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## IMAGINING TRANSFRONTIERAL SPACES IN MIA COUTO'S *THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE FLAMINGO*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reads Mia Couto's novel *O último voo do flamingo*, translated into English by David Brookshaw as *The last flight of the flamingo*, as postcolonial spaces of the subaltern, away from silence into rumorous fado, as it focuses on concepts of translanguaging and interculturality. In short, I investigate how the novel as a practice of cultural translation accounts for a new society after Mozambique's civil war and how language in translation can help in its account.

**KEYWORDS:** postcolonialism, interculturality, cultural translation

### IMAGINANDO ESPAÇOS TRANSFRONTEIRIÇOS N'O *ÚLTIMO VOO DO FLAMINGO* DE MIA COUTO

**RESUMO:** Neste artigo, leio o romance *O último voo do flamingo*, de Mia Couto, traduzido para o inglês por David Brookshaw como *The last flight of the flamingo*, enquanto espaços pós-coloniais do subalterno, escapando ao silêncio e adentrando ao rumoroso fado, uma vez que ele foca em conceitos de translanguagem e interculturalidade. Sucintamente, investigo como o romance, enquanto uma prática de tradução cultural ajuda a constituir uma nova sociedade após a guerra civil de Moçambique e como a língua traduzida contribui para isso.

**PALAVRAS- CHAVE:** pós-colonialismo, interculturalidade, tradução cultural



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## Introduction

In my recent incursion into the Lusophone world, back in 2007, every time I turned on the BBC, many were the issues of postcolonialism that raised my curiosity towards the Lusophone case and its translation into the Anglophone context. After all, the colonial wars are still very much present as dangerous memories of failure in Portugal and much still needs to be spoken before the Portuguese collective unconscious makes any sense (even if this means making no sense at all) of colonialism and postcolonialism. In this sense, one of the most acclaimed authors in these recent years is precisely Mia Couto, Antonio Emilio Leite Couto, who was born in Beira, Mozambique, in 1955, but who has been largely acclaimed in Portugal and Brazil as a main literary figure, capable of translating the reality of a post-independent Mozambique, particularly with its intense magical realism, which is present in both his short-stories and novels and efficiently works as a metaphorical device similar to that employed by South American authors, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. For Couto, the real and the imaginary, the real and the fantastic are dense parts of the Mozambican reality, which seems to have another order of rationality and, as such, it translates the alienated atmosphere in which live most part of the Mozambican population – and that coincidentally so well resembles Brazil, in that the effects of the now empowered left have to do less with what the same left had earlier promised as efficient government than with favoritism and other abominable political practices.

Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira (2008), in her essay on *O outro pé da sereia*, signals to the fact that

[i]n his works, Mia Couto surpasses the contemporary sociopolitical issues, taking for granted the need for African people to reencounter their origins, their traditions, their rituals and beliefs (CARREIRA, 2008, p. 3. Our translation).<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, the story consists in the designation of a UN official, Massimo Risi, whose knowledge of the Portuguese language is weak, to investigate strange facts that have been happening to UN peace force soldiers: their bodies disappear, without leaving vestige, except for their genitalia. It all starts with a penis that is found right on the trunk road, outside Tizangara, an imagined village in Mozambique, which gets busier than usual with the visit of carloads of foreign investigators and the Italian, designated UN official. The local inhabitants' and authorities' reports are always contradictory and confusing, which hinder the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting from the original: "Em sua obra, o autor vai além de questões político-sociais contemporâneas, partindo da premissa de que é preciso que o africano reencontre suas origens, suas tradições, seus cultos, suas crenças".



elaboration of any kind of meticulously, Cartesian-like report, the type that Massimo Risi is supposed to produce for his boss in New York. Thus, Risi ends up trapped by the mysterious stories told by the inhabitants, as well as in their local political relations. The narrator is a humble worker in Tizangara, nominated as the local, official translator by the administrator Estevao Jonas, the stereotype of the former left revolutionary who is now empowered and forgotten of his earlier promises of egalitarianism. Estevao Jonas in the present moment of the story shows no limits to keep himself in power.

