

Fried fish, rice and a taste of Angola's past

Luanda, Angola

Walking into the Alves Primo's couple's house, or rather annexe, is like walking into Angolan history. It is a taste of the old Angola, which is often forgotten in Luanda's building and modernization craze. Over a lunch of fried garapão [fish] and rice, they relive the past. "We had to be very creative with food."

"We live in a yellow and brown house in the Kinaxixi neighbourhood, with a brown wooden gate, next to where the Cuca [Angolan beer brand] building used to be," Mrs Alves Primo (62) explains over the phone. The Cuca building was torn down last year. Portuguese contractor Somague is building a shopping mall in its place. Those who get a chance to peep behind the temporary steel wall that surrounds it, see nothing but a surreally deep and wide hole."

A 14-floor apartment flat

"The whole of Kinaxixi used to be a swamp up until the 1940's," Mrs Alves Primo says. "Many of the old houses here are still having major problems because of the wet soil underneath."

The couple's house has recently been restaured by Portuguese building company Soares da Costa, which propoposed a plan about five years ago to tear down Alves Primo's four-bedroom, two-livingroom house and replace it with a 14-floor apartment building, promising the couple 40 percent of the value.

"But soon afterwards, Soares da Costa got into financial trouble and right now, all construction companies are on standby until the elections. They are finishing what they started, but aren't starting anything new."

The couple's house was uninhabitable, the roof almost fell down. "As you see with many colonial houses, ours still had a private sewage system," Mrs Alves primo says. "A special car had to come and clean it every five years! So we let them renovate it instead, and how it's being rented out."

Doll's house

The Alves Primo couple live in the little annex next to the house, which they call their 'doll's house'. And that is exactly what it looks like from the inside: tiny, with one bedroom, a miniature kitchen, a small bathroom and a small living-dining room, it has an antique, cosy feel. One corner of the room is covered with pictures of their parents, grandparents and great grandparents.

"We're already in our sixties," Ana Bela says. "In Angola, we don't have social pension system for the elderly. My husband receives a small military pension of 2500 USD per month because he used to serve as a colonel in the MPLA army, but that just covers gas, electricity, water, internet and our cleaner and cook's salaries. I myself work as a freelance Portuguese teacher and English or French translator. But that definitely doesn't cover the 300.000 USD restoration of our house."

An old man, Raul, is preparing lunch on a stove outside. He was worked for the couple for the last twenty years. "Raul is also tired," Mrs Alves Primo says. "He needs an assistant."

Similar types of houses in Luanda are worth 10.000 to 15.000 USD in rent a month. "We get half in

exchange for Soares da Costa's restoration. Like that, we maintain an acceptable lifestyle." A few years from now, when the flat has been built, the couple will receive rent from four or five apartments.

From Portuguese to FAPLA

Mr Alves Primo is the first son of family of eight children. His father was an accountant under the Portuguese government, and his family moved to Luanda in 1968. Like many others of his generation, Mr Alves Primo served as a soldier in the Portuguese army during the colonial war. He joined at the age of twenty and stayed two years, until 1975.

We sit down in their joint office, which technically speaking is more a shed than an office. The walls are lined with books. The place is dark and disorganized, but in a way that makes one feel intrigued, comfortable and at home.

"We were forced to join," he says. "But I was already in contact with the guerrilleros at the time. In 1975, I switched to the MPLA army, which was called FAPLA (Forças armadas populares de libertação de Angola). All I did was remove my chevron, it was that simple."

"With pride, and without false modesty I can say that FAPLA's victory in Luanda in 1975 was thanks to us, former Portuguese soldiers," Mr Alves Primo says decidedly. "Because we knew Luanda's internal structure extremely well. Of course Russians and Cuban support was crucial, but the first steps towards victory were taken by us."

Mr Alves Primo fought with the MPLA for ten years, until he was thirty two years old. He sympathized with the guerrilleros from a very young age, he says. "As the owner of a fazenda and a diamond reseller, we made a pact: I gave them logistical support, and in return they promised not to attack my fazenda."

