

**A HERITAGE OF ONE'S OWN:
A CONVERSATION WITH ANA PAULA TAVARES¹**

*Margarida Calafate Ribeiro
CES, University of Coimbra*

MCR: Who is Ana Paula Tavares?

APT: I am an Angolan poet, but I'm also a historian, and as such, sometimes everything about me gets all mixed up, to echo Camões, it's a case of the lover transforming into the beloved, and utter confusion ensues... I have published several collections of poetry—*Ritos de Passagem* (1985), *O Sangue da Buganvilia* (1998), *O Lago da Lua* (1999), *Dizes-me Coisas Amargas como Frutos* (2001), *Ex-Votos* (2003)—and I also like to write prose. In 2004, I published *A Cabeça de Salomé* (2004), a collection of chronicles, and recently, a novel written with Manuel Jorge Marmelo, *Os Olhos do Homem que Chorava no Rio* (2005).

MCR: You began to write in Angola in the notorious 1980s. So what is your literary heritage, what would you consider to be your autobiographical literary memory?

APT: In Angola, our relationship with the literary and historical past is not that neat, calm sea so common in other literary histories, with their dates of birth and baptismal certificates. For us, there are in fact several possible “birth certificates.” Indeed, the doubts begin with unanswerable questions: did our literary history begin in the 1840s, when Maia Ferreira published *Esportaneidades da Minha Alma—às Senhoras Africanas*? Or maybe earlier, with Cadornega, who wrote the *História Geral das Guerras Angolanas*? I am not going to enter into the loaded and charged debate about the history of Angolan literature. I prefer, instead, to reflect on the way in which my generation, who lived the intense experience of independence and began to publish in the 1980s, tackles the past, and how the past functions in the era after independence.

Immediately after independence, there was a scramble to fix a mythology that could reference us as Angolans. At that

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

time, the classic psychological tactics of nations killing their cultural fathers and mothers, and of including some people while excluding others, were rife. Let's not forget that writers like Pepetela had work already written but they were not able to publish it in the immediate aftermath of independence. Apart from a stack of documents that have been published, as testimonials, *Mayombe* is, to date, the only thing written about the history of the struggle for national liberation. Prior to the 1980s, our heroes had to be great, unimpeachable heroes. We couldn't portray freedom fighters with a human face and human foibles as Pepetela did in *Mayombe*, with its depiction of a freedom fighter who steals other men's women, and a man who doesn't share the household chores. That image was totally incompatible with the socialist New Man. It was unthinkable for the book to have been published prior to the 1980s, and even when it was, there was an almighty fuss. In the same decade, Manuel Rui's *Quem Me Dera Ser Onda* was also published—a small book which did a huge amount for the country. At the time, no one had realized that you could play with the present the way he did, and actually, this book shows us how literature can anticipate history. It isn't possible to write a history of the present, but it is possible to write literature about the present. If we still remember that a demijohn was called a "Ramalho Eanes," or that a glass of beer was referred to as a "Búlgaro," or that there was such a thing as the "Carnaval da Vitória," it is because of that little book by Manuel Rui and all the tales that were told and did the rounds about it.

It was around then that the voices of some women began to be heard. There is, of course, a tradition one inherits, despite all the problems of the baptismal certificate which I mentioned. There were the voices of great contemporary writers like Luandino Vieira, Pepetela, Uanhenga Xitu, and Manuel Rui; there was a whole literature that glorified the New Man, the Revolution, and everything that rhymed with it, all shibboleths which at the time were cultivated without question. This is all part of our heritage, but some of us combined it with the difference of a younger outlook on the world, an outlook which tried to speak of the country

Interview with Ana Paula Tavares

without always having to speak of the Revolution or of the New Man. That difference engendered the poetic voice of some women in the 1980s.

MCR: What was different about publications in the 1980s?

APT: There were publications by the youth yearning for autonomy that came out of the União de Escritores Angolanos, the only non-party organization created in Angola during socialism. That was how the Brigadas Jovens de Literatura came about, a group of poets with a project that still had a revolutionary name and statutes, but which tried to forge its own path. The Brigadas arose first in Luanda, and its first manifestations were actually in honor of Agostinho Neto. But then little newspapers started to pop up—small papers, just pamphlets really—with poems by the Brigada Jovem de Luanda, or the Brigada Jovem do Lubango, or the Brigada Jovem do Huambo, or the Brigada Jovem de Malange. Their aspirations were very ambitious: autonomy, liberty, things like that, and most of them were not fulfilled, but it was starting there that some poets managed, through their own personal trajectory, to demonstrate that some things were possible. In this regard, I would highlight João Maimona, Lupito Feijó, and Luís Kandjimbo. It was thanks to Lupito Feijó, who published the anthology *No Caminho Doloroso das Coisas*, that these movements from the 1980s grew and took on a more important dimension. At heart, what these young people were saying was that there are other ways of saying things!

