



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 23 June 2018



*everything will be alright* | 2015 | Pedro Valdez Cardoso

## DECLARATION OF WAR 1

Vasco Luís Curado

In 1960, I turned twenty, and got called up. I went on a course for paramilitary sergeants and graduated as a quartermaster on the day we set off for Angola, on 5 May 1961. The company HQ was in Muxaluando. Our job was to protect the convoys of lorries carrying food and coffee from the plantations. We often needed to clear the roads. The guerrillas destroyed bridges, blocked the road with trees, dug holes big enough to fit a car and camouflaged them, laying wooden stakes at the bottom. I commanded a section of eleven men. For two months we were dispatched to a farm to protect the settlers and the coffee cultivation. Once, the farm was attacked. I retaliated, and they never came back.



In Mucondo, we dug shelters in a circle around the barracks. On the second day I heard noises in the woods, though the guard didn't hear anything ... I told them to get the 60-mm mortar shells ready. Minutes later, a whistle sounded, and they appeared with shouts of "Upa! Upa!", making a devil of a racket - there were about 450 of them, we learned later. Some jumped the barbed wire and died on the parapets of our shelters. We killed a lot of them with semiautomatic rifles and machine guns. We counted more than 100 dead. There were no casualties on our side. We interrogated the survivors about which whites they had killed, and where they had been active. Afterwards, they were felled with a Mauser pistol shot to the forehead. I said to one of them, who was very injured, "The troops can't do anything for you, what do you want before you die?" He asked for water, I told the soldier to fetch water but gave him a signal not to go, that it wouldn't be necessary. I picked up an FBP submachine gun, which wasn't reliable, and fired a shot to kill him, but he stepped to the side. I said to the soldier, "Hey, 235, kill that man." The soldier pressed a Mauser to his forehead and killed him. From then on, I began to think that I shouldn't have done that, but on the other hand that man wouldn't have been able to get away, he'd have died anyway...

My section went to provide reinforcements to a platoon in the bush. We got close to a river, and on the other side, near the water, on a slope, we saw the manioc moving. I gave orders to shoot. We heard some children cry out, I halted the fire. Were they monkeys? They say that monkeys cry like children. We put a tree down as a bridge and the section crossed the river. We found five women and three children. One of the women was injured. I sent two men up to see if there was anyone who could attack us, but they didn't see anyone. We took the women and children with us. The soldiers carried the one who was wounded in a stretcher made with sticks and clothes. As we were crossing back, the tree gave way, and the water got us right up to the neck. The wounded woman went under, but we lifted her out. When we got to dry land, I asked the second lieutenant: "The wounded woman... did she die?" The second lieutenant told me to do as I pleased. I sent the children away, and only the woman was left. I remembered what had happened in Mucondo, and I said to the soldiers: "Which one of you is going to kill the woman?" No-one volunteered. "We'll have to carry her then." We went cross-country to the jeep, which was a long way away, uphill and downhill. We put her in the jeep, the blood soaking out of her. She died on the way.

The witch-doctors told them that to kill a white man you had to cut his head off, and that the white man's bullet was made of water. We had to show them that the white man's bullet killed you. We didn't take prisoners, and neither did they.



We put the guerrillas' heads on sticks so that when their friends passed by they'd see that the white man's bullet wasn't water.

We were attacked between Roça Portugal and Mucondo. The GMC and the jeep with the Breda machine gun were up ahead, and we were following in line. They attacked early in the morning, it was still dark. They had machetes, shot guns, and some machine guns which they had stolen from the station chiefs. We killed them all. I took pictures of the heads spiked on sticks, to show people later. Someone said that some of the guerrillas were cannibals and I believed them. The bodies were buried in a ditch we dug with bulldozers. I passed it again fifteen days later. It had rained a lot and the ditch was all ploughed up, and you could see arms and legs.

After the commission, which lasted two and a half years, I went home and got an office job at a transport company. I am 78 years old, I have a 54-year-old daughter and a granddaughter who is 27.

When something happens that I don't like, I get an image from the war in my head. If I see an accident, I transpose it onto an attack where two or three enemies get caught. They aren't real memories, they are generic images of conflict and death. A few years ago I dreamt that I had been posted in Angola as a civilian, in Luanda ... they gave me a machine gun and sent me to the front. I was looking for enemies behind every corner... I nearly died laughing.

I like talking about the war with friends who fought too, it makes me feel lighter. I've been asked if I have feelings of guilt and I say no. I don't feel guilt or remorse for things I did or didn't do.

Translated by [Alexandra Reza](#)

[Vasco Luís Curado](#) is a writer and psychologist. His novel *The Ghost Country* (Don Quixote Publications, 2015) addresses colonial society, the war and Angolan independence.



