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KALAF EPALANGA

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A magazine about migrants of all kinds



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THE LUSOPHONE LUMINARY

Hailing from Angola, once the jewel in the crown of the Portuguese empire, **KALAF EPALANGA** has made a name for himself as Lisbon's conscience — and an unusually popular one, at that.



When I first meet KALAF, it's difficult for me to square the unassuming beanpole with Coke-bottle glasses cutting a dash across the lobby with the rowdy MC I've been watching earlier that morning on YouTube. He's traded the oversized graphic t-shirts and affected swagger of his rapper days for a more Wes Anderson-adjacent look of tailored trousers and a neat red beanie.

But then of course it is precisely this knack for shapeshifting that has made KALAF a much-admired champion of Lisbon, reaching across its diverse communities.

We meet at Soho House Berlin, a private members' club frequented by the low-key famous and those who pay to sit near them. As soon as we are past the receptionist and sitting down at our table, KALAF makes a point of telling me that his membership card is "the last symbol of my international jet-setter life". It's a credit-card sized piece of cardboard with a tiny dent in one corner, but clearly it's still working for him.

KALAF is a recovering rock star, best known as a founding MC of the rambunctious, bone-shaking music project Buraka Som Sistema that burst out of a Lisbon nightclub and onto the global stage in 2006. Buraka fused contemporary European electronic dance music with *kuduro*, a frantic dance beat developed in Angola when KALAF was growing up there in the 1980s. This combination produced a distinctly boisterous sound, occasionally categorised as "world music" by clueless record store staff.

The hybrid music project, which KALAF describes today as "an electronic dance carnival machine", was active from 2006 to 2016, taking their multicultural musical mashup to major festivals across Europe and beyond.

Buraka provided an exhilarating concert experience. The Guardian's music critic Kitty Empire described the crowd at one London

show as a mix of Portuguese-speakers from all over the Lusosphere and "party people intent on digging their way to the southern hemisphere using only their feet. I can't recall a better atmosphere in half a lifetime of bass-bin worshipping."

"We felt like it was important for us to stop importing culture, to create our own and use that to communicate as equals with the rest of the world."

The group's list of more official achievements include an MTV Europe Music Prize and collaborations with M.I.A. and Diplo. By the end of the decade, football fans around the globe were thrashing the PlayStation game FIFA 10 to the menacing rhythm of Buraka's "Kalemba (Wegue Wegue)".

But the group had its sights set on more than just the classic music career checkboxes. In naming their project after a predominantly African migrant neighbourhood in Lisbon called Buraca, the group aimed to recognise migrants of all kinds. "It was our

way of saying thank you to migrant communities," explains KALAF. "And not necessarily just those in Buraca."

The five members of Buraka Som Sistema – an almost-translation of "Buraca Sound System" – have roots in former Portuguese colonies including Angola, Mozambique and Brazil. They set out to prove that the places they came from were capable of producing global popular culture, too. "We felt like it was important for us to stop importing culture," recalls KALAF, "to create our own culture and use that to communicate as equals with the rest of the world."

room in the middle of a ghetto". That's also what caught the attention of English rapper M.I.A., who guested on Buraka Som Sistema's deliciously irritating track "Sound of Kuduro" in 2008.

M.I.A. says that on hearing Buraka Som Sistema for the first time, she "felt like there was some sort of universal language felt and spoken amongst all third world countries."

"We were all coming from oppressed places," she remembers, "and we were happy and proud of just being in the jungle or the sun in a shanty town with broken buckets and one speaker and one flip-flop for making



KALAF takes Team NANSEN on a personal tour of Lisbon.

The group aimed to empower kids from suburbs like Buraca and back in Angola to take pride in their own musical styles, to hold them in the same esteem as acts from the US or UK. "The best way to empower people," says KALAF, "is to show them they're capable of doing something themselves."

One way to communicate that idea was to use rudimentary recording tools: "cheap computers and cracked software, in a tiny

music with one machine. That's how it all felt." KALAF might not have been living in quite so dire circumstances, but he and his bandmates came from cities and neighbourhoods where many people were. That was the reality they wanted to speak to, the people they aimed to connect with.