There were three women in this wave, who had published small books through a series from the União de Escritores called “Lavra e Oficina.” They were women who really had begun to think differently. They were Ana Paula de Santana, Liza Castelo and Ana Paula Tavares.

MCR: So that was where you published your first book, *Ritos de Passagem*?

APT: I always wrote, always took notes, but never felt the need to publish. It was as if the “collective self” was so important—at the time, it was vital to write minutes and I

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

was a great writer of these. Publishing under one's own name was, for me, something linked to those already consecrated like Arlindo Barbeitos and Ruy Duarte de Carvalho. However, just at that juncture, Luandino Vieira, who was then the president of the União dos Escritores Angolanos, noticed me and that was how I came to be a published poet. But I caused a huge scandal. At the time, I had a great need to put a name to the land, the fruits, to call things by their names, in the midst of an Angola devastated by a war that went on and on, and so it was actually said that "this isn't poetry, it's pornography." Somehow, I never managed to get free of the label, a label the content and intensity of which I never really understood. Then I forgot all about the book, and now, thirty years later, it returns to life, once again through the auspices of Luandino Vieira.

MCR: What led you to write that book, or rather, what leads you to write at all?

APT: At the time, I looked at Angola and thought, "this is a country of women, but where are the women? There is such a gaping silence, even of poetry by women." Alda Lara wrote, and started a poetic project she has yet to finish, but she always wrote as if she was looking or needed to be the partner of someone who was going to create the promised land.

I didn't really invent anything, but I did have many advantages. I was born in a colonial society formed just when colonialism really began, that is, after the Berlin Conference, when Portugal was forced to occupy its territory, and began a policy of populating Angola with whites. For Lubango, this meant groups of dirt poor whites from Madeira, who wandered barefoot, something many people from the society into which they arrived no longer did. There were half a dozen richer whites, who were the proprietors and businessmen. There was also a class of herdsmen, who really existed on the margins of that society. They were the owners of livestock, some had enough head of cattle to be declared rich men by the standards of their culture. But that was never really said aloud, and nor did the livestock owners

Interview with Ana Paula Tavares

themselves want the whites to consider them rich. They themselves knew they were rich, and that their livestock gave them status. So, you see, it was a society fragmented into many groups, and I grew up in the midst of all that confusion, without really perceiving what was going on there. Also Lubango is in the south of Angola, and at the time, what is now Namibia was a colony of South Africa, and Apartheid crossed the border really quickly. In my high school, I only had one black colleague—today he's a big wig in UNITA—and we were three mulattoes. The privilege of having been born there, of having a Kwanyama black grandmother and a white one from Castelo Branco, gave me the speech I have, this Other speech. What was it those two women spoke about at night? Somehow, there was a profound rumbling I went after. And as luck would have it, I discovered that in the nineteenth century, some missionaries had also gone after that very same rumbling. For better or worse, they had set down these rumblings in narrative form, in poems, in foundational myths and epics... That is how I could read—knowing that there was treason there—I could read the memory of those peoples. I thought, that is the way I should go. If I manage to do something, that's the way I am going to do it.

I do not produce ethnographic poems, but fiction. I don't see my land the way Sembene Ousmane, the great Senegalese film-maker, explained it to Jean Rouch, the grandee of Other cinema. "You film Africans as if they were locusts, and we will only reach equality when one day I manage to film Europeans as locusts." I don't see my land, these women and men, these herdsman, as locusts. My land and I are inseparable. I do not use all this material to which thankfully I've had access, as a source, from which I extract a little here and there. I try to incorporate a lot of this material and to know how it was...

I am not a woman who passed through any rite of initiation. I am a woman who only speaks imperial languages... but I have heard the sound of these other languages, and so, I don't copy them: I work them, canibalize them, devour them, as many other Africans have

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

done before me. That is the work I try to do: the incorporation of various heritages, and while my outlook on the world is from that land, that space, I am not blind to the rest of the world. I read poetry from around the world, and am open to the experiences of the world. What I try to do is not confuse things, not to confuse registers, and to work with a legacy that fate put at my disposal.

Notes:

1. Translated by Phillip Rothwell and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro.