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Memory, History, Fiction

A Note on the Politics of the Past in Mozambique

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Abstract

In 35 years of independence, memory has played a central role in Mozambique in more than one respect. The memory of the liberation struggle in particular, has represented a powerful means both of implementing the national project and of legitimising political power, resulting in a less than flexible narrative often in tension with subaltern memories. My conference will focus on tensions between the several memories, while questioning the role narratives have played, and can play, in such process.

The fiftieth anniversary of African independencies is a special opportunity to carry out all sorts of balances. In making a *bilan* we face – as Paul Ricoeur would say¹ – two distinct times: the time of what is enunciated (in this case the African independencies) and the time of the enunciation, which is the current time, now. In other words, the way we look at the past reveals a lot about ourselves and our present. Therefore, in looking at the past fifty years, we are also asking, in a way, where we are now. Therefore, along with the discussion of events we are also discussing the itineraries that brought us from there to here, and the meaning of both.

My address will discuss some aspects of the relationship between memory, history and fiction in the particular national post-independence context of a non-francophone country, Mozambique, trying to point out the importance of these categories and the tension they establish among themselves. I will do so less based on scholar literature than on my own impressions as a Mozambican historian and novel writer. In this respect, I want to make clear that far from trying to infer any sort of authority from direct experience, I am just taking advantage of the fact of having been placed in the third topic of our *rencontre*, one that, in discussing the view of the art, is so to speak less obliged to the rigours of the academic discourse.

I will start by saying that as much of the territories in the continent, fifty years ago Mozambique was engaged in the process that would lead to its independence. But in

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit 2*, Paris: Seuil, 1984.

contrast with the majority of the African countries, it had to fight a ten year violent war before such independence could be achieved. For some, the nature of the Portuguese colonialism (or the kind of struggle that was pursued to overthrow it) might have been behind the radicalisation of Mozambique's emancipation process, a development that transformed the meaning of independence in much more than a replacement of political elites, in fact in a political and social revolution.²

The main instruments to implement such revolution, once independence was achieved, were Frelimo – the liberation front that in 1977 was transformed into a Marxist-Leninist party – and an idea of the past constructed around the liberation struggle as the true source of that revolution, an idea based on the experience of a process that created unity amongst all Mozambicans and established the basis for defeat of Portuguese colonialism.

As a practice, the liberation struggle and the experience of the liberated areas permitted both to create the revolution and to foresee the future of the whole country once such experience was replicated in it. The memory of the liberation struggle came therefore to play a central role in post-independence politics and life, not just as a past reverberating in the present but also as a beacon and a reference to walk to the future. As I tried to show elsewhere,³ it did so in being the act that permitted the Mozambicans to emerge with a national identity, and also to the extent that it provided the basis for post-independence Government's policies and a sort of *carte blanche* for the political and developmental decisions to be taken, in the sense that these decisions, taken by the very same protagonists who had won the struggle, were presented as a sort of continuation of the practice adopted in the former liberated areas. Included in this logic of continuity was the appeal to keep the unity adopted during the struggle, what if on the one hand created cohesion to face a hostile region as it was Southern Africa in the 1970s, also played an important role in avoiding any sort of political contestation.

In brief, the liberation struggle was an idea of the past that came to form the core and substance of the nation building process and of political developments in the fifteen

² Some authors find a correlation between the nature of colonialism and the radicalisation of independence. See, for instance, Joseph Ki-zerbo; Ali A Mazrui; C Wondji (in collaboration with A Boahen), 'Nation-building and changing political values', in AA Mazrui (ed.), *Unesco General History of Africa VIII – Africa since 1935*, Paris: Heinemann and University of California Press, 1993.

