

Beyond the Colonial Empire: Can we decolonise *Uaná – An African Narrative*, by João Ferreira?¹

Para além do império colonial:
Podemos decolonizar *Uaná – narrativa africana*, de João Ferreira?

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Abstract

This article proposes a critical and decolonial reinterpretation of João Ferreira's (1927-) novel *Uaná – narrativa africana* (1986), in order to rescue it from selective academic oblivion and its reductive classification as "colonial literature" or Lusocentric propaganda in Guinea-Bissau. It analyses the critical reception of the narrative *Uaná*, marginalised and considered outside the scope of Guinean culture and literature. This paper argues that the novel should be understood as a contribution to Guinean culture and national identity, due to the way it constructs the figure of the national hero (Uaná) and the heroine queen (Ilangará), based on the valorisation of individual and collective freedom and human dignity. It highlights the centrality of female emancipation to the construction of a free society, a point that brings the novel closer to Amílcar Cabral's political ideals on the social transformation of Guinea-Bissau.

Keywords: colonial – decolonial – *Uaná-narrativa africana* – João Ferreira – Guinea-Bissau.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma releitura crítica e decolonial da obra *Uaná – narrativa africana* (1986), do escritor luso-brasileiro João Ferreira (1927-), para a resgatar do esquecimento seletivo académico e da classificação redutora como "literatura colonial" ou propaganda lusocêntrica na Guiné-Bissau. Analisa-se a receção crítica da narrativa *Uaná*,

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marginalizada e considerada fora do escopo da cultura e da literatura guineenses. Este trabalho defende que o romance deve ser entendido como um contributo à cultura e identidade nacional guineense, pela forma como constrói a figura do herói-nacional (*Uaná*) e da rainha-heroína (*langará*), assente na valorização da liberdade individual e coletiva e da dignidade humana. Destaca-se a centralidade da emancipação feminina para a construção de uma sociedade livre, ponto que aproxima o romance dos ideais políticos de Amílcar Cabral sobre a transformação social da Guiné-Bissau.

Palavras-chave: colonial – decolonial – *Uaná*-narrativa africana – João Ferreira – Guiné-Bissau.

1. Introduction

In the context of studies of Portuguese-language African culture, it is important to revisit the novel *Uaná – narrativa* and propose another belonging, a new analysis from a decolonial and conjunctural perspective to restore it to the common history between Portugal and Guinea-Bissau. This re-reading is necessary because the critical reception of this novel is fraught with ambiguities and weaknesses that undeservedly place it among the works of Portuguese colonialist propaganda. Therefore, the aim is to “decolonise” and reframe *Uaná* as a contribution to the construction of Guinean memory and of interest to generations born before or after the independence process.

Firstly, we will present the biographical trajectory of the writer João Ferreira (b. 1927) and the intellectual field to which he was linked when he wrote the novel, in order to understand the intellectual/writer in his historical context and the cultural horizon he inherited. Next, the work will be revisited, in particular the main characters that comprise it, *Uaná* and *langará*, symbols of the process of constructing an ideal hero and heroine for the building of an independent Guinea-Bissau.

This reflection shares the view of Edward Saïd when he advocates a more complex and integrated analysis of the history and culture of imperialism, without resorting to rigid or simplistic categorisations. From this perspective, it is understood that the historical experience of imperialism/colonialism is something that concerns everyone, because the historical experience of empire is something shared in common between colonisers and colonised, in an evident “*existência de enredos de memória plurais*” (Cardina & Martins 2018: 14). Thus, for the purposes of this work, we defend the history of the common colonial past in constant dialogue and from a broad perspective, with room for the problematisation and deconstruction of crystallised canons about the colonial or post-colonial culture of Guinea-Bissau.

2. The life and intellectual career of João Ferreira

João Ferreira was born in 1927 in the village of Agunchos, in the municipality of Ribeira de Pena (Vila Real/Portugal) and currently lives in Brazil. He is a retired university professor from the University of Brasília (Brazil), essayist, poet and writer, making his debut with the novel *Uaná – narrativa africana* (1986).

He graduated in Italy, at the Pontifical Athenaeum Antonianum (Rome). In 1953, he publicly defended his doctoral thesis entitled *Petrus Hispanus eiusque positio psychologica relate ad Avicennam* on the Portuguese philosopher Pedro Hispano, Pope John XXI. He obtained the title of Doctor of Philosophy in 1959, after the publication of *O Augustinismo avicenizante na teoria dos intelectos de Pedro Hispano*, in 1959. In Portugal, he contributed to several journals in the field of Portuguese philosophy, namely *Revista Filosófica*, edited by Joaquim de Carvalho, from the University of Coimbra, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, from Faculty of Philosophy of Braga, *Filosofia*, edited by António Alberto de Andrade, from the Centre for Scholastic Studies in Lisbon, *Studium Generale*, a journal published by the Centre for Humanistic Studies at the University of Porto, among others. In the field of philosophical thought, he was a member of the Portuguese Philosophy Group, which met at the *Palladium* café in Lisbon, together with Álvaro Ribeiro, José Marinho, António Quadros, Afonso Botelho, Orlando Vitorino, António Telmo and others. He was one of the directors of the Philosophy section of the *Enciclopédia Luso-Brasileira de Cultura*, published by Editorial Verbo (Lisbon). From 1957 to 1963, he was editor of the Franciscan journal *Itinerarium*, based in Leiria, where he founded the Literary Colloquiums at the National Culture Centre to discuss contemporary issues of interest with young students.