The foreign UN official, then, guided by the local translator, starts investigating about the blue helmet soldiers who exploded without any explanation. However, the solutions seem to be the weirdest ones, such as the call of the prostitute Ana Deusqueira (whose name becomes Anna Godwilling in D. Brookshaw's translation). After all, her last name is a composition of Deus = God and the subjunctive verb "queira" = will/willing, in spite of the fact that this is the only name translated into English in Brookshaw's translation. Anna Godwilling or Ana Deusqueira, then, should analyze that which is supposed to be her expertise, in order for the investigators to acknowledge to whom the sexual organ exposed in the street belongs. This is one more occasion in Couto's narratives that humour works as a translating device for representing political chaos and social alienation. Other, magical parallel stories cross this main one, such as the plot that is weaved between Massimo Risi and Temporina (whose name, like all others, is not translated, but it indicates that who hoodwinks time: a woman of exuberant body, whose face is that of an old witch). Nevertheless, the story's wiseman is Tizangara's translator's father, ironically, a fisherman, whose creative name is Sulplício (once again, with the name kept in Portuguese in the translation by Brookshaw). Well, the name Sulplício is a word game, a parody of south (= sul) & suplício = torment and noun to the verb "beseech" or "supplicate". Maybe, his name could turn into Southpplicate?

## 1. Transfrontieral spaces of existence

In my readings of Couto's narratives and criticism, I have found the influence of his linguistic choices, predominantly, neologisms, as being from the works of Brazilian author Guimaraes Rosa, with whom Couto admittedly dialogues. And apart from my on-going curiosity of how such linguistic appeal and strategy would get translated into English, the main focus of my reading of *The last flight of the flamingo* had to do with how the deterritorialization of the Portuguese language happens, in the attitude of a minority translating the political immediacy of post-independent (1975), post-civil war (1977-1992) Mozambique. In the face



of multiple, external influences, Mozambique was kept as a Portuguese colony until the war of independence and, as such, maintained the realm of the Portuguese language in its everyday modes of life. Thus, the country helps build a Luso contingent of postcolonialism, that is, it will become part of the community of Portuguese-speaking countries that will struggle to free themselves from the realm of hegemonic discourse – particularly, in cultural terms. In this sense, my concern related to the transference into English of the notion of variety, of interculturality (BANDIA, 1998), which pervades both Couto's works and all the other literary works first written in Portuguese from a vast range of linguistic varieties than not just Portuguese-Portuguese and Brazilian-Portuguese. And this is how I reached another question: would there be any parallelism between the insertion of Mozambique in the Commonwealth of Nations in 1995 and the almost reminiscent Portuguese language, constantly reinvented by Couto? An immediate answer would imply the varied aspects that have to do with multiple influences into a culture intersected by diverse, socioeconomic interests and how it matters that a whole society is revealed, both culturally and linguistically – which is Mia Couto's non-resilient attitude in an apparently global world.

The novel's character Massimo Risi embodies the ironic incapacity of European outsiders to understand and, therefore, translate the local environment, immersed in alienating faith, which is constructed through magical realism and the depiction of the supernatural. In this case, there is a transference of knowledge power: from Cartesianism to spiritualism, from syntactically ordered discourse to disordered oral narratives, in a multi-colored play of sounds: from silence, metonym of the subaltern, to rumour, not necessarily the rumour of fado, as I had initially thought of, but perhaps the rumour that would resemble the samba or the sounds of the forests that are yet to be known. By the way, the concern with orality is another common feature in Couto's books and it is not different in *The last flight of the flamingo*.