³ João Paulo Borges Coelho, João Paulo, 2005, "Política e Memória. Fontes arquivísticas e história contemporânea de Moçambique: problemas e algumas perspectivas", IV Seminário Internacional de Arquivos de Tradição Ibérica, Lisboa: Torre do Tombo, 24-28 de Outubro de 2005; João Paulo Borges Coelho, "Memória das Guerras Moçambicanas", conferência, Coimbra: Centro de Estudos Sociais da Faculdade de Economia, 5 de Julho de 2007.

years which followed the 1975 declaration of independence. It was around it that the political memory was created.⁴

Of course, this idea of creating a 'controlled reverberation' of past events in the present is not new. In fact, the past is never past but rather a vision of it through present day's eyes and motives. Remembering, as Todorov reminds us, is always a selection process guided by criteria set in the present.⁵ And, of course, all states develop their mechanisms to attempt at controlling and utilising the past in order to create a political memory that favours them, one that they hope will be in some future transformed in collective and even historical memory, the former shared by all and the later the one capable of standing in the *long durée*.

One particularly common mechanism of political memory consists in the promotion of national or official histories, which in the words of Beatriz Sarlo are usually made of "a pantheon of heroes, a group of excluded and reprobates, and one sole development line bringing us from past to present."⁶ Histories that are clear cut and simple, with a strong nationalist accent, and that circulate widely in schools or in the media, through processes which have deserved already a lot of attention and analysis.

Mozambique also had its liberation struggle encoded as a grand-narrative according to, and following those steps, with the simple structure of a tale, starting with a symbolic colonial aggression (the Mueda massacre, which corresponds to other identical phenomena as the 1959 Pidjiguiti massacre for Guinea-Bissau, or the vague of repression that followed the assault on the Luanda prison in February 1961, for Angola), followed by the 'first shot' fired by the guerrillas at the colonialists, and unfolding as an heroic story in which the movement got rid of the reactionaries and acquired an ever growing revolutionary purity. The story is based on a series of binary oppositions (colonialism versus revolution, reactionaries versus revolutionaries, civil versus military, rural versus urban, etc.) and clearly it is this simplicity which conferred it a tremendous efficiency.

⁴ I distinguish political memory from collective memory. Roughly, political memory is the one controlled by the authorities, who try to make it as collective memory. It is more structured and active, while collective memory is passive and operates by accumulation throughout time.

⁵ Todorov writes that "(...) la mémoire ne s'oppose nullement à l'oubli. Les deux termes qui forment contraste son l'*effacement* (l'oubli) et la *conservation*; la mémoire est, toujours et nécessairement, une interaction des deux. La restitution intégrale du passe est une chose bien sûr impossible (...). La mémoire, elle, est forcément une sélection (...)." (Tzvetan Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire*, Paris: Arléa, 2004, pg 14).

⁶ Beatriz Sarlo, *Tempo passado. Cultura da memória e guinada subjectiva*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras/Editora UFMG, 2007, pgs 13-14.

However, what seems interesting, and in a way unique, is that despite its centrality for the life of the country, this grand-narrative remained verbal, uttered in words. In thirty five years of independence no serious attempt was made to write it down, to register it in written form. If we exclude the fragmentary speeches of Samora Machel occasionally published by Frelimo and the State information and propaganda channels, or by newspapers on special celebration days, there is no official written history of the liberation saga. How should this be understood?

Evidently, there are no traces here of an old and culturally entrenched oral tradition mechanism, since the armed struggle is a phenomenon that precisely breaks away from tradition and in a way inaugurates modernity.

And maybe we should look for several instead of just one reason. First of all, keeping it verbal was perhaps the best way of avoiding deviations from a canon whose contours were not entirely well established (the absence of deviations contributing, in its turn, to reinforce the cohesion of the tale). Seen from a different angle, this means that the fact of being verbal assured greater flexibility and capacity of adaptation of the narrative; in other words, greater effectiveness.

It is important to have in mind that the liberation struggle, based in Tanzania, was progressively established in the Northern provinces, where it created liberated areas, but did not directly affect extensive areas of the country, including the most important cities (and the capital Maputo) and the Southern region in general. In these 'unaffected' areas the population, although lacking the experience of the liberation struggle, certainly had their own experience of the colonial brutality and kept private good and bad memories of colonial life. However, after independence, and despite the saying of the old revolutionary song (*'let us not forget the time that has passed'*), the memories that provided the raw material for the future came not from these experiences of the rest of the country but rather from the liberated areas.

