Saturday, 13 March 2021

author's photo | Muaua | 2019 | cortesy of the author

THIS IS NOT YOUR WAR (3)

Paulo Faria

Before abruptly leaving the room, Adriano shoots at me:

– I'm the kind of guy who, if I hear a tap dripping, I can't sleep until I've fixed it. You know why? Because I was often thirsty in the bush, in Guinea. If I see that someone has left a light on, I go back and turn it off. You know why? Because life was very hard in the war.

This is Adriano's war: a tap dripping on his temple until each drop is like a hammer, a crackling lamp with the filament ready to burn out, that casts a bloody light in his eyes. Things that do not let him sleep.

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The other veterans come into the room. Marco Mané introduces us. Only he and Maurício have come back from the conversations I had a month ago. My habitual pendulum sets off. It is stronger than I am. It swings between affinity with these men and distance from them. Between, on the one hand, the moments in which their words send chills down my spine, when they let out, with a disarming candour, an endless flood of insensitivity, violence and prejudice. And, on the other hand, the moments in which I feel a deep, unfathomable communion with them.

Armando (Guinea, 1964-1966) says, "the natives were very self-seeking". Lúcio (Angola, 1967-1969) cuts him off:

- Being self-seeking comes from hunger, right?

Armando explains himself better. When he was tasked with putting out another roll of barbed wire around the Nova Lamego barracks, he was sent six or seven Africans as manual labourers. A sergeant with experience in these things said to him: "Corporal Trafaria, if you want them to work, choose one of them and put him in charge. But you've got to give them something". Armando says that the Black men asked him for a large bottle of wine, but he said that was impossible. What he could do, though, was give them the dregs from the refectory. He poured the wine from the half empty glasses left on the tables after meals into a rinsed-out can and gave it to his workers. And he says that in this way "everything went smoothly". Maurício assures me that some of his comrades went back to Guinea in the 1980s, to Bula. And the natives, recognizing them from colonial times, embraced them and cried, asking: "When are you going to return? When are the Portuguese coming back?" And he finishes: "Yes, sir, it was a war. But there was no hate. There was no racism. They say this, that and the other. But I never saw racism. For the love of God..." Armando agrees: "There was no racism." Marco Mané, himself a former African commando, nods his head in agreement. Lúcio recounts his impressions of racial relations in Angola and says that in the coffee and sugar plantations that he visited, the Black overseers were crueler. He concludes, "the Black man is worse for the Black man than the white man is". And "Angola lost a lot when it became independent". Because before "there was respect."

I have often heard these stories, these recurring truths, always the same, with few variations. In some cases, they are second-hand stories, that their tellers did not live themselves. The Black men embracing the white men, in Angola, in Guinea, in Mozambique, with tears in their eyes, asking when they will come back, imploring them to come back. In other cases, they are mere impressions ("this is

how it struck me"), conclusions drawn from the colonial experience ("at least that is the conclusion that I come to"). The Black people themselves crueler to Black people than the white people are. Life after independence much worse for the natives than colonial life. And almost always, last of all, the decisive argument: the post-independence civil wars were worse than the colonial war: more destructive, more bloody. Anyone who says that does not understand that the colonial war was already, in different ways in each colony, a civil war (a month ago, Marco Mané told me that he took part in a large commando operation in Canquelifá, and that after the war he discovered that he had been fighting against a cousin, on the PAIGC side, on the same dates, on the same terrain).

These recurring truths are not exemplary stories, they do not rub salt into the wound, they contain nothing uncomfortable. They are comfortable histories, that lull those who tell them. If Black people's lives are worse now, perhaps the cause we fought for was just, in spite of everything. If Black people are crueler to Black people than white people are, then racism and oppression are their work, not ours. If they want us to return, those years of our youth were not lost, after all. If they want us to return, everything was worth it: the exhaustion, the suffering, the death. If they want us to return, it is as if we never left. It is as if we were young again, us and them.

But afterwards, Lúcio recounts an operation in the bush. He was responsible for communications and, on the dirt road, the captain asked him for the radio, and spoke by his side to the Lieutenant Colonel who was leading the operation from a light aircraft. The Lieutenant Colonel ordered them to advance on the enemy base, but the captain refused. Gunfire could be heard at a distance, the other companies had already suffered losses that day: dead and wounded. The captain said on the radio to the Lieutenant Colonel: "I'm not pushing forward. I don't want to get back to the Metropole and see mothers crying." Saying this, Lúcio turns quiet for a couple of seconds–just two or three–because the emotion silences him, only after that does he carry on talking. I lower my eyes, confused, and don't know what to do with my hands.

Someone speaks of the fear the prisoners had of the PIDE ("they trembled like cut reeds"), and it is then that Cristiano (Guinea, 1970-1972), the most laconic there, whose unit was in Bula before being relieved by Maurício's, said:

- In Bula there was an electric chair.

I replied, incredulous:

- An electric chair?

Without looking me in the eyes Cristiano said:

- Yes, a metal chair hooked up to the power supply.

I turn to Maurício:

- You didn't tell me about this a month ago. Who used the chair, the army or the PIDE?

He said:

- It was the army, though some of the PIDE guys were around too. There were many who have already died and who tortured and beat the prisoners there. That's why I can't tell.

- The lights even went off when they turned the chair on, added Cristiano.

- It's true, the lights went off – Maurício confirmed. – I ended up having my office right by the prison.

I understand that, a month before, he deliberately left out these details. I understand that, in Bula, he worked right next to the cells, that he heard everything. I start to wonder if he too will have nightmares. A light that goes off and on again. Everyone in the barracks at Bula new that, when the lights went off, it was because they were torturing someone in the electric chair.

It is strange that he tells me that he does not want to go into details because there are torturers who have already died. It would be more natural to tell me that he doesn't want to go into details because there are torturers who are still alive. In Lissette Orozco's film, *Adriana's pact*, the "pact" of the title is the pact of silence among the former torturers, who refuse to recognize their actions, protecting one another and themselves. Maurício protects the memory of the torturers who have already died and who fought the war by his side. We protect the memory of our dead, we forget the dead who were nothing to us. The legend of gentle colonialism grows and grows in the silences.

Saying goodbye, they all ask me to send them the texts that I may write. I will do that. I will disillusion them again, perhaps lay them low. I do not write their memories, I write my memories of their memories. I look for taps that drip in the dark, the lights left on in the night in empty rooms. I sit under the naked lightbulb, in a metal chair, and hope that the living and the dead will break the pact of silence.

Paulo Faria
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Paulo Faria (born Lisbon, 1967) is a writer and literary translator. He has translated Cormac McCarthy, George Orwell, Don DeLillo, James Joyce, Charles Dickens and many others. To date, he has published the novels *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* (2016, Ítaca) and *Gente Acenando para Alguém que Foge* (2020, Minotauro). His third book, *Em Todas as Ruas te Encontro* (2021, Minotauro), has just been published.

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