



**A *Luta Continua*: entangled  
histories of Southern Africa four  
decades on**

Caio Simões de Araújo\*

2015 marks four decades since Mozambique and Angola declared independence from Portuguese colonial rule, on June and November of 1975, respectively. Naturally, these events are most remembered as a foundational turning point in the national trajectories of these countries, as moments of both end and inception. On the one hand, the end of more than four centuries of servitude and oppression under multiple forms of foreign intervention and control. On the other, the inception of a national society and new polity. Transfers of power from retreating European empires to authorized liberation movements have often been regarded as the goal and endpoint of decolonization as a worldwide historical process<sup>1</sup>. Everywhere, from Asia to Africa, the world coming out of the decolonizing moment was, or was thought to be, one of neatly bounded and sovereign nation-states.

At the time when postcolonial states were coming into being, these entangled narratives of rupture with the colonial past and commitment to a national future were appealing to many, if not simply politically necessary. Now, four decades on, they no longer seem so solid or unproblematic (if they have ever been). The postcolonial turn in theory and in historiography has encouraged historians of empire and of the Global South to question the disciplinary paradigms around which their master narratives have been written. This includes, of course, the popular tale of decolonization as a clear-cut transition from empire to the nation-state. Everywhere, historians have found that ending empire was a messy affair, subject to political design as much as to historical contingency. Here, the nation-state is no longer a self-evident endpoint, but one amongst many ways of imagining the future, such as regionalisms and internationalisms of various kinds. Moreover, recent scholarship has complicated our cartographies of national liberation by emphasizing the networks, alliances, and circuits cutting across metropolises and colonies alike. Perhaps nowhere this depth of experience is made so visible as in the motto of the Mozambican revolution: *a luta continua*. Attributed to the anti-colonial leader Samora Machel, *the struggles continues* was a nationalist anthem. In the context of the war of liberation, it appealed to a sense of resistance in face of increasing hardship and violence. After 1975, the phrase was a powerful reminder that independence was not a comfortable endpoint, but rather a moment from which to follow yet unfulfilled aspirations, such as national unity and social equality. But



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its uses were not restricted within Mozambican borders. From the United States to Cuba, these words travelled. They spoke to African Americans struggling for racial equality at home, and to socialists everywhere hoping to witness a global revolution. Arguably, it was in Southern Africa that the phrase resonated the most. In the original Portuguese version or in its English translation, *a luta continua* came to represent transnational solidarities against histories of oppression: settler colonialism, white minority rule, and apartheid.

Here, I take *a luta continua* as a pretext to engage with the historical problem of decolonization in Southern Africa. Four decades on, in my view this moment of celebration can be an opportunity to rethink and reposition the histories of Angola and Mozambique beyond imperial and nationalist framings. While my point of reference is the sub-regional dimension, I do not intend to claim that this is the most historically relevant or accurate way of rearranging these pasts. Then and now, Southern Africa is just one of the several political geographies on which Angola and Mozambique are embedded. My aim here is merely to point out that this “regional lens” may shed some light on histories and trajectories that have been so far overshadowed by visions of decolonization centered on the empire or on the nation alone. That the latter perspectives have been dominant in the historiography is particularly surprising if we consider how prominent were regional circumstances in shaping trajectories of colonialism, liberation and postcoloniality in these countries. For when Samora Machel died in the plane crash that to this day remains a mystery,<sup>ii</sup> his wife Graça Machel, in a letter to Winnie and Nelson Mandela, stated that the fall of apartheid would be the greatest tribute to the memory of her husband.<sup>iii</sup> This gesture of recognition was by no means exceptional. It is illustrative, however, of a sense of regional connectedness. How did this come into being and to what ends? Two areas of inquiry are particularly promising in this regard: histories of regional mobility and entangled histories of decolonization.

### Regional mobilities and Entangled liberations

In 2014, South Africa instituted a new immigration rule. Citizens coming from neighboring countries would be required to carry at least 3.000 Rands (the equivalent of 300 US Dollars) to be allowed into the country. In the popular border of Ressano Garcia (connecting Johannesburg and Maputo), Mozambicans who had their right of entry denied effectively shut down the border post, by impeding movement in both directions. In face of popular protest, the new requirement was soon abandoned, and people could return to their business as usual.<sup>iv</sup> I heard this story from Mozambicans who were generally resentful of South Africa’s restrictive stance. This was unfair, I was told, particularly if we remember the long history of labor migration beyond the border, and especially to the gold mines of the Transvaal. Another common claim was that “South Africa was built by Mozambican labor.” I do not wish to corroborate or to dispute the historical soundness of these statements, even though the literature at our disposal suggests that regional labor migrations have



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been profuse and economically significant enough to shape virtually all societies and cultures in the area.<sup>v</sup> Rather, I am retelling this story here to illustrate how a history of migration is mobilized, in the present, against state-sanctioned restrictions to people's mobility.

Concerns over people's ability to move, migrate or settle have been at the core of the modern state form both in Europe and in the colonial world. In Southern Africa, these issues have been mostly written about in relation to the mechanisms of control and channeling of the African labor force to European-dominated enterprises. Mineral extraction and agricultural production in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, to cite the most prominent examples, absorbed a substantial portion of Mozambican (and, in a lesser extent, Angolan) labor throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But we know relatively less about those people who migrated illegally, off the official grid. These included Africans trying to evade the tentacles of the colonial state but also single white women in search of a more independent life or poor whites seeking better economic opportunities. Indeed, up until the early 1950s, Portuguese peasants, often coming from the impoverished Madeira Island, used Mozambique as a gateway into South Africa.<sup>vi</sup> Regional tourism in all directions was another powerful pathway of human mobility that has been commonly overlooked. In the early 1970s, tourism from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia to Mozambique was an important industry and source of state revenue.<sup>vii</sup> Soldiers and military operations, too, might have travelled more across the border than we earlier thought. Historians are still uncovering the regional specifics of the liberation wars, including the secret military alliance between white regimes, brought to light by sources recently made available.<sup>viii</sup>

On the other side of the colonial divide, exchange between anti-colonial and anti-apartheid actors in several Southern African locations persisted throughout the years of struggle, before and after 1975. But if, in preceding years, capital, laborers, tourists, and soldiers had travelled at relative ease between white minority ruled spaces, Portugal's imperial withdrawal from Southern Africa had a considerable impact on the region's map of connectivity. The emergence of two independent states at the borders of apartheid South Africa catalyzed the rise of a (more or less coherent) group of African states committed to exert diplomatic pressure against white rule in the region, the *Frontline States* (FLS), which included Botswana, Angola, Mozambique, Lesotho, Tanzania, Zambia, and, later, Zimbabwe.<sup>ix</sup> In the aftermath of independence, Angola and Mozambique were inviting to freedom fighters from the region (and beyond). A notorious case is that of Jacob Zuma, current president of South Africa, who found political refuge in Maputo as a representative of the ANC until 1987.<sup>x</sup>

Zuma's time in Mozambique made news earlier this year, in the aftermath of the violent xenophobic attacks that shook Kwazulu-Natal and Gauteng and displaced thousands of immigrants. Two Mozambicans were killed in Durban and many were abused.





