 Ibid., p. 134.
64 Finnegan, Oral Literature, p. 383.
a performance unique to each speaker. Sila comments in the epilogue to A Última Tragédia that where somebody might make an effort to tell a story exactly as they heard it without adding any salt, the audience may nevertheless remark that there was a fair bit of salt in it, or too much salt added, and others still will say it was all *kafumban* – full of lies (Crioulo) – and demand it be told truthfully with no salt added whatsoever. However, he states, stories without salt do not exist. As Semedo’s young narrator Cici announced, every listener will hear the story differently, interpret and remember it differently, and then go on to tell it in his or her own way. According to Finnegan, ‘there is seldom any concept of a “correct” version’. Sila brings this characteristic of *guineidade*, of local, oral literary culture into the printed, traditionally fixed, western literary form.

In the epilogue to A Última Tragédia the author attempts to alter the way in which the reader perceives his narrative, deeming it unfixed and unreliable. He disputes many of the events of his novel; happenings which a reader unaccustomed to the oral tradition may tend to assume to be unchangeable and unquestionable facts purely on the basis that the author chose to record or create them this way. He writes that other people tell this story differently and that the characters meet different fates depending on who is “narrating”, or “who said what”. To the reader rooted in western literary culture, the idea of adapting a novel just as one might, whether intentionally or accidentally, distort a piece of gossip or a rumour is completely unrelated to the experience of reading a novel. As Leite remarks, we assume the novel to be the conclusion of a process of development and resulting from the work of one sole author. Yet Sila brings these two cultural concepts to converge in his published work.

The novel begins when the young female protagonist, Ndani, is alienated from her community after a *djambakus*, a traditional healer or medicine man, proclaims that she is cursed and will bring misfortune to all those around her. His vision brings upon her a traumatic life marked by abuse, hardship, isolation and – of course – *tragédia* (tragedy), whose eventual matrimonial and maternal happiness is but temporary; quickly snatched away when colonial corruption condemns her husband to a life sentence on the penal colony São Tomé. Years later, still unable to deal with his absence, the narrative describes her throwing herself into the sea at the docks from which he was sailed. In the epilogue, Sila mimics a perfectly translatable gossipy tone to inform us that in Ndani’s hometown Biombo they say that the *Djambakus ‘disse que nunca disse o que se disse que ele disse’*, (‘said he never said what they said he said’); he claimed it was all a big misunderstanding, that in fact he really liked Ndani. Sila reports that some say Ndani did not die; they say the body found down the coast was that of another woman who had drowned in a paddy field and drifted out, and that Ndani actually went to São Tomé to be with her husband. But then again some say that she had now left São Tomé to go elsewhere, and she would not come back home until she was sure that no more *tragédias* would befall her beloved country. Thus he goes on to disturb further assumptions of truth created by his own narrative: he disputes the relationship between the two principal male characters and even contradicts the narrator’s salacious mention of one colonial Portuguese woman’s particular enjoyment of exposing herself to her young African male servant. By asking the reader to consider different perspectives, and possibly even to introduce yet more, the author also brings us to question narrative reliability in this novel as in others, bringing a refreshing way to read

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and doubt the narratives of all novels, as one accustomed to the Guinean culture of playing with stories and “adding salt” might do in the oral literary context as perhaps in the novelistic. This author evidently values the creative and ever-evolving nature of his national literature, a primarily and principally oral one, and uses his own creative power to give orality a place within the growing corpus of scribal national literature to which he is contributing. To quote Teresa Montenegro and Carlos de Morais in their collection of transcribed stories from Guinea-Bissau,

Sila reintroduces this dependency upon the reader to continue, direct, and alter the path of any story they come across.