From 1963 to 1965, he lived in Guinea-Bissau (then Portuguese Guinea), where he presided over the Apostolic Prefecture by appointment of Pope John XXIII and was responsible for more than five hundred schools, including rudimentary schools, primary schools, arts and crafts schools, and teacher training schools. Upon his return from his mission in Guinea, he taught Ethics at the Higher Institute of Languages and Administration in Lisbon during the 1965-1966 academic year. Also in 1966, he went to Rome to teach *History of Ancient Philosophy* at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Pontifical Athenaeum in Rome. In mid-1967, he returned to Portugal and, “por decisão pessoal e por espontânea e livre vontade, de consciência formada”, decided to leave institutional religious life. In 1968, the Holy See formally released him from his institutional ecclesiastical ties.

From then on, João Ferreira began a second stage in his personal and professional life. According to him, in an interview, “É uma etapa que representa o ser humano escolhendo e assumindo o comando de sua própria vida - uma escolha humana situada nos espaços da Liberdade” (J. Ferreira, personal communication, September 16, 2009). João Ferreira began to build, in Brazil, from 1968 onwards,

“uma vida académica a que me entrego de alma e coração”. The philosopher Agostinho da Silva played a fundamental role in this journey, encouraging him to work at the *Centre for Classical Studies* at the University of Brasília, which was coordinated by the Hellenist Eudoro de Sousa. With the dissolution of the *Centre for Classical Studies* in the early 1970s, he went on to work at the Institute of Humanities at the same university, and more specifically in the Departments of Humanities and Linguistics and in the Department of Literary Theory and Literatures, where he founded the chair of African Literature, which he taught for fifteen years, and began his scientific reflection on African literatures written in Portuguese, concluding at the same time the writing of the novel that would begin in Guinea, *Uaná – narrativa africana* (1986).

In the 1980s, from Brazil, João Ferreira’s debut work, *Uaná*, gained international recognition. The writer notes that, in 1984, the French Ministry of National Education, through the Academy of Rouen, and thanks to the efforts of the inspector general of Portuguese language teaching in France, Solange Parvaux, published an anthology of texts in Portuguese entitled *Mundos*, by authors from various Portuguese-speaking countries (Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea, Mozambique, Portugal and São Tomé and Príncipe) aimed at French students. This collection includes João Ferreira’s text “Minino di vaca”, taken from the draft of the narrative *Uaná*, about Guinea-Bissau. Later, the Republic of Guinea-Bissau prepared and adopted as its official eighth-grade textbook a Portuguese language manual entitled *Há mais mundo*, produced through a partnership between Guinea-Bissau and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. This school textbook has twelve chapters, all of which open with a text taken from João Ferreira’s book *Uaná*.

Uaná was also the subject of study in other areas of knowledge. The author of the *Dicionário brasileiro Aurélio Século XXI*, Aurélio Buarque de Holanda Ferreira, commissioned French researcher Michel Laban to conduct lexicographical research on João Ferreira’s book. This research resulted in the inclusion of some Guinean words (e.g., *mampataz*, *bajuda*, among others) in the dictionary. At the invitation of Manuel Ferreira, he also contributed to the *Revista África: Literatura – Arte e Cultura*, in the section on Guinea-Bissau.

In 1987, João Ferreira, while an academic at the University of Brasília, published the paper “Corpus seletivo da poesia contemporânea da Guiné-Bissau”, in which he sought to “insistir na presença da literatura guineense relativamente descartada das histórias gerais da literatura africana, da crítica, das antologias e das monografias de conjunto”. Alongside the first works on African literature in Portuguese by Russel G. Hamilton (1975: 358), Manuel Ferreira (1977), and Alfredo Margarido (1980), this epistemological and methodological study proved, at the time, the existence of a Guinean literature. João Ferreira disputes the words of Hamilton when he “dryly” states that Guinean literature “é mero apêndice da literatura caboverdiana” (Hamilton 1975: 358) and denounces that “a emissão deste juízo de valor pode levar

a crer que o espaço literário da Guiné-Bissau é simplesmente um vazio” (Ferreira 1987: 85), a fact that was corrected in the 1984 Portuguese edition/translation (Hamilton 1984) , which dedicated a separate chapter to Guinea-Bissau.

