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Language Communities or Cultural Empires? The Impact of European Languages in Former Colonial Territories

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«Utopian Eyes and Dystopian Writings: Portuguese Language, African Literature and a "very private" Semiotics of Resistance»

Foreword

In this text we will consider two main topics: 1- the notion of post-colonial utopia through social, political and literary events in Angola and Moçambique namely during the 60s and the 80s; 2- the ways in which Literature in these countries has shown to be consistent with such a reality in particular through a semiotics of cultural resistance.

Colonial and postcolonial utopia: idealization and meaningful projections

Postcolonial theory is showing to be a productive line of thought for the African Literatures and Cultures in former Portuguese colonies. On one side, it allows the search of differentiated answers within political realities that have evolved in autonomous directions as far as the production of discourses that address the colonial and post-independence realities. Also, it helps finding updated hermeneutical references for the various artistic fields in these countries. If we recall that the independences in Angola and Moçambique took place as recently as 1975 it is easy to understand that it is a reality that cannot be read through the

eyes of a post-modern society testing the limits of a fragmentary culture as such.

What these countries have been looking for - as we will try to show in this essay –
are the many possible ways of building or maybe restoring in the present an
ethics based on the multiple dimensions of ancestral and pre-colonial narratives.

Whether and how this has been or is being achieved is a question that still cannot
be fully answered but we would like to add our contribution to such a debate.
To start testing this hypothesis we should go back to the 60s where post-colonial
has to be read as anti-colonial. By then, the different utopian perspectives were
marked by representations that addressed the colonial system from the inside
and the outside of its dominant strategies. The reason for choosing this decade
can be easily explained: it was during the 60s that the colonial war started and it
was also during this period that the guerrilla became an organized structure
based on international, namely African, support.

Portuguese politicians at the time seemed to be looking at Africa finally as a cause
that could not be taken for granted. This accentuated a utopian project based on
intensive economic development and on the encouragement of emigration. The
occupational strategy, both on the military and social fields, was a reaction that
supposed a project adjusted to principles of modernity and was at the same time
a mirror-based strategy. By this I mean that Portugal was trying to build its
identity through the renewal of an image that was grounded on new territories
and through the appropriation of different dimensions of alterity. Dominating
other peoples meant as well appropriating cultural and symbolic systems that
could justify the new portrait of a country not at ease within its European borders
and international partnerships. Isolated on international grounds Portugal

needed to reinforce its role in Africa in order to achieve a singular position. A good part of this dimension tended to be built as one of a spiritual nature, based on the idea of a distinctive Portuguese society, defined as multicultural, within a dynamics of "gentle occupation" since inspired by the mystical idealization of free contact and racial mingling. The well known and controversial *luso-tropicalist* perspective illustrates clearly this assumption. It is based on the idea, as its author, the brazilian Gilberto Freyre puts it, of a very gentle and non-prejudicial contact fostered by the Portuguese who would be the main responsible for a supra-racial and multicultural Brazil.

Homogeneity being the basic feature of this approach sounds contradictory with the image of diversity that it proposed and is one of the problems such perspective hardly explains. If we see the Other as a reflexive and dependent image of the Self, and the Self as an image only fully accomplished through the transformed Other, as Portuguese culture did as far as its colonies, we can realize that Portuguese identity was one of a split nature. The need to recall the structuring signs of this ideology was anyhow one of the major supports to the imperial construction.

Building the Self upon the "Other as I see it", locating the Self on alterity grounds, became a vocational strategy inspired by a spiritual motivation for improvement, relying at the same time on a rational system of values. This could be one of the main characteristics of the Portuguese culture outside of its borders: a search for itself through the represented Other; a representation of the Other through a rationalist and *orientalist* discourse.

What could then be found on the other side of the war situation? The guerrilla had to find for itself a territory that could define the limits of the occupation and foster the planning of all the military interventions. Having a pan-African support, it supposed the building of a transitory state, inclusive of all the nations inside its limits.

In this sense, the guerrilla war showed to be a very important space for addressing a utopian project of national dimension. The narratives that occur within this time frame are of major importance in organizing the identity topics to shape the future independences. Several literary features can be pointed out to support this idea: the selection of spaces that have a trans-territorial importance, becoming a sort of unequivocal common ground, or having a strong symbolic feature of homeland; narrators that show their commitment to particular causes and who express positions either through ideologically educated characters or through multiple social, cultural and ideological types and stereotypes.

