

**Bridging histories, forging connections:
African immigrants as intercultural mediators in São Paulo**

**Connettere storie, creare connessioni:
gli immigrati africani mediatori interculturali a San Paolo**

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Abstract

Understanding the field of education in a broad sense, this communication addresses forms of intercultural education developed by African immigrants in their role as cultural mediators between Africa and Brazil. It is part of a research project on displacements from Africa to São Paulo, in which life stories (Ferrarotti, 1983) were collected from immigrants from regions that were colonized by European countries (Portugal and France) and who came into contact in the new context with a society that carries the marks of centuries of enslavement of black African people (Balandier, 2013; Bastide and Fernandes, 2008; Demartini, 2020a). The problems they began to experience led many to reflect on ways to address them in order to disseminate their own vision of themselves, Africa, and propose changes in society. With clear objectives, but which fall within what can be called non-formal education, they constitute themselves as cultural mediators, exercising intercultural education (Gohn, 2022). To this end, immigrants have sought in a variety of ways to preserve their practices and traditions, exercising cultural mediation in the context of São Paulo.

Keywords: African immigrants, cultural mediation, São Paulo, Brazil.

Sommario

Comprendendo il campo dell'istruzione in senso ampio, questo articolo affronta le forme di educazione interculturale sviluppate dagli immigrati africani nel loro ruolo di mediatori culturali tra Africa e Brasile. Questo lavoro è parte di un progetto di ricerca sugli spostamenti dall'Africa a San Paolo, in cui sono state raccolte storie di vita (Ferrarotti, 1983) di immigrati provenienti da regioni colonizzate dai Paesi europei (Portogallo e Francia) e che sono entrati in contatto nel nuovo contesto con una società che porta i segni di secoli di schiavitù dei neri africani (Balandier, 2013; Bastide e Fernandes, 2008; Demartini, 2020a). I problemi che si trovarono a fronteggiare portarono verso una riflessione su come affrontarli, al fine di diffondere la propria visione di se stessi, dell'Africa, e di proporre cambiamenti nella società. Con obiettivi chiari ma che rientrano in quella che può essere definita educazione non formale, alcuni individui appartenenti a questo gruppo si sono costituiti come mediatori culturali, esercitando l'educazione interculturale (Gohn, 2022). A tal fine, gli immigrati hanno cercato in vari modi di preservare le loro pratiche e tradizioni attraverso la mediazione culturale nel contesto di San Paolo.

Parole chiave: immigrati africani, mediazione culturale, San Paolo, Brasile.

Introduction

Addressing the influx of immigrants arriving in São Paulo (and also in the other Brazilian states) demands scholarly attention to various issues – economic, social, cultural, linguistic, identity-related, political, sentimental – all related to the process that accompanies immigrants and their displacement from their former territories to integrate themselves in new lands, whether temporarily or with longer duration, even implying

permanent settlement. Sayad (2000) has previously warned us about the profound marks carried by immigrants, both from their experiences in their original contexts and in others.

Understanding the field of education broadly, this communication explores forms of intercultural education developed by African immigrants in their roles as cultural mediators between Africa and Brazil. It is part of research on displacements from Africa to São Paulo. The reflections in this text must be understood in consideration of previous studies¹ we conducted on immigration, particularly those in recent years focusing on the movements of Portuguese, Luso-African, and African individuals to São Paulo. From there, we remain attentive to the various flows that occurred during the 20th century involving individuals who, in some way, had their lives connected to Portugal and the Lusophone world. The analysis of the experiences of individuals belonging to various groups during these moments of crisis revealed, as Balandier (2013) also warned, that crises can be revealing.

Continuing the study of the experiences of immigrants who came from the African context in the 20th century to São Paulo, we now focus on the new flows arriving in the 21st century from newly independent African countries. We address individuals who constitute the new migratory waves from African countries to the São Paulo context, which we may perhaps refer to as an *alternative immigration* in contrast with the customary routes directed towards Europe or the United States.

1. The arrival of young Africans

They originate from contexts that underwent periods of European colonization during the 20th century, attaining independence in the second half of that century (Demartini, 2020b); they were markedly subjected different colonization processes carried out by Portugal and France, leaving imprints on the institutions and populations subjected to them. In the case of the Portuguese colonization process, we interviewed several young individuals from Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. Regarding French colonization: Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Togo, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Benin, and Egypt. The interviewed young individuals originated from regions that experienced prolonged European colonization during the 20th century, achieving independence in the latter half of the same century. Portuguese colonization concluded in 1975 in its colonies, whereas France exerted dominance over significant portions of the African continent until the mid-20th century, with many territories gaining independence before those under Portuguese rule.