While critically depicting the absurdity of local alienation by means of metaphorical symbolism in this narrative, such as the case of the image which entitles the book, Couto identifies elements that would compound an-other (new, perhaps?) country: ancestral rituals of witchcraft and illogical facts. Such bizarre and strange world where the living meet the dead, or yet, the dead continue living through the living (which is in itself a dense, political metaphor) is weaved in the specific Mozambican linguistic traces, of which I should refer to from now on, mainly, because that was another of my preoccupations, as I decided to start investigating on Mia Couto's translations into English. I stress, however, that it is in fact a secondary, relevant issue, as regards the whole intention of transposing such vast, Lusophone world into the



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English language. And here I already quote a line by the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade in a poem translated by Elizabeth Bishop, “The seven-sided poem” (“O poema das sete faces”):

Universe, vast universe,  
my heart is vaster//  
Mundo mundo vasto mundo  
mais vasto é meu coração (DRUMMOND, 2012).

to quote the book’s narrator, as he states that

The smaller a place, the greater the extent of our obedience  
(COUTO, 2004, p. 4).  
Quanto mais um lugar é pequeno, maior é o tamanho da  
obediência (COUTO, 2005, p. 17).

while referring to the obedience paid to the administrator, Estevão, by most people.

This same obedience referred to along the narrative is counter-produced in both Couto’s local use of graphic signs, as in the word “voo”(flight, in Portuguese) in the title, without the usual, expected stress (before the Orthographic Agreement of 2009), which the Brazilian editions kept, and in the local lexicon, which D. Brookshaw’s translation is most unfortunately unable to reproduce, as it reduces the whole text to a level of literalness that does not correspond to all the word games and neologisms that evidence to Mia Couto’s narratives. Moreover, the word games and neologisms symbolize the way the author creatively decided to represent Mozambican identity. In this sense, while the original book contains a “Glossary”, the translated version simply excludes it. One way out of this would have been to keep the localisms and the glossary – without any transposition into English, as the localisms in Portuguese sound African orality and little do they have to do with Latin words, as the term “Txarra” for “what a pity” or “machambas” for “crops”. Furthermore, there are the pronoun usages in Africa (particularly, Mozambique and Angola, differently from Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau). These usages are similar to the ones found in Brazil, such as in “me ajuda” instead of the Portuguese-Portuguese “ajuda-me” for “help me”, for which case there is no way of reproducing the difference in tone, in oral speech.

Another level of comparison and reflection upon the practice of translation regarding this particular narrative by Couto had to do with the poetry in which his prose is embedded. For example, the political and poetic metalanguage in:

At that time, there were no days of old (COUTO, 2004, p. 30) for  
Naquele tempo, não havia antigamentes (COUTO, 2005, p. 47),



which gets lost, because “days of old” is all that exists in Couto’s Mozambique. There is precisely no space for the new, for the present outside the past, unless there is the revision of language, the retelling of orality, the contacts amongst cultures, the transpositions that happen in spite of felt untranslatabilities. *The last flight of the flamingo* is probably the most metalinguistic of Couto’s narratives for translators of culture, as the following lines attest:

- \_ Who are you?
- \_ I’m your translator.
- \_ I can speak and understand. The problem isn’t the language. What I don’t understand is this world here (COUTO, 2004, p. 26).
- \_ Você quem é?
- \_ Sou seu tradutor.
- \_ Eu posso falar e entender. Problema não é a língua. O que eu não entendo é este mundo aqui (COUTO, 2005, p 40).

This dialogue is when the UN representative meets the local translator. A few chapters later, after Massimo Risi’s apparently non-sensical question “Has the river stopped?”/”O rio parou?” to the narrator, this latter reveals:

The Italian looked at me, flabbergasted. I knew it wasn’t a question that required an answer. After all, he wasn’t speaking what he was saying. He was referring to something else. Every object has the right to be a word. It is the duty of each word not to be nothing at all. The matter he was referring to was time. Like the river: when it’s unflowing, that’s when time grows (COUTO, 2004, p. 107).  
O italiano me olhou, arrelampejado. Eu sabia que não era para se responder. Ele, afinal, não falava o que dizia. Referia outro assunto. Cada coisa tem direito a ser uma palavra. Cada palavra tem o dever de não ser nenhuma coisa. Seu assunto era o tempo. Como o rio: parado é que o tempo cresce (COUTO, 2005, p. 135).

