



Article

“Mortu Nega”: A Decolonial Film or a Film about Decolonization?

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Abstract: While discourse surrounding decolonization is not new, in recent years it has gained significant momentum with many advocating for its implementation as a means to address historical injustices. However, Olúfemi Táíwò’s thought-provoking book, coupled with the movie “Mortu Nega”, invites us to critically examine the concept of decolonization. This article aims to present an argument that challenges decolonization narratives by exploring the potential limitations and unintended consequences of embracing decolonization as an absolute solution for humanitarian issues in African societies. To accomplish this, I will begin by providing historical context on Guinea-Bissau, the former Portuguese colony that serves as the focal point of the film. Furthermore, this article will provide a comprehensive description of Flora Gomes’ film, followed by a discussion addressing the trope of decolonization theory. I will use the persistent lack of women’s emancipation and their ongoing struggle for genuine liberation and gender justice in Guinea-Bissau as an example of the need, following Táíwò’s thought, to rethink the uses of decolonization as a tool for analyzing Africa’s issues.

Keywords: decolonization; African agency; Guinea-Bissau

1. Introduction

I would like to start this article by making a confession and issuing a warning. Firstly, the confession: up until receiving the invitation to contribute to this Special Issue on “Decolonization in Lusophone Literature,” I had not given much consideration to the theory of decolonization in my own research. I acknowledge this as a personal shortcoming, and I see this opportunity as a way to challenge my own ignorance and gain a better understanding of a subject that previously had not caught my attention or been a focus of my study and analysis of Lusophone literatures. Secondly, the warning: after immersing myself in research on this topic, I have chosen to write a piece that diverges from the intended theme of this issue. Instead, I aim to provoke thought in different directions, using film rather than literature as my medium, since engaging with film expands the scope of the discussion and encourages a more comprehensive understanding of decolonization within the Lusophone context, and posing a strong critique of traditional decolonization theories. I hope that my approach does not disappoint the Guest Editor, as I hold him in high regard.

The discourses surrounding decolonization are not new, but in recent years they have gained significant momentum, with many advocating for the implementation of decolonizing culture and politics as a means to address historical injustices. However, Olúfemi Táíwò’s thought-provoking book, *Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously*, coupled with the movie “*Mortu Nega*” (1988), invites us to critically examine the concept of decolonization by complementing the discourses surrounding it and offering a perspective that challenges conventional notions of decolonization. This article aims to present an argument that challenges decolonization narratives by exploring the potential limitations and unintended consequences of embracing decolonization as an absolute solution for



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In 1998, California Newsreel, the now oldest American non-profit, social justice film distribution and production company, based in San Francisco, released Flora Gomes' "Mortu Nega", in order to commemorate three starkly dissimilar events: the 25th anniversary of the independence of Guinea-Bissau; the assassination of its leader, Amílcar Cabral; and the year that the country annihilated itself in a brutal civil war. In the catalogue description of the movie, one can read that "'Mortu Nega', as its title implies [Those Whom Dead Refused], is a unique kind of elegy—not so much to the victims of the liberation struggle as to its survivors" (n/p). Aaron Segal, in a short 1990 review of the movie, interprets the title as derived from a ceremony in the movie to reconcile the living and the dead. According to him, "This extraordinary ritual which is danced in the film by the National Ballet Company and several thousand volunteers is intended to drive out the forces of disunity. Hence the title of the film, which might be translated as 'Denying Death'" (Segal 1990, p. 100). The California Newsreel catalogue entry also adds that "The film poses a question facing much of Africa at the start of the 21st century: with the goal of independence achieved, what can serve as an equally unifying and compelling vision around which to construct a new society?" (n/p). That is thus the challenge: while the goal of independence may have brought diverse groups together in a common struggle, sustaining unity in the post-independence era requires a shared vision that goes beyond political liberation. It necessitates a comprehensive framework that addresses social, economic, and cultural dimensions, fostering inclusivity, equality, and sustainable development. While agreeing with this assessment, I am also arguing that the film poses a slightly different question: how can the vision for constructing a new society, following the achievement of independence, actively include and empower women in shaping social, economic, and cultural dimensions, promoting gender equality and ensuring their meaningful participation in governance and decision-making processes? Can the answer to this question be explained by decolonization theory? Or, to put it a different way, can decolonization discourse explain why and how total liberation for women remains an unaccomplished goal in Guinea-Bissau? Even though "Mortu Nega" has been characterized as the "trajetória de luta e de vida de Diminga (Bia Gomes), que perderá seus filhos na guerra" (Oliveira 2017) and as "a tale of passion unconsumed by war" (Dhada), I would like to suggest we also view it as a critical narrative about the shortcomings of post-colonial Guinea-Bissau.

2. Historical Context

In order to understand the significance of "Mortu Nega" in relation to decolonization, I will begin by providing some historical context on Guinea-Bissau, arguably one of the most challenging Portuguese ex-colonies, due to its long-term, continuing resistance to imperial power¹.