As the group began locking down dates at major European festivals like Glastonbury and Roskilde, the music blogs hurrying to

<p>explain kuduro to readers who had woken up the morning after wondering what it was they'd heard last night, kids in the streets of Luanda could be found dancing their gutsy kuduro moves to Buraka Som Sistema with fresh pride, knowing that the sounds and rhythms that belonged to them were being spread and admired around the world.</p> <p>BARRIERS TO ENTRY</p> <p>But with fame and touring came additional challenges for KALAF. These days he has both Angolan and Portuguese citizenship, but back when the group was preparing to set out on its first European tour, he was a migrant without EU citizenship and his Angolan passport was hardly a door-opener. His need to acquire visas ahead of the tour involved additional planning, with KALAF in some instances making extra trips ahead of the tour to pick up paperwork in advance.</p> <p>During the tour, KALAF lost his passport with his Portuguese residence card inside. Buraka Som Sistema was forced to cancel a number of shows so that he could return to Portugal and collect a new residence card.</p>	<p>His Angolan passport, however, would take many months to renew.</p> <p>"We had that one summer to 'make it,'" he says. "So I decided to do the most important shows, the last two shows of the tour: one in Sweden and one in Norway." KALAF would be travelling without a passport.</p> <p>Knowing that passport checks were more frequent on planes than buses, KALAF decided that rather than flying with the rest of the group, he would hedge his bets and take the bus instead, setting off from Lisbon 24 hours before the rest of the group.</p> <p>"The first show went really well," he recalls. "But then before the last show, crossing into Norway, I got stopped." KALAF was arrested, his residence card practically useless without a valid passport. His back-up option, a years-ago expired passport, only served to support the border police's impression of him as someone who shouldn't be there.</p> <p>KALAF used his one phone call to alert his bandmates to his detainment and the music festival's legal team stepped in. KALAF made it to the festival 45 minutes before the Buraka Som Sistema set. "But somehow the arrest</p>		<p>and not having a European passport kind of summarises my life on tour," says KALAF, with an easy laugh. "I got to know embassy processes inside and out."</p> <p>On top of Buraka's heavy touring schedule, KALAF had signed up to pen a weekly column for Portugal's Público newspaper. He wrote about his experiences as an Angolan in Portugal and what it was like touring around the world, but he also used the opportunity to draw attention to the bureaucratic struggles faced by migrants like him. He remembers that during one visa appointment at the British Embassy, a staff member apologised to him personally for a delay after having read his most recent column lamenting their lengthy processing times.</p> <p>KALAF knows that the visa rigmarole he managed to work his way through back then still prevents plenty of other great artists from countries like Angola from breaking through to an international audience. Today he tries to use his experiences to shed light on these challenges in his interactions with others in the music industry, because "when I tell my peers how difficult it can be, they often haven't thought about it before".</p> <p>Writing his newspaper column became his outlet for more complex ideas. "Whatever I wanted to grasp intellectually, I put in my column. Then I could just be a rock star with my colleagues and travel around the world," he explains, grinning.</p> <p>What might have been an exhausting arrangement for another touring artist was, for KALAF, a useful way to expend the energy he apparently had left over after whooping it up on stage. This double-whammy would allow him to cultivate the broad influence he enjoys in Portugal today, stretching from young clubgoers to middle-aged newspaper readers. In fact, when I later meet one of our contributors for this issue, feminist</p>	 <p>When KALAF isn't stopping to greet people in Lisbon's streets, incoming calls keep him busy.</p>
	<p>Stopping at a newspaper kiosk, KALAF reflects that a number of his favourite independent stores have closed in recent years (→ p. 90).</p>		<p>academic and activist Joacine Katar Moreira, she congratulates me on nabbing KALAF for our magazine, calling him "the most famous living black person in Portugal today".</p> <p>Buraka Som Sistema would perform for the final time in 2016, proud of having secured a spot for kuduro on the global map and paved the way for a new generation of Portuguese-speaking artists with roots in other continents (→ p. 40).</p> <p>By then, KALAF was already busy turning his experience at the Norwegian border into the first chapter of his auto-fictional novel.</p> <p>For KALAF, storytelling has always been at the centre of his work. In fact, the first time we meet, he is eager to clear up what he sees as his "lack of musical talent". As we share a</p>	



pot of ginger tea, he explains that for him, the music is simply one of a number of vehicles for communicating his ideas about the world.