With the cessation of conflicts in several African countries, the departure of young adults and adults to pursue education in Brazil, particularly in the state of São Paulo, intensified. Networks were established to facilitate the influx of an increasing number of students into private higher education institutions, with several interviewees being connected to these networks. Throughout the interviews, a concern for the reconstruction and development of countries after wars became evident. The interviewees perceive this as a plausible outcome but emphasize the need for improved training and qualification of leaders within the broader population. As we conducted numerous interviews, we observed a dimension of the migratory process that we had not initially considered: the shift from African countries to the new reality of São Paulo meant, for many, the necessity to scrutinize how they were perceived. Consequently, they began engaging in activities aimed at demystifying the constructed images of Africans while simultaneously combating prejudices in this new context. They manifested themselves as cultural mediators between these two contexts.

In this manner, we focused on a new phase of the research, examining how Africans directed their activities toward this form of intercultural education. We conducted more in-depth interviews with thirteen immigrants, and we believe their narratives unveiled a panorama of their experiences in combating stereotypes and prejudices encountered in the new São Paulo context. One interviewee came from Congo, two from Niger and nine from Angola.

2. Fieldwork with subjects and the construction of narratives

It is crucial to emphasize that, given the qualitative nature of the research, decisions regarding fieldwork were made dynamically during the interactive process with the interviewees. In the context of this study, the dialogical relationship, extensively explored in relation to oral history and the biographical approach in narrative construction (Ferrarotti, 1983), unfolds among three actors: the researcher formulating initial questions and problematic issues, the interviewed subject, and the interviewer originating from the same context. Consequently, certain questions undergo modification, while others arise, and interests and objectives evolve. The obscured presence of the researcher gradually recedes, paving the way for a dialogue between two interlocutors who perceive each other not as the *other* but as equals.

We emphasize the two key moments of the process: how narratives are acquired and how they are analyzed (Bourdieu, 1991). Initially, interview scripts/topics were developed for engaging with institution representatives, individuals responsible for the immigrant-related sector, service users, and cultural mediators. Concerning the organizations/groups addressed during the research, specific themes were proposed: history of the institution/NGO/service; nature (religious, ethnic, etc.); organization (services provided); partnerships (public and private); department/sector related to immigrants. Specifically regarding African interviewees participating in cultural mediation, the following aspects were investigated: personal trajectory; educational background; how they assumed this role in the institution/NGO; what attributes are necessary to perform this role; which tasks/assignments do they carry out; what are the difficulties/challenges they face; how do they address issues of language and cultural differences; how do they evaluate the support provided to immigrants; what has been the appropriation of those participating in the activities developed.

Before delving into the content of the interviews, it is necessary to provide some context. The presence of an experienced African researcher on our team, familiar with some interviewees due to their work in the São Paulo context, was fundamental in conducting the interviews. This researcher facilitated the necessary dialogue in this type of study. Anonymity of the subject(s) becomes necessary for their protection in this initial phase of the work. In this case, where there is the mediation of someone from the same background as the interviewees, it is essential not only to explicitly state how the narrative was constructed with the subjects but also to analyze the interview considering the presence of two African subjects².

3. African immigrants: belonging and actions

There were various forms of reception for those arriving in the context of São Paulo, facilitated by social and familial networks. Notably, support from religious institutions, predominantly Protestant ones with a significant presence in Africa, played a prominent role. The Methodist, Baptist, and Adventist institutions were particularly highlighted. We conducted interviews with individuals who were embraced by these institutions during

their displacement and integration, often arriving post the *conclusion* of wars or in an effort to escape them. Many came with the primary purpose of attending middle, higher, or postgraduate education institutions, aiming to acquire better qualifications to contribute to the reconstruction of their home nations, seek integration in developed countries, or pursue a religious career. Networks were established to facilitate the influx of a growing number of students from diverse backgrounds and religions into private higher education institutions. Each institution provided varied assistance, but many individuals benefited from scholarships and accommodation to pursue their studies.

