

Poemas da Guiné-Bissau (Poems From Guinea-Bissau)

Ana Raquel Lourenço Fernandes et al (Eds) *Para Vasco: Poemas da Guiné-Bissau (For Vasco: Poems From Guinea-Bissau)*
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With the publication by Heaventree Press (U.K.) of an anthology of Lusophone African poetry *Poemas da Guiné-Bissau*, more people around the world will come to know a little about some of the youngest and poorest nations of West Africa. This explains the editors' choice of Guinea-Bissau as 'first in ... series of anthologies of postcolonial poetry from lusophone Africa.' (*Poemas* 6) One record of statistics in this pamphlet of 12 poems shows that 'only 6 extant books of poetry and one novel at the time of writing' (Augel in *Poemas* 6) are available from that lusophone African country where the collection *Poemas da Guiné-Bissau* derives. And the editors (scholars from the Universities of Birmingham and Warwick) remark that 'greater awareness by the outside world of this national culture is clearly necessary.' (6)

An approach to this necessity by way of this anthology is relevant in keeping to the context of literature as illuminator of cultural, historical experiences of the people. For Guinea-Bissau, more shall yet be written of its epic 'dramatic national journey,' (9) and the ultra nationalistic zeal of Amílcar Cabral in uniting the various ethnicities and eliminating the exploitation and division that characterised their society.

The poet of 'O último adeus dum combatente' ('The last adeus of a forest fighter') -Vasco Cabral- has been identified as 'the first Guinean intellectual.' (7) Having fought in the war of independence to become vice president of the new nation, Vasco's poems are full of high patriotic sentiments. 'The last adeus' resonates with the age-old emotional pangs of parting, and the loyalty of the freedom fighter split between his personal and national interests. This choice, between which lies the distinction of higher and selfish human values naturally, or as a question of commitment, must fall to the triumph of the higher cause.

That afternoon I left and you remained,
we felt, us two, the *saudade's* sorrow.
I suffered the bloody truth of your tears.
You're not my only happiness, *amor*,
I left you there for love of Humankind (12)

Compared to the South African struggle for majority rule the Lusophone African experience takes a similarly organised but more intensive emotive configuration mainly for the relative smallness of the country and the organised guerrilla warfare which it had to contend with. All through the 1960s Amilcar Cabral conducted a war of liberation against Portugal and effectively controlled every part of Portuguese Guinea not occupied by the Portuguese army (MERL 2003). The 'last *adeus*' points to this philosophy of the revolution in the temporary satisfaction and subsequent denial of self; the acceptance and separation from the comforts and yearnings of the body for the cause of communal liberty in which self sacrifice is nevertheless embedded in the hope of return.

Believe I never will forget your love,
and, if I am the one your love burns for,

carry the hope that one day I'll return. (12)

In the interaction of individual happiness and sadness, discovery and loss, it is thus not uncommon to find the expression of poetic thought and feelings as a missive in which the personal intimacy yields to a condition of inner peace in an otherwise uncertain and chaotic world. This yielding of understanding, intended to evoke the sense of comradeship and revolutionary sympathy, is as stable as the themes of love and sacrifice that run through the poetic universe of struggle, affirmation, invocation and hope.

Helder Proenca's 'Uma carta para ti, amor' ('A letter for you, amour') seeks this replication of traditional themes through an intensive device of parallelisms.

I want to march with you, *amor*

...

I want, and only this way,
to march strangely
holding your waist

...