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In a response to this situation, the acclaimed Mozambican writer Mia Couto published an open letter to President Zuma in *The Daily Maverick*, a member of *The Guardian Africa* network. Couto mentioned Zuma's presence in Maputo as a point of entry into the many historical and political ties between the two countries. Recalling that "Mozambique [had] paid a high price for the support we gave to the liberation of South Africa," Couto pointed out that "when apartheid fell, our festivities were the same, on either side of the border." Now, he concluded, his fellow countrymen were suffering the same kind of atrocities and violence the apartheid state had inflicted on freedom fighters before 1994.<sup>xi</sup> Couto's words were powerful enough to incite Zuma to respond. In a letter published in *The Guardian* only one week later, the president claimed that xenophobia was not a widespread sensibility in the country, but was rather propagated by a small minority. He recognized the role of immigrants in building South African society and economy, and he stressed the historical bonds between his country and Mozambique. Bonds based on memories of "our living together, our working together, and our fighting together against colonialism and apartheid."<sup>xii</sup> It is indeed remarkable how both letters resorted to a shared, entangled, history of liberation to support national claims in the present. To Couto, South Africa's responsibility to zeal for the safety of Mozambican citizens was predicated on a sense of historical debt. To Zuma, the memory of shared struggle served to defend the post-apartheid project as one of commitment to human rights and non-discrimination (including based on nationality). For both, liberation is not a finished business, well rested in the past.

### Entangled histories as a needed exercise

In October 1975, South African troops invaded Southern Angola, in a move intended to undermine the independent government newly formed under the MPLA. Following a wave of strong international criticism, South Africa withdrew in March 1976. But it did not back down from its Southern African military campaign. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, apartheid's aggression, including periodic invasions and political assassinations in neighboring countries, was perhaps the most emblematic proof that decolonization was not complete until white minority rule, as regional reality, was abolished. In the aftermath of another invasion of Angola in 1981, the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) held several public meetings, many of which were attended by prominent activists from the region, such as ANC President Oliver Tambo and Armando Guebuza (who was later elected the 3<sup>rd</sup> president of Mozambique, from 2005 to 2015).<sup>xiii</sup> Similar solidarity actions took place elsewhere around the world. To me, these scattered, yet strongly connected, events are a testimony that the politics of liberation took place within Southern Africa as well as elsewhere (in very different ways and with very different implications for the people involved, of course). Yet, they tell us of a particular sense of historical connectedness. This is important because one of the legacies of decolonization – everywhere – is that we are left with many self-contained histories that ultimately reify the idea of the nation-



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state (and its trajectory of liberation) as a bounded, discrete, reality. The moments of interdependence, that is, the historical entanglements, are forgotten. As scholars and social actors alike have come to the realization that perhaps the most revolutionary promises of independence remain unfulfilled, it might be fruitful to revisit decolonization as a moment of endless possibility. This might help us better understand the many closures and exclusions that followed, in historical writing and beyond. To me, some of these issues resonate in our present as strongly as ever. Take the case of Luaty Beirão, an Angolan activist arrested for nothing more than exercising his constitutional right of public assembly. He has recently gained prominence for carrying out, from jail, a hunger strike for 36 days. Beirão's plight received overwhelming international support (including condemnations of human rights abuse implied in his imprisonment) by the International Federation for Human Rights, the Amnesty International, and leftist groups in the Portuguese parliament. In what can only be considered a historical irony, an Angolan politician played the anti-colonial card, by saying the country was no longer a "slave" to Portugal and that the arrest of citizens was a prerogative of state sovereignty, thus immune to international criticism.<sup>xiv</sup> For us, historians and students of decolonization, these arguments are all too familiar. But in the past they had served to support and justify repressive measures of colonial and apartheid states against their political antagonists. Four decades on, for Beirão and his fellow activists, *a luta continua*.<sup>xv</sup>

\* Caio Simões de Araújo, PhD Candidate, IHEID



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<sup>i</sup> Signed on 15 January 1975, the Alvor Agreement granted independence to Angola, to come to fruition on November 11. It was signed by the Portuguese government and the three main anti-colonial movements in Angola: the People's Movement for the

<sup>ii</sup> Machel died in 1986, in a plane crash whose political and suspicious circumstances have incited a great degree of questioning, investigation and speculation. See: "Events leading to Samora Machel's plane crash". *South African History Online*, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/events-leading-samora-machels-plane-crash> (Last accessed on 28-10-2015).