For numerous interviewees, opting to come to São Paulo through a religious institution was a chosen approach. This network supports a university offering diverse educational programs and extends scholarships to immigrants. Several cultural mediators went through an institution known as UNASP³, exemplifying one of the ways to establish intercultural exchanges in the realm of school education. To illustrate this, we draw upon the narratives of one of the interviewees, highlighting specific aspects.

A religious educational institution facilitating exchange with African immigrants, engaging in intercultural education

An interviewee associated with the church succinctly outlined the diverse forms of assistance available, contingent upon the needs and capacities of individuals arriving from Africa.

The responsible institution is UNASP (Adventist University of São Paulo), UNASP São Paulo, Engenheiro Coelho. It's good to explain that there are three campuses. There's UNASP São Paulo (located in the city of São Paulo), UNASP Hortolândia, and UNASP Engenheiro Coelho. This institution has various projects, and one of these projects is called Janela 10/40. Through this project, they try to bring or provide opportunities for immigrants who are within the 10/40 Window. In the Christian world, the 10/40 Window is the area with the greatest challenges for spreading the gospel. It mainly includes Muslim countries. So, this institution focuses primarily on this 10/40 Window area to offer opportunities for immigrants to enter Brazil. Within the 10/40 Window, more than 75% of the population follows religions other than Christianity. The goal is for Christianity to prevail by spreading it in areas dominated by other religions (A.A., Niger, 2019).

According to information received from this interviewee, the university has this project that aims to provide opportunities for people coming from the 10/40 Window to come to Brazil and have opportunities, especially in terms of education. To him the entire process, from leaving their country to coming here, is the responsibility of the university, the Adventist University. To summarize, the process is carried out at two levels: the institution, in this case, the university, communicates directly with the student, sends a letter, and sends another letter to the embassy to facilitate the visa issuance. The immigrant student can choose the course they want to pursue, there are many options:

The main focus, in fact, is for you to have an education with a spiritual foundation. Because the objective is for you to influence in some way, but the choice is yours. You can choose any field: Engineering, Architecture, Education, Theology, Literature... other faculties, Music. You can choose (A.A., Niger, 2019).

The interviewee discusses the objectives of the institution and how, in spite of being a religious institution, the option is the student, without any link with the option of becoming a missionary.

So, the focus is on having other qualifications, which will somehow benefit your own people, but at the same time, you will be spreading the gospel. [...] Look, in the 10/40 Window, one of the focuses of the university is to help in the growth of institutions within that country. For example, in the field of education, perhaps one day, through you, we will build a school, a university, a hospital, who knows, maybe other things (A.A., Niger, 2019).

In addition to the formal school education provided to young immigrants, there exists another form of interaction with non-Brazilian contexts. The university facilitates exchanges with African countries, enabling Brazilian youth to explore their cultures and address various needs. «The university also sends young Brazilians there, more or less like an exchange, to be there in some way to help. To work. For example, they sometimes bring engineers, doctors...» (A.A., Niger, 2019). The interviewee from Niger talks about the origins of the students:

Well, when I arrived at the university, the majority of people I met were foreigners, such as Guineans and Angolans. [...] Well, apart from them, when I arrived, I met people from Iran, Yemen, and other countries. But in terms of nationality from Africa, we have representation from 13 countries, 13 African countries. Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Cape Verde, among others, Mozambique. Talking about the university environment, first of all, those of us who came from the 10/40 Window, most of us come from countries that do not speak Portuguese. So you spend some time studying the Portuguese language. And the institution offers that as a means for you not only to learn the language but also to start adapting to the country (A.A., Niger, 2019).

Some students came by themselves. In this way, the forms of interaction differ with the institution, the way of entering and the received support:

For example, those who are from these countries that come on their own, usually they come to study, those who are going to study the language first will have a regular scholarship, which means they pay for everything, [...] Now, there are also AP 1, AP 2, AP 3, AP 4, up to AP 5. AP stands for Partial Student. [...] All students work, except for regular students, regular students who pay for everything (A.A., Niger, 2019).

The interviewee talks about the importance of the university:

So the role of the university is as follows, bringing these students from the 10/40 Window to be in the school, and those others who come on their own, the role of the university is to guarantee or somehow take care of the students' stay within the university or within Brazil. Because everything related to our documentation, as you come with a one-year visa, this visa needs to be renewed, you renew it every year. And this process, the role of the university, in fact, UNASP has a legal center and this legal center was created specifically for foreigners (A.A., Niger, 2019).