In a phenomenon that I think still needs to be much better understood, the new independent political memory was thus 'imported' from the liberated areas much more than being built over the ashes of the old political memory, the memory of colonialism. Put in a somewhat radical way, it is as if in the new independent country there was no room for the past, just for a certain future disguised as past. Gradually, the key attitude would then go from 'to do different from colonialism' to 'to do the same as in the liberated areas'. It was as if the colonial world was identified with evil, where not even experience could be gathered from. In this sense, I reiterate, independence was a denial of the experience of many in favour of the illusion of writing the present in a *tabula rasa*.⁷

⁷ This could be discussed in several contexts and was reinforced in very concrete terms by the equally relatively unexplored issue of the Portuguese exodus at the time of independence, one that also implies

Another key aspect of the absence of a written canonical text was that it reinforced the role of the witness of the liberation struggle, the one that had participated in it and could claim to have gathered experience from it. This excluded of course a great number of Mozambicans without experience of the struggle, as we have seen, and also many that had such experience but could not vocalize it.

I explain. Not all guerrilla fighters covered the itinerary that creates a witness out of a mere protagonist. To become a witness implies conquering and keeping a voice capable of telling the story after independence. Since no serious attempt was made to systematically register guerrillas' testimonies according to an adequate method, the ones that kept a voice capable of telling the story were the ones that entered the cities and held a prominent responsibility in the party and state structures. To these were added, in the transition period between the 1974 military coup and independence, some revolutionaries that occupied key positions but lacked that experience, and consequently were sent to Frelimo camps in Tanzania to acquire it. Here, the argument is not intended to infer any sort of social divide or privilege, what would take us to a different line of thinking, but merely to show that a strong reduction in the number of voices capable of telling the story is unquestionably behind its great cohesion, a cohesion that was further reinforced by the militarised discipline of society in those days.

The status as witness (the revolutionary, the one with the correct experience and a voice to tell it) conferred a strong capital to the ones that could hold it after independence, in more than one dimension. In particular, it was important from an ethical point of view (comprehensively, to have participated in the liberation of the country was an experience of the highest quality possible), but also politically (to render public such quality) and in material terms.⁸ And, of course, whenever and wherever alternative sources are unavailable, the witness became the only source of the tale, what increased enormously the loudness of her voice.

In some aspects, and despite the obvious differences and even contrast, it is possible to find here a resonance of the witness as it is discussed in an opposite context of memories of extreme past events as the holocaust or the South-American military dictatorships of the 1970s, in particular when the witness becomes the only source.⁹

for the country a less symbolic and very concrete denial of experience (deprivation of technical skills to run services and the economy in general, etc.). This argument explains, for instance, why the hated colonial villagisation process was candidly repeated a mere three years after independence, even if with obviously distinct objectives.

⁸ For example, besides more informal privileges and accesses to job opportunities, etc., time spent in the struggle counted twice for retirement from public service.

⁹ Sarlo, *op cit*, pg 21.

Of course, in those extreme negative cases the witness brings the experience of the evil past while here that experience (associated with the colonial environment) is progressively wiped off and replaced by an opposite category, noble and positive, and linked to the future. While what seems fundamental in the case of the holocaust is to transmit the experience of the ones that ceased to be able to speak, and in the one of the survivors of the South-American *juntas* to tell the own experience, here, in a context where pride replaces trauma, the aim is to affirm a common experience in order to reinforce the cohesiveness of the collective version.¹⁰

As was said above, when the collective experience is transformed from a common experience of many into a 'will be' experience of all, in other words when the version gains a voice to become a grand-narrative or political memory with national reach, it exerts great pressure not only on subaltern memories (either individual, community etc.),¹¹ but also on other social mechanisms of dealing with the past, namely academic history and several forms of artistic expression, including fiction literature.

There are a number of reasons why political memory and scholar historiography are not good neighbours. Besides threatening to write down the narrative, thus exposing it to unforeseeable risks, the later is an activity that searches the archives, interview people, looks for all sorts of sources and does not submit itself to what the former defines as public interest. Even when 'collaborating', the only guarantee it brings is to imprint complexity and internal contradiction to a body whose efficiency depends precisely on the opposite: simplicity. This is why Znepolski writes that «[political] memory tends to eliminate competing testimonies, tends to weaken their arguments and to create the necessary conditions to impose the memory of 'their ones', the 'shared memory' .»¹²

This is why, despite the deficit of historical knowledge inherited from colonial times, academic history, particularly contemporary history, did not deserve special attention from the new authorities after independence. On the other hand, very seldom did academic history stood up to create or defend a camp of its own, distinct from the ideological one where the grand- narrative was developed. One particular exception

¹⁰ We could look at the re-education camps created after independence as part of the same principle of getting rid of an old experience (forgetting bad habits) and acquiring a new one.