“In the end it’s all about communication and whether you’re able to do it or not,” he says. “That’s how I measure success. If I’m able to make you feel something, then mission accomplished.”

The weekly newspaper column KALAF started writing in 2005, just before Buraka Som Sistema got cracking, was a commitment he kept up for more than 10 years, eventually turning a set of the columns into a book. Unfortunately his books – there are three in total – are only available in Portuguese, at least for now.

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

Two years ago, KALAF’s preoccupation with storytelling had the weight of history added to it. Years after having taken up writing, KALAF inherited his maternal grandfather’s diaries. These revealed that his grandfather, who had worked as a politician in Angola, had also dreamed of becoming a writer.

“My grandfather’s name was Faustino Epalanga. But during colonisation and the Portuguese occupation in Angola,” explains KALAF, “those traditional names were not considered European enough. One of the policies of colonisation was to strip out people’s memories, people’s languages, history.”

At that time, if Angolans wanted to secure employment, they were forced to take on Portuguese names (→ p. 32). Faustino Epalanga became Faustino Alfredo out of necessity. Now, two generations later, KALAF – who was born Kalaf Ângelo – has renamed himself Kalaf Epalanga, symbolically reclaiming his people’s right to their identity.

The first seventeen years of KALAF’s life were lived under civil war. Following four centuries of slavery and colonisation, Angola

gained independence from Portugal in 1975, only to descend almost immediately into one of the bloodiest civil wars in recent history. KALAF was born three years into the conflict.

Somewhat ironically, a number of key moments in Angolan history have connections to the central Berlin district in which KALAF and I have met for our interview.

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During the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, European leaders carved up Africa, imposing borders around Angola and deeming it a Portuguese territory. These decisions were made just a short walk from where we sit eating our pumpkin stew and avocado on toast today. And later, during the Angolan Civil War (1975–2002), which quickly became a proxy for the Cold War, East Germany made the decision from its seat here in Berlin to send paratroopers to Angola to support the Communist side. In fact, the bulbous New Objectivity building that houses the exclusive members’ club in which we meet today was previously home to the East German governing party’s central committee.

The Angolan Civil War dragged on until a final ceasefire in 2002. By then, at least one million people had been killed and 10 million landmines concealed in the soil, many thousands of which still threaten Angolan lives to this day. Landmine clearance, promoted by Princess Diana during a 1997 visit to Angola, remains an ongoing operation.

“We had the slave trade, we had colonisation, we had civil wars triggered by the Cold War. Then there’s the economic side of it, because Africa is still exploited to this day. How do you position yourself?”

Raised in the coastal city of Benguela, formerly a major slave trade post, KALAF didn’t see conflict with his own eyes until 1992. KALAF remembers his childhood home as a “paradise”, a house filled with an unending

rotation of visiting cousins, where the family spent most of its time outside on the shady patio, the kids alternating between climbing the mango tree and the coconut tree. Every evening, when children’s television programming ended for the night, a teenage KALAF would wander down the street and flirt with his crushes over their fences.

But the war was still somehow present. Benguela became a refuge to those displaced by the conflict and, inside the family home, KALAF was raised on war rations, the spectre of compulsory military service creeping ever closer. “You grew up knowing that time was approaching,” remembers KALAF. “You know you’re going to serve in the army and that shit can happen once you get there.” He says as children, he and his brother “sub-consciously knew about the glass ceiling, the limitations. When you’re at war, sure, you aspire to better things and hope that you’re going to have peace. But then 10 years pass, 20 years pass, 30 years pass, and it’s everything you know.”

It was only in 2002 that KALAF, aged 24, was able to travel through Angola by car for the first time. “That’s really when we started discovering our country, to be honest.”

What KALAF saw of his country by car was “amazing. To the point that I’m really resentful of our leaders,” he says. “I think their selfishness and their lack of vision blocked generations of Angolans from being able to experience their own country. Because we have everything in Angola: the sea, forest, desert, and when you’re in the middle of that you understand so many more things about yourself, like your history, your name, your culture, what holds you, your ground.”