According to the interviewee, the immigrant student has the commitment to return, not necessarily to their country of origin. Exchange can occur with other regions and other welfare institutions. Intercultural mediation linked to UNASP thus occurs within the scope of school education in various ways:

- through the recruitment of young immigrants and arrangements for their arrival and stay;
- through the training provided at the three campuses of UNASP in the state of São Paulo, offering courses tailored to various specialties;
- through the commitment assumed by students to return to their regions of origin or other regions to address the needs of the population, including in the field of education;
- through the dispatch of Brazilian volunteers to other contexts to assist in addressing needs and understanding the culture of local populations.

African cultural mediators

To analyze the narratives of the cultural mediators about their own acting, the first difficulty is that the researcher who conducted many interviews, although closely involved, was unable to participate in this stage due to academic reasons. Therefore, the observations prompted by the transcribed narratives, thankfully mostly done by the researcher himself, although subject to discussion, were not consistently, frequently, and deeply explored. This will be done in a subsequent stage, now that the pandemic is subsiding.

Nevertheless, it is possible to learn during the process how he positioned himself in relation to what was narrated and to develop a representation of the reported experiences after several readings. These representations will still be thoroughly worked on and treated with the necessary care for their publication in book form. For that, feedback from the interviewees is still required, which was not possible during this pandemic period. We don't know if what I would have observed in the narratives would be the same as what he would have observed while conducting and transcribing them. For these reasons, the interviewees are not identified here, and their accounts are not presented in full. However, we aim to provide examples with some illustrative narratives. In general, several aspects were addressed in the interviews by the subjects we call cultural mediators: those who mediate with *others* who are not of the same African origin, those who mediate between the *others* and the immigrants, and those who mediate between the group of origin and civil society and the State.

It is interesting to observe that although not belonging to the same groups, the mediators usually know about the activities carried out by other groups, as well as their organizers. It is as if they form a large network of mediation with largely shared objectives. Some interviewees belonged to more than one collective focused on discussing African issues in the Brazilian context. Several active groups in São Paulo were mentioned in the interviews: Palancas Negras, Coletivo Raízes, Coletivo Digital, África do Coração. However, some individuals or religious institutions also engage in mediation. Certain aspects were addressed by all the interviewees, although sometimes with different perspectives and varied proposals for action.

In all the narratives analysed, under the perspective of intercultural education, there are, among others:

- perception of the stereotypes present in Brazilian society about Africa and Africans;
- identity issues;

- difficulties for the integration of African immigrants in São Paulo;
- concerns about racism;
- combating stereotypes and racism;
- assisting those who come from Africa (education, professional support, legal assistance);
- pursuit of individual growth;
- establishing exchanges with other Africans and Brazilians;
- creativity and the need to find new paths and develop new projects;
- spiritual dimension;
- production of knowledge and understanding by Africans themselves.

In the narratives, these aspects are intrinsically related as they constitute the thoughts and proposed actions of each mediator, they are fundamental for thinking about new forms of education and intercultural pedagogical practices. It is important to highlight some accounts that demonstrate the concerns of the mediators who bridge the gap between Africa and Brazil. We will highlight two of them. One of the leaders of an important African collective in São Paulo, who has been in São Paulo for many years, commented on the goals and activities of the group, as well as other collectives.

Our goal as an association is precisely the integration among communities, not only necessarily the Angolan community. In other words, we aim to organize the Angolan community but also interact with other African communities. Considering that Angola has always had a diplomatic relationship with Brazil, the association becomes an institution that encompasses several cultural factors, further bringing these two peoples together. Regarding the aspect of cultural identity, what I have noticed is that various aspects of our culture are part of Brazilian culture, but often they are unaware of these cultural aspects. So, the association works with the intention of highlighting the Angolan cultural product even more, and for that, we work with literature, art, gastronomy, and many other things. It has been very successful because I believe that Brazil, or rather Afro-descendants, are going through a moment of seeking their roots. Therefore, this is the best time to bring knowledge of Africa to the national territory, here in Brazil. Last year, several events were organized, not only by the association but also by various projects. One of them is the Roots Project, coordinated by I.S., an Angolan who has been working extensively with the theme of Sarau (cultural gathering). In the various Saraus, we presented cultural gatherings from various places in Africa: Mozambique, Angola, Congo, and so on. We also had the Literafrica, which was also very important and a great success... It took place last year before FESCALA⁴. But there was another event after FESCALA. Let me think... the Independence of Angola. Ah yes, Angola Cultural 43, it was a wonderful event. Angola Cultural 43, as the name suggests, was an event focused on cultural aspect. Last year was a marvelous year in terms of promoting Angolan culture and not only African culture here in Brazil. It was wonderful for us. The Palancas Negras Association or other organizations that partner with Palancas Negras (C.F.J., Angola, 2019).