As Peter Karibe Mendy reminds us, "The Luso-Guinean encounter dates back to 1446, when the Portuguese navigator Alvares Fernandes dropped anchor at Varela, between the Casamance and Cacheu rivers on the extreme northwest coast of present-day Guinea-Bissau" (Mendy 2003, p. 37). Portugal claimed control and exclusive trade rights over Guinea-Bissau, then known as Upper Guinea, incorporating the region in its vast seaborne empire that extended to Asia. The Portuguese monarchs, claiming authority over various regions, including Guinea, faced opposition from local rulers who resisted their imperial ambitions for 450 years. Despite some collaboration between the local ruling classes and the Portuguese settlers, forts and settlements were mainly limited to the coastal

network of waterways known as the Rivers of Guinea of Cape Verde. The term “Cape Verde” referred to Portugal’s assertion of sovereignty over the area, which appeared to be exercised from the archipelago located around 900 km northwest of Guinea-Bissau. Conflict between the Portuguese and the Papeis, a tribal group, arose in 1697, as the tribal chief, Incinhate, demanded the removal of trade restrictions and an end to the exploitative practices associated with the slave trade. This marked the beginning of a series of wars between the two parties. In Chilcote’s words:

Such wars persisted throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the end of the latter century intensive military efforts could not subdue the rebellious Africans. The assassination of a Portuguese governor in 1871 was followed nearly a decade later by attacks on the military outpost at Buba. Only after years of harassment and the grouping of a force of several thousand were the Portuguese able eventually to force the retreat of the legendary chief, Mussa Molo, in 1886, although resistance continued thereafter. (Chilcote 1977, p. 32)

Portugal’s establishment of the loosely defined and self-governing Province of Portuguese Guinea was a strategic move to prevent rival powers from making claims in the region. This decision, made just before the Scramble for Africa, also reflected Lisbon’s growing concerns about French activities in the area. In their desperate attempts to control the African population, the Portuguese initiated the “Campaign of Guinea” in 1907. Initially, they focused on isolating the rebellious chief, Infali Sonco, which involved the pillaging and burning of numerous villages and vast stretches of land. They achieved moderate success in containing the Africans near Bissau as part of the second phase. However, despite four military campaigns between 1912 and 1915, they were unable to fully control the African population. States of siege were declared in 1917 and 1931, and even as late as 1936, another military operation was required to quell disturbances in Canhabaque².

The territory known in Portugal as the oldest colony would ultimately be the stage for the first independence of overseas territories in Portuguese Africa, but only after ten years of guerrilla warfare. Beginning in 1954, determined efforts by African individuals to liberate Guinea-Bissau commenced with the establishment of the first underground liberation movement. When this initial attempt failed, the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) was founded by Amílcar Cabral. Initially, the focus of the PAIGC was on mobilizing artisans and urban workers, particularly those in port and river transportation. A series of strikes took place in 1958, but after the tragic incident on August 3 the following year, where fifty striking dockworkers, who were holding a peaceful demonstration at Pidgiguiti, lost their lives, the PAIGC altered its strategy to avoid public demonstrations. Instead, the organization concentrated on mobilizing and organizing the rural peasantry, aiming to bridge tribal divisions and achieve national unity by shifting their activities from urban centers to the countryside. As Chilcote affirms: “As early as 1962 the PAIGC initiated raids within Guinea-Bissau, but guerrilla warfare was launched a year later. Africans gradually gained control until even the Portuguese acknowledged fifteen percent of their colony had fallen to enemy hands” (Chilcote 1977, p. 34). The war of liberation began in January 1963, after a two-year intensive and successful campaign of political mobilization (Urdang 1975, p. 29). In February 1964, the party held a conference within Guinea-Bissau, announcing the need for a new phase focused on discipline and organization. This led to the establishment of revolutionary armed forces and the division of the country into strategically defined command zones. Concurrently, efforts were made to address economic and social issues. An economic plan was implemented in liberated areas, aiming to enhance agricultural production, establish internal trade networks, create food storage facilities, and dismantle Portuguese monopolies. Additionally, schools were set up in these liberated zones. On 24 September 1973, Portuguese Guinea declared itself Guinea-Bissau, in the Boé Hills, unilaterally proclaiming its independence, which would only be recognized by Portugal after 25 April 1974, with the end of the dictatorship.

In Section 4, I will explore the role of gender in Guinea-Bissau’s history of liberation struggle.

