

LUUANDA – AND HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

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Nature is mad and strong and it grips the reader from the very beginning – in fact nature is one of the main characters in the story about grandma Xíxi and her nephew Zeca Santos in the first story in *Luuanda*.

A storm of water and red earth sweeps over us. The human beings are at the mercy of these forces – they can't but wait, keep away, tell the children to go home and hope that everything will pass very soon.

The only human who can match nature is grandma Xíxi. She controls the fire in the hut and the food in the pot. She was never defeated by life and she is not afraid of telling the truth. She lives together with her nephew Zeca Santos, a young man who loves beautiful shirts.

This musseque in Luanda is a universe of its own and Grandma Xíxi is the centre of it. But there is also a periphery, where distant but powerful forces live a life of their own. They are like huge, distant animals – ready to attack at any moment. They determine the fate of everybody in the musseque.

I'm speaking about the policecars, the military jeeps and the towers with searchlights. These are the concrete proof of the presence of the Portuguese Colonial power, and they represent a force almost as strong and brutal as the storm.

So this is Africa, this is Angola, it is Luanda and we are there. I am there – but not as a stranger, a european, a journalist or somebody just coming to have a look. I am there as a participant. I AM ONE of all the inhabitants in the musseque, in the universe of Luanda's musseque.

When Luandino Vieira takes me by the hand and invites me to meet grandmother Xíxi – nothing feels strange, exotic or dangerous. When I sit down at the fireplace in the little hut I feel at home. Everything feels all right, even though the mud slides down the walls, the roof is torn and the pot over the fire is empty.

The people in this hut are no strangers, they are my friends and brothers. And most important of everything – despite the poverty, hunger and hopelessness, these people are no victims. They are living, acting subjects.

And we, who were young Swedish students in the 1960's and 70's, we really did want to sit down at that fireplace, together with grandmother Xíxi. We wanted to put something in her empty pot and we would so much have liked to buy a new fancy shirt for Zeca Santos.

We were young Swedes, from a country, which had not experienced any wars or catastrophes for a very long period. We lived in a country without poverty and oppression, a country with a free press and fair judges. And we were looking for a brother to help, a fellow human being to care for. Some of us thought that we had found these brothers in the far away musseques of Luanda or in the liberated areas of eastern Angola, «as terras do fim do mundo».

It was for their sake that we stood on the icy cold streets of Stockholm every single Saturday, rattling our collection boxes and asking the shopping Swedes to help the people of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau to fight for their just cause.

Of course we had all read *The wretched of the earth*, by Frantz Fanon, and we believed that it was our mission to inform about the situation in the Portuguese colonies and in South Africa. We had all seen the film *The battle of Algiers*, by Gillo Pontecorvo, and we thought it legitimate for the oppressed peoples to gain their freedom with the help of violence.

And yes, we thought that there existed different kinds of violence. There was the unjust violence of the Colonialist oppressors and there was the fair and justified violence of the oppressed people. The wretched of the earth had the right to protest, to take to arms in order to change their situation. This was a beautiful fight, and it was a good way to change the world.

Maybe we were naive, probably we were romantic and most certainly very inconsiderate. But we thought it was our task to create a new kind of justice and a new kind of world.

The «Afrikagroups of Sweden» at the time was a very active organization. We collected money for the fight in Africa, we edited a newspaper and on the whole tried to make the fate of the oppressed people known.

I personally was vaccinated against all kinds of communism – I had read the novel by Alexander Solzjenitsyn, *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovitj*, and had no sympathy whatsoever for the Soviet kind of liberation of the oppressed.

The freedom fight represented by ANC, MPLA, FRELIMO and PAIGC seemed to me – to us all – to be something quite different. The liberation movements in Africa seemed

to offer a new and better way for the African people to change their lives. It was something quite different from being commanded by those old, grey politruks in the Kremlin. The African fight was the fight of noble *guerilleros*, living in the bush with their *kalasjnikovs*, risking their lives for the sake of freedom.

We were fascinated by this fight, and of course we had to go on spot and see the struggle for ourselves.

In 1971, I went to Africa for the first time, and in Zambia I met with the representatives of MPLA. I met with Agostinho Neto, a silent, very kind, almost shy man, quite different from my romantic picture of a freedom fighter.

Next year I managed to meet with the more «real» fighters – as I imagined them at the time – in the liberated areas in southeastern Angola.

There was Saydi Mingas, who later became the first minister of finance in the free Angola, and was killed in the attempted *coup d'état* in 1977. There was the dynamic captain Orlog and the thoughtful Paulo Jorge, who later on, for a short while, was the first minister of foreign affairs of Angola. And there were all the others, less romantic and less famous, but all of them equally engaged in the fight and the building of a new society.