By commenting on the association's name, which is linked to the antelope symbol of Angola, the issue of Angolan people's history and identity is brought up again.

It is characteristic in the region of Angola. So, that's the significance of the name Palancas Negras. As you can see, even Angolan culture is being worked on from this perspective, and the name of the institution already carries a historical reference to our country... Exactly, so we are working a lot. This year we will have the second edition

of the African Writers' Festival, called Literafrica... Coordinated by J.C., who has been working in the field of literature. The general idea is to bring people closer together, who, in my opinion, are already close, judging even by the historical context, but lack the information that could take this proximity to another level. Let's say, a brotherhood based more on affinity and identity. Identity is something you can talk about. Because in Brazil, Africans from various parts of Africa arrived, and the hardest part is for a Brazilian, an Afro-descendant, to say, «No, I am a descendant of Angola, of Nigeria», you can assume, and some are even managing to be certain. So, do you think there has been a loss of identity for Afro-descendants or a lack of local identification by Afro-descendants themselves? So, the way you put it is true, but I'll phrase it differently so as not to imply any blame on their part. The slavery process itself, how this human madness unfolded, aimed precisely at stripping the identity of all the African peoples who came here. This technique was widely used in Brazil but also adopted in several other regions that practiced slavery. You take away the individual's identity in order to give them another one. [...] So, specifically, the Afro-Brazilian has suffered greatly in this regard. Although we are in the 21st century, in the year 2019, where communication is much more open, you still encounter this lack of self-knowledge as an Afro-descendant, as a Black Brazilian. But what I have noticed, thank God, with the advancement of technology, thank God, and the expansion of communication, is that the Black Brazilian is increasingly liberating themselves from this ignorance and lack of knowledge about their origins, to which they were subjected. It is very good to emphasize that they were subjected. So, they are becoming more and more interested in knowing who they are and where they come from. It's beautiful to see because it allows the individual to take a stronger position, you know? Even within society, they can assert themselves more because they know themselves, they know who they are... Yes, they know their history. So, they don't live depending on a crutch, living according to someone else's history, according to an identity that is not truly theirs but to which they were subjected. They live as someone whose existence is based on what they truly are. This is what we can perceive in Brazilian society. And it is our role as an institution that values culture to work on this. [...] So we are working on this theme, on this issue of culture, of bringing people together. And it's not just about Afro-descendants. I believe that as human beings, we all benefit from this. The idea that the world is diverse arises precisely because of this plurality of ideas, colors, and different customs. Trying to suppress that would be killing life, killing this universe, you know? So, we are here to say, «No, despite being different, this is pleasant, despite being different». The point is, we are bringing this into practice, not just in theory. Let's bring our African writers, let's make it happen (C.F.J., Angola, 2019).

The interviewee strongly emphasizes the significance of African individuals themselves engaging in the construction of history and knowledge, drawing upon their own reflections and experiences.

Drawing from my own experience as an African, I assert that being African is perceived through a spiritual lens. African spirituality is deeply rooted, distinct from other religions such as Christianity and Islam. Our understanding of spirituality differs significantly, sincere and profound within our African reality. Similarly, the spirituality of others, particularly Europeans, is sincere and profound within their own context. I am not claiming that our perspective is the absolute truth. Instead, I aim to highlight how the introduction of other beliefs has contributed to the deconstruction of African identity, eroding our existence as Africans. Consequently, these searches, which every

African should undertake, become essential. [...] Regrettably, or perhaps not necessarily regrettably, it was others who spoke about what it means to be African, not Africans themselves. I believe this occurred due to the absence of Africans actively shaping their own history, but not because Africans were unwilling to do so. Our market favors European products, just as the producers of historical narratives worldwide predominantly come from European backgrounds. I am unsure if I am conveying my point clearly. What I am trying to express is that African writers often lack the same opportunities and visibility as their European or even American counterparts. This is the issue at hand. Instead, another individual emerges to tell our story, a significant misconception. Despite having some interaction with indigenous peoples, which provides limited knowledge about them, it does not equate to the profound understanding that derives from living among that particular community. This understanding is necessary to speak about them with depth. Therefore, I believe we are bringing forth this perspective to say, «It is commendable what others are attempting to do concerning Africa, but it is we who should be the ones shaping the narrative about Africa. We possess the knowledge of African history». What you are doing is a necessary complement, aiming to address the lack of knowledge about our people. Now, we are here, and we want to speak for ourselves. Resistance is to be expected, but it is normal (C.F.J., Angola, 2019).