The narrator’s translation of the metaphor aforementioned finds correspondence in both the narrator’s reference to her mother’s vision of the flamingos (in chapter 4, in which we first acknowledge that the flamingos return from their long journey represents hope and the narrator’s own final supposition upon the father’s possible journey as being that of the last flamingo, the last hope) up to the point where the writer himself, while speaking on the occasion of the Mário Antonio’s Prize for fiction, in 2001, translates the image of the flight of the flamingo to that of hope. The last flight, the last hope. And, for the writer, the last hope is the word, for words are always something, they never run the



risk of being “nothing at all” (after all, as mentioned above, “every object has the right to be a word. It is the duty of each word not to be nothing at all”. It is the duty of each individual to be a citizen, of each group of individuals, to be a society. And the existence of both (individuals and societies) implies speech, voice, positioning (or, lack of them). It is against silence and for the depiction of marginal voices of the Lusophone world that *The last flight of the flamingo* stands. As long as there are stories being told, there are arms to be raised, attitudes to be taken, voices to be heard, the margins move themselves to spaces not previously imagined. Certainly, the translation of such work contributes to the postcolonial shift in sociopolitical dynamics regarding countries that are traditionally known as marginal.

In fact, translations of Lusophone texts into English point out to new horizons regarding postcolonialism and the shifting dynamics of power, still to be taken into account in African, Translation and Intercultural Studies. Thus, David Brookshaw’s transcreation of *The last flight of the flamingo* signals to the beginning of cultural encounters long hoped for and long waved by postcolonial theories, in spite of the inevitable translational (mainly, cultural) flaws that such processes imply.

## 2. Crossing cultural borders

The chapter titles in Couto’s *The last flight of the flamingo* evoke cultural localisms that are highly pertinent to the reconstruction of Mozambique as a post-independent nation, as they point out to both local, social practices and beliefs, such as spiritualism, witchcraft and the art of writing, the transposition of the imagination in magical realism, as also seen in contemporary, Latin American authors, such as Gabriel Garcia Marques, Isabel Allende and others. “A scaly woman”, “Introducing the teller of the tale”, “The witchdoctor Andorinho’s talk”, “The tamarind tree”, “The ancestors’ estranged children” are some of the intriguing chapter titles in Couto’s narrative. In short, they relate to the habits of a “strange land”, that is, customs that are not usually referred to in the imagination of the Other, at the same time that they work as elements of new, imagery constructions. The most metaphorical of the political unrest that must be combated in Tizangara, itself a metonymic geography of hope (at last, and in contrast to the lack of hope at stake), is the revelation of the role of the translator in chapter 12. It starts with the chapter title, “Father dreaming before the unflowing river” (“O pai sonhando frente ao rio parado”) and the suggestion that sociopolitical unity definitively matters in the foundation of a new, postcolonial nation-state – “Learn one thing, my son. In our country, one man is all the others” (COUTO, 2004, p. 113). By writing stories and giving voice to



characters that would not, otherwise, be heard, except for folklore and stereotyping, Mia Couto attests to the adequacy of imagining new spaces that are transfrontieral – they are local and, yet, manage to go beyond the usual expectation of complying with the centre, as such spaces speak for themselves; they have characters that translate them culturally, the characters of these spaces are subjects of their own stories – and no longer mere objects of appreciation. In this sense, the father in the story shall talk through other people’s voices and let the river flow. Therefore, *The last flight of the flamingo* shall be the first and foremost of all flights: a new beginning, thus, transgressing the ritual of political inertia.

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