

Russell Hamilton's *Voices from an Empire: A Pioneering Study*

DAVID BROOKSHAW
University of Bristol

The study of African literature in Portuguese was a largely vacant field in universities in the USA and the UK in the 1960s, in contrast to the emerging study of Anglophone and Francophone African literatures, which were well under way as both Britain and France completed their processes of decolonization. Works by a growing number of African writers were widely available in bookshops in cities like London and Paris. In Portuguese-speaking Africa, the situation was entirely different as the dictatorship in Portugal clung on to its colonies. Many of the writers and intellectuals who would later emerge to play leading roles in their countries' political and cultural lives when they eventually became independent in 1974 and 1975, were either in prison or in exile. Those writers who lived in Portugal were being closely watched by Salazar's political police; those who remained in Africa were participating in the wars of independence. The poems of Agostinho Neto, the stories of Luís Bernardo Honwana and of Luandino Vieira, all iconic figures in the literatures of Angola and Mozambique, were banned, and very difficult to obtain unless they had been translated, or one had access to very rare, limited editions of the originals, hidden away in the secrecy of private libraries.

Did African literature in Portuguese exist as far as the authorities in Portugal were concerned? Yes, it did, but it involved literature written as often as not by Portuguese settlers, who adhered, more or less, to the ideas enshrined in Lusotropicalism, the ideological justification for Portugal's continued presence in Africa derived from the theories of Brazilian social historian, Gilberto Freyre. Indeed, it would be true to say that the wars being waged in the African bush between the colonial and guerrilla armies, also had a literary dimension. On the one hand, there were the authors who sustained or bought into the ideology of

Portuguese colonialism with its attendant themes—Portuguese nobility of enterprise in ‘exotic’ environments, even an attraction to what we would now term an ‘orientalized’ Africa. On the other hand, there were the authors, most of whom were banned in Portugal, who sought to express in their work a local regional consciousness, to focus on the social reality of the Africans, and to even promote a literature of national identity (itself a heretical concept when, under the Salazar-Caetano’s dictatorship, the only nation to uphold was Portugal). As always in conflicts of this type, there were those who were caught in the middle. Russell Hamilton was not the first anglophone academic to write on the theme of Portuguese African literature. In the 1960s, Gerald Moser had raised awareness of individual writers such as the neo-realist novelist Castro Soromenho, and Clive Willis had translated the ethnographic tales of Óscar Ribas; however, Russell was the first to write a comprehensive, cohesive, and balanced study of the field in *Voices from an Empire: A History of Afro-Portuguese Literature*.

The irony of the book’s title was given added poignancy by the fact that while the research had been carried out in Portugal, Angola and Mozambique in the years before the overthrow of the Portuguese dictatorship in April 1974, it was only published in 1975, when the timetable for decolonization had already been set by the new democratic government in Lisbon. Suddenly, all the writers who had been banned were emerging from prison, or preparing to take part in the transitional governments that prepared the way for independence. Their works were becoming available again and, in many cases, for the first time: for example, individual poems by Neto had been published in the early 1960s, but his collected work was first published in English translation in Dar es Salaam, and only appeared in Portugal in 1974/5. Fortunately, Russell had time to make additions to both his foreword and his conclusion, so as to signpost the changes that were rapidly taking place between April 1974 and the first half of 1975, when the terms of the political independence of the five African territories were being negotiated. As he himself stated (and I am paraphrasing him here)—we knew change was inevitable, we just didn’t expect it to come so suddenly.