The Association collaborates with other organizations to carry out activities and projects, receiving support from Brazilian public institutions, albeit not on a permanent basis:

So, the Palancas Negras Association establishes partnerships with various other collectives, such as the Raízes Project, Literafrica, Kizomba Yeto, and several others, right? And for this year, in the month of May, on the 24th, 25th, and 26th, there will be the second meeting of African writers, which is the Literafrica event. But before that, we also have an event taking place in the city of Hortolândia, involving the local community (C.F.J., Angola, 2019).

Additionally, they collaborate with a tourism company to facilitate trips for Brazilians to visit Angola, an important experience for those who participate. Another interviewee, (I.S.) who is a representative and founder of another significant collective called *Coletivo Raízes*⁵, a group of African cultural mediators established in 2016, addresses the same aforementioned issues and provides detailed information about all the activities carried out in recent years. It is important to emphasize how it highlights the significance of the African immigrant's role in enhancing the understanding of what Africa represents.

Well, as it emerged, actually, as I could perceive, the public, you know, Brazilians have a very limited idea of Africa, so there is a micro Africa that is proclaimed, and the Raízes Collective aims to bring an Africa with more protagonism, that is, through Africans, an Africa by Africans. And since São Paulo, for example, is one of the states with the highest number of African immigrants, I thought we could contribute not only with our culture but also in the social aspect, working towards this goal of promotion, especially focusing on countries with a significant presence in the city of São Paulo. So it was a way of saying, «Hello Brazilians, we are here, we want to discover our history». [...] Because many people talk about Africa. Descendants talk about Africa, researchers talk about Africa. So where does the role of the native African come in, right? For me, as an African, as an Angolan, it is indeed a responsibility that I have to

be here in Brazil and speak a little about myself, and with that, the Raízes Collective, the name Raízes (Roots) comes from this idea because Brazilian society, surprisingly, is a society that, to a certain extent, Africa colonized with its culture, although society does not identify with that culture, but there is much about Africa in Brazilian culture. So if there is a lot about Africa in Brazilian culture, it is very important that the native African, the one with roots, takes the main role in demystifying African history, what Africa truly is (I.S., Angola, 2019).

The activities are carried out in various regions of the city of São Paulo, with the presence of African immigrants from diverse nations.

The collective operates in the southern zone of São Paulo (municipalities of São Paulo). With that, we organized the *Saraus*⁶, which were held at the Casa de Cultura de Santo Amaro, and it was actually the first literary and artistic *Sarau*, where we had the pleasure not only of showcasing literature but also dance, culture, people, Africans. So we had several *Saraus* focused on specific communities, as the project initially reflected the countries with the highest presence and immigration in the city of São Paulo, so we started with Cape Verde, Senegal, Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique. Until now, today in São Paulo, it has become a project of greater magnitude regarding the promotion of African culture, especially through Africans. [...] So we have people from Congo, Cape Verde, Mozambique, Niger, one member from Angola, Senegal, and we also had some participants from Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea. We had these participants in the project as well (I.S., Angola, 2019).

The events they organize are referred to as *Saraus*, focused on cultural issues and the history of Africa and involve various activities.

We promoted and created various activities and discussions surrounding African culture, focusing on the countries that we showcased in our cultural events. These events, known as *saraus*, were typically itinerant in nature. We started in the southern zone and gradually expanded to the city center, where one can find one of the largest African communities, including Nigeria, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. One of the projects that had a significant impact on *Coletivo Raízes* was the publication of a book, an anthology featuring the participation of 40 African authors, encompassing poems and poetry. However, what has been particularly remarkable and continues to be pursued is the first-ever exchange program between Brazil and Angola. Afro-descendants had the privilege and pleasure of traveling to Angola, experiencing firsthand the culture and people and gaining a closer connection to Africa. Our goal was to move away from observing Africa through a binocular lens because Africa did not come to a halt after the period of slavery. Now, Brazilians have the opportunity not only to sit down with Africans and learn about African history but also to immigrate and explore their own ancestral history (I.S., Angola, 2019).

