

Article

Imagining revenge: the adoption of violence by *Mayombe*'s fighters¹

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Whether he is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist, or a novelist, whether he speaks only of individual passions or whether he attacks the social order, the writer, a free man addressing free men, has only a single subject – freedom.

Jean-Paul Sartre (cited in Jinadu 1986:136)

So the survivors stayed.
And the earth and the sky stayed.
Everything took the blame.

Not a leaf flinched, nobody smiled.

Ted Hughes, from 'Crow's Account of the Battle' (1972)

While the exact origins of the armed resistance to Portuguese colonial rule in Angola are uncertain, the mythology of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) has it that the armed resistance began as follows: on the night of February 3, 1961, fighters of the MPLA attacked a Portuguese colonial army base and two prisons in which their members were being incarcerated prior to being shipped to Portugal for long term imprisonment (van der Waals 1993:58, Chabal et al 2002:6). What followed was an anti-colonial war that was to see three nationalist movements – the MPLA, the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA) and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) – fight a guerrilla war against the Portuguese Colonial forces that was only to end with the fall of the Salazar-Caetano regime in Portugal, in April 1974 (van der Waals 1993:250, Chabal et al 2002:3, Birmingham 2002:141). What is certain about the night of February 3, 1961, however, is that over and above the intended freeing of the MPLA members the attack was intended as a first blow in a war to end 500 years of brutal Portuguese colonisation.

Such a view, however, overlooks one vital aspect of the anti-colonial war in Angola, or for that matter any armed conflict. At some stage prior to the first shots being fired, the members of the MPLA who attacked the prisons had to accept that they were about to adopt extreme violence to further the cause of an Angola free of colonial rule. Why, in this case, did the decision to adopt violence take place, or for that matter, why did any of the many African colonies that ended colonial rule through violence choose this approach and not a pacifist one? Perhaps the most detailed attempt to answer this question was provided by the Martiniquan/Algerian theorist Franz Fanon.

Geertsema (2004:749) says of Franz Fanon that he ‘played a significant role in the Algerian revolution of the 1950s and 1960s and produced highly influential theorisations of it, as well as of black identity and decolonisation more generally’. To others, he has come to be ‘regarded as a prophet of violence following Hanna Arendt’s claim that his influence was mainly responsible for growing violence on American campuses in the 1960s’ (Mamdani 2002:5). Regardless of how one feels about the specifics of his work, it cannot be denied that Fanon’s theories have become a cornerstone of post-colonial theory (Parry 2001).

In his *The Wretched of the Earth*, first published in 1963, Fanon describes how the colonial state ‘is violence in its natural state, and will only yield when confronted with greater violence’ (Fanon 2001:48). This reasoning he attributes to the Manichean nature of Western colonial thought, as in his view, the ‘native’ had been ruled by a people who saw ‘him’ as no more than an unreasoning savage who would only respond to the violence that ‘he’ was seen by the coloniser to embody. He posits therefore that:

... [t]he existence of an armed struggle shows that the people are decided to trust to violent methods only. He of whom *they* have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free. (Fanon 2001:66)

The ultimate aim of this violence is a free ‘life’, which Fanon adds ‘can only spring up again out of the rotting corpses of the settler’ (Fanon 2001:72). What form this ‘life’ will take is expressed through an extended Marxist ideal of a utopia where all members are bound to its prosperity through ‘the work of violence’ (Fanon 2001:73). Any and all partisan or personal thought is subsumed by nationalist thought through the ‘mobilization of the masses, [which] when it arises out of the war of

liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history' (Fanon 2001:73).

However, this 'work of violence' would have, in Fanon's view, not only the practical result of destroying the physical and social structures of colonialism while creating solidarity amongst those involved in the fight for freedom, it would also have moral justification and reason through its restoration of the 'native's' humanity. This would be a humanity that has been denied through the 'settler's' application of a violence morally justified by a Manichean understanding of the 'native' as being without humanity. This Fanon terms 'an ironic turning of the tables [as] it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force' (Fanon 2001:66). For Fanon then, the native's willingness to apply force, as enacted through the violent resistance of colonialism, is proof that,

... [at] the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self respect. (Fanon 2001:74)

This notion of violence as a 'cleansing force', or as Emile Capouya (1992:743) puts it, 'that killing [the] colonialist is mental hygiene for the colonized' has, however, become the rallying point of Fanon's critics. This is illustrated by the following statement by one such critic, B Marie Perinbam:

[Fanon] associated violence with powers capable of changing people and societies for the better. He did not specify the nature of this power. He simply stated its impact on the minds and lives of the Algerian people who were committed to the nationalist struggle. Thus when he claimed that violence ... 'detoxifies' by eliminating feelings of inferiority ... he was citing the impact without identifying the process of the power behind it. He never did. (1982:8)²

While he may never have 'specif[ied] the nature of this power' Fanon certainly did comment extensively on the moment of its enactment. The moment of 'detoxification' is viewed, by Fanon, to be akin to a moment of catharsis in which the 'alienation' (Fanon 2001:45) experienced by the native is replaced by the experience of his humanity through the 'restor[ation of] his self respect' (Fanon 2001:74). I will argue, however, that as it is presented in Pepetela's *Mayombe* (1986), this moment can also be viewed as one of *intoxification*, a moment in which the colonised experiences the power of agency through violence in a manner that is more corporeal than Fanon's cerebral experience of the returning of humanity and subjectivity. It can be

read as a moment of pleasure, an *intoxification of agency*, formed through the enactment of violence, by the colonised, on the body of the coloniser and is ultimately an act that brings with it the pleasure of revenge. I argue too, that as Pepetela presents it, this moment is a deeply problematic one, one that is more than just the coming together of the conscious decision to follow the revolutionary teachings of Marx and the need for catharsis or revenge, but one that has an ambiguity unaccounted for by Fanon. To illustrate this point I shall now turn to a text set in what the MPLA terms the first liberation, or anti-colonial, war of the country with which I began this paper, Angola.

The text is Pepetela's *Mayombe* (1986). This novel was written in the early 1970s while Pepetela – nom de guerre of Artur Carlos Maurício Pestana dos Santos – was actively involved as both a teacher and combatant in the MPLA during its campaign in the Cabinda region, an enclave separated from the rest of Angola by what were then Zaire and Congo (Hamilton 1993:266). It tells of a group of MPLA fighters as they live and fight against Portuguese colonial forces in the dense forest of Mayombe, from which the novel takes its name. To do so Pepetela makes use of a 'straightforward narrative' (Chabal 1996:118) in his dealings with the day-to-day struggles, activities and events of the group, but punctuates this narrative with 'internal narratives' (Chabal 1996:118) as narrated by individual members of the group.

In this way Pepetela is able to make the novel operate on two levels. On one level it is a fictional account of the activities of a group of MPLA fighters, while on the other it works to imagine and represent the individual fighters' responses to those activities. These imaginings are not, however, limited to the characters' responses. As with the 'straightforward narrative', Pepetela uses the internal narratives to expose and discuss a large number of issues pertaining to Marxist ideology and its practice in an Angola that is deeply segregated on political, ethnic and racial lines: an Angola that is, in fact, a nation in name only. The novel thus becomes what Peres (2002:72) terms 'a type of collective testimonial of the revolutionary struggle' for Angola, and it is precisely with this view in mind that I shall begin my reading of it.

The following is taken from a moment in the novel shortly after an attack on a group of forestry workers supervised by a white Portuguese man. The narration is taken over by Miracle – a 'bazooka-man' who has just used his bazooka to destroy a bulldozer that was being used by the foresters:

I love to see trucks laden with troops halted by my marksmanship. I think there can be not greater pleasure in life. My land is rich in coffee, but my

father was always a poor peasant ... I was a child in 1961, but I still remember the spectacle of children bashed against trees, men buried to the neck, with their heads above ground and a tractor passing to lop off their heads with a blade made to dig up earth, to provide wealth for mankind. What pleasure I had just now destroying that bulldozer! It was like the one that took off my father's head. The bulldozer is not to blame ... but I cannot lose my hatred for bulldozers, forgive me. (Pepetela 1986:18)