“To this day I’m still processing it,” he adds. “It’s not something I’ve come to terms with yet, that my life could have been different. I’m not saying I haven’t enjoyed my

life, or that I haven’t enjoyed the outcome.” But the loss is enormous and ever-present.

“Travelling through Africa today,” says KALAF, “you can feel that we haven’t started the healing process yet. We had the slave trade, we had colonisation, we had civil wars triggered by the Cold War. Then there’s the economic side, because Africa is still exploited to this day. And you say, ‘man, how do you position yourself? Do I forget that, do I erase that from my mind?’ I have cousins who were child soldiers. How do you heal that person?”

Another area in which KALAF is reckoning with Angolan history is language. The dream of an indigenous cultural resurgence following Angola’s 1975 independence from Portugal was quickly thwarted by Angolans taking up arms against other Angolans. This meant that KALAF didn’t have the chance to learn his native Umbundu and was raised speaking Portuguese.

“It’s very common in my generation to find people who don’t speak our native language,” he explains. “But now the younger generation has started learning it, so my nephews are starting to learn that in school, thank God. I’m even thinking about spending a year in Angola, taking my kids and putting them in school just so they can learn the native language.” Reclaiming the Epalanga name is just one step in KALAF’s plan for reconciliation.

AN UNWILLING MIGRANT

When KALAF was 17, his parents decided he and his brother would move to Lisbon to complete their education away from the civil war. Sent to live with his father in the Portuguese capital, KALAF spent the first year refusing to unpack his bag.

“I didn’t want to stay,” he says, “I hated it. Not so much Portugal, not so much Lisbon, but I hated the fact that I didn’t get along with my father and I didn’t want to force it,

and I don’t think that was the best scenario or situation in which to build our relationship. I felt like we were somehow forced on him. And that’s what he made me feel, too.”

KALAF spent his time shopping for books and records, “because I felt like, when you’re in Europe, that’s what you do: you buy books and records to take back home,” hoping that the war would soon be over, allowing him to return to Angola. “As soon as the country gets stabilised,” he told himself, “I’m out.”

After two years, it was KALAF’s father who decided to return to Angola, offering him the option to do the same. But by then, KALAF was beginning to find a place for himself in Lisbon, the city he has called “the most African of European capitals”.



KALAF reads a magazine in the Louie Louie record store.



“I was downtown grabbing everything,” he recalls. “Art, culture, everything I could get my hands on, I was getting into it.”

KALAF canned his studies to focus on an increasingly rich cultural life as a flâneur, working in a pizzeria to pay his rent and performing at poetry slam events. Just like his grandfather, KALAF dreamed of becoming a writer, but the writers in his crowd warned him about how tough it could be to earn a living that way. One thing KALAF had going for him was his deep voice, which commanded the attention of musicians and producers who invited him to collaborate. “I saw that as an opportunity to keep on writing and get to say my stuff.”

“I feel like my presence demands that people acknowledge history in a different way.”

Having left his studies behind, KALAF now faced the tricky visa dance so many of us sit up late trying to figure out. His student visa had lapsed and he had no way of securing another one. “I went into that grey zone of illegal immigration,” he explains. “You have to get your papers in order if you want to get a job,” but you can only obtain those papers if you already have a job.



KALAF pauses at the edge of the Tagus River.

Eventually KALAF solved his chicken-egg dilemma by employing himself. Having established a strong network in Lisbon’s music scene through his poetry slam work, KALAF started a record label with his future Buraka Som Sistema bandmate Branco.

As KALAF’s music career began to ramp up, other European cities became attractive potential homes. London, Madrid and Barcelona all beckoned, but Lisbon remained an active choice. “The proximity to Angolan reality, I didn’t want to lose that,” he says. “I considered moving to Spain, because it was so much fun. But then they didn’t have that many African people there and I needed that closeness. And Lisbon represents that,” he adds. “I can bump into my high school friends there and I couldn’t replace that.”

KALAF’S POSTCOLONIAL VISION

As well as the lingual and cultural ease of living in Lisbon, KALAF felt like it was a place in which he could make an impact.

