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Narratives of "Belonging in Nature" in Gorongosa (Mozambique)

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Abstract

The words are from different people: hunters, journalists, writers, tourists, conservationists, tour guides... The paper will present the expressions of the sense of belonging in a glorified and commodified nature, the Gorongosa National Park. The narratives present in newspapers, fictional books, guestbook and internet sites will be cross with the testimonies collected from interviews and will allow us to understand colonial and postcolonial visions of nature. Although the Gorongosa National Park is a paradigmatic scenario of dynamic reconfigurations created by conservationist processes, the political and institutional issues, or the dynamics of interaction and conflict with local communities, will not be the main focus of this contribution. The focus will be rather on personal experiences and emotional attachments to place and what they tell us about the ideological processes in a historical perspective.

The descriptions of those who were, sometimes only briefly, in Gorongosa, are enthusiastic and expressive manifestations of incorporation in nature. We will listen from the voices that claim the legitimacy of being in place of colonial safari hunters until the nostalgic narratives of contemporary visitors...

In 1971, Charles Duke, the Apollo 16 astronaut, told his guide when he visited the Gorongosa National Park that 'visiting Gorongosa was as thrilling as landing on the moon' (Hanes, 2007: 87).

In 2004, a group of foreigners who live in Mozambique left the following message in the guestbook after their visit to Gorongosa Park: 'We had a wonderful surprise to find this wild place. People need a paradise to live in.'

I start my paper with these statements as they express emotions aroused by a tourist experience in a protected area.

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My aim is to look at how nature was viewed and sensed at different periods in the Park's history by means of what different social actors (hunters, journalists, writers, tourists and conservationists) have said.

I will present ideas I'm exploring in research work entitled 'Rhetoric and conceptions of nature and animals in colonial and post-colonial times', which is part of the project 'Portuguese Castles aboard II. Heritage, tourism and Portuguese cultural cooperation in African contexts'².

The end purpose of this work in progress is to determine and describe the colonial and post-colonial dynamics involved in the touristification and patrimonialisation of nature in Mozambique.

Gorongosa National Park – narratives through History

Gorongosa National Park is in central Mozambique and was created in 1960. I will briefly describe the three main periods of its history: Gorongosa as a game reserve; Gorongosa National Park in the colonial period; the rehabilitated National Park following the civil war in Mozambique.

Gorongosa - game reserve

The history of protecting Gorongosa began in 1920 when this area belonged to the Mozambique Company. This company worked in a similar manner to other large colonial commercial companies in Africa and managed the resources of most of the land of Mozambique until 1948.

The company created a game reserve in the Gorongosa area in 1920 for its administrators and visitors.

In 1941, Gorongosa came under the administration of the colonial government but remained a game reserve.

This was the beginning of concerns about nature conservation that resulted in the setting up of an association that aimed to preserve its fauna as an economic resource especially for hunting tourism.

We find here the first narratives in praise of the wealth of fauna and hunting possibilities in Gorongosa, described as 'a sanctuary of wild game' and 'one of the greatest treasures of Mozambique'.

² Project 'Portuguese Castles aboard II. Heritage, tourism and Portuguese cultural cooperation in African contexts', Center for Research in Anthropology (CRIA), coordinated by Maria Cardeira da Silva and financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal (FCT - PTDC/HAH/67235/2006).

Of the lived experiences of that time, I would like to highlight what Nuno Bermudes (a journalist and writer, settler of Portuguese origin), said about his trip to Gorongosa in 1948:

‘There are feelings that can’t be explained. One of them is this: we as civilised men inside a car, a symbol of the power of the world and numbers and machines, feeling that we are sliding backwards as if we were naked, chained to the disquieting hour, ready to fight the moment the voice of instinct demands hate and violence from us, ready to love without a deceitful phrase between desire and ownership. (...)

We forget the part we play from day to day. (...) We now want to live life intensely; to merge with everything in this violent yet gentle setting; to drink in air instead of merely breathing out of necessity; to return to the days when man struggled to dig his caves in the mountain, do away with conventional smiles and let loose, into this vastness where no cement walls or garden fences exist, a roar of laughter that will strike the heavens like lightning.’ (Bermudes, 1954: 8)

Words that express a view of untouched nature that takes man back to his past. But it is also a romantic view of African nature that can be easily appropriated in its purity.