3. *Mortu Nega*

In one study regarding “*Mortu Nega*,” Jusciele Conceição Almeida de Oliveira mainly deals “with some issues of cinema, history, culture and memory of Guinea-Bissau, present in the film *Mortu nega*, with emphasis on themes such as the beginning of the liberation struggle and its last year, Amílcar Cabral, 25 April 1974, decolonization and the postcolonial situation” (Oliveira 2017, p. 73). Oliveira, nonetheless, does not question the process of decolonization and its aftermath. Below, I will closely examine the narrative and thematic elements of the film in order to delve into the complexities and limitations that impede the full realization of gender equity and empowerment in post-independence Guinea-Bissau. “*Mortu Nega*” highlights the paradoxical nature of gender decolonization, where dismantling colonial structures alone falls short of addressing deep-seated socio-cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequalities. Through an exploration of the film’s portrayal of historical events and personal narratives, I aim to shed light on the often-overlooked challenges faced by women within formerly colonized communities in their pursuit of true liberation and gender justice. On one hand, “*Mortu Nega*” challenges traditional gender roles by portraying female characters who actively participate in the struggle for independence. Through the character of Diminga, a strong-willed and resilient woman, the film illustrates the agency of women in the liberation movement. As Aaron Segal rightly points out, “The role of women in the protracted struggle for independence in Guinea-Bissau has found its film and its heroine. It is also a lyrical film about Diminga and her older companion Lebeth, about the return of Diminga to the village, and village life before and after independence” (Segal 1990, p. 100). Thus, Diminga represents the collective experiences and aspirations of the women in the film. On the other hand, and in a contradictory way, the film also leads us to a discussion whether decolonization discourse can or cannot explain the continuing struggle for women’s rights in Guinea-Bissau.

It is 1973. The end of the struggle for liberation in the Portuguese Guinea is approaching. In a realistic way, “*Mortu Nega*” begins with a scene at the border with Guinea Conakry, where PAIGC guerrilla members are receiving army munitions from the soldiers in the neighboring country. Amongst them, women help to carry the weaponry. Diminga, the main female character, is introduced as she is recognized by a guerrilla fighter who gives her good news: her husband, Sako, a comrade fighting the Portuguese army, is doing well. She is obviously happy to receive such information. We also get a glimpse of Lebeth, since Diminga questions her if she is capable of walking with them. As the group gathers to initiate the long walk towards their camp, they are warned of the danger that they might find on the road and of the need to always walk together. War, the spectator realizes, is a community effort, bringing together men, women, and children in the bush. Eventually, they reach a stopping point to spend the night, and Lebeth, an older woman who becomes Diminga’s companion, is formally introduced, and we hear her devastating story. She is from the village of Kassumba. She tells Diminga that her village had been bombarded and all her family left. Lebeth was wounded and sent to Conakry by the Party to be treated. She came back to her country because she felt odd to be away from her family. The group resumes their journey, and another threat is raised. This time, the rebels face mines that could blow up and take lives in a split-second. The soldier in command puts Lebeth right behind him in the line instructing that everyone must step where she does. Why did he choose the eldest women in the group to be in second place begs the question, one that it is followed by an almost immediate answer. This is perhaps one of the movie’s techniques to show the relevance of women to the liberation struggle, since Lebeth imposes herself and tells the guerrilla fighter that she cannot follow him because he is young and strong, the opposite of her, and so he will have to follow her. He is taken by surprise and smirks. His decision is cut off by the sound of a helicopter and everyone has to hide in the bush. While laying on the floor, Diminga says that it is over now, to which Lebeth replies: “It will never be over, never. . .” Her answer, as an older woman, can be interpreted as a hint to the future where one war can officially end, but the struggles of women will continue after independence. Diminga asks, “What makes you say that?” and we hear silence.

The silence is broken by the explosion of a mine, one that kills a child, bringing the camera to a close shot of a woman, again showing the continuous suffering of women. As the group moves on to the village, the women shed tears for the loss while the men's body language is stern. At the village, some children are happily playing when a bomb drops. A woman lays on the floor in deep suffering. Her home is destroyed, and she cannot fathom the idea. We see flames, burning huts, and Diminga trying to console her. The human caravan continues their journey, moving slowly through nature's own tricks. At a resting point, another close up shows Diminga and Lebeth as they engage in conversation. Lebeth asks the correct direction of the camp and if she will find her husband there. Diminga smiles as she replies that she hopes so. The following question is harder to answer since it pertains to her children. Will Diminga also find them there? We hear another silence.

Their journey continues across a river where people have difficulty walking and get buried in the mud. The women need to be helped by the men. They finally arrive at the camp. Diminga asks for Sako and is told that he is out at the ambush. At night, a dancing ceremony helps to release the mood. The following day, Lebeth and Diminga rejoice at the radio as it announces a victory for the freedom fighters. Diminga decides to join a supply team so she can go see her husband at the front. She reunites with Sako in a tender and happy embrace. He is surprised to see her there. As they walk along a trench an attack happens. Diminga is scared since, as she states, "death is everywhere today." Sako thinks that she should not have ventured to the front, obviously a dangerous place reserved for the men. He is, nonetheless, optimistic that the end of the war is near. They need to move along, and Diminga is now the only woman amongst a group of fighters who needs to hide as they suffer another attack by the Portuguese army. Her courage is emphasized in the scene. Sako's optimism is soon to be broken by the unexpected and shocking news: Amílcar Cabral is dead, assassinated. It is hard for him to believe it. The morale at the camp is low, and a dying comrade asks Diminga to confirm its truth to which she replies that no one can be certain, possibly just rumors, as she closes his eyes. Death is everywhere. Diminga is once again in pain; tears flow down her face for the loss of one more comrade.