2.1. *Uaná – African narrative: what critical reception?*

Manuel Ferreira published *Literaturas africanas de expressão portuguesa*, volumes I and II, in 1977 and 1987, respectively, in which he states that Guinean literature is, compared to Angola or Cape Verde, the least extensive chapter of the African literary space of “Portuguese expression” (Ferreira 1977: 87) . In his inventory of 124 literary works, he noted “o risco de qualquer omissão discutível ou involuntária” (Ferreira 1977: 114), aware that the list presented would not be definitive. In the 1987 Brazilian edition, the author did not include *Uaná – narrativa africana* (1986) by João Ferreira, despite having published the first chapters in 1979 in *Revista África: Literatura – Arte e Cultura*.

Uaná – narrativa africana was considered “Lusocentric” and “Eurocentric”, soon coated with “coloniality” (Augel 1999) , and for this reason consigned to oblivion in Guinean history, literature and culture. This Western view of the world cannot be entirely denied, but it does limit the scope and contribution that *Uaná* could offer to Guinean culture. It is believed that this was Manuel Ferreira’s argument when he agreed to publish the first two chapters of *Uaná* in the abovementioned journal he edited. These chapters, rich in descriptions, deal with traditional Guinean culture (the Manjaca ethnic group) in an account of the childhood of the protagonist, *Uaná*, and customs in Pecixe, the land where he grew up.

Thirty-nine years after the publication of *Uaná*, which has rarely been read, studied or referenced, it is argued that *Uaná – narrativa africana* is not colonial(ist), because this novel does not meet the assumptions of “colonial literature” according to Manuel Ferreira’s definition:

a literatura colonial define-se essencialmente pelo facto de o centro do universo narrativo ou poético se vincular ao homem europeu e não ao homem africano. No contexto da literatura colonial, por décadas exaltada, o homem negro aparece como que por acidente, por vezes visto paternalisticamente e, quando tal acontece, é já um avanço, porque a norma é a sua animalização ou coisificação. O branco é elevado à categoria de herói mítico, o desbravador das terras inóspitas, o portador de uma cultura superior (Ferreira 1977: 15).

According to Mota (1990) and Augel (2007) , authors who have studied, albeit in a limited and conditional way, the work of João Ferreira, *Uaná-narrativa africana* hardly fits into Guinean national literature, despite having been considered the first Guinean novel (Rosa & Schönberger 1993). In the field of Portuguese-language African

(literary and cultural) studies, this work is practically unknown or, when mentioned, is referred to the epistemological field of “colonial literature”, from which it is considered urgent to liberate it.

Marcus Santos Mota, in a short review published in 1990, is categorical: “UANá nem é uma narrativa, nem é africana” (1990: 18). Mota suggests that the writer should either write literature or critical essays, stating that “no livro há material tanto para uma como para outra coisa” (Mota 1990: 18). João Ferreira, in the afterword to the 1986 edition, explains the reason for choosing fiction, namely that he lived in a time, i.e., in a political, social and religious context in which it would have been difficult to write Uaná as a sociological and political essay, but he remained “a fidelidade à mensagem primitiva e original” (Ferreira 1986: 147). This message was already germinating, to a certain extent, in the texts he wrote for the *Boletim Cultural da Guiné Portuguesa* in 1964 and 1965, under the titles *Juventude, educação e liberdade* and *O mistério da Família*, where he defended the cultural and humanistic education of young people in general, signing as Frei e Prefeito Apostólico da Guiné Portuguesa [Friar and Apostolic Prefect of Portuguese Guinea].

In turn, Moema Parente Augel, following and quoting Marcus Mota’s perspective, places João Ferreira’s work outside Guinean literature, placing him alongside Fausto Duarte and Fernanda de Castro, in the field of “colonial literature”:

Não pretendo tão pouco incluir aqui como literatura guineense o romance de João Ferreira, Uaná. Narrativa africana. O romance tem como temática as lutas da libertação culminadas com a proclamação da independência. O recurso estilístico utilizado, de reproduzir um documento supostamente escrito pelo próprio Uaná, protagonista principal, levando o relato a prosseguir na primeira pessoa, quis emprestar à trama romanesca um ar de verossimilhança. Embora haja uma sensibilidade indiscutível para as coisas do país, envolvimento emocional e empatia, a perspectiva é exógena, apresentando matizes ideológicos talvez inconscientes que fazem entrever também ali um sistema de representações e de valores subjacentes, revelando uma aceitação da ação “civilizatória” portuguesa no mundo. O estilo da narrativa faz sobressair o descritivo, com tônica no exotismo, através do qual a presença do narrador onisciente é marcadamente dominante. O grande espaço dedicado à temática da terra, à descrição realística da sua aparência física e à exaltação da feérica e luxuriante natureza africana espelha igualmente a visão de fora do narrador, talvez numa preocupação informativa advinda do seu encantamento pelo país. É digno de nota o grande conhecimento que demonstra possuir das sociedades de que trata, assim como dos acontecimentos históricos dos quais foi em parte testemunha. Sua visão de fora não invalida a qualidade estética enquanto obra literária, mas não o habilita a enfileirar as trincheiras da literatura nacional (Augel 1999: 27-28).