This view becomes clear in the words of the author of ‘*Grandes caças. Turismo na África portuguesa*’ (Great hunting trips. Tourism in Portuguese Africa), a Portuguese pamphlet published for the 1937 Paris Exhibition:

‘To the south, beyond the Tropic of Cancer, Africa remains unexplored, fascinating and sensual in the eyes of those who come to it. A vast continent with primitive and virtually barbaric peoples, in immense and naked quantities and where at every corner of the forest, wild animals are ready to attack men who are bold enough to defy them. Savannahs, grasslands and thick forests where civilized man with his own efforts must cut a path. (...) White men have a place there to satisfy their curiosity as a tourist and as a hunter’ (Silva, 1937:7).

By hunting African big game, men could assert their dominion over nature, and by extension, over Africa, as Landau (2002) and Cejas (2007) argued.

Gorongosa National Park - colonial period

The colonial government followed the international trend and, albeit belatedly in comparison to other countries, acknowledged the importance of ecological conservation. Aware of the growth in non-hunting tourism in Gorongosa, it increased the preserved territory and created the Gorongosa National Park in 1960.

That same year, Hunting Reserve No. 1, located in the north of the park, was created and a hunting guide entrepreneur was given its concession. The park area was therefore separated from the hunting safari area.

Gorongosa National Park then became a symbol of tourism in Mozambique, and always appeared in publicity for colonial tourism. Publicity at this time highlighted and praised the diversity of the park's vegetation and landscape, but, most of all, the diversity of wild life that could be seen there: huge elephants, lions, enormous herds of zebra, buffalos, hippopotamus, elands, antelopes and other mammals, as well as more than three hundred species of birds.

The diversity and quantities of animals are the first things remembered by all who knew the park at that time. In conversations I had with informants who had been hunting guides in the 1960s and early 70s, what stands out are the lists of names of the species in Gorongosa and in what numbers and their pride in them.

At this time, the park was mainly visited by colonists who lived in Mozambique and came to spend their leisure time there. The type of visit and its duration depended on what they could afford, but as a former director of the park stated: 'Nobody remained indifferent to the display of harmony and immense beauty. The abundance of colours and scents was deeply moving.'

Documents dating to the colonial period reveal that the importance of preserving the fauna clearly had an economic aspect linked with tourism as a direct source of wealth for the colony.

But at the same time, the idea that prevails is that wild nature must be preserved for the benefit of those with the economic means and in political control.

Gorongosa Restoration Project

After Mozambique became independent in 1975, there was a period of upheaval marked by civil war. Between 1981 and 1994, the Gorongosa area was a theatre of armed struggle and its wildlife was decimated.

At the end of the civil war, the Mozambican government together with the support of international organisations (such as the IUCN) began work on the park's rehabilitation in 1995. In 2004, Gregory Carr, an American millionaire, appeared and, as he himself said, 'fell in love with Gorongosa'. He decided to invest in what became the 'Gorongosa Restoration Project' after establishing a protocol between Mozambique and the foundation he created, the Carr Foundation. There's a great deal to be said and reflected on with regard to this project, the reconfigurations of policies connected to nature conservations as

well as the dynamics of collaboration and conflict between the Park and local communities.

However, the focus of this presentation does not lie here. I'd rather present, in line with the ideas behind this presentation, what Greg Carr said himself. Called the 'saviour of Gorongosa' by the press, Greg Carr has given dozens of interviews and appeared on numerous TV programmes in recent years.

I underline two recurring themes in his statements about Gorongosa.

The first refers to the importance attributed to preserving diversity linked with sustainable development of the communities in the Park area. The formal discourse of the 'Gorongosa Restoration Project' departs ideologically from the Park of colonial days. Greg Carr said, for instance: 'This is modernity meeting traditional culture' and 'You've got to bridge the two cultures. You've got to create a situation where both sides win' (Kvinta, 2006: 110).

The second more obvious aspect in Greg Carr's statements is an understanding of the Park as a business venture based on ecotourism, which reminds us of the processes of the commoditisation of nature, in a 'mode of conservation production' (Garland, 2008; Brockington & Scholfield 2010; Igoe, Neves & Brockington, 2010).

But how does the 'saviour of Gorongosa' describe what he feels with regard to the most emotional experiences?

Let's look at what he said:

'When I began the project five years ago, I didn't know much about nature conservation and biology. I didn't know that to be in a forest could be a spiritual experience for humans. This is what I've learnt. Gorongosa has brought me back to nature and this has made me a happy person' (Revista Única, 2009: 46).

Recurrences in the way of "Belonging in Nature"

Spiritual experience and nostalgic return

The idea of a spiritual experience and a nostalgic return to communing with nature doesn't date from today.