The death of Cabral is incommensurable, with some believing that now the war will never end. Others are more optimistic. Their reasoning: the Portuguese cannot go on forever, as the spectator is faced with another scene of attack to a Portuguese camp, from which the women are absent, but in which there is confirmation of the weaker resistance of Portuguese soldiers. They ran away and a white flag is raised. Those Guineans, the so-called "traitors" who were fighting on the Portuguese side, surrender. Meanwhile, Diminga is taking care of Sako, who has been in bed for a month, sick. The scene is telling the viewer that the role of women is also to take care of the injured men, to give them love and support. They talk about the end of war as they put their clothes to dry; they have had enough of war, but Lebeth warns them: "Do not rejoice so soon. The war began before the births of me, my mother, and grandmother. Who says it is over?" The men rejoice as well. One more campaign and the war will soon be over. Sako and Diminga have to part again and she insists on going with him. He refuses because she has already taken too much risk. The question may arise for viewers: is this male protection because they see women as valuable, or because they are considered too weak for war?

Diminga and Lebeth initiate a long journey to Diminga's village, during which we hear Lebeth singing. Her song is one of pain caused by the struggle and hope for a better future:

I too bear the memories of the struggle
I too feel the suffering of all mothers
I too bear the marks of suffering
I too will never speak of it
For I too, I too live in hope

The small pleasures of the hard lives of these women can be found in a little sip of palm wine given by a stranger in the road and the playfulness and happiness of children whom Diminga tells that the war is over. They might have a future now. As the journey

proceeds, they need to cross a river on a boat. We hear Diminga's thoughts. In the war she was separated from Sako. Today the war is over, but she is going back home alone. Her loneliness and pain remain as signs that life might not change from one day to the next. Almost ten years away from home, Diminga cries, since she will find an empty house. As they arrive to her village, she is welcomed by all the women who are happy and surprised to see her. They thought that they would never see her again. She is questioned about her children, and we get the answer that was already suspected: "The war took them." An older woman tells her with the practicality of those who have endured too much in life: "You are young. God will give you other children." Out of kindness, Diminga lets a woman who had occupied her house during her absence stay, since she has children.

The scenes that follow show the arduous work of women: they are responsible for taking care of the children, cultivating the fields, and grinding manioc in large pestles. Men are not suited for these tasks, as they laugh at the schoolteacher who offers to help them in the fields. In school, they learn the word *luta* [struggle], and only a woman can explain its meaning. And, in her case, it has a very specific definition: "Struggle is what I do to feed my children." This is different from the meaning given by Sako, for whom struggle is connected to the fight for independence. To him, the teacher replies: "The struggle was yesterday, for women it is today." They all agree that the struggle is not over. This is shown by the living conditions in post-war independence: the well is dry, and there is no potable water. If it does not rain, Diminga does not know how they will manage.

Sako's war injury keeps getting worse, and needs treatment at a hospital at the capital. The crossing of a river in a boat that is taken on water can be symbolic of a future country that needs to fix the holes and heritage left by colonialism. One issue highlighted in the film at this point is the social emergence of neo-colonialists: Sako's comrades in the war are now the new urban elites who have abandoned their revolutionary ideals and commitments to their colleagues; and, as Diminga finds out when she seeks help for her husband, they have lost their solidarity with and forgotten the names of former comrades as they move up the ranks of bureaucratic jobs. As she moves on in her attempt to find a second official, whose name was given by Sako, we hear a song in her tribute:

Diminga, mother of guerrillas,
You have wept enough
Diminga, you must put up a fight
That is what "struggle" means.

There is still some hope, since the second comrade offers to send a car to take Sako back to his village. His injury cannot be treated in the city, a site now of neo-colonialist aspirations. He does not want to die there. Only the village can bring him peace and the possibility of healing. During the drive, though, the images of the landscape are of dry land. The drought is everywhere, perhaps even in people's hearts.

Diminga has a prophetic dream: of burning cubatas, mud, cadavers, skeletons, fire, drought, and death. She tells the village women that she has never had a dream like that. A ceremony is organized to ask the dead what must happen with all the ethnic groups. Diminga speaks at the ceremony: "I am Diminga from the generation of sorrows, Mother and sister of our fighters, their faithful friend. My breasts have fed the stones of Boé with tears and sweat. I have watered the palm, the kapok and the baobab tree that offer their shade to our dead. Do not take offense that I call on you so late. Do not look at my face lined by adverse winds." The people rejoice at her words. All are united, all those who sacrificed their lives for the struggle, those whom death denied. Diminga wants to know who the gods want. After the ceremony, the rain comes. Diminga and Sako smile, the children come outside to play in the rain. It is the last scene in the film. Rain is easily read as a symbol of hope, but does this hope persist after fifty years of independence, especially for women?

4. Women in the Liberation Struggle

In the throes of the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau, the pivotal role played by women becomes a captivating and frequently neglected facet. Expanding on this, a 2019 article by [Galvão and Laranjeiro \(2019\)](#) highlights the integral participation of women in the PAIGC-led liberation struggle. It portrays women not merely as passive contributors, but as dynamic agents undertaking diverse war-like activities and engaging in anti-colonial militancy. In this portrayal, women emerge as equals, assuming roles that are both complementary and equivalent to those of their male counterparts. Nevertheless, women's role mirrored the intricate tapestry of the country's history.