Nonetheless, it was precisely the period when the book was being researched and prepared for publication what makes it such a unique and pioneering work, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it includes references to settler writers and engages critically with some of their work, pointing up their contradictions and weaknesses. Writers such as Reis Ventura, Guilhermina de Azevedo, Orlando de

Albuquerque, Garibaldi de Andrade, Tomaz Vieira da Cruz in Angola, and Rodrigues Júnior and Vieira Simões in Mozambique, had all represented the ‘acceptable’ face of African literature under the old regime (and to be fair, many of them felt a far greater sense of belonging to Africa than to Europe, even though some of them had been born in Portugal and left for Africa in their youth). The majority of these writers were swept away by the tide of political events between 1974 and 1975, and were promptly (and in some cases deservedly) forgotten. Secondly, and centrally, Russell’s study foregrounded the work (that he was able to gain access to) of writers who are now considered the pioneers of their countries’ literatures: Neto, Craveirinha, Honwana, Luandino, Tenreiro among many others. Thirdly, he included the work and engaged with the literary debates surrounding poetry and identity as articulated by writers like Rui Knopfli and Eugénio Lisboa, both of whom were born and lived in Mozambique, who left the territory when it became independent, but who firmly belong to the literary historical narrative of the land of their birth. The same could be said of Mário António, a member of the *Mensagem* generation in Angola (the first modern nativist consciousness movement), but who left his country to live in Portugal in the 1960s. Regarded initially as a turncoat, his poetry, prose and seminal—albeit controversial—work on the cultural history of Luanda, eventually caused him to be re-incorporated into his country’s literary history. This is in spite of the fact that he continued to live in Portugal after Angola became independent and lived there until his death in 1989. The diasporic dimension of these literatures, which Russell highlighted in his study, would only re-emerge in the analysis of African literature in Portuguese, once the initial euphoria of political independence and revolution died down, and literary activity ceased to be a weapon with which to elevate the political vanguard movements that had seized power in 1975. Now, some of the writers of the type whom Russell first discussed in *Voices from an Empire* have regained a place in the literary histories of their countries: people who left Africa in 1975, often as teenagers with their families, but whose subsequent literary work reflects their background, their memories of a homeland left behind, but which is part of their life’s journey, part of their own sentimental geography. Some more recent scholars, maybe inspired by Edward Said and others, have engaged with more obviously colonial literature again (and I am thinking here of Francisco Noa’s *Empire, Myth and Myopia: Mozambique as a Literary Invention*, 2014).

Finally, we cannot forget that the author of this first, systematic study of Afro-Portuguese literature was himself an African American, of the generation that grew up during the great Black Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s in the United States. While respecting the cultural specificities of the Luso-Brazilian world (and Russell was of course originally a Brazilianist), he would have known how skeptical to be when faced with the claims of Lusotropology/Lusotropicalism, according to which Portugal was an integrated, multi-racial and multi-continental nation. Indeed, no one appraising critically the issue of race relations in Brazil or the Portuguese empire during their respective dictatorships could do so without a certain degree of caution. Nevertheless, Russell's approach is reflected in the firm but diplomatic way in which his study cites colonial writers, but places its central focus on the work of authors who really engage with the overarching themes of Afro-Portuguese postcoloniality, themes that would be inherited, developed and debated by subsequent generations of Lusophone African writers.

After 1975, Russell Hamilton went on to become a central figure in the academic study and dissemination of the new discipline of African literature in Portuguese in the English-speaking world, along with other academics such as Donald Burness in the 1970s and early 80s, and then many more in subsequent years. Of course, within little more than a year, he had to translate and update *Voices from an Empire* in order to make his ground-breaking study available to an increasingly avid Portuguese readership. He therefore contributed to the field in Portugal itself, along with pioneer figures such as Manuel Ferreira, and then critics such as Salvato Trigo and Pires Laranjeira. And of course, his ongoing studies of new writers and his supervision of theses on the subject ensured that the discipline thrives in American and British universities to this day.

For me, *Voices from an Empire* accompanied me throughout my career. It was one of the first monographs I ordered for the arts and humanities library at Queen's University Belfast, where I was teaching when it first came out, and again at Bristol, to where I moved later. At one point, I had my own copy of the book (until a student failed to return it!). But in preparing this paper, I checked: the University of Bristol library copy is still there, still on limited loan during term time, battered but still in one piece, annotated by generations of students, some of its passages highlighted and underlined, attesting to its importance in the study of African literature in Portuguese and to its continuing relevance today.