



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

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Twins (from Cinema Karl Marx series) | 2017 | Mónica Miranda (courtesy of the artist)

## QUESTIONS OF LANGUAGE, MULTILINGUALISM AND EXILE

António Pinto Ribeiro

*“And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.  
And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do:  
and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.  
Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.  
So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.  
Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the  
earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.”*

*Genesis 11, -9 (King James’ Bible)*



Though I have no intention of performing any biblical exegesis, this fragment of the Book of Genesis that deals with the Tower of Babel allows us to see that the dilemmas we face even today in relation to questions of language were already set out in the Old Testament. Three elements are at stake in the Tower of Babel myth. Let me begin with two of them. First, the attempt of all peoples – at a time when everyone spoke the same language – to build a tower to reach God. God, in turn, saw this communitarian gesture as an attempt to usurp his power, which leads to the second element: everyone is punished by forgetting their original language and by being dispersed throughout the world. In the end, each people speaks a different language, which causes great confusions of communication and understanding. Many of our dilemmas today – the disappearance of ancient and minority languages; the need to translate works by authors from formerly colonized nations; and the hegemony of one language, English as the language of globalization – began in the Modern Age with European expansion and colonization. In these processes, religious conversion served as a pretext for the colonization of the spirit and the demise of local languages. In this regard, Humboldt’s accounts of his travels in South America or the diaries of Richard Burton, that caricature the language of Brazilian indigenous peoples, are important sources. Even more important are the studies by Lévy-Strauss; by members of the Latin American “decolonality” group such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano; by anthropologists such as Aparecida Vilaça, Yvone de Freitas Leite, Elisa Loncon Antileo and Pedro Niemeyer Cesarino; and by indigenous leaders such as Ailton Krenac. The latter both denounce the extermination of native languages and also study them, trying to record them as far as is still possible. With this intellectual investment they recover the languages’ memory and, with it, a pre-colonial cultural universe. This work, which has also involved lawmakers, insists on the importance of official multilingualism in countries such as Bolivia, Guatemala, some Brazilian states, Peru and Chile. In some of these cases, because there are written national languages, relevant literary work has also appeared.

Similar situations are likely to be found in most African countries – more obviously in sub-Saharan Africa than in North Africa – where along with the official languages of the former colonizing countries – Portuguese, French, English, Italian, and various amalgams such as *Afrikaans* – there are still millions of speakers of national languages. Though multilingualism is official in countries like South Africa or Cape Verde, national languages are not necessarily an ordinary and effective way of thinking and communicating. Mia Couto’s statement that “the losers live by orality” (1) is more a desire than a reality: one of the reasons many languages are disappearing is that they are not



written down. Nevertheless, work on oral and visually passed down cultures has contributed to an archaeology of knowledge in Amerindian and African territories and cultures. Though it is true that using a language makes its speaker its owner, and legitimises any deviations from the colonizer's language, the debate about the ways colonized peoples use those languages has been going on for years and remains a central question of decolonization. Chinua Achebe, often considered the founder of anglophone African literature, defended the use of English in his works because he considered that as a Nigerian, English contributed to the unification of his country: "I can only speak across two hundred linguistic frontiers to fellow Nigerians in English" (2). Nevertheless he acknowledged his good fortune in having Igbo as his mother tongue, one of the three languages which is not going extinct. The Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, author of *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), among other works, occupies a radically opposite position. At the end of the 1960s, Ngũgĩ renounced the English language and began to write in Kikuyu, a Bantu language. This posture seems in part to have originated in a childhood experience: during property dispute in a Kenyan court the defendant was accused of unduly appropriating his father's land. He won the case only because his defence was made in written texts against the arguments of the legitimate owner who argued in a traditional oral language. Years later, Ngũgĩ's refusal to write in English took on a political dimension because he considered that using English contributed to an ongoing colonialism of the mind. Another Nigerian intellectual, Kole Omotoso, author of *Season of Migration to the South: Africa's crises reconsidered* (1994), advocates multilingualism: he himself writes in Yoruba, English, Arabic and French. For Omotoso, multilingualism represents a political and literary strategy of epistemologically legitimatising the African intellectual, of insisting on their claim to universal citizenship. Their fellow citizens can in turn find themselves in the multiplicity of languages. This posture is a more sophisticated version of an earlier proposal made by a group of intellectuals led by the writer Amin Malouf, who in 2008 made the case for learning three languages: the mother tongue, the language of global communication and an adopted language, chosen according to taste, interest or other traditions of apprenticeship.(3)

At the level of the literary uses of language, work ranging from Goethe's *Weltliteratur* to Omotoso and Malouf's mobilises the ideal of accessing concepts and works of literature unobstructed by language barriers. In this sense, God's punishment would not so much generate confusion as allow people to multiply multiplicity without creating disputes between them. This would be a big setback for God. What remains to be settled, however, is not God's punishment, but that many times men,



foremen, businessmen, soldiers, religious men, and politicians and rulers of European origin have invoked God to impose foreign languages and cultural practices on other people and territories. Among other things, this led to the extermination of those peoples' languages and of those nations' memory.

Although using a language makes its speaker its owner, languages carries memory in themselves. A capacity for performance is intrinsic to language, which only stays current and useful if the language is recurrently used. This helps us understand the difficulties diasporas face when second and third generations struggle to use their mother tongue, even if it serves to evoke the countries their parents came from.

The Portuguese actress Zia Soares, daughter of an Angolan mother and a Timorese father, who came to live in Lisbon when she was very young recently said (4) that often “on stage everything seems right but sometimes there is a constraint that comes from the fact that she feels that she does not really mean the things she is saying; it is as though she is talking about a language (Portuguese) about which she has no memory, a language that was imposed on her, for all that all her education was in Portugal and in Portuguese.” But it is also at these confused moments when sometimes she finds herself remembering her father speaking *Tetum* and how much she loved this, although *Tetum* is a minority language with almost no speakers in Europe. This is evidence of a fracture between the language her father spoke and her difficulty in accessing that language's memory. Somehow the actress is confronted with wanting to belong to a language that she has already lost and to the cultural memory in which she is steeped, but has to resort to another dominant language does not always mean what she means. It is as though she were exiled in a place that is not uncomfortable but that still does not satisfy her needs for communication. This is a constant experience of second and third postcolonial generations for whom diaspora is still an exile.



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- (1) From the program of *The grandchildren of Gungunhana*, Teatro O Bando, S. Luiz Municipal Theatre, 2018.
- (2) Achebe, Chinua, *A educação de uma criança sob protetorado britânico. Ensaio*. (2009) Isabel Mara Lando (trad.). São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 2012, p.104.
- (3) Cf. Amin Maalouf, A group of intellectuals in favour of intercultural dialogue, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-07-972\\_pt.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-07-972_pt.htm)
- (4) Interview given to the project *Memoirs – Filhos de Império e Pós-memórias Europeias*, 9 November 2017.
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