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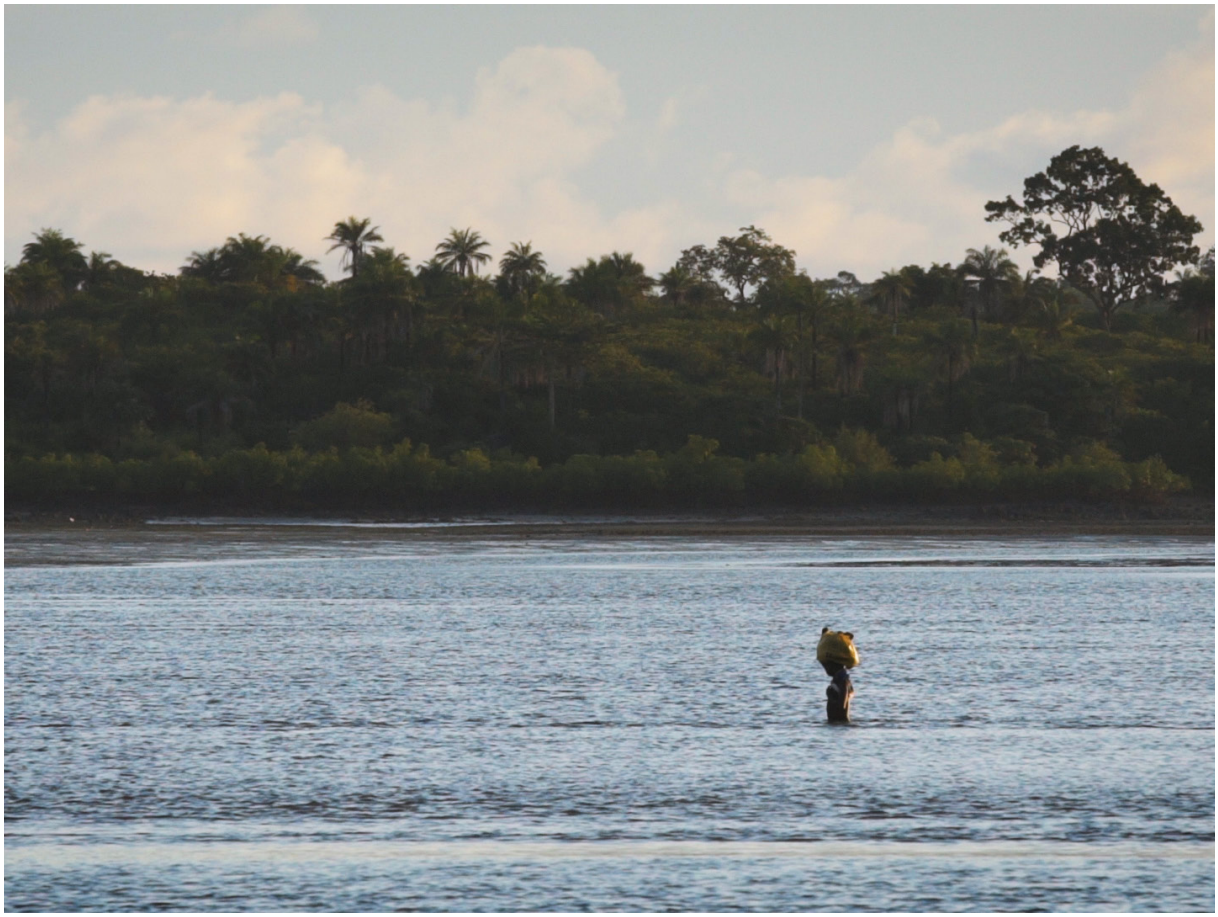

Guiné-Bissau: Da Memória ao Futuro | 2019 | Garden Films / CES-UC (courtesy of the director)

"GUINEA-BISSAU: FROM MEMORY TO THE FUTURE"

Bruno Sena Martins

On the 24th of September 2019, on the 46th anniversary of the independence of Guinea-Bissau, the documentary *Guinea-Bissau: From Memory to the Future*, directed by Diana Andringa, premiered on RTP Africa. The screenplay was written with Miguel Cardina, and the film was produced by Garden Films and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra. The film was already familiar to me. It is the result of the work of researchers at the CES in Coimbra working on the project CROME

– Crossed Memories, Politics of Silence. I also made a modest contribution as one of the interviewees, filmed when I took part in the Colloquium "Memórias e Legados das Lutas de Libertação" [Memories and Legacies of the Liberation Struggles], in Bissau in September 2018.