“I feel that the contributions that we as Angolans can make in the land of the coloniser, let’s say, are far more important than just being in our own country. I feel like my presence demands that people acknowledge history in a different way,” he says. “And I feel the importance of, and carry the weight of, empowering the African community in Portugal.”

It’s a weight I see KALAF carrying with grace, as my inbox dings with a two-page list of contributors he’s emailed me, people from within that community he’d like to see us work with in this issue of NANSEN Magazine. On a lunch break during our photoshoot in Lisbon, KALAF praises our young photographer Rafael Duarte, who has roots in Cape Verde, telling him just how much a recent music video he’d shot had moved him.

Actions like these form the daily grind of KALAF’s sweeping vision for Portugal and its former territories, of a Lusophone identity (→ p. 86) that extends far beyond the likes of Ferdinand Magellan and Vasco da Gama, those explorers memorialised in statues all over the former Portuguese empire and other outposts they claimed as their own.

“I see Portugal beyond the role of those men and I would like this nation to make them accountable,” says KALAF, hitting his rhetorical stride. “I would like to see this nation believe that their sense of identity is far more important than discovering Brazil – because they didn’t discover anything – beyond colonising Brazil, colonising Angola, or even finding their way to India.” He wants to see Portugal take pride in more than just “discovering” other people’s lands.

KALAF has an ambitious and quite gorgeous view for a new kind of postcolonial

identity, available not only to those from former colonies but to the descendants of those who oppressed them, as well.

“I’m also trying to forge my identity beyond the fact that I speak Portuguese,” he adds, “beyond the fact that the majority of my country was conquered and colonised by a European nation. I want to live beyond the idea that black African identity is moulded on top of the Atlantic slave trade,” KALAF explains, his voice creeping higher. “So I’m working on myself, but I’m also working on other people, because I know that we as a people are much better than this.”

“If the opportunity presented itself, would we repeat what they did to us?”

As a writer, KALAF sees his role as being present to observe, document and interrogate the relationship between Portugal and Angola. For example, during Portugal’s economic crisis, which began in 2009, a number of wealthy Angolans began buying up property in Lisbon, a move many referred to as an act of “reverse colonialism”, some with anguish, others with glee.

This perceived role reversal, between coloniser and colonised, was one chapter in the centuries-long relationship that KALAF was



Being able to distill Lisbon in his work means spending plenty of time wandering its streets.

present to bear witness to. He would go on to publish a collection of essays provocatively titled, *The Angolan who bought Lisbon (at half the price)*, where he argued for a higher-minded process of decolonisation, based on mutual respect rather than a quick, greedy dash for profit.

“What the ‘reverse colonialism’ represented,” says KALAF, “was that we were no better than the so-called colonisers we now wanted to conquer. And that’s the tricky part,” he explains. “If the opportunity presented itself, would we repeat what they did to us? Or would we be a little bit better than that and engage in something far more productive and far more equal?”

As wealthy Angolans descended on Lisbon ready to splurge, middle-class Portuguese workers were jumping on the same planes headed back to Luanda, where well-paid jobs awaited them thanks to Angola’s oil boom. In a re-routing of traditional migration patterns between former colonies and their colonisers, by 2011, 100,000 Portuguese people were living in Angola, almost five times the number of Angolans in Portugal.

But these opportunities – to get rich on property in Lisbon, or join the expat class in Angola – were only ever accessible to the privileged, educated few. Today, about 36 percent of Angolans still live below the poverty line – hardly a win for the former colony.

“I would prefer this ‘reverse colonialism’ was based on something far more productive than just profit,” says KALAF. “Like the empowerment of our societies, sharing on an equal basis.” If humans invented colonialism and statues of heroes and public holidays, he reckons, “then we can invent something else, too.” Something even better.

KALAF’s ability to speak directly to such a broad range of audiences – from rowdy music fans to literary critics, loyal newspaper readers to style blog followers – means that if anyone can sell a new vision for the Portuguese-speaking world, it’s him.

A NEW VANTAGE POINT

For the past decade, KALAF has been living between Lisbon and Berlin. But two years ago, he made a more permanent move to the German capital, finding himself once again

on the doorstep of a nation that previously exerted significant power over his homeland.