In this case it is made quite clear that Miracle has joined the MPLA and their armed conflict as a reaction to both the extreme violence of the colonial Portuguese and, as one can infer from the reference to the economic factors mentioned in the beginning of the passage, the poverty caused by the economics of colonisation. It is stated later on in the 'straightforward narrative' that Miracle subscribes to the MPLA ideal of a Marxist-style utopia, but I would argue that while this may be seen as a driving force in his decision to fight, it is subverted by the statement that he 'love[s] to see trucks laden with troops halted' by the extremely violent action of his bazooka. When one considers this in conjunction with the graphic portrayal of his father's violent death and the killing of babies by the colonists, it is easy to see why he states that he found 'pleasure' in his destruction of the bulldozer. This 'pleasure', I argue, is rooted in a desire for revenge for the violence of the colonial state. The moment of destruction can therefore be seen not only as a moment of catharsis but also as a moment that illustrates the power of violence to bring pleasure through its enactment. In addition, this moment of pleasure is given far greater weight in Pepetela's imagining of Miracle's narrative than is any need to create a utopia such as the one proposed by Fanon's theory, or as is the telos of the triumphant Marxist discourse within which the novel is written. Pepetela's representation of this ambiguity between the personal need to come to terms with the violence of colonialism by satisfying a desire to use violence to destroy colonialism – in this case represented by the bulldozer – and the 'rational' decision to fight for a future utopia, illustrates a flexibility of imagining the adoption of violence by colonised people that goes well beyond that of Fanon.

In addition, there is the question of the use of a bazooka to destroy the bulldozer. As a representation of the taking of violent action against a symbol of the colonial state, there can be little to rival the use of an armour-piercing, high-explosive, rocket-propelled grenade. And yet the description of the firing of the bazooka at a 'truck laden with troops' is described as 'halt[ing]' it, a representation of violence that is far removed from the

later image of Miracle's father's head being 'lop[ped] off' or of the 'children bashed against trees'. While I do not intend to promote the sanitisation of representations of either the colonialists' or the MPLA's violence, I argue that the difference in the language used to describe these acts of violence illustrates another important factor in Pepetela's imagining of the adoption of violence as a means by which to regain agency, both political and personal, by the fighters in *Mayombe*.

Pepetela's use of Marxist discourse in writing the novel influences and restricts the attempt to nuance the above-mentioned ambiguity between violence to satisfy a personal desire for revenge, with its resulting intoxication of agency, and violence to further the aims of Marxism.³ This point is illustrated by the very different representations of the intensity of the two acts of violence and is visible in the following passage, which is taken from a scene in which the group of fighters ambushes a sizable column of Portuguese colonial troops:

Beautiful, like sitting ducks! thought Fearless. And he began to fire... Fearless changed magazine, just as he saw the soldier in front of him stretched out at the roadside and feverishly trying to open the bolt of his G3. The soldier had seen him, but his weapon had jammed. Fearless aimed his AK. The soldier was a frightened kid in front of him, some four metres off, with hands gripped to the bolt that would not release the spent round. Both knew what was going to happen. Inevitably, as in a tragedy, Fearless's bullet opened a neat hole on the lad's forehead and the expression of fright vanished. Inevitably, without either of them imagining any alternative. (Pepetela 1986:32-33)

In this case it is Fearless, the commander of the group and the hero of the narrative, who is about to take 'pleasure' in the attacking of representatives of the colonial state. The fact that the soldiers are in a position to be slaughtered is to Fearless a thing of beauty, and he proceeds to empty his AK into their massed ranks. It is only when he is face to face with one of the soldiers that there is any sign that Fearless might find this act of violence difficult. When we read later that the soldiers are not Portuguese but Angolan recruits with a few white officers, we are forced to question why Fearless did not, as he did with the foresters, kill the Portuguese officers and attempt to 're-educate' the remaining soldiers. The answer is simple – the foresters were not armed and therefore not a physical threat – but this does not explain the ease with which Fearless overcomes the realisation that he is about to kill a 'frightened kid'. Is Fearless' killing of the 'lad' not the same as the 'bashing' of children's heads against trees? Perhaps not, as the

soldier is easily recognisable as an agent of the colonial state and the fact that he is a young 'kid' goes further in representing the evil of that state. It is truly Fanon's 'violence in its natural state' – a state that both kills children and uses them to kill for it – and it must therefore be violently destroyed. The only surprising thing therefore is that its destruction comes not with the blast of Miracle's bazooka, but with an 'inevitable ... [small] neat hole on the lad's forehead'.

The 'inevitability' of this ending is enforced by the final line of the extract: 'inevitable, without either of them imagining an alternative'. This line again echoes Fanon's assertion that colonialism can only be beaten by greater violence, but the acceptance of that fact is mediated by Pepetela's description of that 'inevitability' – 'as in a tragedy'. The 'inevitability' is, however, still accepted by both the ideology of Pepetela, as a member of the MPLA, and Fearless' Marxist ideology, which of necessity as Achille Mbembe (2002:251) states, 'required the total surrender of the individual to a utopian future and to the hope of a collective resurrection that, in turn, required the destruction of everything that stood in its way'.