A 1975 article by Stephanie Urdang, a well-known South African writer and anti-apartheid activist, raises important points on the participation of women in the liberation process in immediate post-independence Guinea-Bissau. Urdang's analysis also benefits from being a first-hand description, since she visited the ex-colony at least twice in the period of the war for independence. In her words:

The involvement of women in the revolution, a goal from the very beginning, was not an afterthought brought about through necessity (the Algerian revolution is a case in point). When the first mobilizers went into the countryside in 1959–1960, the program of political education for which they were trained by Cabral included raising the consciousness of both women and men about the oppression of women and the need to fight against it. At first few women attended the meetings called by the mobilizers; those who did relayed the message to the women of their village and encouraged them to attend. Attendance by women slowly increased. By the time I visited the country just over a decade later, men and women were attending meetings of the population in equal numbers. Half the speakers that I heard were women, who told me of their participation in the revolution and who spoke with confidence before hundreds of people. ([Urdang 1975](#), p. 30)

As Urdang states, Amílcar Cabral believed that a truly successful revolution would not be possible without the full participation of women³. The PAIGC's program, which encompassed both the armed struggle and the establishment of a new society, exemplified this. A party directive from the early 1960s expressed this notion:

Defend women's rights, respect women (children, youth and adults) and make them respected; but convince the women of our country that their liberation should be their own achievement, by their work, attachment to the Party, self-respect, personality and steadfastness before everything that could be against their dignity. ([Urdang 1975](#), p. 30)

Urdang also reminds us that, initially, women on the council were assigned the task of supplying rice, which was a crucial food source for the guerrillas. This responsibility was considered part of traditional "women's work," and men were unable and unwilling to perform it. Therefore, men supported the inclusion of women on the council. Food production was made into a political task. Once women joined the council, they actively participated in collective decision-making, and were encouraged to play an active role. At the time that Urdang was writing, the party had women serving as presidents, vice-presidents, and taking on responsibilities beyond the village. PAIGC took various measures to contribute to the advancement of women's freedom. They identified three traditional customs—divorce, forced marriage, and polygyny⁴—as particularly harmful and oppressive to women. These customs were specifically targeted for elimination, aligning with PAIGC's stance on eradicating "detrimental traditions." According to Urdang, "Lack of divorce for women and forced marriage were seen as the most oppressive of the three, and efforts were quickly made to decrease their practice; the result has been that they have virtually disappeared" ([Urdang 1975](#), p. 31). As we will see further, not all the goals were achieved and women in Guinea-Bissau are still struggling for their freedom.

More recently, Aliou Ly explores the role of women in Guinea-Bissau's history of liberation struggle and the country's overall history in his article "Promise and Betrayal." Ly highlights the fact that women's mass participation in the independence struggle was not followed by sustained commitment to women's equality in the post-colonial period. For example, the critic states that "The discrepancy between the official policy of gender equality and the low representation of women in political leadership has inevitably aroused several interpretations and speculation about the seriousness of Guinea Bissau's commitment to gender equality" (Ly 2014, p. 35). He discusses how Amílcar Cabral and his party, the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), realized that the national liberation war could not succeed without women's participation, not only as political agents but also as fighters. Cabral also understood that a genuine national liberation meant liberation not only from colonialism but also from all the local traditional socio-cultural forces, both pre-colonial and imposed by the Portuguese rulers, that excluded women from decision-making structures at every level of society. However, many of the former women fighters say that male PAIGC members did not fulfill promises of socio-political, economic, and gender equality that were crucial to genuine social transformation:

[...] when it is about gender and women's emancipation, Guinea-Bissau males found refuge in the idea of maintaining our culture or tradition to avoid any potential change, but they also forget that African social and cultural practices are dynamic and not inert. African cultures and social practices always adapt to new environments. (Ly 2014, p. 37)

Ly concludes that Guinea Bissau provides an especially clear case for exploring the relation in Africa between broken promises to women and the unhappiness reflected in the saying "Africa is growing but not developing". (Ly 2014, p. 38)

In a subsequent article, "Revisiting the Guinea-Bissau liberation war: PAIGC, UDEMU and the question of women's emancipation, 1963–74," the author further explores the role of women in the liberation struggle of Guinea-Bissau. Ly focuses on the role of women in the PAIGC and UDEMU (Democratic Union of Women of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde) parties, and their contributions to the struggle for independence. He argues that the absence of viable women's organizations working for women's liberation presented several challenges to African feminist activists and male-led national liberation movements during anti-colonial movements. It was only after the Second World War that the demands of women across the continent converged with those of national liberation movements, as women proved to be a very reliable asset. The PAIGC and UDEMU offer examples of African national liberation movements that stressed the need for equality between men and women in the context of the revolution, ensuring that women occupied leadership positions. However, many party members did not support this radical approach, and internal conflict among the men caused UDEMU to disband in 1966. Ly's study reveals the sociocultural and gender biases among even the most advanced male leaders, which hindered the women's emancipation agenda from being fulfilled. Nonetheless, during the struggle, many women reverted to their traditional beliefs, believing that other matters required their attention more urgently: "The women who were assigned to UDEMU leadership appeared to view themselves more as freedom fighters than as a feminist vanguard" (Ly 2015, p. 374). By offering a nuanced examination of the women's role in the liberation struggle and their endeavors to establish gender equality in Guinea-Bissau, Ly concludes that UDEMU failed:

[...] because it was subordinate to the PAIGC, which focused on national liberation, as opposed to the women's struggle, even though women's emancipation was part of the PAIGC's official agenda. Second, within the PAIGC, forces against social and cultural change were able to stop or minimize any reform in the area of women's rights. These conservative sociocultural forces were successful in part because women in Guinea-Bissau did not assign great importance to gender questions, nor did the leadership of UDEMU consider achieving equality for women as its most important goal. (Ly 2015, p. 375)

What I will attempt to show next is that we should not fall into the trap of decolonization thought to explain the failures in the process of women's liberation and emancipation. As Ketu Katrak emphasizes, "[...] a revolutionary change does not guarantee an automatic equality of the sexes. The history of revolutionary struggles where women's issues are considered 'secondary' or 'divisive' are all too common" (Katrak 1989, p. 161). She clearly states that "the most regressive aspects of culture, particularly detrimental to women, persist through almost all decolonization strategies" (Katrak 1989, pp. 161–62). Even though Cabral's theory and Gomes' post-independence movie stress that without freeing women, there's no decolonization, decolonization theory still has not guaranteed the full liberation for women, peasants or African spaces, as we will further see.

5. The Trope of Decolonization

It is not hard to analyze "Mortu Nega" as a decolonial film. The movie challenges and subverts the dominant narratives and representations imposed by colonial powers. It highlights the agency and resilience of the colonized people, portraying their resistance, sacrifices, and determination to reclaim their independence and cultural identity. By giving voice to the perspectives and experiences of the colonized, the film disrupts and confronts the colonial gaze, offering a counter-narrative that seeks to decolonize the representation of history. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that the film is more about the process of decolonization, centered in the last year of the war in which Guinea-Bissau achieved its independence with some temporal distance to what the challenges of the new nation would become. By using Olúfemi Táíwò's⁵ argument that we should abandon the "decolonization" trope, if our aim is to answer questions such as "what kind of human the newly decolonized will become, and how far along the path to creating the best human and to establishing the conditions for the best life for the humans we are (...)," we see that "decolonization was not intended to answer" (Táíwò 2022, p. 42) these questions. According to Táíwò it is fruitless to extend "the scope of decolonization beyond its original meaning—that is, of making a colony into a self-governing entity with its political and economic fortunes under its own direction (though not necessarily control)" (Táíwò 2022, p. 20). However, he continues,

'Decolonization' today ... has come to mean something entirely different: forcing an ex-colony to forswear, on pain of being forever under the yoke of colonization, any every political, intellectual, social and linguistic artefact, idea, process, institution and practice that retains even the slightest whiff of the colonial past. I call this decolonization.

Decolonization presents itself in a number of ways. Any aspect of an ex-colony that mirrors what was there during the colonial period is treated as evidence of continuing colonization. Any institution that can be traced to colonial times must be shunned once colonization has supposedly ended. The ultimate nebulous claim is that decolonization is complete only after all forms of domination are overturned. In this way, decolonization is equated with human emancipation, and this is why some people speak of the 'myth of decolonization' in Africa. It does not take too much effort to see how this way of thinking is flawed. (Táíwò 2022, p. 20)

Táíwò argues that no society is anywhere near accomplishing full human emancipation, and if we see this as the ultimate goal of decolonization then the anti-colonial task is always unfinished. According to him, "it is decolonization that has lost its way and is seriously harming scholarship in and on Africa" (Táíwò 2022, p. 21). Without wanting to digress here too much, it is worth noting that an argument very similar to Táíwò's was offered by another African scholar at a recent presentation focused on decolonization: she called the use of the term an "intellectual vogue,"⁶ while decolonization has "become a catch-all trope, often used to perform contemporary 'morality' or 'authenticity'" (Táíwò 2022, p. 21). Táíwò clearly explains that the concept of decolonization, "accurately applied,

describes the struggle for independence and its outcome, creating a sharp and clear division between one state and another, and aiding in our understanding” (Táíwò 2022, p. 21). “If we extend its parameters beyond this,” Táíwò affirms, “we are just chasing shadows and incorrectly identifying causality” (Táíwò 2022, p. 21). The issue here, in his perspective, is that the “facile attribution to colonial causation of many practices and processes comes from an absolutization of colonialism and its supposedly almost undefeatable capacity to bend the will of the colonised,” and, at the same time, “this approach denies or at least discounts the agency of the colonised” (Táíwò 2022, p. 24). In this way: “Decolonising scholars cannot escape a Manichean division in which, (just as during colonial times), the colonized and the colonisers must occupy entirely distinct space” (Táíwò 2022, p. 25). Táíwò argues, in a nutshell, that “the concept of ‘decolonization’ is best understood if we restrict ourselves to conceiving of it as eradicating colonialism” (Táíwò 2022, p. 39).

