Languages we don't know we know

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(English translation: David Brookshaw)

In an as yet unpublished short story of mine, the action is as follows: a terminally ill woman asks her husband to tell her a story so as to alleviate her unbearable pains. No sooner does he begin his tale than she stops him:

- *No, not like that. I want you to speak to me in an unknown language.*
- *Unknown?* He asks.
- *A language that doesn't exist. For I have such a need not to understand anything at all.*

The husband asks himself: how can you speak a language that doesn't exist? He starts off by mumbling some strange words and feels like a fool, as if he were establishing his inability to be human. But gradually, he begins to feel more at ease with this language that is devoid of rules. And he no longer knows whether he's speaking, singing, or praying. When he pauses, he notices his wife has fallen asleep, with the most peaceful smile on her face. Later, she confesses to him: those sounds had brought back memories of a time before she even had a memory! And they had given her the solace of that same sleep which provides the link between us and what was here before we were alive.

When we were children, all of us experienced that first language, the language of chaos, all of us enjoyed that divine moment when our life was capable of being all lives, and the world still awaited a destiny. James Joyce called this relationship with an unformed, chaotic world 'chaosmology'. This relationship, my friends, is what breathes life into writing, whatever the continent, whatever the nation, whatever the language or the literary genre.

I believe that all of us, whether poets or fiction writers, never stop seeking this seminal chaos. All of us aspire to return to that state in which we were so removed from a particular language that all languages were ours. To put it another way, we are all the impossible translators of dreams. In truth, dreams speak within us what no word is capable of saying.

Our purpose, as producers of dreams, is to gain access to that other language no one can speak, that hidden language in which all things can have all names. What the sick woman was asking was what we all wish for: to annul time and send death to sleep.

Maybe you expected me, coming as I do from Africa, to use this platform to lament, to accuse others, while absolving my immediate fellows from guilt. But I prefer to talk about something of which we are all victims and guilty at the same time, about how the process that has impoverished my continent is in fact devitalizing our common, universal position as creators of stories.

In a congress that celebrates the value of words, the theme of my intervention is the way dominant criteria are devaluing good literature in the name of easy and immediate profitability. I am talking about a commercial rationale that is closed to other cultures, other languages, other ways of thinking. The words of today are increasingly those that are shorn of any poetic dimension, that do not convey to us any utopian vision of a different world.

What has ensured human survival is not just our intelligence but our capacity to produce diversity. This diversity is nowadays being denied us by a system that makes its choice solely on the grounds of profit and easy success. Africans have become the 'others' once again, those who have little to sell, and who can buy even less. African authors (and especially those who write in Portuguese) live on the periphery of the periphery, there where words have to struggle in order not to be silence.

My dear friends

Languages serve to communicate. But they don't just 'serve'. They transcend that practical dimension. Languages cause us to **be**. And sometimes, just as in the story I mentioned, they cause us to **stop being.** We are born and we die inside speech, we are beholden to language even after we lose our body. Even those who were never born, even they exist within us as the desire for a word and as a yearning for a silence.

Our lives are dominated by a reductive and utilitarian perception that converts languages into the business of linguists and their technical skills. Yet the languages we know – and even those we are not aware that we knew – are multiple and not always possible to grasp by the rationalist logic that governs our conscious mind. Something exists that escapes norms and codes. This elusive dimension is what fascinates me as a writer. What motivates me is the divine vocation of the word, which not only names but also invents and produces enchantment.

We are all bound by the collective codes with which we communicate in our everyday lives. But the writer seeks to convey things that are beyond everyday life. Never before has our world had at its disposal so many means of communication. Yet our solitude has never been so extreme. Never before have we had so many highways. And yet never before have we visited each other so little.

I am a biologist and I travel a lot through my country's savanna. In these regions, I meet people who don't know how to read books. But they know how to read their world. In such a universe where other wisdoms prevail, I am the one who is illiterate. I don't know how to read the signs in the soil, the trees, the animals. I can't read clouds and the likelihood of rain. I don't know how to talk to the dead, I've lost all contact with ancestors who give us our sense of the eternal. In these visits to the savanna, I learn sensitivities that help me to come out of myself and remove me from my certainties. In this type of territory, I don't just have dreams. I am dreamable.

Mozambique is a huge country, as huge as it is new. More than 25 languages are spoken within it. Ever since independence, which was achieved in 1975, Portuguese has been the official language. Thirty years ago, only a tiny minority spoke this language, ironically borrowed from the colonizer in order to disaffirm the country's colonial past. Thirty years ago, almost no Mozambicans had Portuguese as their mother tongue. Now, more than 12 percent of Mozambicans have Portuguese as their first language. And the great majority understands and speaks Portuguese, stamping standard Portuguese with the imprimatur of African cultures.