Escape from prison

There were already quite a few Angolan fazenda owners in the seventies, and some very rich angolans. "For example in Malange, Angolan business man Paulo Masokina had diamond fortune," Mr Alves Primo recalls. "He gave the Portuguese white man who married his daughter a one-litre bottle filled with diamonds. To him, one litre was nothing. He had various five-litre bottles full of diamonds in his fazenda."

Mr Alves Primo was in jail during the civil war. "I was commander of the Southern front. In October 1975, the South Africans entered to support UNITA. I participated in that fight, lost and was imprisoned by the South Africans."

"He escaped because he spoke the same dialect as the South-African black guards," Mrs Alves Primo finishes the story. "He had a conversation with them and they let him go, even pushed my husband's car. Why did we speak the same language? Well, the frontiers drawn here aren't our own."

The man who imprisoned Mr Alves Primo happens to be the brother of his sister in law. "We're friends now!," Mr Alves Primo says, laughing.

"It's the way Angolans are," his wife explains. "They take their own misery and turn it into a party. Otherwise we'd all go crazy."

War-time divorce

We sit down to a simple but delicious, traditional Angolan lunch of fried garapão, rice and a simple salad in the annexe's tiny living room. As always, the garapão has been bought directly from the fishermen on the Ilha [Chicala], where it's cheap and fresh.

Mrs Alves Primo continues their story. She was born in Lisbon, to Portuguese parents. At the young

age of 21 she moved to Angola with her first husband, who was summoned to joining the Portuguese army in Huambo. When he finished military service a few months after the 1974 Portuguese revolution, unlike many white families the couple decided to stay in Angola.

Aged 28 with four children, she got divorced. Her first husband returned to Portugal. Ana Bela and her children fled to Luanda as the result of the civil war. Her life changed completely. She maintained my family by working as a Portuguese and French teacher at a public school. After that, she became a journalist at national press agency Angop. She also briefly worked at Angola's National Insurance Company. "Then, in the 1980's and under the MPLA one-party system, I met Francisco." UNITA was in Angola's provinces. The fresh couple moved into the house in Kinaxixi.

One of Mrs Alves Primo's sons died in an accident, and she had two more children with Mr Alves Primo. Altogether they have five children. Three live in Portugal, two in Luanda. "They all have good jobs, and our youngest (25) is studying."

An entire Cow

During the civil war, simple things like going shopping were a drag, Mrs Alves Primo remembers. "In Luanda, people used stand in cues for hours for one kilo of meat per week. But we had friends in the air force, so we'd travel to a fazenda in Lubango on a cargo flight. Once there, we'd point: 'We want that cow!' The people there killed the cow, cut it up in four or five pieces, and we brought the entire animal to Luanda by cargo ship. It was crazy! The cut up and frozen meat would last for six months."

The family also ate fish, and imported rice. Few vegetables were available. "We used to buy 50-kilo bags of rice or sugar. Bread I made at home," Mrs Alves Primo says. "We exchanged food with friends, we had to be very creative. There was a spirit of sharing, it was the time when Angolans were most solidary. Are you sure you don't want another garapão?"

Mrs Alves Primo wraps up two fishes in tin foil. She will give them to me later, when I go home. Their lives have improved. The couple now buys 40 percent of their groceries at Shopright, and 40 percent on the informal market to save money. On special occasions like Valentine's Day they have dinner at the chique Hotel Tropico, where a buffet for one costs 70,00 USD. Once a year, they go on holiday to Portugal, Brazil or South Africa.

"We consider themselves lower middle to middle middle class," the couple agrees. "What Angola needs to do urgently," Mr Alves Primo says, "is to create a 'bourgeoisie', a word that of course scares certain people. Because a middle class will create jobs and spur Angola's economic and democratic development."

"A luta continua, a vitória é certa!" is the MPLA political slogan that is still used today. But now it's a political fight, for the country's development."

*By Lula Ahrens
for Collateral Creations*

Full names:

Ana Bela da Costa e Silva Alves Primo
1950 (Lisbon)
Francisco Alves Primo
1952 (Huila)