The avant-gardes that were then responsible for leading such process knew the dimension of many of the problems ahead for the new society being shaped within these limits. Going back to the pre-colonial experience and adjusting it to a new reality was an inevitable and desired choice but that return was by no means one of an easy nature: many acculturation phenomena could not be eradicated; the intercultural knowledge was insufficient and often contaminated by misunderstandings and equivocal perspectives; the different ethnical backgrounds and positional readings of the military and political organization were not of a consensual nature. Looking for a multiple Self was therefore difficult and ambivalent since not all were looking for the same or through the

same eyes. What did it mean for this matter being an Angolan or a Mozambican? Not necessarily the same as being a Kwanyama or a Emakua. An inclusive state could then suppose, by generalization, an exclusive eye on national backgrounds. The definition of a single state to be had to deal with the representativeness of nations that existed before it but that often had an incomplete knowledge of each other. Literature assumed a leading responsibility on this approach and therefore the accomplishment of the utopia at risk due to such multiple expectations. Besides fiction there were many examples of poetry generally oriented to the topic of "heroism" and many times inspired by mythical characters often African leaders or of African origin. The canon that resulted from this reality was one of an instrumental and collective nature, reproducing the epic dimension of the war within the spatial limits of the guerrilla.

It was replaced by an exemplary one, right before and after the independences, evoking another experience that has to be seen as symmetrical to the war spaces> the jail and the exile of some of the leaders. Role models like Agostinho Neto became more relevant then. He wrote the poems in *Sagrada Esperança* as a testimonial manifesto for the future. Most of his texts were written in prison and were later on adjusted ideologically to the process of independence.

It is nevertheless in fiction that we would like to place the main references that allow us the analysis of utopian literature in these contexts.

The contextual importance of these texts coming from the 60s relies namely on the dialogic nature of their reading. When were they written? Why were they written? When were they read? How were they read?

With very rare exception, the authors writing in the 60s knew they were doing so for future generations and under censorship were concealing their work, sometimes managing to send it abroad but always within a restricted reading community though putting into perspective its expansive potential.

They all concurred at the time to design a homeland to be in territorial terms but anticipated by one of a strong symbolic nature through a pan-African aspiration and a multi-ethnical affirmation. The critique that emerged from this reality was in general ideologically coherent with the political choices followed by the African leaders.

At the time, one of the ways Angolan and Mozambican critique looked for in order to find their individuality within the context of contemporary thought could be seen as having a somehow contradictory epistemological position: on one side it used a methodology that was resilient to change, on the other side it searched intensively a resistance strategy to models of foreign configuration.

The language use, its African location, had then to be in the center of all changes. This tension was responsible for a productive approach to new reading strategies and it intensified the phenomena of hermeneutical revision through stylistic originality. Some, like Pordzik, say that one strong possibility to escape this dilemma can be placed within the preference for stories from the post-colonial interiority and expressing different semiotic and cultural models for reading identity.

The relevant issue here seems to be the fact that these literatures were and are often reading themselves as a field of political interventionism and I don't mean

only through a meta-rethorical impulse but also through discoursive strategies tested on ideological grounds.

Angolan fiction and the revision of the nation - words to say it later...

We will now point out a few examples that can be representative of this diversity in fiction. Starting with Angola: there aren't many texts about the guerrilla, but two are clearly significant within this context: *Mayombe* (written in 1970/71, pub. 1981) and *As Aventuras de Ngunga* (from 1973, recently republished), both by Pepetela.

Written in the 70s they evoke the times of colonial war in the 60s through a pedagogical approach to ethnical diversity in the first case, and organized as a handbook for youngsters' education intended for the *maquis* in the second case. The first work is in itself an allegorical portrait of the revolution, and of the country to build in a near future. The diversity of characters, all representing a social class or an ethnical group, evoke the principle of national representativeness. What we see there is the strategical importance of the forest of Mayombe, as a space where there is a ground for war but also for planning for the future. The allegory of a constructive process based on the people's representation is one of a horizontal nature, anticipating a society educated for decision and discussion and it clearly points out a leading way to possible futures. There you have the militaries, coming from many different ethnic groups and also the intellectuals, looking for the admission of their relevance within a space characterized by an actancial rather then a reflexive organization. The various

narrators show different perspectives and allow an understanding of how the author is willing to hide his presence in favor of an idea that is to result from a polyphonic and at the same time pluri-significant reality. The second text presents the *maquis* as a self-sufficient society, operating on all grounds of functionality. It stresses the value of education and literacy and at the same time places the young "pioneers" in the center of the idea of a revolution under construction. These two metaphorical choices are very present in many Angolan and Mozambican texts, stressing clearly that the future relies in knowledge and children.

For different reasons, another work should be considered here as well – it's the novel "Estória da galinha e do ovo" by Laundino Vieira. This writer applied to his name a self-referring location. Luandino comes from Luanda and therefore it can be easily seen as the space that was privileged for building a private relation with the idea of nation itself. It is an autographical choice that eludes the Portuguese origin of this Angolan author and at the same time it is a self-inscription with consequences to a commitment of a collective nature. Being an anti-colonial novel, since it builds the setting of a sort of a popular court, where characters coming from the margins of the system judge the behavior of the icons of the colonial regime, it also represents the voice of the ones who have no place and therefore it assumes the preparatory nature of a democratic society in the future. The surroundings of the city are of a strong significance at this point. This is a place that is neither the city, mostly controlled by the colonial elites at the time, nor the countryside, still vast enough to prevent total occupation and being multicultural by definition and generalization. At the same time it stands on the

turning point of the cultural encounters and appears as the vigilant space where critical thought grows.

All this was of course a confronting attitude, and along with the attribution of a prize to this work, *Luuanda*, escaping the eye of the censorship, it resulted, as the political authorities realized its dimension, in sanctions to the Portuguese Writers Association, since their responsibles had valued it for its originality.

Though written in Portuguese it had an African style, through the use of Kimbundu language, and couldn't therefore be a part of the imperial canon. This is even more relevant as the Portuguese politics was one of an assimilationist nature.

The textual relevance of most of these works goes along with precise contextual references that support their historical relevance. And as these authors hide their single presence favoring polyphonic narratives or africanizing their style and identity, they favor as well a mediating role between their "people" and the power.

Reprinting some of these works, as it is happening recently, could be seen as a way to confirm their historical relevance but also as a strategy to reevaluate their significance under contemporary conditions of reading.

A Geração da Utopia (1972/1994) again by Pepetela shows another side of this particular state of the art. It is now the disenchantment process that is under evaluation through a dystopian perspective, relating to what was missing in the former project, but not denying it fully. The intellectuals that were busy building the revolution were also its first critics. This runs along with a relegitimating process of their role after the independences. The way in which the writers

started deconstructing these main ideological principles had many different occurrences, ranging from a direct political message as in *O Ministro* by Uanhenga Xitu, to an indirect evaluation of society and of its leaders. Through his *Cultos especiais* he chooses the ambiguity of religion and rituals to discuss the political iconography.

Another novel that moved the dystopian writing to a level of a non-cryptic approach is *Quem me dera ser onda*, by the Angolan Manuel Rui. It received a national award in 1981 and was therefore accepted within the auto-critical frontiers of the Angolan system. In the foreword it was referred to as a text that intended mostly to denounce the dangers of bourgeois behavior. This preface interprets the award itself and limitates its hermeneutical potential. But there is a very different reading that can also be taken into account if we remember its plot: a building in Luanda is the micro-cosmos of the whole society; the political agents are always being tested by a group of children; the daily survival puts constant pressure on the families; the main characters are children, which is – as we stressed before – a relevant sign of the particular mytographic worlds of Angola and Mozambique (they often appear as the alter-ego of the authors reviewing meanings and interpreting them); the school is shown as a potential place for change and for a critical approach to reality.

In general, the textual configuration of these novels also implies a project of general development and not only a broad set of empirical statements. This is what makes them consistent with the idea of political utopia: change through a collective impulse for improvement, based on the ideological and artistic choices of the elites.

Heterotopia and multiple reading

We have considered the 60s as the decade that launched the basic features of utopian fiction and the 80s can be seen as the decade that joined dystopian and heterotopian writing. By this i mean that literature was then build around the idea of multiple readings and multiple literary choices at the same time or after a deconstructive strategy for reading African society in the post-independences. As far as poetry, there were several important collective projects looking for new approaches to an aesthetics based on non-political messages. A good example could be a group of young Angolan poets, lead by Lopito Feijoo, who published an anthology *No Caminho Doloroso das* Coisas, claiming a non-revolutionary literature but clearly assuming an avant-garde project and in some ways one of a prophetical and leading nature. The revindication of an affiliation with Brazilian and Portuguese Modernisms can easily be read as the admission of an heterotopical production. One poet one canon seemed to be the main idea to be passed on.

Heterotopy can be seen in many different ways. A writer like Ruy Duarte de Carvalho is, for instance, mostly interested in showing a dimension of Angola seen from the south and from its cultural representations. The writer is himself a good example of how far you can go when relating empirical experiences and the representation of the Other. This Other is not the one that is readable through one's own eyes, but rather the one that is being read at the same time as it is being written. The functional similitude between inscription and outscription means here the eyes that can overlook the symbolic frontier of geographical

reality. In choosing namely the Kwanyama people as a sort of a cultural alter-ego, RDC proposes a reading of one of the nations on Angolan ground wanting it to stand for the identity of Angolans and the itinerary chosen is one of multiple experiences. The work *Vou lá visitor pastores* is about a community of transhumant shepherds and it makes sense as a literary proposition to the extent where reading and writing are simultaneous activities. Visiting shepherds, walking with them, is also writing their stories and taking the mythological nature of such narratives to the level of national History. This cross-textuality is even more meaningful when you realize it comes from a film director, ficcionist, poet and anthropologist. (RDC intertextualizes this work with his previous ones and its main references come therefore from the 80s as well as the examples we've given before).

The notion of heterotopia, as R. Pordzik puts it, applies clearly to the Angolan and Mozambican literature of the 80s and 90s in the sense where it also complies with the idea of dystopia. Disenchantment after the revolutionary process fosters all sorts of productions that review the role of the authors and of the language they write in. One element also commonly applied to Utopian fiction is that of alternative worlds. Though often dealing with the topic of the fantastic or the uncanny, around all forms of representation of alternative worlds, they don't apply fully to these examples. The fiction here is very grounded on reality even if to that reality applies an important element of derivative fantasy, or private mythological experiences, but what is implied here is not a change of society rather its correction and pedagogical reading.

Heterotopian thought allows the diversity of visions and also of visionary possibilities. So, in which way is it different form utopia itself? It takes the inversion of discourse to a further level of representation since accepting the different possibilities of imperfect societies and systems. The fragmentation of values and experiences concurs to the fragmentation of discourse. This illustrates the core of the African experience today: multiple identitary systems and choices, either through the linguistic reality or through the mythological and mythographic experience.

The urban spaces have become a consistent example of this evidence. They are leading the definition of the boundaries of culture, cross culture and counter culture in Africa. They appear as chaotic and can be reorganized through a reevaluation of the role of pre-colonial cultures.

Disparate utopias have no place here because these have a reorganizational nature. Finding an order within the transitory chaos that comes after the excessive regulations is in the center of heterotopia itself.

This way Angolan and Mozambican authors are writing their history: literature assumes the epistemological responsibility of reviewing and legitimating the facts.

Classical utopian novel makes the future more credible by uncovering historical links and the heterotopian one addresses the reader in order to imply him into creating a coherent illusion of plural historical representation. It is a matter of detotalizing and detemporalizing through discontinuous settings. This is not about relegitimating narrative archetypes but, on the contrary, it is a search for all possible variations within the limits of linguistic and structural change.

Mozambican literature, mostly the one from the 80s, should be read through a similar perspective, since it stresses very clearly the potential of the semiotic inversion of discoursive canonical experience.

Does this mean that utopian novel should be seen as a new genre? If we consider it in its multiple forms, maybe this could be an answer to all the new questions that are being risen. What forms could then be considered within these limits? Two literary forms, present in Mozambican literature, should be considered: the dystopian feminist fiction and the existentialist one. We will now discuss their main characteristics and representative authors.

Writing of the civil war and semiotic resistance

With the exception of Luis Bernardo Honwana, who chose an anti-colonial discourse with his novel *Nós matámos o cão tinhoso,* most writers from the Mozambique have taken the post-civil war problems as their major topic.

Mia Couto, probably the most read author in this country, started a genre that could be called dystopian existentialist novel. His narratives are about the war and the need to overcome its consequences on the day to day life. The novel *Terra Sonâmbula* is a very good example of this choice: it has a combined narrative structure with two stories running in parallel and that become complementary afterwards: one relates to an historical situation (a young boy and an old man are trying to survive and to find their family, meaning their social identity, after the war), and the other one is of a fantastic nature including characters that are all a-social and uncanny. Their complementarity in the end recreates the existential encounter of the two boys and it is presented as a

metaphor to regeneration. We could therefore say that there are two texts in this novel, since they build different forms of textuality and independent meanings though around one single idea, which is reshaping identity. One point that stresses this possibility is also the clearly symbolic presence of two generations that are the ones that mark the image of the survival of all the country: children and elderly people, not directly involved in the war, but addressing its consequences, and naturally proposing a future society based on the empirical contact with change and violence.

This means of course there is the expectation of change and the contribution to a utopian society, where individual and social identities are reshaped, but deriving from a dystopian portrait of reality. It is therefore utopia grounded on self-evaluation and on an ideology of self-responsabilization.

Another trait that his work evokes is the one of disbelief towards the international aid and the arguable cooperative systems established in the country. *O último voo do flamingo* shows the dis-disenchantment through a very critical look over the presence of foreign aid in the country. This "return" is seen as interventionist. It's not the demise of socialism that has to be taken into account here, but rather the new sides of international occupation of Africa.