I want, and only this way,
to listen to the melodies... (16)

In the apartheid years of South Africa, the liberation chant of 'Amandla' also recurred frequently along with the rejection of conditional freedom by Nelson Mandela in his famous speech 'The struggle is my Life' from Robben Island prison. Similarly between the Guinean and his love there is no other way but 'only this way' –of struggle which endears the merger of personal and public responsibility. Since universal triumphs are won at the willing sacrifice of individual selves, 'the vigil' in the /stilled silence' equals

the voluntary impairment or incarceration of selves while negotiating the difficult hurdles to political self determination. These nuances of sacrifice are equally apparent in the poem 'In memory of Kauh Nan Tungue' where the communality of poetry evidences the marriage of the universal and personal feelings as in the passionate ejaculation,

I would, oh Mother Africa! feel
the warmth of blood that gestated us
in atmosphere of resistance and war. (20)

Hélder Proença's 'glorification of the liberation movement' (8) in not just an intimate 'sexual' sense flourishes in the association of personal intimacy with the wider cause, a corollary which imbues power and commitment to the vision; for the poetry of political liberation is infused in a deeper sense of history, of commitment to a collegiate vision, and of fulfilment that can only find some relevance in its actualisation of the general macrocosmic plan. Yet with a sense of the necessity of sacrifice springs up images of hope that sing of the 'pain time has not healed' and of 'tomorrows' breeze,' a new smile 'that heralds the new day.' The evocation can only succeed in memories of bloody sacrifices, of the massacres of nationals in their struggle against colonial statutes, against foreign invaders, around which the violence of a whole continent is inscribed.

'Hino do dia novo' ('Hymn of the new day' by Tony Tcheka) can also be seen in the celebration and veneration of the struggle cast in a landscape of 'blossoming flower' and 'red carnations' while yet belonging to the younger generation of voices concerned with national rebuilding after devastating years of war. Significantly, all draw from the memory of the past in symbols of regenerative power and force.

let us go to Komo to regain strength

...

Let us go to Komo to drink at the same fountain
where the first nameless freedom fighter
drank his last drop

Somehow it is not surprising to find womanhood cast in some of these verses as the ritual source of positive masculine succour and warmth of future destiny as it were in the days before the colonial presence upturned the values of Africa and imposed its exploitative sexist and racial discriminations. As Julião Soares Sousa's 'Saudade e Esperança' ('Saudade and Hope') testifies, the parallel of 'mother' and 'hope' coming in several repetitions is seen to simulate incantatory cadences that evoke the divining force of the uttered word in order to conjure the idea of survival in the face of continuing disappointments with the postcolonial state.

I grabbed the sun and *saudade*
I fought and lived in hope
so the reluctant land
would smile in hope

my hope, Mother... (28)

In 'Cantos do meu País' ('Songs for my country') this postcolonial dialogue has taken the centrespread of the struggle, and the new clamour in that of a disappointed sensitivity where the shackles of a native form of colonialism 'still restrain the motion' of national progress and the new victims are still the sacrificed peasantry.

The acknowledgement of nativity is markedly resonant in Ytchyan's 'Para ti da tabanca' ('For you from the Village') a

dedication to the purity of womanhood and to a peasantry whose 'feet (are) marked by sacrifice' 'hand(s) surrendering to the rhythm of hoes /chanting truth in times of rain.' (34) The woman of the postcolonial nation states is the 'suffer-woman, enslaved woman' (36) enslaved that is, by a new political equation that excludes her positive involvement, a condition which the poetry of Eunice Borges 'Mulher da minha terra' ('Woman from my Land') would seek to destabilize in the outcry of what being a woman is not.

To be a woman is not to be weak.
To be a woman is not
obeying without understanding
following without knowing the way
giving without taking.

No! Woman from my land!
Come know what you're worth (36)

Here the recurrence of 'my people' becomes a formulaic device for much constant reappraisal of art and society in agreement. Poetry for Lusophone Africa rightly remains a communal ritual where the addresser and addressee are linked in a dialogue of forever seeking frontiers of exposition or understanding.

Even for its being the first independent Lusophone Africa nation and yet ranking as the sixth poorest nation in the world, the objective of this collection, if nothing more than a new awareness in terms of creative, linguistic and cultural interest in a nearly forgotten part of the world, would have been sufficient positive gesture by the publishers who honour here the poetic and visionary ideals of the people of Guinea-Bissau.