Having obtained his Portuguese citizenship, KALAF was now able to live in any of the other European Union member states he wished. It’s a privilege available to all EU citizens; currently, about 3.1 percent of them live in an EU country other than the one they were born in (→ p. 84).

If anyone can sell a new vision for the Portuguese-speaking world, it’s him.

KALAF’s wife had already moved to Berlin in 2009, right at the apex of Buraka Som Sistema’s heaviest period of touring. At that time, KALAF was pretty tied up with making music, touring and writing his weekly column, and she was drawn to pursuing her own challenges in a new city where she also has connections, as a Portuguese-German.

The pair has kept a home in Lisbon, and still travel back and forth quite a bit. But two years ago, as Buraka Som Sistema announced its hiatus, the couple decided it was time to start a family, moving themselves more officially to Berlin. KALAF says that for him, making the move “official” was more about changing where and in what language he submits his tax returns than anything else.

Today the couple has two kids, aged two and “five months tomorrow!”, and KALAF

is now experiencing a new iteration of the migrant experience: figuring out how to raise your kids in a place that you are only just starting to call home (→ p. 72).

“Yes, parenting is a lot of work,” he says. “But that’s one of the things Berlin can provide, or Germany in general. The maternity leave my wife can get here is great, while in Portugal you have just four or five months, and then you need to go back to work. In Germany it’s different,” he explains. “We can take a year off, or one-and-a-half years, and that makes a whole world of difference.”

On top of parenting, KALAF writes a column for the magazine GQ Portugal every month and is working on his next book. “For now I’m calling it *How to raise a black child in Prenzlauer Berg*”, after the affluent,



KALAF locates an intricate example of Lisbon’s world-renowned tiles.

predominantly white district of Berlin where he lives with his wife and children.

KALAF is also developing the concept for a TV show about an Angolan woman who migrated to Portugal at the turn of the 20th century. He still dabbles in music from time to time, mostly writing or producing music for other artists. And all of this work is fed by his new vantage point in Berlin, a convenient spot from which to continue observing Europe as both an insider and an outsider.

“If you model the world on yourself, then you should set the example.”

KALAF believes that European identity today is “in crisis. And it’s in crisis because they haven’t given themselves an opportunity to really face their ghosts yet.”

Having an outside perspective allows him to see both the privileges of living in Europe today – “social democracy, these models of education, healthcare” – and the challenges, like who is free to move within the EU and who is not. “That mobility, it’s fantastic,” he says. “But who has access to that mobility?”

“Even the ones who are more enlightened and aware are living in denial,” he believes. “Living in denial of their choices and the consequences of their choices.” For KALAF, making small donations to the Red Cross or supporting petitions on Facebook are ways

for people to feel like they’re helping a little without actively participating in the societies in which they live.

KALAF believes that isn’t enough, not if we’re going to be living up to his post-colonial vision, let alone the human rights principles that Europe claims to have founded.

“I tend to hold Europe in higher regard because it’s the dominant culture,” he says. “If you model the world on yourself, then you should set the example.”

“You think ‘oh, every four years I vote and then I’m done’. No, it doesn’t work that way. Our neutrality oppresses. I feel like we all need to participate. We all need to be accountable. That’s why I feel like European identity is a work in progress.”

KALAF says he would like to encourage Europeans to commit to “everyday solidarity”.

“If you meet your neighbour and you don’t say ‘good morning’ to them, or ‘goodnight’ when you come home, that creates a bad feeling. It creates friction.” Perhaps not at first, he reasons. But then after a year, if you are still not greeting your neighbour when you see them in the street, then “when you need them, they will turn their back on you. And for me that’s part of identity: solidarity, empathy. I think Europe has it,” he explains, “but it’s more intermittent. And we need to make it constant.”

Having finished our interview, KALAF and I head back downstairs and into the Soho House Berlin lobby, passing a receptionist wearing a blue hooded sweatshirt. In the centre of her chest, the ring of EU stars is broken by the absence of a single star, a commentary, no doubt, on the ongoing Brexit negotiations. It’s an unusually political choice for a member of hospitality staff, but then Berliners aren’t shy about their eagerness to discuss politics. It feels like just the kind of place that can cope with an additional conscience.