<sup>iii</sup> Christie, I. (1988). *Machel of Mozambique*. Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, p.

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<sup>iv</sup> "New border demands take Mozambican and South African authorities by surprise," *The Club of Mozambique*, 08-08-2014.

<http://clubofmozambique.com/solutions1/sectionnews.php?secao=mozambique&id=2147483843&tipo=one> (Last accessed on 28-10-2015).

<sup>v</sup> Harries, P. (1994). *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, c. 1860-1910*. London: James Currey. Crush, J., Jeeves, A. and Yudelman, D. (1991). *South Africa's Labour Empire: a history of black migrancy to the gold mines*. San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press.

<sup>vi</sup> Glaser, C. (2013). "White But Illegal: undocumented Madeiran Immigration to South Africa, 1920s-1970s", *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 31(3), pp. 74-98. Macdonald, A. (2012). "Colonial Trespassers in the Making of South Africa's International Borders 1900 to c. 1950". PhD Dissertation submitted to St. John's College, University of Cambridge.

<sup>vii</sup> Azevedo, M. J. (1980). "'A Sober Commitment to Liberation?' Mozambique and South Africa 1974-1979", *African Affairs*, 79(317), pp. 567-584.

<sup>viii</sup> Illustrative examples of recent attempts in these direction are: Afonso, A. and Matos Gomes, C. (2013). *Alcora: o Acordo Secreto do Colonialismo*. Lisboa: Divina Comédia. de Meneses, F. R. and McNamara, R. (2014). "Exercise ALCORA: Expansion and Demise, 1971-4", *International History Review*, 36(1), pp. 89-111. Meneses, M. P. and Martins, B. S. (2013) (Org.) *As Guerras de Libertação e os Sonhos Coloniais: alianças secretas, mapas imaginados*. Coimbra: Almedina.

<sup>ix</sup> Anglin, D. G. (1988), "Southern African under Siege: options for the Frontline States", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26(4), pp. 549-565. Omari, A. H. (1992). "The rise and decline of the Front Line States (FLS) Alliance in Southern Africa, 1975-1990". PhD dissertation submitted to the Dalhousie University.

<sup>x</sup> For more on the ANC in Mozambique, see: Manghezi, N (2009). *The Maputo Connection: ANC Life in the world of Frelimo*. Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana.

<sup>xi</sup> "Dear President Zuma: a letter from Mozambican writer Mia Couto," *The Daily Maverick*, 20-04-2015: <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-04-20-dear-president-zuma-a-letter-from-mozambican-writer-mia-couto/#.Vio4-qQriGh> (Last accessed on 28-10-2015).

<sup>xii</sup> "South Africa is not a xenophobic country: a letter from Jacob Zuma," *The Guardian*, 28-04-2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/28/south-africa-is-not-a-xenophobic-nation-a-letter-from-jacob-zuma> (Last accessed on 28-10-2015).

<sup>xiii</sup> A list of several of the activities of the AAM on Southern Africa during the 1970s and 1980s can be found here: <http://www.aamarchives.org/file-view/category/25-front-line-states.html> (Las accessed on 28-10-2015).





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<sup>xiv</sup> For the statement by Amnesty International: “Luaty Beirão and 14 other young Angolan activists were arrested for meeting to discuss democracy”: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/demand-release-of-luaty-beirao-and-angola15/> (Last accessed on 28-10-2015). The appeal by the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders can be found here: <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/angola/angola-arbitrary-arrest-and-detention-of-thirteen-members-of-the> (Last accessed on 28-10-2015). On the statement of the leader of the MPLA: <http://www.dn.pt/portugal/interior/general-avisa-que-pais-ja-nao-e-escravo-de-portugal--4855782.html> (Last Accessed on 28-10-2015)

<sup>xv</sup> Their struggle continues in a literal sense. As this article was concluded, Beirão and 16 other Angolan activists are being prosecuted in Luanda, accused of plotting a rebellion against the current president.