The same author, in “Ficção ou profecia? Aspectos da prosa contemporânea na Guiné-Bissau” (2001), includes the work in the final bibliography, but strangely makes no reference or direct or indirect quotation throughout the text. Later, in another publication in 2007, *O desafio do escomburo. Nação, identidades e pós-colonialismo na literatura da Guiné-Bissau*, she gives it a footnote (on page 62), as an additional note to the following words: “As forças libertadoras proclamaram unilateralmente a independência da Guiné naquele mesmo ano, em 24 de setembro de 1973, em um ato festivo, na pequena localidade de Lugadjol (...) região montanhosa de Madina de Boé, no Sudeste do país” (Augel 2007: 62). The footnote appears as follows:

Existe um romance de um autor português atualmente radicado no Brasil que trata ficcionalmente dos últimos meses que antecederam a proclamação da independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde, a cena do ato festivo em Boé é o ponto alto daquela narrativa (Augel 2007: 62).

However, the description of the festive act is found in the Prologue, and the remaining 19 chapters deal with the formation of Uaná, from birth to death, and not the last months leading up to the independence of Guinea-Bissau, as the author claims.

Hildo Honório do Couto and Guinean writer Filomena Embaló, in a special issue of *Papia* journal entitled *Literatura, língua e cultura na Guiné-Bissau. Um país da CPLP*, calling for the novel *Uaná* not to be forgotten, they argue that: “Há também obras que assumem uma posição mais favorável aos povos da Guiné e contra o colonialismo. (...) Não pode ser esquecido neste contexto o romance *Uaná: narrativa africana* (1986), de João Ferreira.”

In 2004, Alfeu Sparemberger presented his doctoral thesis, *A singularidade da literatura guineense no contexto das literaturas de língua portuguesa*, which includes a chapter entitled “Novos contextos: a prosa de ficção e o aprendizado da Independência”, in which he devotes a subchapter to the work of João Ferreira: “A aprendizagem da luta de independência em Uaná – narrativa Africana” (Sparemberger, 2004: 278-291). Compared to other scholars, Sparemberger offers a comprehensive analysis of the work, based on the theme of the novel, namely the historical process of Guinea’s independence, centred on the formation of the male protagonist, Uaná, and his participation in the liberation struggles, emphasising the resistance of the “founder-hero” of Utanca and the learning process, which is advocated without catechism or role models (Sparemberger 2004: 289).

Based on this state of the art regarding the critical reception of *Uaná – narrativa africana*, other possible interpretative paths are proposed below. For this new analysis, it is suggested that the author’s abovementioned biography, and the context in which the work was written should be both considered. Part of the novel was written in Guinea between 1963 and 1965, and in 1973-74 it was completed, coinciding with the assassination of Amílcar Cabral (20 January 1973) and the unilateral proclamation

of Guinea's independence (24 September 1973). It should also be noted that between 1965 and 1973, João Ferreira's life underwent major changes: he abandoned his religious life and left for Brazil, which may be why the work remained in a drawer longer than expected, until 1986.

3. Decolonising *Uaná* – *African narrative*: other interpretations

The work *Uaná* – African narrative consists of a prologue, 19 chapters and an epilogue. The book also contains an afterword, a glossary and a brief biography of the author. In the prologue, the author takes the reader back to 1973, to the celebrations of the recent declaration of autonomy of Guinea-Bissau by the United Nations (UN) in Madina de Boé, where “representantes dos chãos tribais, de norte a sul”, who had come from all over the liberated or occupied territory:

Estavam nalus de Cacine, sossos de Cabedu; balantas bravos, balantas manés, balantas de fora e saracolés; felupes de Susana e Varela; baiotes e banhuns de S. Domingos; fulas e soninkés do Gabu e de Bafatá; mandingas de Contubo-el e de Farim; papéis da ilha de Bissau; balantas de Mansoa e de Bissorã; bijagós de Bolama, de Orango, de Bubaque e Canhabaque; mancanhas de Có e de Bula; manjacos de Pecixe, Caió e Canchungo, beafadas do Xitole... Era um aglomerado colorido e alegre (Ferreira 1986: 8).

A French reporter is also present to gather information about the “heróis da novel república” because “Na França, o nome de Uaná era citado ao lado do de Amílcar Cabral como lídimo inspirador do idealismo da independência” (Ferreira 1986: 7). The journalist is introduced to “langará, viúva de Uaná, [este] herói do Oio e fundador de Utanca”, who provides him with a “manuscrito precioso” or “manuscrito mitológico” so that he can reconstruct a “perfil histórico e a contribuição de Uaná para a independência” (Ferreira 1986: 12) and make it known to Europe.

The manuscript corresponds to the nineteen chapters of the novel. At the end of the narrative, Uaná, a young man committed to the ideals of liberation of the peoples of Guinea, is captured in an ambush set up by Portuguese troops; he is arrested, raped and interrogated. The military and the PIDE demand that he denounces his people and locate his village-catacomb. He does not speak or denounce anyone. They shoot him... “para acabar com a história de uma vez” (Ferreira 1986: 140). For his courage and loyalty, he becomes a hero of Utanca, a village idealised together with his beloved, langará.