Other objectives are also crucial for the collective, aiming to intensify the exchange between Brazilians and Africa through public and private policies.

What is Africa? Well, Africa is not solely what is written in books, depicted in movies, or portrayed by African experts in literature. One can truly understand Africa from the perspective of an African when they leave their homeland and visit the African continent. It is a learning process, akin to consuming a bag of salt: it takes time

and unfolds gradually. Coletivo Raízes embraces this proposition. [...] Our initial proposal was to promote both public and private policies aimed at facilitating access for African immigrants. Many Africans are unaware of the Casa da Acolhida (House of Reception) and are unsure about the refugee process or the existence of agencies that assist with resume creation and offer courses. Coletivo Raízes has taken these steps to provide support. We have become pioneers in this field of emancipation, advocating for the idea that Afro-descendants or Brazilians should not be solely responsible for traveling to Africa. We were the first to embark on this path in collaboration with African embassies, addressing visa petition issues and playing a primary role in developing a catalog of migratory flows. We have created a project focused on developing resumes for immigrants, although we have not yet made significant progress. There are many individuals who have studied engineering and other fields, but due to their immigrant status and being of African descent, there is not much differentiation between African and Afro-descendant blacks in Brazil since everyone is considered *black*. In other words, the struggle against racism is the same, even though it may not be perceived as a problem by Africans who see it from their perspective. Acceptance is more natural for Africans because everyone in their homeland is *black*, so they do not face the same identity issues. They are here to fight and survive, and they will achieve their goals (I.S., Angola, 2019).

Some mediators adopt a more individualized approach, especially those working in the field of arts. One of the mediators (A.L.N.), who has a profession in the technology field, exercises their mediation activity through theater, through the plays they present. One of the plays, which effectively expresses the message and aims to communicate, is *They Call Me Africa*.

They Call Me Africa refers to the history of Africans, especially migrant immigrants, in the city of São Paulo. I mention São Paulo because it's the city where I live, where I have resided since I arrived in Brazil, and I can already understand the reality of many Africans living here. As known, São Paulo is a multicultural city, primarily due to genetic factors and the mix of cultures. Therefore, in most cases, based on what I have observed or at least in the areas I frequent, such as the South Zone and Downtown, a significant portion of the population has lighter skin tones. This is because we Africans—Angolans or Africans of other black origins—have darker skin tones compared to a Brazilian person you may know who is also black but with a much lighter complexion, for example... (A.L.N., Angola, 2019).

Another play, *The Stranger* discusses the themes of immigrants, their confinement, and their difficulties in social integration. The interviewee has contact with other artistic groups, including dance and painting, and develops other productions. «They call me Africa... They call me Africa because of the tone of my melanin and the sweat I exude in the scorching sun of São Paulo. So, it was about bringing the reality of how street vendors and, especially, immigrant friends who are street vendors are treated» (A.L.N., Angola, 2019). Another interviewee (S.W.), a mediator, manages to express the condition of being an African immigrant through performances with his own body. Coming from Congo, he had already been performing before coming to Brazil as a way to question societal issues. He faced difficulties in the early years in São Paulo as he couldn't pursue his artistic activities as a painter, sculptor, and performer. Interacting with São Paulo society brought about a sense of strangeness due to the presence of black individuals like him and social differentiations, leading him to reflect on the condition of immigrants and refugees. He

discovered that those who had left Africa in slavery had remained in Brazil. It was as if he had found his brothers, his ancestors. However, he was disappointed because he realized there was a lot of racism. He emphasized the importance of the work he does, which is like an exchange program:

It is about conveying what we have, our culture, to the Brazilian people because the majority of individuals are not familiar with the history or culture of Africa. Even in schools, it is not well-taught. As artists, we can educate through our work, our presentations, by speaking about Africa, African society, religion, politics, everything. We transmit, we discuss almost everything. For me, discussing the reality of Africa, what Africa is like, how Africans are, how black individuals are, is the main theme I address in my work when talking about Africa. [...] Through the performance I created, *Bagage*, many people got to discover and become familiar with my work. It was just the first impression I saw in society, which is why I made this performance. People use our bodies but not our minds. That's why you see me well-dressed, like a minister. They use our bodies, but not our minds. But what is inside that suitcase that we carry? For example, when you have a visitor at your house, they arrive with a suitcase. You should be concerned about what is inside the suitcase, right? You should know, but nobody cares about what we brought. Most of the time, it is the immigrants who have helped develop the country (S.W., Congo, 2019).