It would seem, however, that Pepetela is unable to write this inevitability. The book ends without the vision of the Marxist utopia being realised, or for that matter, without its realisation even being gestured towards. Fearless dies in an attack on an enemy base and at the close of the novel, the group of MPLA soldiers is still deeply divided along ethnic and racial lines. It is as if Pepetela is unable to believe that, as Fanon (2001:73) would have it, '[v]iolence is in action all-inclusive and national' or that 'at an individual level violence is a cleansing force'. On the contrary, Pepetela's inability to end the narrative in a conclusive manner, when read in conjunction with the knowledge that the novel was only published in 1980 (Leite 1996:117), four years into a civil war that began immediately after the end of Portuguese rule, could be read as an acknowledgement that what I have termed the revenge aspect of the adoption of violent resistance to colonial rule has a far deeper effect on the subject than Fanon reasoned. Nevertheless, I argue that such a reading does suggest a far more complicated relationship between the adoption of violence by an individual and the effects of that adoption on the state that is born of such conflict. Such view casts into doubt Leite's (1996:119) assertion that:

In the work of Pepetela, the theme of war takes on an heroic and epic dimension since it is a conflict which defines the principle of the foundation of the 'fatherland'. The characters in the novel are emblematic

of the founding fathers of the future nation, a nation created in the crucible of the armed struggle.

The fact that this is Angola, which 'future nation' could only be said to have come into being with the death of Jonas Savimbi in 2002 (Garzdecki 2004:45)⁴ belies Leite's understanding that the 'crucible of war' was in Angola's case restricted to the anti-colonial war. It would seem that to Pepetela, war and the violence that accompanies it is not 'heroic and epic' but rather tragic. Its protagonists, too, are not 'emblematic of the founding fathers of the future nation', but rather the victims of the violence necessary in the reclamation of land and agency. And while such violence is necessary, it is not, as Fanon would have it, over with the fall of colonialism but lives on in the lives of those affected by it. I argue that it is for that reason that the 'straightforward, narrative ends with the seemingly ironic and violent mourning of Fearless and Struggle's death described below:

Miracle, the bazooka-man, sighed and said:

'He was a great commander. And Struggle a good fighter!'

He withdrew a few steps from the others and fired a bazooka missile which exploded in the trunk of a mulberry-tree, AKs and Pepeshas sang out, in a last salute. (Pepetela 1986:183)

The choice of a violent send-off, as represented by the firing of weapons, seems to celebrate the manner of Fearless and Struggle's death rather than their lives, which even when they are mentioned, are referred to in terms of their military capabilities.

Violence, I argue, has come to be seen by Pepetela as the chosen form of expression to those exposed to it through war. Moreover, the subject identities of the fighters have been claimed and created in the moment of violent action. This is an interesting point, when one considers that Pepetela only ever wrote under his birth name prior to his involvement in armed conflict and continues to use his nom de guerre to this day.

Such an understanding of the result of the taking of violent action to gain freedom, both political and personal, may at first seem to be in stark contrast to the clearly defined liberated 'native' and nation that Fanon would have his reader believe in. However, as Peres points out:

For Fanon, the protracted struggle against colonialism centred on the reclamation by colonized peoples of their history. These reclaimed representations of the past are essential to the transformation of subject formation ... What is important for Fanon ... is that the colonized peoples are necessarily other than their pasts. These pasts may be reclaimed but

they can never be fully reconstituted and therefore their representations are always partial and fragmented. (Peres 2003:113)

To this I would add that it is not only the actions of colonisation that have resulted in these 'partial and fragmented' representations, but also the effect of the regaining of agency through violent means as the process by which the new subject is formed. In short, the effects of the use of violence by the 'victim-turned-perpetrator' (Mamdani 2002:6) have a problematic, lasting and dangerous role to play in the formation of the postcolonial subject and state, one that Fanon does not seem to account for as Pepetela does in the final passage of *Mayombe*. The passage is an 'internal narrative' and, narrated by The Political Commissar, contains his final thoughts following Fearless's death:

The death of Fearless meant for me a change of skin of twenty-five years, a metamorphosis. Sad, like any metamorphosis. I only understand what I had lost (perhaps my reflection projected ten years forward), when the inevitable occurred ...