The central theme of the “manuscript” is not the martyrdom of the hero, but rather the construction of a Guinean national hero and the idealisation of a society free from colonial rule, created in a fictional village, Utanca, admired by Amílcar Cabral himself, who appears in the narrative in the form of a “whirlwind visit” (Ferreira 1986: 7, 74, 128):

Amílcar Cabral resolvera fazer uma visita-relâmpago ao nosso acampamento, pois estava entusiasmado com as notícias (...) sobre a orgânica de Utanca.

– Fantástico, disse-me [a Uaná] ao olhar para a multidão cantando em ajuntamento. Toda a vida, desde 1961, lutei por implantar aldeamentos deste tipo. Infelizmente não havia condições nem gente qualificada, com visão. Agora que absorveu a ideia mais pura do nosso movimento de independência, temos de incrementá-la (Ferreira 1986: 128).

The manuscript, a “espécie de diário de campanha” (Ferreira 1986: 12), however without the characteristics of the genre, narrates the life (birth, initiation rites, marriage, education, profession, travels) and the development of the political consciousness of a young Manjaco who, out of love for langará and as a consequence of that love, becomes a man politically committed to the liberation of all peoples/ethnic groups in Guinea. That political consciousness is triggered when he finds himself unable to live his love because Manjaca tradition does not allow it. It is important to note that the central action of the narrative unfolds from this high point: for love, Uaná fights, first and foremost, for individual freedom (for women), which will later extend to the collective freedom of Guinea.

The young Uaná and langará, from the same village, fall in love, but the woman has been promised since the age of seven to the old Kabiari for a dowry marriage, a tradition and common law in the Manjaca tribe:

O amor nos unia. E por essa razão a notícia [do casamento] nos mantinha nervosos. Éramos jovens. Tínhamos uma noção semelhante da vida e pontos de vista comuns. Pertencíamos à nova vaga da selva. Nossa perturbação era a consciência do obstáculo, representado na tribo. (...) A tribo não libertaria langará da obrigação de seguir a lei comum (Ferreira 1986: 43).

Despite the young lovers’ struggle to break with tradition, the marriage takes place and Uaná, heartbroken, leaves for Bissau, where he will study, work and develop his political thinking to free langará, because “como filha da selva, seu destino seria decidido pela celebração do casamento de dote, apesar de nas terras onde predomina a lei moderna não [ser] assim. A mulher pode escolher o marido” (Ferreira 1986: 43). Kapeli, a relative of langará living in the city of Bissau, “pessoa assimilada à formas de vida civilizada, reconhecia que a situação da mulher sujeita ao direito tradicional na Guiné deixava muito a desejar” (Ferreira 1986: 44). The Pecixe tribe does not allow women freedom, condemning children and young people to early and forced marriages, which makes any prospect of development impossible:

[Kapeli afirma que] A tribo não entende isto. Mas terá de libertar a mulher para que a Guiné possa entrar em seu desenvolvimento social (...) A gente cresce e depois lembra o que fizeram injustamente connosco. Não podemos deixar de nos revoltar (Ferreira 1986: 45).

This is not a case of propaganda for Western civilising policies, but rather a denunciation of cultural practices, such as forced marriage, which violate human dignity, especially that of women. It should be emphasised, and strangely enough never mentioned by critics, that Guinean women play a central role in the narrative and in the process of resistance and construction of a free society. More than creating a Guinean national hero, Uaná, João Ferreira honoured langará and all Guinean women; the author made her Queen of Utanca, 'semideusa, heróina de Utanca' (Ferreira, 1986: 141), of the community that Uaná founded and ruled with her and which gave rise to independent Guinea. Throughout the narrative, there is evidence that female emancipation, in the figure of langará, is part of the idealisation of Utanca. This is the main point of the work: without the liberation of women, there can be no Guinean society.

It is possible to corroborate Augel's (1999) analysis when she states that Ferreira's vision is exogenous. However, it is not possible to agree with the author when she states that the text reveals "uma aceitação da ação 'civilizatória' portuguesa no mundo" (1999: 28). On the contrary, this work, in defending human dignity, cannot be colonialist, nor can it be seen as defending Portuguese colonization. It is undeniable, based on the evidence presented below, that João Ferreira shares the political premises conveyed by Amílcar Cabral, which, in the narrative, appear as a backdrop and beacon in the struggles for liberation.

