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## *Mia Couto and the African Guilt Slavery*

In the Folha de São Paulo, we read the text “Africans were not only victims of colonization, says writer Mia Couto.” In it, we can see that “It is necessary to look at Africa with its complexity, including the margin of guilt that people from that continent had in the history of colonization itself.” The Mozambican Mia Couto says so. Next, the text reproduces the writer’s sinuous and slippery statements, such as “Africans have not always been only victims, and the acceptance of this margin of guilt dignifies us. Because it does not reduce us to objects in the actions of others. It was a history of domination and genocide, yes, but Africans were not always passive objects.”

And more from the writer: “The simplification of the continent may have helped when it was necessary to claim that Africa had culture and history-we Africans ourselves spoke of one Africa. But then we built differentiated identities and voices, we have been plural since forever.”

Here again we can note that it is possible to speak big lies with partial truths. Remember an anthological Washington Olivetto ad, which reconstructed a terrible figure with flattering references? The video of the ad spoke with images in dots on the screen: “This man took a destroyed nation. He restored its economy and restored pride to its people. In his first four years in office, the number of unemployed fell from six million to nine hundred thousand people. This man made the Gross Domestic Product grow 102% and the per capita income double. This man loved music and painting. And as a young man, he imagined pursuing a career in the arts.” Then the points were reduced and the image of Hitler came up, to conclude: “You can tell a pack of lies by telling only the truth.” Here’s the video clip:

Without the resources of a propaganda video, we can take a broader look at the points of Mia Couto's partial truth. Now, to say that Africans sold African slaves, and to dwell on this point as an admission of guilt, is to "forget" that this trade was stimulated, created, or produced by the Portuguese colonizers, who chained men, women, and children together like beasts and merchandise in the largest forced migration of peoples in history. Historians even talk about a staggering 100 million people forced to leave their homeland. It is impossible not to see that the slave trade was the running machine of colonization for Brazil. Thus, to candidly state, at first sight naively, that Africans are partly to blame for the enslavement would be similar to blaming the worker who sells his labor to the capitalist. He does, doesn't he? What is certain is that these things are pronounced as if they were nothing, in a rhetorical resource that I would even say is fraudulent. Blacks enslaved blacks, right? Yes. But to say that whites led blacks to sell other blacks as slaves is to conceal the cruel exploitation of the merchants of Portugal.

When Mia Couto states that "we Africans ourselves used to speak of one Africa, but then we built differentiated identities and voices, we have been plural since forever." Africans might well ask:

– We, who, paleface?

In fact, Mia Couto is not unaware of the role that his fellow colonists played in Mozambique. And in an oblique way, therefore aware of the step he is taking, he skirts around the crimes of colonization in Africa. I noticed this in Recife, when he came for a lecture at UFPE on October 24, 2012. There, Mia Couto, in the midst of friendliness and lightness, spoke and constructed a more serious speech, which, despite the appearance of conviviality for peace, shook me like a punch in the stomach. There, he spoke:

– I saw that you announced that I would speak here on Literature, Identity and Memory. But I didn't prepare, I didn't have time to prepare. Or I was mistaken, thinking that a contrary theme was waiting for me. I think I would be better off talking about Forgetting. In this I rely on recent events in the history of the Mozambican people. In Mozambique, it was thought best to forget the traumas of the war. This was a strategy for peace. To continue our journey without more war.

Or as the Recife newspapers published the other day:

Good humored, the writer told that he thought the theme of the lecture was about Literature and Forgetting, rather than Identity and Memory. 'I have reached a certain point in my life that I think it is better to forget than to remember,' he declared, citing how the process of forgetting had been important for Mozambique to overcome the Civil War that

haunted the country for 16 years, in the sense of not holding on to old rivalries. By saying that the past was a construction of what people invented for themselves, Mia highlighted forgetfulness as a way to form identities, making it clear that each individual has plural identities.

Such a harsh phrase, this one of forgetting to achieve peace, was more than a punch, it was bullets against an essential heart. It introduced peacemaking between offenders and offended after war. Hence, when the public, which was expected to be only admirers, was given the floor, I asked for the microphone. Then I found myself obliged to break the convivial atmosphere of the meeting at the university. And nervously, I said more or less the following:

– Mia, you said that in the reconstruction process of Mozambique forgetfulness was adopted as a strategy for peace. You, as a writer, must write better than you speak. Your phrase, forgetting for peace, is very dangerous at this moment in Brazil. Here we are at the moment of the Commission of Memory and Truth. We cannot forget, Mia. Note that even forgetting, any forgetting, is not absolute. How can we forget the crimes of the dictatorship? From what you say, there would have been no Nuremberg Tribunal, no more hunt for Nazi criminals, because they would all be forgotten.

There was an embarrassed silence in the audience.

Then he came back to Pernambuco for Fliporto in November. On the 17th he was at a meeting and lectured alongside the writer Agualusa. The auditorium was once again packed. I watched his lecture on a big screen outside. And without warning, Mia Couto returned to the theme of memory, that which one forgets in order to obtain peace. Or, as the G1 portal translated it:

During the conversation, answering several questions from the audience, the only point on which there was disagreement was about memory. For Mia, there is the possibility of it being forgotten in order to avoid past mistakes. For Agualusa, it needs to be faced head-on. Mia justifies herself by remembering Mozambique's Civil War, which lasted 16 years and left 1 million people dead. "Afterwards, the subject was never spoken of again, like a sponge that removed it from memory. [...] People decided to put the lid on it, so the demons wouldn't return. That is a greater desire, which was the desire for peace," he commented. "I don't make an apology for forgetting, but in the case of Mozambique it was the solution found. Literature rescues that time and can make that visit without pointing fingers or blame," he added.

At the time, on November 17, I made notes in a little notebook. I wrote:

“Memory is a woman. She doesn’t forget. Mia assumes the forgetfulness of Mozambique. Mia is relativistic when she says that memory also remembers lies. A thesis dear to the reactionary media. The memory of Africa is founded on victim stereotypes...’, he says, as if he were a Portuguese man ashamed of his colonial past. Mia confirms the UFPE lecture as well, when he makes statements with catchphrases, worthy of an entertainer. ‘The dictatorship of reality is the worst dictatorship we can have,’ he says. The fantasy of the distinguished public goes wild.”

Now, this week he returns with the concealment of crimes, with the shaming of colonial cruelty, reducing it to points of the complicity of Africans selling Africans into slavery. He has advanced his memoir for peace.... In the end, I note that these statements, from which he sometimes apologizes, are not an oversight. They are a system. A system of omitting the crimes of Portuguese colonization in Africa. The civilized world should protest against the new history of this infamy.

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