This tendency towards change places worlds that are not only distinguished by language, in confrontation with each other. Languages exist as part of culturally much vaster universes. There are those who fight to keep alive languages that are at risk of extinction. Such a fight is an utterly worthy one and recalls our own struggle as biologists to save animals and plants from disappearance. But languages can only be saved if the culture that harbours them can remain dynamic. In the same way, biological species can only be saved if their habitats and natural life patterns can be preserved.

Cultures survive for as long as they remain productive, as long as they are subject to change and can dialogue and mingle with other cultures. Languages and cultures do what living organisms do: they exchange genes and invent symbioses in response to the challenges of time and environment.

In Mozambique, we are living in an age when encounters and disencounters are occurring within a melting-pot full of exuberance and paradox. Words do not always serve as a bridge between these diverse worlds. For example, concepts that seem to us to be universal, such as Nature, Culture, and Society, are sometimes difficult to reconcile. There are often no words in local languages to express these ideas. Sometimes, the opposite is true: European languages do not possess expressions that may translate the values and concepts contained in Mozambican cultures.

I remember something that really happened to me. In 1989, I was doing research on the island of Inhaca when a team of United Nations technicians arrived there. They had come to carry out what

is generally known as ‘environmental education’. I don’t want to comment here on how this concept of environmental education often conceals a type of messianic arrogance. The truth of the matter is that these scientists, brimming with good faith, had brought with them cases containing slide projectors and films. In a word, they had brought with them educational kits, in the naïve expectation that technology would prove the solution to problems of understanding and communication.

During the first meeting with the local population, some curious misunderstandings emerged that illustrate the difficulty of translating not so much words but thoughts. On the podium were the scientists who spoke in English, myself, who translated this into Portuguese, and a fisherman who translated the Portuguese into Chidindinhe, the local language. It all began when the visitors Introduced themselves (I should mention here that most of them happened to be Swedish). We are ‘scientists’, they said. But the word ‘scientist’ doesn’t exist in the local language. The term chosen by the translator was ‘inguetlha’, which means ‘witchdoctor’. In those folks’ eyes therefore, the visitors were white witchdoctors. The Swedish leader of the delegation (unaware of the status conferred upon him) then announced: ‘we have come here to work on the environment’. Now, in that culture, the idea of the environment has no autonomous meaning and there is no word that exactly describes such a concept.

The translator hesitated and eventually chose the word ‘ntumbuluku’, which has various meanings, but refers above all to a sort of Big Bang, the moment when humanity was created. As you can imagine, these island folk were fascinated: their little island had been chosen to study a matter of the highest, most noble metaphysical importance.

During the course of the dialogue, the same Swedish member of the delegation asked his audience to identify the environmental problems that were of greatest concern to the islanders. The crowd looked at each other, perplexed: ‘environmental problems?’ After consulting among themselves, the people chose their greatest problem: the invasion of their plantations by the ‘tinguluve’, or bush pigs. Interestingly, the term ‘tinguluve’ also describes the spirits of the dead who fell ill after they had stopped living. Whether they were spirits or pigs, the foreign expert didn’t understand very well what these ‘tinguluve’ were. He had never seen such an animal. His audience explained: the pigs had appeared mysteriously on the island and had begun to multiply in the forest. Now, they were destroying the plantations.

- They’re destroying the plantations? Well, that’s easy: we can shoot them!

The crowd’s reaction was one of fearful silence. Shoot spirits? No one wanted to talk or listen anymore, no matter what the subject. And the meeting came to an abrupt end, damaged by a tacit loss of trust. That night, a group of elders knocked on my door. They asked me to summon the foreigners so that they could better explain the problem of the pigs. The experts appeared, astonished by this interruption to their sleep.

- It’s because of the wild pigs.
- What about the pigs?
- It’s because they’re not quite pigs…
- So what are they, then? They asked, certain that a creature couldn’t exist and at the same time not exist.
- They are almost pigs. But they’re not ***complete*** *pigs.*

Their explanation was going from bad to worse. The pigs were defined in ever more vague terms: ‘convertible creatures’, ‘temporary animals’ or ‘visitors who had been sent by someone’. Eventually, the zoologist, who was by now getting tired, took out his manual and showed them the photograph of a wild pig. The locals looked and exclaimed: ‘Yes, that’s the one’. The scientists smiled, satisfied, but their victory was short lived, for one of the elders added: Yes, this is the animal, but only at night time. I have few doubts that by this time, the experts doubted my ability as a translator. In this way, they didn’t need to question what they were saying or query how they had arrived in an unknown

locality.

Whatever the correct translation might be, the truth is that the relationship between the experts and the local community was never good and no manner of modern power point presentation could make up for the initial misunderstanding.

