

Recreating African Futures through literary imagination. The newest gender, racial, national and African identities as revealed in Mario Lúcio Sousa's *O Novíssimo Testamento* (The newest Testament) (Cape Verde)

Catarina Martins

Institution: Center for Social Studies and Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Coimbra, Portugal

Member of CODESRIA since 2013

Abstract:

The role of literature in imagining and building African identities, social roles, economic dynamics and political structures cannot be underestimated. Indeed, from anti-colonialism through the pre- and immediate post-independence periods up to the contemporary postcolonial state, literature has been path breaking: it was through literature that pre-existing realities and historical processes were critically revised in important ways. And it was also through literature that future projects were designed that inspired political agents of all sorts, the most important example being the very construction of African states as described by the poets and storytellers that were decisive in creating the "imagined communities" that would sustain political struggle.

Resume

Le rôle de la littérature dans les enquêtes et la construction des identités africaines, les rôles sociaux, la dynamique économique et les structures politiques ne peut pas être sous-estimée. En effet, de l'anti-colonialisme à travers le pré et les périodes post-indépendance immédiate à l'État post-colonial contemporain, la littérature a été de chemin de rupture: il était à travers la littérature que les réalités post-existantes et les processus historiques ont été grièvement révisées de façon importante. Et ce fut à travers la littérature que les futurs projets ont été conçus que les agents politiques inspirées de toutes sortes, l'exemple le plus important étant la façon la construction des Etats africains comme décrit par les poètes et les conteurs qui étaient décisif dans la création des «sociétés imaginaires» qui soutiendraient politique luttes.

Mots clés: *la littérature africaine, les femmes africaines, l'état post-colonial, communautés imaginées, le Cap-Vert*

Introduction:

The need for critical revision of the past and for the imagination of new realities for Africa continues to be an important motivation of African literary writing. This paper proposes an analysis of *O Novíssimo Testamento* (“The Newest Testament”) by the Cape Verdean novelist, musician and Minister of Culture, Mário Lúcio Sousa, as the recreation of a future for an African country that implies the return to the very roots of its creation: religious revelation. Mário Lúcio Sousa’s novel offers a complete new map for understanding gender, racial, national and African identities from the specific situation of Cape Verdean insularity, one that needs particular attention when dealing with the future of the Continent as a whole.

The role of literature in imagining and building African identities, social roles, economic dynamics and political structures cannot be underestimated. Indeed, from anti-colonialism through the pre- and immediate post-independence periods up to the contemporary postcolonial state, literature has been path breaking: it was through literature that pre-existing realities and historical processes were critically revised in important ways. And it was also through literature that future projects were designed that inspired political agents of all sorts, the most important example being the very construction of African states as described by the poets and storytellers that were decisive in creating the “imagined communities” that would sustain political struggle.

Of course, this is not new and is common in literature from all over Africa. Yet, this process contains some specificity in the Cape-Verdean case, due to the insularity of this country and the fact that its territory had not been inhabited prior to Portuguese colonization, the arrival of West Africans as slaves, and the gradual development of a creole elite that used literature and culture to construct a national identity modelled more often according to white references of the imperial metropolis than to the heritage of the black continent. Despite the legacy of Amílcar Cabral, the country’s founder, several ambiguities remain in the self-comprehension of Cape-Verdeans and their national and racial identities concerning the African continent, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a particular relationship with the North, which is sought-for by marking a difference between contemporary Cape-Verdean politics and social realities and the patterns of governance and social development that dominate in the Continent. Indeed, although the archipelago presents remarkable internal heterogeneities, the narrative of a creole nation, that has outgrown its Africanness and become a more refined hybrid, although preserving African elements in its culture, is very much present in the country’s self-understanding and presentation to the outer world. This is, I believe, the message of Cape-Verdean Minister of Culture’s, the well-known musician Mário Lúcio Sousa’s CD entitled *Kreol*, which includes duets with musicians from the old colonial metropolis and from countries on both sides of the Atlantic (Africa and Central and South America), thus reinforcing