At the end of Mistida, Sila once again draws attention to himself as narrator by placing himself as an acknowledged entity in the narrative. He again questions the validity of his role as supposed creator and owner of that which he narrates and calls us to question our acceptance of what is written by a writer of presumed fiction. At the close of the final chapter, two of the principal female characters of the trilogy berate him, calling him a djidiu di caneta—a Crioulo term roughly translated as a ‘pen-poet’, ‘pen-rhapsodist’, storyteller with a pen’, or ‘pen-singer’—for telling “their” story and thus dictating what happens to them. They complain that after Ndani had suffered all manner of pain throughout her life, when she finally found love this djidiu took it all away from her by writing the sad fate of her family. Moreover, he changedMbubi’s name to Mama Sabel between her feature in Eterna Paixã, 70 a previous novel of Sila’s, and Mistida, which she deems a good pinch of salt too far. Not to mention the fact that he was just (re-)writing a story which she had told him herself, as she cries. Ndani goes on to criticise him and his writer ilk further for ‘em vez de escreverem sobre os verdadeiros acontecimentos, relatar tal e qual as barbaridades que acontecem quase todos os dias neste terra e que de facto valem a pena por no papel, não, metem-se a inventar, a contar kafumban...’, (‘instead of writing about things that really happened, describing the barbarities that go on here every day exactly as they are and which are actually worth putting down

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70 A. Sila, Eterna Paixão, (Bissau: Ku Si Mon Editora, 1994).
on paper, they decide to invent things, talking *kafumban* [Crioulo: ‘a load of rubbish’, ‘a big lie’].\(^{71}\) Mbubi argues, ‘*quando uma pessoa conta uma passada, mesmo se for pequenina, tem que por um pouco de sal. [Mas] esse fulano exagere demais*’ (‘when someone tells a story, even a tiny one, they have to add a bit of salt, [but] this guy goes too far!’).\(^{72}\) Sila then closes in a very informal, confessional tone with ‘*um pequeno parêntesis*’, (‘a brief parenthesis’),\(^{73}\) where he asks the reader what he or she would do in his shoes, in the face of such humiliating criticism. Would we ever pick up a pen to write again?

With a hint of dry humour he bemoans the dilemma of the profession of *djidiu de caneta*, the impossibility of escaping the scathing comments, people’s lack of interest in the force of imagination and effort that goes into writing, their only being interested in accusing him of defamation, misrepresentation, and many more unforgivable acts. The harsh words thrown at him bring him to ask the reader to put the book away and never talk of it again, though he decides not to explain exactly why, ‘*o melhor mesmo é não dizer mais nada*’, (‘it’s better not to say any more right now’).\(^{74}\) This criticism comes from characters we had assumed to be entirely fictional but Sila’s juxtaposition of the fictional to himself as an entity within the fictional space complicates our assumptions of what is real and what is not in the world of storytelling, novel writing, and authorship. We are brought to think again about the use of gossip and personal anecdotes as the bases for stories. Perhaps his internal, creative conflict between oral influences and the concretisation of the written form is too much to resolve. After all, a writer publishing under his or her own name has no anonymity, nor may they enjoy the disconnection from the root of a story as the instigator of a purely oral story can – the responsibility for their *kafumban* must be entirely theirs. Sila might betray here, now that his name is imprinted on this version of events forever, that he is possibly unsure about the burden of claiming responsibility for his *passada*, as no *djiudiu* would.

**Conclusion**

Odete Semedo and Abdulai Sila bring undoubtedly valuable and enjoyable works of literature to the national, lusophone, and international scenes. Amongst their literary worth, these works are enriched with a strong sense of source, their latent *guineidade* present in the intrinsincness of an array of cultural and linguistic references that accurately communicate their locality. Further to this, these writers succeed in reaching beyond their individual narratives to produce a meta-narrative of orality. This not only places the books culturally and geographically but, also, brings to the fore a playful and challenging questioning of the roles and reliability of writers, storytellers, and their creations. Through *Sonéá* and *Djênia*, Semedo brings that which is often missing from anthropological surveys of oral literature by recording the context in which it exists in Guinea-Bissau. And this, alongside Abdulai Sila’s reflections on the role of author as a “storyteller with a pen”, succeeds in foregrounding orality which, communicated via a global language and recorded in the globally expected and accepted written form, alters, and hybridizes them to express the local, *guineidade*, and to produce lit/orature.


\(^{72}\) Sila, *Glossário*, *Tragédia*, p. 190.


\(^{74}\) Ibid., p. 212.
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