I evolve and develop a new skin. There are some who need to write to shed the skin that no longer fits. Others change country. Others a lover. Others a name or a hairstyle. I lost a friend.

I think, like he did, that the frontier between truth and lies is a track in the desert. Men are divided on the two sides of the frontier. How many are there who know how to find this sandy path through the midst of sand? They exist, however, and I am one of them.

Fearless knew as well. But he insisted that it was a track in the desert. So he laughed at those who said it was a path, cutting clearly through the green of Mayombe. Today I know there are no yellow tracks in the midst of green. (Pepetela 1986:184)

The Political Commissar has changed; war and the resulting death of his friend and leader have altered him. With this change comes the understanding that nothing is clear; 'truth and lies' are separated by a barely perceptible 'sandy path through the midst of sand'. Such an understanding of the role of a freedom fighter is in stark contrast to the clearly outlined descriptions of the Marxist fighter that The Political Commissar is seen to be issuing throughout the novel. Through the representation of this change in what were his novel's firmest adherents to the Marxist doctrine and its accompanying teachings of anti-colonial violence, Pepetela illustrates an understanding of the effects of violence and its loss that is far more nuanced than that of Fanon. There is nothing of Fanon's clearly defined

idea of postcolonial subjects made whole by war, or cleansed by the violence of war. Nor is there anything of Fanon's conviction that there is a truth to be gained from violent resistance. There is only the loss of a friend and an understanding of the nature of truth, rather than a discovery of the truth itself sheathed, as it once was for The Political Commissar, in the triumphant Marxist discourse of Fanon.

To some readers, such a conclusion may illustrate a failure of imagination. I would argue, however, that Pepetela's open-ended conclusion of *Mayombe* illustrates a tension between Pepetela-the-author and Pepetela-the-MPLA-member and, in addition, that such a tension is a space of great productivity. It is a space that ultimately enables Pepetela to resist writing a conclusion that would be belied by the conflicts that continued in Angola and many other postcolonial African states and is therefore a triumph of the imagination rather than a failure. This is not to say that the violence experienced by those involved in Angola's anti-colonial war should be viewed as the only reason for the almost continual state of war that the country experienced from 1975 to 2002. Perhaps the greatest irony of what is referred to by historians as Angola's civil war is that it was influenced and informed by both the international policies of the Cold War and the regional policies of southern Africa. With, on the other hand, the involvement of troops from South Africa on the side of Unita, the supply of material and funding to Unita by the USA, and, on the other hand, the involvement of Cuban troops on the side of the MPLA, and the supply of material and funds by the USSR to the MPLA, the conflict took on an international reputation as a Cold War conflict fought by proxy forces, most notably South Africa and Cuba.

Bearing such external influences in mind, it becomes possible to see why Pepetela's ending of *Mayombe* – while gesturing as I argue it does towards an uncertain and violent future – should be seen as an important voice in the continuing debate surrounding the effects of the experience of war-related violence in Africa. In addition I would add that with *Mayombe*, Pepetela speaks directly to Achille Mbembe's later questioning of the role of war in the formation of the modern African subject:

[T]he state of war in contemporary Africa should in fact be conceived of as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as the family, the school, and other social institutions do. (Mbembe 2002:267)

This point becomes especially important when one considers that the Portuguese troops that fought in Angola returned to a Portugal that was,

unlike Angola, able to move beyond the era of colonialism without external interference. If this is understood to be so, then Pepetela's ending of *Mayombe* could be seen to be a gesture towards the illustration of a realisation that colonialism, its violence and the violence that I term *the intoxicification of agency*, does not end with the Portuguese handover of power in 1975. It would seem that Pepetela understands that colonialism and its violence will live on in Angola for many years to come as a result of the damage that both it and the resistance to it have done to the citizens of the land.

Notes

1. My thanks to Liz Gunner and Stefan Helgesson for their guidance and assistance with the writing of this article.
2. 'He did not live to see the torture centres for Algerians in a free Algeria' (Capouya 1992:741), or for that matter the violence and destruction that is all that Angola has known since independence. Fanon died in 1961 and was therefore never to see the unending violence that engulfed many African countries following their violent overthrow of colonial rule (see Macey 2001).
3. At the same time, much of the novel is at one level an attempt to interrogate that very discourse.
4. Against whose Unita forces the MPLA had been waging a constant civil war that began following Portugal's granting of independence to Angola in 1975 (van der Waals 1993:254).

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