this non-continental, but Atlantic, mestizo and diasporic identity. As Sousa states in an interview: "My writing and my music inhabit this creole world" that is not only European, African or American, but rather "tries to harmonize these bifurcations" (Freitas, 2010). Cape Verde's geographic location and function as a former axis of commerce in the globalized economic web of early colonialism, namely through slave trade, are reinvented: the country appears now as an Atlantic platform of encounter and circulation mid-way between the South and the North, including Africa and South America on one side, and Europe and North America on the other. This new centrality, allied to hybridity understood as openness and as the capacity to establish strategic bonds and build fruitful synthesis, seem to be the core of a national identity that will sustain the country's impulse towards development. Sousa's CD marks this creole national identity, which is not new in itself, with a clear geopolitical trait as a bridge between cultures and ways of living that are reciprocally enriching. In a way Kreol reinscribes Cape-Verde on the map as the center of an idealized and aestheticized world where harmony flows from and to every cardinal point, through the archipelago as a concentrating and irradiating knot.

The attempt to focus on a new world geography that dislocates its axis from the North to the center of the Atlantic is also present in Mário Lúcio Sousa's novel *O Novíssimo Testamento. E se Jesus ressuscitasse mulher?* ("The Newest Testament. What if Jesus resuscitated as a woman?"). Jesus resuscitates as a Cape-Verdean woman, in a tiny village of a small island in the middle of the Atlantic. From this new geographic epicenter, the author attempts the deconstruction of religious, historical and epistemological narratives that sustain social paradigms and identities, world geopolitics and human ethics.

The religious problematic is frequent in African literature: decolonizing African culture generally involves returning to the sources of autochthonous religious worldviews and practices that have been destroyed, erased or marginalized by the colonial imposition of Christianity and giving them a renewed legitimacy. In this sense, a great number of novels depicts and brings to the fore a broad spectrum of what the Christian Church banned as witchcraft, superstition, blasphemy or sin. Indeed, this is central in the construction of a pre-colonial African identity. This identity is strongly marked by a particular unity with a fantastic Nature inhabited by spiritual forces and which is the source of a wide variety of knowledge that was forgotten, obliterated or put aside by colonialism. Christianity is thus presented as un-African and questioned as part of the destructive violence of colonialism upon African culture. Other tendencies of dealing with the problem of the Africans' relation with Christianity are the acceptance of a paradoxical syncretism with local religious beliefs and practices: while some Christian principles are shown as ridiculous in African contexts, others are incorporated (African women writers blame African patriarchy for using Christian values in order to reinforce its power). In some cases the Bible is read as a description of African lives and experiences, namely in Egypt, and an appropriation of this African ancient knowledge by the West is denounced.

Mário Lúcio Sousa, however, attempts something else: the rewriting of the Gospel

and of many other works of the Christian tradition as it was built during several centuries in Europe and brought to Africa with colonialism. Sousa does not reject Christianity as a part of Cape-Verdean or African identity. Indeed, his concern is not primarily the assertion of a particular national or continental identity, but a problem that became universal since the Christian church and ethics spread worldwide. Sousa attacks Christianity's core, not because it is un-African, but more importantly because it is inhuman. He develops a strategy that is original in relation to most tendencies in African literature: he combines the audacity to deal with a universal subject from a point of view that is African but does not proclaim this identity. Not because Sousa disowns in any way his origins, but because he is beyond the need to assert his continental or national identity. The Cape-Verdeans depicted in the novel are simply and above all human. In this sense, the author is more inspired by literary works from the North than by his African counterparts, the most important influence in content and style being the Portuguese Nobel-prize winner José Saramago and his novel *O Evangelho Segundo Jesus Cristo* ("The Gospel according to Jesus Christ"). The Portuguese writer does not feel the need to define the location where he is writing from, like most works from the North that deal with subjects with ambitions of universality, such as religion and ethics. Similarly, Sousa has overcome the need to state an Africanness and chooses Humanity as his inspiration, his motivation and his ambition. In *O Novíssimo Testamento* we witness an attempt to develop a religious message that will do justice to a broad concept of Humanity. This concept is significantly modelled upon one of the smallest and most isolated communities of the world, a microcosm that nonetheless is enough to point out the need for a new humanism. This seems to mean that in African literature writers are beyond the need of rejecting everything that is exogenous as a way of affirming what is African, but prefer to write from the position of universality that the North had so far reserved for itself and claim this position for Africans as well.