I believe it is worthwhile to call attention here also to the words of Luís Cabral, the half-brother of Amílcar Cabral, who became the first President of independent Guinea-Bissau. In an interview with Ronald Chilcote (1977) during his presidency, Luís Cabral responded in the following way to a question regarding the country’s lack of resources if it would remain dependent on the outside world:

Even if one had all necessary resources, no one country can exist in isolation. But we are in Africa and we must establish relations within the African community of nations as well as the rest of the world.... We are a people who wish to integrate into our African world. This cooperation is indispensable for our development. Because of the struggle that we have experienced, no people or state has the right to dominate another state, but the state must be free and sovereign and able to develop itself on equal terms. (Chilcote 1977, p. 39)

Furthermore, Luís Cabral does not see a contradiction between the dependency of the country on the outside world and the anti-imperialist struggle. Decolonization, for him, we might emphasize, has ended with the independence of the nation. Táíwò’s makes the same type of argument when he states that,

Many of the practices and ideas that must be expunged from our lives to move closer to Fanon’s ‘new human’ do not have their origins in colonialism. Whether it is child marriage, polygyny, caste systems, oppressive rule under native hierarchies denominated largely by chieftaincy, gender oppression, ethnic chauvinism and so on, it would be difficult to make sense of the struggles against these in terms of decolonising. (Chilcote 1977, p. 49)

6. Conclusions

It is my sense that Flora Gome’s “Mortu Nega,” released fifteen years after Guinea-Bissau’s independence, is a movie about decolonization which has a couple of goals: first and foremost, it is an homage to Amílcar Cabral—as well as to the revolutionary soldiers (men and women) who fought and died valiantly—and the ideals of the liberation struggle, ideals which the movie reminds the spectator should not be forgotten; by centering itself around female characters and their struggle, the film is also a reminder that the goals for the liberation of women have not been fully accomplished. Concomitantly, “Mortu Nega” questions the myths of nationhood, reminding us that in many ways the “‘new humans’ born from the independence might fail [and indeed, failed] at their task” (Táíwò 2022, p. 47), and that the responsibility to become history-makers falls upon African agency, as was the case during the struggle for independence. By paying tribute to Cabral, the message cannot be other than Cabral’s own vision for the independence movement, i.e., “the key qualitative difference between colonialism and independence was that in the one, their capacity to control their destinies was blocked, while in the other, they could make their own history under their own steam—even if they may have been doing it badly” (Táíwò 2022, p. 44). When we read Cabral’s words regarding specifically the issue of women’s liberation, it is easy to realize that he does not make colonialism responsible for the lack of

emancipation and advancement of “their” women, and he warns the post-independence men of the need to get rid of their patriarchal minds or they will eventually lose their status as a representative of the people. In the following statements, Cabral is speaking and emphasizing the role of agency in the post-independence country.

A particular instance was the occasional stubborn, silent resistance to the presence of women among the leadership. Some comrades do their utmost to prevent women taking charge, even when there are women who have more ability to lead than they do. Unhappily some of our women comrades have not been able to maintain the respect and the necessary dignity to protect their position as persons in authority. They were not able to escape certain temptations, or at least to shoulder certain responsibilities without complexes. But the men comrades, some, do not want to understand that liberty for our people means women’s liberation as well, sovereignty for our people means that women as well must play a part, and that the strength of our party is worth more if women join in as well to lead with the men (Cabral 2012, pp. 105–6)

But in a while, when we have gained our independence, anyone who then wants our land to be independent, for example, but does not want women to be liberated, but wants to go on exploiting women in our land, though he is of the people today, he will not be so tomorrow. (Cabral 2012, p. 124)

As Urdang’s study points out, women at the time were conscious that the fight for their liberation “will go on long after the Portuguese colonialists have left the shores of Guinea-Bissau” (Urdang 1975, p. 34). She states at the end of her article, “Portuguese colonialism has been defeated. The fight against the other colonialism continues” (Urdang 1975, p. 34). The use of “other” means here that women were aware that the persistence of their issues had roots that did not necessarily derive from the colonial power.

Let us also not forget that Flora Gomes met Amílcar Cabral during the war for independence and that, as Gomes states in an interview, “Cabral wanted to document the formation of our country” (Bittencourt 1998, n/p), and so he sent Gomes with a group of others to study cinema in Cuba. Gomes states that “When I returned, Cabral wanted us to document the life in the liberated regions—the war, but also the daily lives of people in the countryside, and what life was like under Portuguese rule” (Bittencourt 1998, n/p). He further adds that Cabral “had a clear vision of what cinema could do” (Bittencourt 1998, n/p). Being formed as a film director under the influence of the liberation leader and intellectual, Gomes has spent his life answering his call, “be[ing] wherever blood was being spilled. Not to kill, but rather to bear witness to Cabral’s greatness” (Bittencourt 1998, n/p). Even though he sees democracy as a European experience, he does not think that democracy should be discarded by Africa, but rather that “we must ask ourselves how we can create a democracy that makes sense in our own context” (Bittencourt 1998, n/p). We cannot then use decolonization as a tool to analyze a piece of art such as “Mortu Nega,” since as Táíwò argues, “the same agency that removed the coloniser from the driver’s seat of the colonised’s history must now work to ensure that this hard-won freedom is not undermined by the ploys of the erstwhile coloniser” (Táíwò 2022, p. 46). As Nkrumah has put it, “For the true and real neo-colonialists are not other than we Africans ourselves” (Táíwò 2022, p. 46).