When I sat down to watch the documentary, though, I felt a degree of distance from it. Or rather, the calm curiosity of someone who is taken by the hand and guided. It was the first time I had heard many of the voices who laid out in vivid detail the journey from the Guinean liberation struggle to Guinea today. Watching, I was struck by the powerfully creative meeting between contemporary Guinean testimonies and the laborious work of rescuing files from the archive: we see Amílcar Cabral rallying teachers in the fight against ignorance, and António Spínola signing the document recognising independence. As I watched I felt I was witnessing a singular, coherent gathering up of parts, a symphony of aspirations and memories narrated through Diana Andringa's distinctive sensibility. It tracked the long and winding road between generations, here expressed in post-colonial disenchantment, there in an uncompleted project: the struggle continues. The struggle, whose roots invariably lead back to Amílcar Cabral.

In the company of these testimonies, songs, archives and political slogans, which have long inhabited my familial memory, I found myself visiting an intimate, ancestral, legendary, almost unreal Guinea-Bissau. The Guinea of my mother and my grandmother, where, they tell me, I lived part of my childhood, but a Guinea of which I remember nothing. But, across the decades, I remember listening to the cassettes that played on the machine in the living room, giving news of Bissau. It was my grandmother. She could not write, so she recorded messages, lively, in Creole. From time to time, my mother would translate for me. After playing each tape with full solemnities – a ritual for which I was always present – my mother would listen to the whole thing again, alone, countless times. When the tape unravelled from being played and played and played, it was me, laboriously, with a pencil, who wound my grandmother's voice back onto the reel. I remember, too, the flavours that would arrive from Guinea in the post, carefully wrapped up in tight packages: palm oil, cashew nuts, *veludo* juice, gourds, ground peanuts, dried fish, chillies. I still remember the suffering my mother went through every time a coup renewed political instability in Guinea. The anguish in 1998, during the war, when we were stuck for long periods without any news at all from Bissau. For a long time, Guinea was, for me, the left behind land. Thanks to the loneliness of my grandmother, and the longings of my mother, it was a mystical place. Mystical, too, because of the repeated gift of receiving news from this country in which peace and prosperity, always much promised, were slow to arrive. And this brings me back to the film.

Diana Andringa's documentary shows the continuing centrality, in Guinea, of political memories of a promised land. A promise woven together in the armed struggle, the liberated zones, the people's stores, the alliance between Guineans and Cape Verdeans, by the pilot school in Conakry, by Rádio Libertação, by the dignity of a declaration of independence made in the bush. As bell hooks writes, self-esteem is a radical political agenda. The return of a hope built in anticolonial times emerges in the film as an inspiration for those struggling for the future of Guinea today. In this sense, a phrase of Cabral's that the film finds written on the walls of Bissau reverberates for me. He saw that the struggle for freedom was "also a struggle to show to the face of the world that we are a dignified people".

The constitution of independent nation states, won against colonial dominance, produces a context marked by the tension between the colonial heritance – with its borders, hierarchies, and modes of administration – and the celebration of the possibilities for new beginnings. When independence emerged from armed anticolonial struggle, new beginnings were made in direct relation to the legitimacy of those who conducted the war. There was the permanent risk that revolutionary violence would be transmuted into state violence. To this intrinsic instability we should add that many post-colonial states were confronted not only with a lack of resources and the absence of structures, but also with the global triumph of neoliberalism and the rigid dictats of international financial institutions. The post-independence landscape was populated by singular national political parties born out of liberation movements, war, and political instability, and by local elites soaked in the logics of international capitalism. In many of the African countries which freed themselves from the colonial yoke, celebratory evocations of liberation struggles conjure both national anticolonial narratives and deep disenchantment.

The struggle in Guinea Bissau was led by the acclaimed Amílcar Cabral. The PAIGC waged a successful armed struggle across its territory. The liberated zones reached international prominence as the rehearsal for a society yet to be born. Independence was declared before the revolution in Portugal of 1974. It is, therefore, perhaps, inevitable that Guinea's contemporary political instability and economic precarity clash, starkly, with the anti-colonial and anti-racist dignity of the past. This collision across time and across expectations suffuses Andringa's documentary. In the film, the struggle for liberation emerges at times as an inspiration to be followed, and at times as a source of legitimacy to be rescued from those who have failed to live up to the dream of Cabral.

Seen from Portugal, *Guinea-Bissau: From Memory to the Future* is a precious contribution to an imperative laid out by Edward Said. Looking back at the cultural archive, he pointed out the need to read again, "not univocally, but contrapuntually, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts" (1). Indeed, to think of the legacies of colonialism based on a plurality of voices and latitudes, with the aim of refusing entrenched inequalities, violences and silences – that is a task for many generations.

(1) Said, Edward W. (1993), *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 51.

Translated by Archie Davies

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