Still, the global is achieved by preserving the local: the microcosm upon which the new idea of humanism is modelled is a panorama of Cape-Verdean society that simultaneously builds a new notion of national identity, one that presents a stronger contrast to Western references than to African ones. Indeed, as Jesus resuscitates among Cape-Verdeans, who thus become the chosen people, these are thoroughly and extensively depicted. The narrator shows a wonderful mix of humor and irony with pride and compassion to portray a community that is rich and diverse due to the characteristics and survival skills of each particular individual, but is so because it lives in utmost poverty and abandonment under an uncaring colonial rule. Misery is such that people – mostly women – come to Jesus to be heard and cannot find ways of expressing their disgrace. Cape-Verdean women talk of deep problems of an intimate, private and gendered nature that men do not normally express (infertility, adultery, children to feed). Also, the description of magic or aberrant creatures becomes a powerful metaphor for a world that has attained the extreme depth of despair – one that no language has words

for (103) - and for the need of a new message and a new society: "... She walked from village to village, ate and drank with the poor, and heard affliction from the people's voices, truths that had never been narrated, and that's how Jesus understood the real sense of the need for a new world, for Jesus had never been able to imagine how old the old world already was ... and thus, little by little, from woman to woman, Jesus gradually understood that in that dead end of the world where She found herself, pain was too big for only one God, because behind the common words of suffering lay a world in decadence, physical decadence and alimentary decadence, and, finally, moral and spiritual decadence, men had started to build the end of their own condition..." (Sousa, 2010: 103-4, my translation).

As the word spreads that Jesus has resuscitated, strangers from all over the archipelago and from all over the world arrive. The island of Santiago must lodge thousands of pilgrims. This way, a forgotten point in the middle of the ocean becomes the center of the world. The inversion is signaled by the narrator in a number of humorous and imaginative ways: due to the weight of the immense crowds that occupy every millimeter of the island, as if the whole humankind had concentrated there, the island loses balance and starts tipping to one side, thus also causing the direction of the flow of rivers to be inverted. These start to flow inland, instead of into the sea. This is a clever way of underlining that the novel intends to operate deep inversions at many levels, culminating in a new broad religious faith that is a new universal narrative. The first inversion happens when a process of colonization in reverse begins, for if the island is in some way occupied by foreigners from the North, these do not impose their culture and customs. Instead they must adapt to the strategies of survival and the particular phenomena of an extremely poor and isolated community that does not know the meaning of progress. Here northern development paradigms are most inadequate, useless and absurd, and must be replaced by endogenous century-old knowledge, which is best suitable to the region's natural and human particularities. This represents, of course, an anticolonial statement against the epistemicides caused by hegemonic paradigms of knowledge and technology. These are exposed to ridicule by nature and by the simplicity of local solutions for problems which islanders have known for a long time. In turn, capitalism, the economic paradigm that shapes western societies and cultures and is the motor of colonialism, must be suspended, for even if foreigners bring a lot of money to spend, they quickly discover that there are neither goods nor services to be bought. Indeed, the island does not possess any natural resources that might be exploited and human resources are quickly exhausted, which makes such an economic system obsolete. Each person must work within the community to guarantee something to eat and a place to sleep, there are neither employers nor employees. It is capitalists who must thus adapt to living in scarcity and to the solidarity and sharing that poverty implies. This situation is presented in the novel with deep irony and humor, yet represents one of its most radical proposals for an alternative future, because economic and social systems are radically