I've found there are several common features at different times in narratives of lived experiences in Gorongosa during my research work. One of them was the sacred character of wild nature:

Here are some examples:

- Basil Lecanides (a settler of Greek origin), describes the landscape and wildlife he saw in Gorongosa in his account of a journey in 1948: 'Sights like these must have delighted the eyes of angels on the sixth day.' He then presents the part of John Milton's epic poem 'Paradise Lost' that refers to the sixth day of the world's creation (Lecanides, 1848:61).

- Mia Couto (a well-known Mozambican contemporary author), describes his childhood memories in Gorongosa thus:

'During the night, I listen to the roar of lions, the false laugh of the hyena and the sad howl of the jackals. (...) I don't stray away from the bungalow. It is a strange feeling, waiting to see but afraid of being seen. The grass is covered with dew; it looks as if the sky came to the earth during the night. It is five o'clock in the morning and I have never felt the morning so intensely. All around dozens of different birds are singing. Suddenly, the baboons sound the alarm. (...) Even today, I can remember that shiver when encountering a strange world. A feeling of the absolute pervades me and it is as if the savannah were an infinite church and I were one of the faithful from an unknown belief' (Couto, 2007: 14).

- In his introduction to a photograph album of Gorongosa published in 1964, José d'Eça de Queirós (an eminent Portuguese) also reminisces about a supernatural order and the harmony he felt, a harmony of pure souls:

'And while a web of roseate light radiated from the distant trees, spreading over the soft green of the elephant grass, one's heart was filled with the infinite peace of that entire innocent and silent world. Everything there moved slowly, everything glided over the dewy ground like a pale fluid over supernatural velvet. A matchless harmony reigned, a harmony of delicate shades, a harmony of unreal reflections, a harmony of clean bodies and pure souls.'

Later he added:

'Gorongosa is like the sea: always the same and always different. There are a thousand seas in the sea; at Gorongosa the veldt has a thousand veldts and the savannah a thousand savannahs.' (Queirós, 1964: 65)

Metaphoric sea

Another common aspect in the various experiences reported by people who wrote about Gorongosa is the use of the same metaphor for this vast and, by its nature, indomitable space - the sea.

'A sea of trees' was how Lynne Tinley (a South African who lived in the Gorongosa Park in the 1960s with her husband, the ecologist Kenneth Tinley)

chose to describe the nuanced colours of the Gorongosa woodland. Colours observed, but above all else, colours sensed (Tinley, 1979: 127).

Many years earlier in 1948, Henrique Galvão (Portuguese army officer and writer) wrote:

‘The tando [savannah] attracts us as the sea does. It’s impossible to take our eyes off its vastness and resist the seduction of following it and running with the morning breeze as it refreshes us.’ He went on to say: ‘An infinite peace seems to float over the tando (...) how comforted I feel with the serene majesty of the nocturnal tando.’ (Galvão, 1948)

Enjoyment of nature is presented as a ‘comfort’, soothing and providing a sense of ‘belonging in nature’.

Paradise and... Africa

Sixty years later, a Brazilian tourist wrote: ‘I’m glad I had the opportunity to smell the scent of the Park, breathe clean air, hear birds sing, see animals ... look at a full moon.’ (Guestbook)

Most tourists visit the Park because of the wildlife in order to ‘take trophy photos’, especially of the very animals that are most sought after in hunting safaris, the ‘big five’ (lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros). They mainly mention the animals they managed to see or not.

But there are also tourists who talk about the how relaxing their stay at the Park was and see it as ‘a wonderful peaceful and a relaxing place to visit’ (Guestbook, 2009).

Or, as one of the park guides explained to me, when the tourists are elderly Europeans or American who have already seen the big five a thousand times before and no longer need to see them, ‘what they are interested in is peace of mind’ (Macadona, 2009).

Tourists feel nature, paradise and... Africa. Two final quotes:

‘This trip has been a great introduction to Africa in general! The lions and the hippo and the monkeys and the baboons were fabulous’ wrote an American tourist (2005).

A Portuguese who lives in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique said: ‘I loved the park although I didn’t get to see many of the large animals. I loved the waterfalls and the people who lived there. They are super welcoming and unpretentious and I felt I was in the real Africa’ (2009).

'What is crucial to the symbolic and economic capital produced by conserving African wildlife is the image of Africa as emblematic of all that is wild and natural – of the continent as a privileged space of nature within the global symbolic imaginary', Garland wrote (2008: 63).

An imaginary that ties us emotionally to nature. An imaginary that has reproduced, in an unbroken continuity, a sense of belonging to nature since the colonial past to modernity.

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