In *Uaná – narrativa africana*, with regard to African women, there are lines of thought and values that intersect with Cabral's political ideals. Among the aspects that the politician considered negative and transformable were some so-called "traditional" practices such as early or forced marriage (as depicted in the novel), female circumcision and inequalities in civil rights. Cabral's political perspective on Guinean women is present in a handwritten document entitled *As Mulheres – na frente da nossa vida e da nossa luta!*, deposited in the archives of the Mário Soares Foundation. Consider the following excerpt:

apesar da importância da mulher na vida dos povos africanos, só raramente ela toma parte activa nas questões políticas. Modesta sem dar mostras de ter consciência do seu valor e da sua força dentro da sociedade, a mulher africana é mantida afastada dos assuntos políticos, das questões de mando, das decisões que dizem respeito à vida que, afinal ela alimenta com o seu trabalho de todos os dias. Em alguns casos mesmo, provavelmente nas sociedades africanas muito influenciadas por costumes de outros meios, a mulher vive numa situação de inferioridade em relação aos homens, chegando

mesmo a ser tratada como propriedade do pai ou do marido. (...) Nós estamos a lutar pela independência nacional e pelo progresso da nossa terra, pela sua dignidade. Não há independência nacional, nem progresso, nem dignidade, se estas coisas não forem também para as mulheres, para todas as mulheres da nossa terra (Cabral s/d).

In the fictional narrative, through the voice of Mr. Macedo, a renowned lawyer in the city of Bissau (perhaps João Ferreira's alter ego), the author presents his views and values regarding the education of Guinean women in the episode that marks the beginning of the struggle to free langará from her marriage to the old Kabiar. These ideas run throughout the narrative until the end:

Você [Uaná] vá até Pecixe (...). Diga a langará que a tribo infelizmente não tem alternativas. Mas que não fique triste. Virá um dia em que os direitos se afirmarão com justiça. Não esqueça Uaná, de frequentar a escola. É bom cultivar a inteligência para se pensar melhor. Eu acho que quando a mulher negra for mais instruída e educada, ela ganhará outros direitos. Implantará, com sua nova personalidade, as exigências da sua dignidade feminina. Com a mulher, toda a sociedade negra se transformará. Estude, meu rapaz (Ferreira, 1986: 47).

He adds later, in a fierce criticism of both the "modern law" of "civilisation" and the "common law" of the tribe, that what matters is freedom and the right to choose:

Há outra coisa, disse o doutor. Eu admiro tremendamente o vosso sistema de abandono à natureza, sem os defeitos da nossa civilização industrial. Esse abandono desconhece nossas angústias, nossos medos, nossas psicoses. Pagamos cara a civilização. Por outro lado, a tribo abafa o indivíduo e seus direitos, reduzindo-o ao esquema do grupo. É necessário proporcionar ao homem africano o direito de escolher o amor e proporcionar à mulher o direito de escolher o marido. Isto é o princípio básico da sociedade humana. Como é básico trabalhar pela elevação da mulher na sociedade. A tribo terá de rever seu processo. E também suas ideias sobre o papel da mulher. Uma coisa me ensinou a vida em África: uma sociedade evolui na medida em que ela faz evoluir a mulher. Uma sociedade com a mulher amarrada na escravidão, é sociedade escrava (Ferreira, 1986: 59).

From the fifth chapter to the end, the construction of the female figure runs parallel to the formation of the national hero, always highlighting the importance of women's education. In *Uaná*, langará represents the idealisation of a society where women live freely and, in this case, on an equal footing with the national hero. Within the decolonial framework of the novel, the character langará emerges as the embodiment of resistance against the colonality of being and of gender. Far from occupying a peripheral role, langará personifies the struggle for female dignity by simultaneously confronting the oppression of the colonial system and the burden of repressive traditional structures, such as forced marriage and the practice of bride price.

Through the centrality of this character, João Ferreira articulates a form of decoloniality that is not limited to the political liberation of the territory, but extends to the emancipation of the subjectivity and the body of the Guinean woman.

By endowing langará with a critical consciousness nurtured by education and the cultivation of intellect, the author symbolically “crowns” all women of Guinea-Bissau, elevating the “heroine of Utanca” to a symbol of autonomy that challenges the historical silencing imposed both by traditional patriarchy and by the colonial gaze. It is precisely langará’s transformative protagonism that makes it possible to contest the label of “colonial literature” attributed to the novel, revealing instead a narrative of resistance that places women’s liberation at the very heart of the construction of national memory and identity.

The following passages from the text are particularly relevant for understanding the development of langará’s critical consciousness and the gradual assertion of her autonomy, as well as the way in which this evolution results in a break with traditional structures of subordination and the formulation of an ethical and political vision for the organisation of the Utanca community. These quotations allow us to observe, in a coherent manner, the transition from individual awareness to transformative action and, ultimately, to the projection of an alternative model of society.

Para completar o drama, langará estava informada através de algumas companheiras da escola de Injante que nas terras onde predomina a lei moderna não é assim. A mulher pode escolher o marido (Ferreira, 1986, p. 44).

– Chega – clamou , gritando. Não agüento. Uma vida assim, eu não posso viver. Vou para casa de meu pai, de onde vim. Fique com seus bonecos de madeira e com sua cachaça. Sou uma mulher nova e não mereço ser tratada assim. Você não é um homem. Você é um morcego, um rato afogado. (Ferreira, 1986, p. 72)

langará ia sendo uma espécie de salvadora pública. Acumularia as funções de professora, de assistente social e de enfermeira, numa zona onde o pessoal qualificado faltava. De todos os lados os problemas chegavam até langará e ela sabia canalizar a popularidade para firmar sua liderança (Ferreira, 1986, pp. 115-116).

langará se preocupava em acentuar que Utanca deveria ter um cunho civilizado. Que a comunidade teria de banir as violências do seqüestro, do roubo, do assassinato e do estupro. Utanca teria de se basear numa lei: a fraternidade, a paz e a justiça (Ferreira, 1986, p. 123).