altered due to what might be the actual evolution of capitalism and the exploitation of resources: overpopulation, exhaustion and implosion. Thus, the dissolution of capitalism becomes one of the preconditions for the path towards a new humanism, one that is already present in the daily ways of living of the described insular African community. Finally, we witness the devaluation of modern logics and rationality which are shown as too ridiculously narrow to be able to grasp the diversity of human phenomena of such a small island, phenomena that would fall into the categories of the absurd or the magic, according to Western paradigms, yet are part of the archipelago's normality. Here, Sousa's imagination and the description of a long list of fantastic characters such as a boy who unbuttons other people's clothes by whistling or a woman forever tied to its child by an unbreakable umbilical cord echo the magical realism of South American writers, thus operating a literary fusion that corresponds to the author's conception of Cape-Verde as a bridge between cultures. More than this, it is an epistemological, political and ethical statement, one that asserts the need to alter the cognitive eye that establishes normality and creates abysses of invisibility where all those who in some way do not correspond to this standard land. As Jesus, in her preaching, underlines madness as true freedom as opposed to the chains of rationality, Sousa clearly denounces that Christianity sustains and is supported by this system of knowledge and political power and is a mechanism of exclusion rather than of inclusion. The reinvention of the Gospel is an attempt to erase the abyssal lines, namely those created not only by religion but by western modernity. Again, the reality of a poor small village closed in itself in an insignificant island in the middle of the Atlantic seems the best place to bring about such global changes. "Lem", the name of the village where Jesus chose to resuscitate, as opposed to "Além" (meaning "Beyond", that is, transcendental) signals the author's call for a return to the local, the simple, the down-to-earth humanity that must found the basis of a radically new understanding of the world.

The deepest revolution however is, of course, the resuscitation of Jesus as a woman and a Cap-Verdean. The new faith, the new humanism, the new future will be built upon the image of a subaltern among the subaltern: a black woman, an African, an islander, a poor. This is the author's most daring statement, one that inverts the submission of women in all the big monotheistic religions and elevates Woman to the epitome of Human. Though feminist and revolutionary, this statement however falls into some traps from a feminist point of view: it presents a mythical womanhood that is still stereotypical and builds upon a rather traditional conception of binary sexual identities. It is true that Sousa does not construct the typical African Woman-mythos, located somewhere between Mother Africa, the sacrificed victim of poverty, or the embodiment of exuberant sensuality (although traits of all three are present). Jesus in the novel is actually split between the sacred words that are spoken by a portrait – the divine voice accorded to the otherwise always silenced women – and the female body that experiences earthly realities and develops earthly knowledge. Sousa's Jesus undergoes a process of learning what being

human is about, a process that was denied to Jesus in the Bible, and is deepened in the novel by the fact that as a woman, She is stereotypically presented as more sensitive and closer to nature and other beings than men. Jesus learns about the body, the senses, and emotions and builds her spirituality upon this empiric learning. Unlike the biblical Jesus, this new female Jesus is allowed to fully live her humanity and discover joy, pleasure (food, wine, caresses) and pain, laughter and weeping, sensuality (her own body and its carnality) and passionate love for a man (though She is prevented from actually experiencing physical love), loneliness and nostalgia (the Cape-Verdean sodade). She is allowed to make errors, is weak and listens and observes a lot. In fact She disappoints many followers for She is often incapable of offering more remedy than the solidarity of her own human weakness, again as opposed to the Christian Gospel. Her doctrine is as humble as it is radical. Indeed she pleads for an illuminated faith that questions and rejects a blind faith that requires simple obeisance. Foremost She preaches the fullness of human existence, deeply diminishes the notion of sin and guilt, and does not associate passion with the concept of sacrifice but rather with a new way of corresponding to the gift of Life by grasping it in its paradoxical richness. Indeed, for Sousa's Jesus there can be no knowledge without freedom and the completeness of the sensual and emotional apprehension of the human, which in turn is the essence of the divine. This celebration of life and humanity is again a message of inclusion and of bonding, a comprehensive embrace of the human kind that is so extensively portrayed in the novel through the many types of Cape-Verdeans. The author goes further: it is Jesus's "revolution of love" and her preaching of radical freedom that lead to the outbreak of national consciousness as the most varied social groups understand the meaning of liberty and connect this with independence and the future for their country, a fact that is, of course, closely connected with the aggravation of poverty: "... now even women already spoke of freedom (...), students already wanted independence and children openly questioned the future of the nation. In sum, for the authorities, Jesus was the cause of national conscience and it was not because cows were so thin and old people could not recall a farming year as bad as this..." (Sousa, 2010: 247, my translation).