*Principales productions d'origine végétale* | 1931 | **Michel Georges Dreyfus**  
(courtesy of the Museum Quai Branly)

## HOW THINGS STAND: FRANCE 2018, THE DEBATE ABOUT COLONIAL HISTORY

Fernanda Vilar

It is halfway through 2018. Emmanuel Macron is the President of France. A year ago he declared colonisation a “crime against humanity.” Macron levied his criticism of colonisation during a visit to Algeria, a territory the French dominated for 114 years, from 1848 to 1962. In Algeria the French President spoke of the need to “confront this past head-on,” because, as Benjamin Stora had warned in his 1991 *La gangrene et l’oubli* (Gangrene and Forgetting), “forgetting” had become a “gangrene” in French society. What for many years had been called “events” in French history are today discussed in terms



HOW THINGS STAND:  
FRANCE 2018, THE DEBATE  
ABOUT COLONIAL HISTORY

of *la maladie algérienne*: the Algerian disease. To this day, the difficult colonial relationship between France and Algeria creates malaise for those French citizens with a direct connection to that past: *pieds-noirs*, repatriated Jews, soldiers, *harkis*, French citizens of Algerian origin, Algerian immigrants ...

It has been half a century since the end of the colonial empire, yet France remains haunted by this past. This is clear above all in the country's relation to its Others and its consequently failing models of social integration. To differentiate himself from his predecessors, Macron asserted that the dynamics of the French language are now global - and perhaps even more African than French. But what about the president's own words and actions? In January France's only self-styled 'francophone' theatre, *Le Tarmac*, (Tarmac) received a ministerial communiqué instructing it to close and make way for another theatre. *Africultures* is also in danger of disappearing due to financial problems. Since 1997 this magazine has documented African and diasporic culture and today represents a crucial archive for the study of contemporary artistic work - but the French Development Agency has lost half its budget.

And so it is clear that the government can't be relied upon to improve the debate about France's colonial past. In this context, it is important to highlight some other initiatives, such as *Villa Gillet's* (1) collaboration with the People's National Theatre in Lyon to put on a two-day debate focussed on postcolonial writing. Held in February 2018, the event adopted a comparative perspective, organising discussions around three main themes: "Setting out the fact of colonialism," "Against forgetting: remembering colonial violence" and "The present of the colonial past: restoring a fragmented discourse." Listening to French points of view in counterpoint to Belgian and Dutch experiences brought forward how productive it can be to treat memories of colonialism comparatively, and as situated rather than isolated.

Although it was open to the general public, the debate didn't have as wide a reach as does *Peintures des lointains* (Paintings from afar), an exhibition of 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century paintings at the *Quai Branly* from 30 January 2018 until 6 January 6 2019. The euphemism of 'faraway paintings' is a deeply troubling way to describe the so-called exotic places France colonised. The paintings in the collection aren't widely known, precisely because they touch the core of a colonial past that remains highly controversial in France. Many of the works came from the colonial museum created in 1931 at the *Palais de la Porte Dorée*. When decolonisation began, the works were relegated to a warehouse and only arrived at the *Quai Branly* in 2006 (2). The exotic images on display throughout the exhibition reveal extremely



HOW THINGS STAND:  
FRANCE 2018, THE DEBATE  
ABOUT COLONIAL HISTORY

superficial perceptions of other cultures. Though they depict various places, the paintings often look extremely similar: they are deformed images of the Other. Is it appropriate to say that this exhibition reflects contemporary public debate in France?

Finally, at the high-profile biennial debate series *Rencontres Capitales* (Capital Encounters), held at the *Institut de France*, whose theme this year was memory and its mutations, there was no room for the colonial question. A two-day programme brought together specialists from various fields. Participants discussed history, war, culture and heritage. There was no mention of French colonialism. Does this absence reflect a rusty institution mainly comprised of aging members? Or does it speak to the disregard that the most powerful in French society have for colonial history?

These four recent examples demonstrate that the desire to discuss French history critically is still a minority position. Discussions do take place in academic meetings and conferences, but despite the current government's declared desire to repair the wreckage, a wider debate about public memory is only embryonic and generally badly informed. The fractures are clear but they have barely been attended to, much less treated.

(1) Audio recordings of the debates are available on this site: <https://live.villagillet.net/user/event/replay>. The programme can be found here: <http://www.villagillet.net/portail/la-villa-toute-lannee/detail/article/les-ecritures-post-coloniales/>

(2) See the debate entitled *Exposer le fait colonial* held at *Villa Gillet*. The event sought better to understand the political and aesthetic questions at play in contemporary curation of colonial history, based on an analysis of the 1931 Paris colonial exhibition. There are synergies between this inquiry and the article by António Pinto Ribeiro published in this newsletter on May 19, 2018, entitled 'The impossible museum.'

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

ISSN 2184-2566

**Fernanda Vilar** is a postdoctoral researcher at the MEMOIRS project, at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra.



Horizon 2020  
European Union funding  
for Research & Innovation