As we said, Mia Couto is the most well-known writer in this context. And it's worth reviewing the reasons that made him so popular, namely outside of his country: he created a style that can be seen as an innovative approach to the Portuguese language, through a private semiotic system that has a complex rhetorical nature but that is also based on identifiable linguistic resources. Since its major features derive from lexical change, the structures within the text don't

relate to a Bantu system: he privatizes the variety of Mozambican Portuguese and is therefore seen as a very innovative writer. His style fascinates readers who often read him with the feeling they are being initiated into Bantu mysteries but this couldn't be further from the truth. What they get is the key to a complex idiolect based on multiple syncretisms.

Another reference that we would like to go back to has to do with the importance of the urban realities.

Suleiman Cassamo is a good example of a writer who chooses existentialist short stories. He stresses namely the importance of the one place that is probably the most representative one in dystopian fiction as we said before when talking about Luandino: the surroundings and the poor quarters of the cities. Being a space of transition, culturally and socially, it can be seen as a major signifying topos of need and exclusion, but also of fostering a resilient feeling of malaise. This is also identifiable through language and in this case we have a curious integration of Portuguese and Xi-Ronga: the two languages mingle but exclude each other in functional terms (the first is the structuring linguistic system; the second reviews the first on rhetorical terms, meaning that in this case we do have an African Portuguese as a literary language).

Paulina Chiziane, again from the Mozambique, is a good example of an author that developed a new literary form showing a dystopian and heterotopian nature: the African feminist novel. Her work *Niketche* shows a feminist perspective that could only come forward recently because Mozambican society is taking some time integrating educated women and even more in accepting the discussion and revision of roles and gender stereotypes. This doesn't mean it is a peaceful

process, on the contrary, women are forcing the society to accept their rejection of the informal polygamic organization of the family and have been also imposing the renewal of a very unstable vision of their role in society facing some forms of social exclusion namely due to the idea that motherhood and marriage are the typical and basic definitions of womanhood.

Again, this is a literature that uses consistently the Portuguese language as a resource to express an ideological system of concepts adjusted to an intensive lexicalization from African languages.

Portuguese as a literary language and as an African language has clearly been in the center of major discussions about identity and linguistic national choices. It has been said to be an assumed choice on a African national levels but that doesn't mean it is a peaceful choice.

We could say that in general terms all the authors we have been referring to in this text have chosen particular ways of nationalizing and privatizing the literary language they use. This occurs namely through very different levels of exposition to the Bantu languages and their respective rhetorical features.

The most intensive approach to these languages can be seen namely in Suleiman Cassamo and Uanhenga Xitu, considering the importance of Xi-Ronga and Kimbundu languages in their work.

The recognition of the existence of these literatures apparently arose before the independence and they should be considered as a means to establish new links to the idea on nation and identity.

How can a European language serve this purpose? By namely incorporating all traits that might reveal its intensive africanization.

Semiotic resistance is a means of building a counter-discourse as opposing to colonial discourse. But it isn't merely this: anti-colonial projects in literature were of a short duration, whereas the hetero-discursive ones have the duration that comes from a system in permanent adjustment to itself and to its dialectic differences.

The internality of all the stories written within this reality can be a major frame to understand the difficult ways of consolidating a balanced relationship between modernity and pre-colonial times.

The problem is that there is a significant unease when most African writers have to deal with the so called traditional worlds and cultures. The resistance to them probably comes from a significant distance in ontological terms. Most of the narratives trying to expose this approach don't go much further then the topical inclusion of folk elements.

All the exceptions to this situation come from integrative experiences that are of consistent bilingual or ethnographic dimension.

 Luigi Cazzato says our culture is one of meta-language, meta-literature, meta-fiction, and that this general need of building self-consciousness could be the major characteristic of post-modern critical thought.

It is very likely that this applies to the contexts we have been dealing with in this paper. Namely through: the revision of the traditional role of the author in the text; the creation of languages of a private nature; the ambiguous representation of the narrators; the creation of effects of *vraisemblance* through fragmentary eyes; the elusion of strict borders between reality and fiction.

Some see these distinctive traits as a means to build a particular look of African authors on colonial dominance. I suppose it's much more then just that: it is also a way to assure self-inscription in literature. Writers have understood the power of their work in countries where the national literary critique and the contemporary History have gone through major though slow changes. And are therefore involved into moderating the excess of modernity and its anxiety through a committed strategy of transformational art. In this sense they are definitely approaching the potential for a culture of diversity and hetero-representation. Even if with a relational malaise with the pre-colonial experience.

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