Almost fifty years after Urdang’s interviews of women in Guinea-Bissau, Ricci Shryock (2021) went to the country to hear the “untold liberation stories of Guinea-Bissau.” According to her, “. . . many of the women who fought during the liberation say the ideals of gender equality that they fought for did not materialize from the battle grounds into independent Guinea Bissau. The work that many of the women championed during the struggle, such as education and healthcare, were essential to winning the liberation fight, but today these services are not accessible to enough people in Guinea Bissau” (Shryock 2021, n/p). Shryock (2021) continues, “Even the 2018 passage of a parity law requiring that 36 percent of members of parliament be women has so far not materialized into more

formal representation. In the 2019 elections, only 14 of 102 elected members were women” (Shryock 2021, n/p).

The numbers show failure in the women’s emancipation project, one that was already predicted in “Mortu Nega.” The hope invoked by the rain is also accompanied by Diminga’s realization of the first fissures in collective solidarity. Nonetheless, “One thing is certain: we cannot simply assume that the colonized will or can never be free if they use their agency in ways that we find unacceptable or difficult to endorse” (Táiwò 2022, pp. 51–52). The new history-makers will then choose their path, the same way as they did when they decided to decolonize and achieve independence. Katrak also reminds us that “Often, with the best intentions, Western intellectuals are unconsciously complicit in an endeavor that ironically ends up validating the dominant power structure, even when they ideologically oppose such hegemonic power” (Katrak 1989, p. 159). Táiwò’s polemic maybe not be completely correct when he calls for an absolute repudiation of the decolonization theory, since he also fails to analyze gender issues regarding women’s liberation. Nonetheless, he urges us, like Katrak, to be critical of decolonization. Gomes’ “Mortu Nega” reinforces this as well, by focusing specifically on women and their role and achievements (or lack of) during and after independence. We need to believe, as Cabral did, in the power of works of art that speak to the human capacity for aesthetic appreciation across boundaries, leaving behind the Manichean division propagated by decolonization scholars or, as Katrak puts it, “We need to find theoretical models that will challenge what Mohanty aptly calls ‘a discursive colonization’” (Katrak 1989, p. 160).

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Notes

- ¹ According to Ronald H. Chilcote, “[Guinea-Bissau’s] Independence represented an end to centuries of African resistance to Portuguese rule and a guerrilla war which since 1963 had inflicted serious losses on Portuguese colonial forces” (p. 31).
- ² Mendy asserts that “During the period 1885–1915, the desperate attempts by Portugal to satisfy the Berlin Conference’s condition of ‘effective occupation’ also met with resistance from the local rulers. According to one Portuguese veteran of the numerous military campaigns during this period, ‘The revolts and massacres continued; the military interventions, always insufficient, were followed by precarious accords and, a little later, new revolts. Our strength was not sufficient to guarantee effective domination of the territory’” (Mendy 2003, p. 41).
- ³ Reiland Rabaka further explains: “The hardships he witnessed his mother endure and overcome while caring for him and his siblings undoubtedly influenced Cabral’s views on gender justice and, most especially, women as cultural workers and bona fide revolutionary comrades in the national liberation struggle” (Rabaka 2016, p. 6).
- ⁴ It is significant that in her study on “Decolonizing Culture” regarding women’s texts, Ketu H. Katrak (1989) mentions that African women’s texts “(…) deal with, and often challenge, their dual oppression—patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the concepts of womanhood, motherhood, traditions such as dowry, bride-price, polygamy, and a worsened predicament within a capitalist economic system introduced by the colonizers. Women writers deal with the burdens of female roles in urban environments (instituted by colonialism), the rise of prostitution in cities, women’s marginalization in actual political participation. Hence, women writers are presenting a new kind of content in their writings—issues which challenge patriarchy and capitalism—and new forms that can carry the weight of these concerns” (p. 173).
- ⁵ Olúfẹmi Táiwò is a Professor at Cornell University whose research work is focused on Social and Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Law and African Philosophy. While Táiwò’s argument may not be persuasive enough for many to abandon the project of contemplating the post-independence meaning of decolonization, those actively involved in this endeavor should seriously consider Táiwò’s text to prevent a scenario where decolonization and decoloniality tropes end up reinforcing colonial conditions.
- ⁶ Katrak makes a similar argument in her study: “Another more subtly insidious trend in recent postcolonial theory is the critic’s attempt to engage with certain fashionable theoretical models in order (1) to validate postcolonial literature, even to prove its value through the use of complicated Eurocentric models or (2) to succumb to the lure of engaging in a hegemonic discourse of Western theory given that it is ‘difficult’ or ‘challenging,’ often for the sole purpose of demonstrating its shortcomings for an interpretation of postcolonial texts” (p. 158).

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