On another occasion, I was accompanying a presidential delegation on a visit to a province in the North of Mozambique. The President of the Republic was introducing his ministers. When it came to the Minister of Culture, the translator, after a brief pause, then announced: 'This is the Minister of 'Tomfoolery'.

In some languages in Mozambique, there isn't a word for 'poor'. A poor person is designated by the term 'chisiwana', which means 'orphan'. In these cultures, a poor person isn't just someone who doesn't possess assets, but above all it is someone who has lost the network of family relationships, which, in rural society, are a support mechanism for survival. The individual is considered poor when he or she doesn't have relatives. Poverty is loneliness, family rupture. It is possible that international experts, specialists in writing reports on destitution, don't take sufficient account of the dramatic impact of destroyed family links and social mutual help networks. Whole nations are becoming 'orphans' and begging seems to be the only route to torturous survival.

By recounting these episodes, I wish to reinforce what we already know: the systems of thought in rural Africa are not easily reduceable to European processes of logic. Some who seek to understand Africa plunge into analyses of political, social and cultural phenomena. To understand the diversity of Africa, however, we need to get to know systems of thought and religious universes that often don't even have a name. Such systems are curious because they are often rooted in actually negating the gods they invoke. For most of the peasantry in my country, the issues surrounding the origin of the world just don't exist: the universe quite simply has always existed. What is the role of God in a world that never had a beginning?

This is why, in some religions in Mozambique, the gods are always referred to in the plural, and have the same names as living people. The problem with God, according to a Makwa proverb, is the same as the one with the egg: if we don't hold it properly we drop it; if we hold it too hard, we break it.

In the same way, the idea of the 'environment' presupposes that we humans are at the centre and things dwell in orbit to us. In reality, things don't revolve around us, but along with them we form one same world, people and things dwell within one indivisible body. This diversity of thought suggests that it may be necessary to storm one last bastion of racism, which is the arrogance of assuming that there is only one system of knowledge, and of being unable to accept philosophies originating in impoverished nations.

I have been talking about the various cosmovisions found in rural areas of Mozambique. But I wouldn't want you to look at them as if they were essentialities, resistant to time and the dynamics of exchange. Today, when I revisit the island of Inhaca, I see that campaigns have been mounted to kill the wild pigs that invade plantations. And local chiefs prepare for the visits of foreign scientists, using their mobile phones. Throughout the country, millions of Mozambicans have appropriated the words 'culture' and 'nature' and have absorbed them into their cultural universes. These new words are working on top of the original cultures, in the same way that certain trees invent the ground out of which they appear to be growing.

In short, cultural phenomena aren't stopped in time, waiting for an anthropologist to turn up and record them as some proof of an exotic world, outside modernity. Africa has been subject to successive processes of essentialization and folklorization, and much of what is proclaimed as being authentically African is the result of inventions made outside the continent. For decades, African writers had to

undergo the so-called test of authenticity: their texts were required to translate that which was understood to be their true ethnicity.

Nowadays, young African writers are freeing themselves from ‘Africanness’. They are what they are without any need for proclamation. African writers seek to be as universal as any other writer in the world.

It is true that many writers in Africa face specific problems, but I prefer not to subscribe to the idea that Africa is a unique, singular and homogeneous place. There are as many Africas as there are writers and all of them are reinventing continents that lie inside their very selves. It is true that a high proportion of African writers face challenges in order to adjust their work to different languages and cultures. But this is not a problem that is exclusively ours, those of us who are African. There isn’t a writer in the world who doesn’t have to seek out his or her own identity among multiple and elusive identities. In every continent, each person is a nation made up of different nations. One of these nations lives submerged and made secondary by the universe of writing. This hidden nation is called orality.

Then again, orality is not a typically African phenomenon, nor is it a characteristic that is exclusive to those who are erroneously called ‘native peoples’. Orality is a universal territory, a treasure rich in thoughts and sensibilities that are reclaimed by poetry.

The idea persists that only African writers suffer what is called the drama of language. It is true that colonization induced traumas over identity and alienation. But the truth, my friends, is that no writer has at his disposal a consummated language. We all have to find our own language in order to demonstrate our uniqueness and unrepeatability.

The Indian sociologist, André Breteille, wrote: ‘Knowing a language makes us human; fluency in more than one language makes us civilized’. If this is true, Africans – assumed down the ages to be uncivilized – may be better suited to modernity than even they themselves think. A high proportion of Africans know more than one African language and, apart from these, speak a European language. That which is generally seen as problematic may after all represent considerable potential for the future. For this ability to be polyglot may provide us Africans with a passport to something that has become perilously rare nowadays: the ability to travel between different identities and to visit the intimacy of others.

Thank you very much!