In summary, it is worth highlighting the strong indications of denunciation of both the colonial system and the traditional system by which tribal societies are governed. Heir to a religious and philosophical upbringing, João Ferreira presents, in an innovative way, a novel of resistance and struggle for human dignity, thus

contributing to the common memory of the colonial past, to knowledge of traditional Guinean culture, but above all to the defence of the rights and freedom of Guinean women. To consign this work to oblivion, to render it invisible or ignore it in the field of African cultural studies is to renounce the debate on issues that are still relevant in contemporary Guinea-Bissau, such as forced and early marriage. Under the backdrop of liberation struggles, the work demonstrates that the construction of female identity should not be dictated by tradition or predestined to subordination but can be constructed and transformed throughout life through education and knowledge. While creating a Guinean national hero (Uaná) in the liberation struggles, João Ferreira, through the figure of langará, “crowned” all Guinean women.

4. The Decolonial Attitude in *Uaná* — *narrativa africana*

The trajectory of langará in the work *Uaná* constitutes the centre of the tension between political liberation and human emancipation. By analysing the evolution of langará from a traditional “objeto de troca” to the “heroína de Utanca”, one observes an idea that challenges not only Portuguese colonial domination but also the very pattern of power, which privileges the male figure.

At the beginning of the narrative, langará is presented under the yoke of Manjaco tradition, where her fate is shaped by “casamento de dote”. In this context, the woman is reduced to a purely transactional function, being described by João Ferreira as a “valor político de prestação. Nada mais” (Ferreira, 1986, p. 160). langará, sensing that the tribe would not free her from the “obrigação de seguir a lei comum” (Ferreira, 1986, p. 159), initiates a movement of escape which is, in itself, the first gesture of epistemic disobedience. Her attendance at the Bor Boarding School, although mediated by the paternalism of Dr Macedo – who saw the “elevação da mulher” as a stage of “civilização industrial” (Ferreira, 1986, p. 167) –, allows her to acquire technical tools that will later be subverted in the armed struggle. It is in the founding of the “aldeia-catacumba” of Utanca that langará becomes a central subject. There, she ceases to be the pupil of the “papai branco” and assumes vital functions with autonomy: “Acumularia as funções de professora, de assistente social e de enfermeira, numa zona onde o pessoal qualificado faltava” (Ferreira, 1986, p. 116).

This prominence in Utanca is what is classified as “decolonialidade materialista” (Cahen, 2025, pp. 151–153), as it focuses on the reorganisation of social life through local autonomies that break with exploitative logic. langará becomes a “espécie de salvadora pública” (Ferreira, 1986, p. 115), whose leadership is recognised by Amílcar Cabral himself, who praised the “recentes iniciativas escolares e assistenciais” for bringing a “nova dinamização à nossa causa” (Ferreira, 1986, p. 116).

By assuming leadership in education and healthcare within the guerrilla movement, langará challenges the historical animalisation of colonised women, who were often excluded from the category of the “human”. Rather than being a commodity between lineages, she becomes the “*deusa de beleza, de amor e de fecundidade*” that sustains the morale of the new nation (Ferreira, 1986, p. 141). The protagonist role of women in Uaná is not an ornament of the anti-colonial struggle, but its most transformative aspect. langará breaks away from the categories that oppressed her, whether from traditional law or from the colonial system, proving that the construction of a free Guinea-Bissau necessarily requires that women cease being objects of exchange and instead become the architects of the new social order in Utanca.

João Ferreira’s decolonial stance, as manifested in the novel *Uaná – narrativa africana*, is grounded in an ethical-political commitment aimed at rendering visible Guinean resistance and the dignity of its people. Positioning himself from a complex and markedly self-critical locus of enunciation, the author — although born in Portugal — assumes a “Luso-Afro-Brazilian” identity. It is from this plurality of identities that Ferreira sets out to interpret the Black reality of the colonial period, driven by an imperative of “truth and affection”.

This posture is translated, first and foremost, into a strategy of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo & Walsh 2018), that is, a rupture with the rules of knowledge imposed by colonial logic. When writing the novel between 1963 and 1965, Ferreira deliberately opts for the “prism of fiction” as a means of circumventing the suffocating censorship and political repression of the time. In this way, literary narrative emerges not merely as an aesthetic choice, but as a necessary vehicle for recording the memory of the liberation struggles, allowing socio-political reflection to survive under the mantle of fabulation.