And it was somewhere there, in eastern Angola, that I heard about a writer called Luandino Vieira. I was told that he was in prison in Tarrafal and had written some very good books about the life of ordinary Angolan people. In this way, literature became for me an important way to learn more about Angola and its people.

But let's get back to Zeca Santos.

Of course he was like us, of course he also wanted to change the world. Most probably he wanted grandma Xíxi to get something in her pot, he wanted to mend her broken roof and give her a happy life.

So of course sooner or later he must have done what Frantz Fanon told the oppressed people to do: stop looking at themselves with the eyes of the colonialists. Because when Zeca Santos suddenly catches a glimpse of himself, in the windowpane at the white man's office, something happens inside him. For this is the very moment when he understands how the white man sees him – a confused young boy in ragged trousers and a wrinkled yellow shirt.

I am quite sure that this experience must have had some consequences and changed something in Zeca's mind. So that's why I believe that sooner or later he really did join the MPLA. But then, what happened to him? We don't know – this story Luandino still has to tell us...

I really want to know what happened to Zeca, after he joined the rank and files of the MPLA. Because what happened to Zeca could be part of the answer to another question; that is: what happens with a person, an idea or an ideal when it meets reality? What happens to your dreams about changing the world, when brutal force becomes your most important instrument, in order to reach your ideals?

There is a famous Russian proverb, often quoted by Josif Vissarionovitj Stalin, which gives a rather brutal answer to this question: «When you chop wood, splinters flie» (лес рубят – щепки летят). And Mao Tse Tung wrote that «revolution is not a dinnerparty [...] it is an act of violence by which one class overthrows another». Both these quotations state that you need violence to change a situation and that, for the sake of the final result – a better world – you have to accept some «collateral damage», as the military probably would say.

But what kind of a victory do you achieve by using violence? And what happens to the persons who use violence? How does power influence you?

So I don't know what happened to Zeca Santos... But I know why I don't stand in central Stockholm any more, asking people to support the MPLA... and it is not only because MPLA is now big enough to support itself. And it is not even because I have maybe become a little lazy, having reached the respectable status of a retired journalist...

I met with Luandino for the first time in Luanda in February 1977. Before that we had had contact by letters, because of the work with my translation of two of his books. But it was not until 1977 that we finally met in person. Angola was then a free state, and we could meet and talk about his life and literature. He told me about the years in the prison of Tarrafal at Cabo Verde. He also told me about how he spent one and a half year of the time in prison trying to tame a sparrow (*domesticar um pardal*).

I remember very well my reactions to this amazing information. Taming a sparrow? Wouldn't it have been better from a revolutionary point of view to – say – organize an uprising among the prisoners? Or at least trying to flee from Tarrafal? Taming a sparrow seemed to me completely useless as a method to change the world...

But Luandino assured me that the taming of that sparrow had taught him a completely new attitude in life. It taught him patience and consideration – two qualities which were never particularly popular in revolutionary situations...

For me – a radical student in the peaceful country of Sweden – this was extremely shocking. We were activists, we were sure that we could – and would – change the course of history with our united forces. The gentle, reconciling attitude, which must be used if you want to tame a sparrow, seemed to us strange and even useless.

I was as surprised by the tame sparrow as I was, when I read the last chapter in *The real life of Domingos Xavier*. Remember? We follow Domingos Xavier all the way right to his very death by the hands of the PIDE. And then – zac – the writer makes a sudden and very sharp turn, taking us to a huge party in the musseque with food, drinks, flirting and dancing.

For somebody like me and my friends in the Africa-groups who used to think about politics as a very serious matter, and who were convinced that a revolution is all about hard work and self-sacrifices – for us this party in the musseque was, to say the least, confusing...

It took me quite a few years to understand the wisdom of Luandino and what he tells us about other ways to reach your goals...

The heroes in Luandino's stories are not the soldiers with *kalasnikovs*, but the normal, simple people: tractor drivers, old women, noisy little boys. In Luandino's world the opposite of the brutal colonial power is not the suffering victim, but the dynamic Africa with its inventive genius, good humour and vigorous life. In Luandino's world, the weak persons are the strong ones and those who own nothing are the ones who really have something to give.

After my African experiences in the 70's, I continued my life as a journalist, witnessing wars, disasters, *coup d'etats* and all kinds of tragedies that human beings continue to invent. I saw people being killed, dictators coming and going. In Eastern Europe a wall came down and an empire ceased to exist. Miracles and tragedies succeeded each other in the spinning wheel of history.

So well, does anyone really think that they know what to do in order to change the world?

I still don't know after all these years... But I am sure that those who know how to tame a sparrow, at least have a small chance to make things a little bit different...