¹¹ One example of confrontation between subaltern memories and political memory is when former combatants remember in ways that contradict the canonical narrative. For example when an ex-combatant candidly assumes to have killed someone outside a combat situation, or when he affirms that Zimbabwean guerrilla fighters were in their vast majority poltroons. When confronted, it is the subaltern memory that tends to disappear, or at least to shut up.

¹² Ivaylo Znepolski, "Les malheurs de l'histoire du temps present: usages postcommunistes de la mémoire", *Divinatio*, vol 13, spring-summer, 2001, pg 82.

was a journal article published by Aquino de Bragança and Jacques Depelchin,¹³ in which the regime's triumphalist vision of the past, as told by the grand-narrative, was severely criticised as providing a picture deprived of problems and full of certainties, where the enemy was frozen and incapable of transformation throughout the struggle while the nationalist movement had victory as natural fate. In other words, they wanted back a space for history with its methods and debate, something the grand-narrative had wiped off.

With fiction literature and poetry¹⁴ things have to be looked at in a different way. The nationalist movement correctly surmised that the literary discourse (and the artistic one in general terms) could be of great value. Poetry in particular created its own and noble space since early in the 20th century, exposing the cruelty of the colonial environment and bravely announcing a new era. In a way, we can even consider that poetry was the first articulated expression of nationalism in Mozambique, well before other forms showed up. However, also here there are important problems to solve, problems that affected the relations of neighbourliness between literature and the grand-narrative since the onset of the later, even before independence.

First of all, despite the fact of the unequivocal support it always devoted to the liberation struggle, nationalist literature did not represent a clear rupture with colonialism capable of matching the one operated by the armed struggle. It had grown in the colonial and urban space, nor just in geographical terms but also to the extent that literature requires an important degree of cosmopolitanism and, in the Mozambican case, and beyond the mere Portuguese language, it involved the incorporation of imported aesthetical values from several quadrants, including Brazil and Portugal.¹⁵ This, I believe, helps to explain the relative mistrust with which the liberation movement faced a literature that, although nationalist and holding a courageous sense of protest against colonialism, grew in a space which was not only

¹³ Aquino de Bragança and Jacques Depelchin "Da idealização da FRELIMO à compreensão da história de Moçambique", *Estudos Moçambicanos*, N.ºs. 5/6, 1986, pgs. 29-52. Also published in English as "From the Idealization of Frelimo to the Understanding of the Recent History of Mozambique", *African Journal of Political Economy*. Vol.I, N.º 1, pgs 162-180.

¹⁴ For reasons of economy I coarsely amalgamate poetry and fiction prose. They establish relationships with the political narrative of the past that are of course differentiated, in ways that deserve to be better understood.

¹⁵ João Paulo Borges Coelho, "E depois de Caliban? A história e os caminhos da literatura no Moçambique contemporâneo", in Charlotte Galves, Helder Garmes & Fernando Rosa Ribeiro, *África-Brasil: Caminhos da língua portuguesa*, Campinas: Editora Unicamp, 2009.

colonial but also urban. Despite being on the right side, such literature was not entirely submissive to the political camp.¹⁶

The liberation movement developed then a literary tradition of its own, conspicuously rural, exclusively focused on the subject of the armed struggle, and not rarely presented itself as echoing the collective voice of the people, mostly made of verses that sounded as 'clamours of subjectivity' in an entirely objective setting as the one of the struggle. Rather naïf at times, it had as main characteristic the complete submission of the literary to the political percept. Not really useful after independence, this revolutionary literary tradition showed incapable of thriving and did not really find its way as part of the grand-narrative.