In tune with Mignolo & Walsh’s (2018: 17) perspectives on decolonial attitudes, the author João Ferreira reveals an ontological openness by adopting the perspective of the “Other”. By centring the plot on the subjectivity and the “African personality” of the protagonist, Ferreira relinquishes a Eurocentric and detached gaze. For the author, his European origin does not constitute an impediment to understanding local essence; on the contrary, writing serves the greater purpose of affirming Guinea in its heroic and sovereign dimension.

The novel articulates a direct critique of the colonality of knowledge, a central concept in the work of Aníbal Quijano. The Peruvian sociologist explains that colonialism imposed European knowledge as the sole universal and valid form, dismissing local knowledges as inferior or non-existent (Mignolo & Walsh 2018: 113-114). Through Uaná’s lived experiences, Ferreira denounces the colonial educational system, pointing to the alien nature of school textbooks produced in the metropolis as a fundamental instrument for the political alienation of African youth. By ignoring the

reality of Africa in favour of the metropolis, the colonial education system prevented young people (both men and women) from developing a critical awareness of their own territory and political situation. In Uaná's words,

Havia um senão. Quanto aos livros de classe mais tarde me apercebi de que eram feitos em Portugal e os textos elaborados dentro do padrão europeu. Não falavam do típico das nossas culturas negras da Guiné. Isso quebrava-me o entusiasmo e tornava-me difícil a aprendizagem. Muitas coisas eram para nós, negros, demasiado distantes. Nomes diferentes, realidades diferentes, que nos impediam a análise imediata, devido à distância da realidade descrita ou falada. Tínhamos em grande relevo o mapa de Portugal na sala de aula, e só depois ganhamos o da Guiné. Para os colonialistas pareciam pormenores sem importância. Para uma escola da terra, estas falhas eram primordiais para a educação e para a consciência política da criança e do jovem (Ferreira, 1986: 70).

This analysis converges directly with the thought of Amílcar Cabral, explicitly invoked as an inspiration for an independentist idealism. Cabral's influence is evident in the defence of a decolonisation that is not merely territorial, but also mental and social, advocating the elevation of women and a rupture with all forms of oppression, whether imposed by the coloniser or inherited from tradition.

Finally, the utopian dimension of the novel takes shape in Utanca, the "catacomb-republic". This symbolic space projects a model of society that pursues its own path of self-determination, immune to colonialist paternalism. By imagining this possibility of existence, Ferreira displaces Western rationality from its centre, proposing Utanca as a horizon where dignity and autonomy are possible.

João Ferreira refuses the condition of a mere exotic observer and instead assumes himself as a voice of resistance. His writing does not limit itself to paying homage to African land; it constitutes a legacy of reflection for new generations, offering them the critical tools necessary to understand their own history and the values that underpin their freedom.

5. Final notes

The analysis developed here has led to the conclusion that classifying *Uaná – narrativa africana* as mere "colonial literature" or "colonialist propaganda" is, in itself, a manifestation of the colonality of knowledge. By applying the theoretical lenses of Mignolo e Walsh (2018), it becomes evident that João Ferreira's novel transcends the simplistic dichotomy of coloniser versus colonised, positioning itself instead within a space of resistance that privileges human dignity and the emancipation of subjectivities.

The canonical view is contested by demonstrating that Ferreira does not use narrative to reinforce imperial superiority, but rather to construct an epistemology of liberation. Through the figure of Uaná, the author projects a national hero aligned with the spirit of Guinean resistance; however, it is in the character of langará that Ferreira's decolonial stance reaches its highest expression. By elevating the Guinean woman to the status of a "demigoddess" and by defending education as a tool against oppression — both colonial and traditional —, the author enacts a rupture with the coloniality of being. langará is not merely a literary heroine; she is the symbol of a "coronation" of all women of Guinea-Bissau, whose identity and autonomy cease to be predestined for subordination.

Finally, if *Uaná – narrativa africana* does not fit into African/Guinean culture and literature, as some authors consider, at the same time the novel should not be consigned to oblivion or classified as "colonial literature" or colonialist propaganda, a classification that deprives it of the multiple possibilities of looking at the common colonial past between Portugal and Guinea-Bissau.

Uaná is characterised as a transitional work in that it brings together four fundamental dimensions of Guinean history: it expresses the colonial dimension by denouncing the alienating education system and the repression of the PIDE during the colonial period; it adopts an anti-colonial stance by documenting Uaná's adherence to the armed struggle and political militancy under the direct inspiration of Amílcar Cabral; it projects itself as post-colonial in its narrative framework, being set during the independence celebrations in Madina do Boé and reflecting on the youth of the new nation after the declaration of autonomy by the UN; and, in a pioneering way, it reveals a decolonial attitude through the founding of Utanca, a citadel of resistance where an autonomous social reorganisation is trialled, and where langará's central role enables a delinking from categories of subalternity, making her the architect of her own history.

Therefore, this narrative deserves to be revisited not as an artefact of empire, but as a contribution to postcolonial and decolonial studies, and to the construction of Guinea-Bissau's national memory. To ignore its value under reductive labels is to squander the opportunity to understand the complexity of the struggle for freedom on all its fronts: political, social, and, fundamentally, human.

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