To be true, the independence claims that arise among Cape-Verdeans in the novel are not attached to a notion of nation as an "imagined community" based on common cultural references, symbols and heroes, nor by shared narratives from the past. Indeed this imagination of a community is not present in the novel. Independence thoughts arise due to suffering and to the discovery of the concept of rights versus oppression that is associated with Jesus's doctrine of freedom. Understanding freedom and claiming rights implies identifying the oppressor. This happens at different levels among Cape-Verdeans in the novel, and is at first more a dissociating process than a unifying one, for different groups with different oppressors within the society, for instance sexual and class oppression, start rebelling against each other. Independence thoughts and concepts such as nation or a people appear only when the colonial administration is

identified as the final oppressor. This means that what unites Cape-Verdeans as a people is the difference from the oppressor and the perception of a submission to a power that prevents individuals from living in dignity and fulfilling their needs, wishes and claims. The novel underlines that Cape-Verdeans are diverse amongst themselves, which means that the construction of a nation in Sousa's narrative does not happen through a process of homogenization, as is common in nationalist discourse, but by preserving an extreme social heterogeneity, that is united mainly by ethical and political principles. These cannot be dissociated from the doctrine of freedom and humanity preached by Jesus. Colonialism annuls freedom, is thus inhuman and must be fought. This is, again, a universal message, although it comes, once more, from a small island as a microcosm of the world. Sousa seems to be stating that oppressive powers must and can be fought without creating and reinforcing the often artificial group characteristics that sustain nationalisms and various types of irreconcilable differences between an I or a We and some kind of Other. While stressing the importance of diversity - Jesus preaches the inclusion of radical difference and destroys the idea of a norm - unity is achieved by a common identity of everyone as human. This legitimizes the political act against every power that is inhuman.

Unfortunately conservative ideas and the various social powers that support colonialism end up defeating Jesus, who is condemned to death. In the end, the whole story is presented as a dream of an old, very bigot lady who had not fully enjoyed life because she was too religious. She had, for instance, remained a virgin, something that the narrator considers to be radically opposed to the importance of sex in Cape-Verdean culture.¹ The conclusion of the novel is somewhat unsatisfactory for the reader who hopes for a revolution incited by the new revelation, a new future for this particular, insular part of Africa. Still, most of the novel points in this direction: it underlines the importance of the individual as a human being, thus stressing the value that everyone possesses, specially the excluded and subaltern, that is, those who do not correspond to a given social norm that is an expression of a power hierarchy. This is why the author resists placing his characters in categories, an exception being sexual identities. Moreover, as stated above, in a sort of ecological vision of the world's future under economic capitalism, the novel foresees this system's implosion and a return to simple, solidary and communitarian economies in which accumulation and surplus value are unthinkable and work cannot be nor sold nor bought. Finally, the author claims a new ethics of freedom and humanism that is the key to end all forms of oppression. The fact

¹ In some of the novel's most humorous pages, we learn that the language of the islands has an enormous number of words to designate female genitals, as opposed to Swedish that counts only 3 (Sousa: 2010: 53). Curiously, this is one of the very few characteristics of a national culture present in the novel, since as afore mentioned, the author prefers to operate from the point of view of diversity and the human that a Cape-Verdean, African community is chosen as the elected people that represents the full extent of human kind

is in itself an assertion of the human dignity of the racially excluded, the economically exploited, and the socially and politically oppressed. As I said before, Sousa's novel opts for a post-African point of view, one that aims for the universality that the western literary canon had reserved for itself. In this sense the author is also coherent with his conception of Cape-Verdean identity as a bridge between cultures from North and South, as a crossroads of cultural influences that once were propelled by the politics of colonialism but now must be redrawn according to an ethics of equality and freedom. Cape-Verde is the axis which allows us to see the globe as it actually is: round, with no upper or lower sides. To this roundness should correspond the absence of power hierarchies. According to Sousa, Africans must have the courage to assume this identity and this role. Only then will they be equal to peoples from all other geographies.

References:

- Freitas, Carolina (2010), "Mário Lúcio Sousa: Em busca do 'espaço crioulo'", in JL online, 12-10-2010, <http://visao.sapo.pt/mario-lucio-sousa-em-busca-do-espaco-crioulo=f575388>, last access 27.08.2014.
- Sousa, Mário Lúcio (2010), *O Novíssimo Testamento. E se Jesus Ressuscitasse Mulher?*, Lisboa: D. Quixote.