The interviewee highlights the field of art in Brazilian society and the differentiation made here between European artists, whom they refer to as international artists, and those coming from Africa: African artists or refugee artists. They aim to establish an organization to assist African artists.

Final remarks

Analyzing the narratives of cultural mediators and following some of their achievements within society, it has been observed that many have successfully secured significant spaces in São Paulo, where their reflections are being disseminated. Some have gained prominence in print, online, and televised media, expanding the reach of their activities. Recently, the works of two interviewed mediators were exhibited in locations frequented by the public, and their reflections on the situation of African immigrants received considerable attention in the media. Paulo Chavonga, a young artist interviewed, who arrived approximately five years ago, showcased 60 paintings at the Museum of Immigration in São Paulo. On September 8, 2023, he drew attention to his stance: «Angolan artist distances himself from stereotypes linked to Africa» (Folha, p. C8). Previously, he had exhibited at the São Paulo Cultural Center and SESC units. The report on the political situation of his country, the African artist, and the importance he attributed to the need to deconstruct stereotypes about Africa, garnered attention. Quoting what was mentioned in the newspaper: «The lack of information about the history of Africa is a trap because it reinforces stereotypes that contribute to the maintenance of structural racism in Brazil» (p. C8). Through art, he and other previously discussed interviewees bring their history and the history of their ancestors to engage in dialogue and propose changes in the new context in which they find themselves and in the field of the arts in general. According to them, they generally do not promote cultural productions from different parts of the world, favoring the Western production of the first world.

Interviews conducted with other African immigrants affirm that the actions of cultural mediators from older collectives such as Palancas Negras and Coletivo Raízes have

attracted young individuals interested in the topics addressed. It would be impossible to address here the process of conducting the various interviews and what these memories of very recent experiences represented at the very moment of their acquisition and how they posed questions to us, researchers. There were many cases marked by subjectivities, diverse meanings, and emotions that need to be considered (Pollak and Heinich, 1986). The study leads to new questions and new research processes aimed at monitoring how the mediations of African immigrants enter into dialogue with Afro-Brazilians who also strive for the elimination of prejudices and discriminations, exercising intercultural education (Gohn, 2022). It is necessary to find new paths and develop new projects as proposed by Ki-Zerbo (2006). The theoretical-methodological option for studying this new form of intercultural education was to bring to light how the interviewees themselves think and exercise their proposals as African immigrants in São Paulo, a phenomenon that is still little studied by Social Sciences and Education.

Embedded is the question about the production of knowledge by immigrant subjects and power relations in the social context, as well as the need for new pedagogical proposals.

Notes

¹ In recent years, we have carried out several studies with African immigrants who arrived in São Paulo during the 20th and 21st centuries, coming before and after the independence of the Portuguese colonized countries. See Demartini 2005, 2015, 2018, 2020b, 2020c, 2021; Demartini and Bano, 2021.

² To maintain the anonymity of interviewees the narratives are identified by the interviewee's initials, the country of origin and the year of the interview.

³ UNASP – São Paulo Adventist University is an institution maintained by the Adventist (Christian) Church that offers courses in various modalities. Its main objectives are to offer opportunities for arrival and educational training from various countries, generally poor and non-Christian, aiming for their return to help in their development and to address the needs of the population. It also aims to train missionaries.

⁴ Festival of African Cinema, Arts and Literature.

⁵ Coletivo Raízes is a non-governmental organization created in 2016, formed in 2019 by six immigrants from Niger, Congo, Cape Verde, Mozambique and Senegal. The objective is to create various activities and discussions around African culture. It promoted traveling soirees, exchange trips to Africa and literary publications to learn about African roots in Brazil, but by breaking stereotypes about Africa.

⁶ Sarau – festive meeting historically promoted by the colonial and imperial elites in Brazil, with presentations by artists and writers. With an emphasis on Western erudite culture, In the case of those mentioned by cultural mediators, the saraus took on other meanings and activities, as explained in the narratives. The focus is on the relations between Brazil and Africa and there is no single definition.

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Short Bio

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