On the other hand, after the idyll that followed independence, the urban literary tradition could not but become increasingly frail. It lost some of its writers and its cosmopolitanism, and the difficult situation of the country originated a steep decay in the editing business and in the number of bookshops. In brief, it lacked breathing air in the narrow political space. In the 1980s, in a context of crisis provoked by the civil war, while a new generation of authors was trying to reinvent a own independent literary camp, away from the epic and more close to the subjective and intimate, literature had lost its added value for a grand-narrative that had to deal with its first serious fissures.

The 1992 Peace Accord marked a deep political change in the country. The accord ended the civil war and started a political transition from the socialist cycle to a new democratic multiparty order. In this new context a lot of changes were expected regarding the role the past could perform in the new order. In particular, a sort of change was predictable that would lead to the replacement of the grand-narrative by democracy as the great reference of nation building and political order. Behind such prediction a number of reasons could be found, including a new recent past rendered very complex by the civil war, the fact that the old veteran generation (the 'witness generation') was rapidly and inexorably being replaced by a new one that grew up after independence (therefore without experience of the liberation struggle), and above all the culture instilled by neo-liberalism where focus at the present is so strong that does not leave much space for past or future.¹⁷

¹⁶ This seems to be the meaning of the process moved against former political prisoners after independence, many of whom artists, trying to ascertain the degree of their collaboration with the colonial authorities.

¹⁷ Sarlo, *op. cit.*, pg 30, talks about a crisis of authority of the past over the present in modern times. In a similar vein, Agamben says that humanity lost experience in the sense that today no one would accept authority based on experience but rather the opposite. See Giorgio Agamben, *Infância e História. Destruição da experiência e origem da história*, Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2008, pg 30.

Only in part this prediction was correct. Formal democracy was adopted, even if still showing important fragilities particularly in the separation of powers and in the consolidation of political plurality. Competition gained terrain over revolutionary ethics as content of the new narrative. Cosmopolitanism grew. However, somewhat surprisingly, the grand-narrative of the liberation struggle did not lose its centrality in society. On the contrary, such centrality was in a way reinforced along the same lines that had prevailed in the previous socialist cycle. The archives remain closed and there are signs that this situation will not change for a long time.¹⁸

Then, recently something rather unexpected started to happen. Many ex-combatants, many witnesses started writing and publishing *books of memoirs*. First a pair; then half a dozen; now much more, and signs are that there are still many to come, some attempting a quasi-fictional experience, most of them announcing memoirs or “the truth”. What to think about this? For a start, it seems this can be understood from more than one angle. It can be the will of a generation who is now retiring and leaving the political scene. It can also be a sort of message of belonging and proof of loyalty to a party rendered somewhat more crisped in the democratic environment, and being in the reinforcement of its cohesion the way to face the current days. It can therefore be talking about the past as a way to guarantee the present. Finally, we could also find here the illusion that, the same way the witness permitted to condemn state terrorism in the South America of the 1970s, or *apartheid* in South Africa, maybe the witness could come now in rescue of the tale.

In any case, it is a phenomenon that is disturbing the march of things. It is writing down the grand-narrative, but in fragments that threaten to provide a less than coherent picture of the whole. Besides, it is helping to freeze the story, to attach it to a certain time through the written word, thus deeply transforming its nature. From now on, the grand-narrative will have an age, from now on it will start to grow old.

These signs can be noticed both in the body of the narrative and in the context where she breathes. As to the former, its key elements are now being challenged, as was the case when doubts were recently and publically casted regarding who really fired the first shot against colonialism, starting a debate around one of the most symbolical elements in the tale, one that would be unthinkable to challenge a few years ago. As to

¹⁸ It is so despite the fact of very strong juridical and ethical arguments in favour of the opening of the archives. The juridical argument has to do with Decree n.º 33 issued in October 26, 1992, on the Archives National System, that dictates that all documentation becomes historical after thirty years, and in that quality accessible to the public unless its confidentiality is specifically declared (this rendering historical all documentation about the liberation struggle, and in that quality accessible to the public). As to the ethical argument, it has to do with the fact that the nationalist documentation was produced by a national liberation front in a context of a national liberation war, and therefore is national and public in the deepest sense. Despite that, all the documentation about the struggle remains closed and currently kept as property by a political party.

the context, also recently the secretary general of Frelimo stated to the media that the *Museu da Revolução*, the Museum of the Revolution, one of the few spaces where there are still traces of the nationalist saga, belonged not to the Mozambican people as a whole but rather was property of the party. This clearly shows that erosion is starting to attack the body and the meaning of the text.

