

Narratives of the Liberation Struggle in Guinea-Bissau: Women's Trajectories and Emancipatory Pathways

I believe that Professor Aminata Diaw Cissé was not only a distinguished African philosopher who contributed in a relevant way to the debate on Africa's place in knowledge production but also an academic who stood out for her commitment concerning the place of women in this production. In this article, I will be talking about women and their perceptions of the emancipation and liberation process in Guinea-Bissau.

Nation building in Guinea-Bissau, marked by a long duration of armed struggle of extreme violence, would not have been possible without women's unquestionable contribution. However, given the complexities of the process, what kind of emancipation are we talking about in this case? What has been women's perception of emancipation? How far has the 'revolution' gone as an effective

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liberating experience? Various sources, although relatively scarce, have shown that the posthumous discourse about the incontestable leadership of Amílcar Cabral made relatively invisible the immense number of men and women who actively participated in the process of independence. My case study on the 'other voices' in the liberation struggle, methodologically oriented in oral history, seeks to understand to what extent the construction of a historical narrative from individual trajectories can be helpful in filling historiographical gaps, and specifically, in discussing African

decolonial perspectives on gender studies.

In my analysis, three important issues emerged: the relevance of women's role in the liberation struggle, the invisibility of their perspectives in the official narrative, and the non-recognition by the society (generally speaking) of women's participation in the nation building process.

In this sense, the effort to bring these women's voices into the academic debate can have transformative potential, since it can lead to new historical readings and reflections, be it in terms of their partaking in political power or in terms of the reconfiguration of gender relations in the context of the armed struggle.

This methodological orientation based on oral history can allow individuals to emerge as historical subjects.

On the other side, African perspectives have been questioning the scope of some concepts and theoretical formulations to understand different realities of the continent. As the Nigerian sociologists Mary Kolawole and Oyeronké Oyéwùmí have demonstrated, the problem of gender in African studies is, above all, epistemological; as the concept in its origin, constitution and expression is based on Western experiences. According to the authors, one of the main limits of 'gender' as an analytical category, considering African contexts, concerns the definition of the 'nuclear family' centred on the subordinated wife, patriarchal husband and children, where there is no room for other adults/individuals.

In several interviews that I have conducted in Guinea-Bissau, the relative irrelevance emerged of the nuclear family model as the founding element of gender as an analytical category to explain social relations and gender inequalities. In my case study, as suggested by Bibi Bakare Yussuf, narrative constructions break with the perspective which essentially presents women as subordinate to men or, alternatively, as a homogeneous group without any kind of tensions and/or conflicts.

Mamae Barbosa,¹ a doctor and former combatant on the south front, explains how she experienced the years of armed struggle. The first daughter of her mother in a polygamous family, she tells about the difficulties of an 'itinerant' life in the context of war:

It was in our village that I started school, in Ganafa. It was there that one learned the 'abc'. And when the attacks became more intense, in 1966, they took

us to the bush and when the attacks ended, we went back to school My father had four wives ... when the situation got complicated, he took my mother, the other wives and children to the village where I already lived with my grandmother Sometimes there was resistance in allowing girls to go to school, but little by little it was getting better.

From this narrative comes the resilient side of communities and of women in particular. It also shows the ideological force of the liberation movement. Mamae Barbosa not only attended primary and secondary schools in that context but also had the opportunity to obtain a scholarship to study medicine abroad. As she stated, 'I studied because my family encouraged me, my mother in particular, but also my father ... But this was possible because of the mobilisation of the Party that facilitated girls' education'.

Indeed, there were several tensions and contradictions inherent in the process. In this regard, Ana Maria Gomes Soares,² a former combatant on the north front, stated:

There are those [women] who are never mentioned, among whom the very first Amilcar Cabral sent to China, such as Nhima Dabo, Carlota Sanca, Aua Cassama

... it is important to know these figures and to know what they have done and, perhaps one day, to honour them with names of streets or squares. And for our young people to know who they were and what they did.

Women's movements in Guinea-Bissau have been an important instrument of struggle, both in the past and in the present. In this regard, Ana Maria Gomes Soares related that Guinean-Bissau women needed to create organisations

that could be representative of the majority. As she stated, 'I see [UDEMU] as a women's organisation fundamentally supported by Amílcar Cabral. He [Cabral] thought that women should emancipate themselves but in an organised way Cabral was very devoted to women and defended their rights. But [the] PAIGC women's organisation has not evolved, in my opinion. 'You know', Mandinga says, 'If you find a bundle and you understand that you can carry it, then put it in your head and take it; but if you see that you are not able to carry it, you will realise by simply looking at it, leave it where you found it. It is necessary to put competent people leading institutions and organisations'.

It was possible to understand from the narratives of former combatants, that the discourse of the liberation movement on women's emancipation and liberation was one thing, another thing was women's own perceptions of what liberation and emancipation were about.

In the Guinean-Bissau case, political and ideological discourse 'imagined' a kind of society that built women in a specific way. My empirical research has allowed me, so far, through the discourses and practices of women who participated in this process, to show that this discursive construction did not always correspond to the experiences lived by women. It seems that two contradictory realities coexisted: on the one hand, the perception that the struggle for independence and nation-building allowed the emergence of new spaces for political action and social mobilisation in an emancipatory perspective; and, on the other hand, these spaces reverted into places of practices that denounced the sexist side of the same process.

Coming to my final remarks, my question is: to what extent has Guinea-Bissau's liberation struggle fully promoted women's emancipation? That is the question calling for an adequate and actual solution. I believe women's contribution has to be documented and made part of our national history. Our children need to be told the correct history and this can only be told by us. This is also what, in my opinion, Professor Aminata Diaw Cissé fought for.

Notes

1. Mamae Barbosa was born in 1958, on the Island of Bolama, south of Guinea-Bissau. She attended the Liberation Movement School/ Escola Piloto in Conakry and studied medicine in Romania. She got a degree in general medicine and holds a master's degree in Public Health as well as a post-graduate degree in tropical medicine from the Institute of Tropical Medicine in Lisbon. Interview with the author, Bissau, 26 April 2017.
2. Ana Maria Gomes Soares was born in 1951, in Cubucaré, south of Guinea, previously named Caolac. She is the daughter of Mandajaco peasants from the central north of the country, who in the years of armed struggle had migrated to the south in search of better living conditions. Interview with the author, Bissau, 23 April 2017.

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