Currently, I think this puts us at a fundamental crossroads. What will happen next?

First of all, it is quite obvious that things cannot remain as they are for much longer. Witnesses, and even protagonists of the armed struggle, forty or fifty years later are now disappearing. More than that, signs are that these very same witnesses, by writing down their versions, will seriously erode the narrative by the mere fact of encapsulating it in written text, creating several contradictions among their structural elements which will not be solved by a flexibility that will be lost by then.

And yet, it is important to preserve the saga as a central element for the identity of the country, the one that rendered possible its independency. Doing so is not a simple or straightforward task. It requires the transformation of the setting, of the actors involved and of the very nature of the narrative.

First of all, by acknowledging that acceding to the past is a fundamental right, and that each one's remembrances are part of the substance that makes collective memory. This means that whatever important, even central, the liberation struggle is only part, not the totality of our past. Secondly, that the statute of witness is not a privilege. After all, democracy, at least theoretically, covers equitably and blindly all citizens, the ones that freed and the ones that were freed. And thirdly, relativising the liberation struggle as one among other pasts means letting it breathe beyond the narrow camp of politics, here understood as just one amongst several ways that are part of the social functioning, even if the one that manages them all. To keep the memory of the liberation struggle entirely contained in the narrow political camp is an act against democracy and against culture. In other words, the present is too big, too complex and too precious to remain hostage of a closed and rigid interpretation of the past. And the new paradigm is, not anymore how to assure unity but how to manage the plurality of views in conviviality.

This will open the grand-narrative to a multitude of other social ways of dealing with the past, including a historiography which has to reinvent its camp, and, of course, art.

The denial of the archives (or for that matter keeping them closed or destroying them), and the disappearance of the witnesses, would in itself create an extreme situation in which the past would be kept hostage of a present political will with obscure contours. However, and since the past was lived by us all or our ancestors, it has no landlord. The past is a land without a lord.

Opening the archives or keeping them away from the eyes of the public is not therefore what will preserve the grand-narrative. That will only influence the way the tale will be transformed. This is why whenever the ways to reach the substance of the past are closed emerges a new unavoidable and precious instrument called imagination. In art, as in social sciences and humanities, imagination is a fundamental instrument to fill the gap created by the denial of experience. In fact, the absence of archival evidence or testimonial sources will always be compensated by such powerful mechanism.

Paul Ricoeur tells us that memory is a province of the imagination: «C'est sous le signe de l'association des idées qu'est placée cette sorte de court-circuit entre mémoire et imagination: si ces deux affections sont liées par contiguïté, évoquer l'une – donc imaginer –, c'est évoquer l'autre, donc s'en souvenir».¹⁹

Maybe it is time now to look at things in a different way, and to see the tension of the political with other memories as positive and capable of opening new avenues. In the context of extreme experience as the one of her own research, Beatriz Sarlo writes that «[fiction] literature is not capable of solving or explaining all the problems we face, but the teller (the *raconteur*) always thinks *outside* the experience, as if human beings besides suffering their nightmares could also take hold of them».²⁰ We could add that this applies not just to nightmares but to all fundamental social memories, and therefore that fiction literature render possible to think the liberation struggle without necessarily experimenting it; and, whatever paradoxical it may look, in doing so, in imprinting to it a fictional dimension, feeds the frozen tale with nourishment that helps through debate to transform it into true social memory.

At a time of such an important celebration as this one, I would conclude by saying that what I tried to do here was providing an example that the African past is not anymore peopled just by colonial ghosts, or ghosts generated in the old colonial days. Africa is not suspended in the past, and the proof of that is that it already started to be haunted by ghosts that are post-colonial. In my view, this in itself is an unequivocal sign of independence.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris: Seuil, 2000, pg 5.

²⁰ Sarlo, *op cit*, pg 119.