

Testimony to the Presence of a Woman in the Colonial Wars in Africa (1961-1974)

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

Below is the testimony of Maria Adelaide Ruano, a Portuguese woman who lived in Angola during the colonial war there. Like many other women, she accompanied her husband to the continent on his military service.

Margarida Calafate Ribeiro took her testimony as part of a research project underway at the Centro de Estudos Sociais (University of Coimbra), which centers on the role of Portuguese women during the colonial war. She is grateful to Maria Adelaide Ruano, for both her willingness and her generosity. Margarida Ribeiro and Phillip Rothwell are responsible for translating the testimony into English.

I am the second daughter of a happy marriage. I was born in July, 1947, in Nelas, but when I was just three months old we moved to Figueira da Foz, where my parents, who were originally from Beira, made a living in business. Figueira was the city of my infancy and youth. I lived there until I went to university. It was a very pleasant city. You could go for walks a lot; you could play in the streets; I was very happy there. Even today, Figueira is a very special city for me. I would spend winter at school, at the cinema, going to small parties at friends' homes, typical activities for Portuguese cities in the provinces. And in the summer, the town became totally cosmopolitan. Waves of Spaniards and French would appear—there were a lot of foreigners, and the casino. In the summer, at least twice a week, I would go to the casino,

you know, there was so much glamour about it: the dresses, the jackets, the shows, the summer nights.

I had a very traditional education, strict in terms of permissible behaviour, ethics and morals, and also politically, even if it was characterized by a certain degree of open-mindedness, it was an “open-mindedness” in quotation marks. At home, we discussed politics openly, and on the whole, we were not happy with things as they were. My father was very liberal, even when it came to religion. I would go to mass, but if I didn’t, it was no big deal. However, we were absolutely forbidden to discuss politics outside our home, because there was a kind of consciousness of the fact it was a no-go area, a kind of fear and knowledge of the consequences that could be unleashed as a result of a less than prudent public expression of what we were actually thinking.

I came to Lisbon to take the university entrance exam when I was just sixteen, and I stayed in residence halls run by nuns. My movements were more or less controlled, even if discretely, but they were controlled. Later, when I came to Lisbon permanently to study, it was the same story. I could only go out at night with the expressed permission of my parents. Every time I wanted to go to the cinema, I had to ring up and ask them. When I say it like that, it sounds like we were completely conventional and that my education was conventional, but, in actual fact, my parents never said no, I couldn’t go out. However, these control measures existed, as was to be expected given the era in which we lived, and it was part of the way we were.

The course I had chosen, Economics and Business, was not offered at Coimbra, which would have been the natural choice for someone who lived in Figueira da Foz. My departure for Lisbon was initially a big shock for my father. It was also for my mother, but especially for my father. At the time, in 1965, the idea that students were all in revolt was common currency, the idea that they were against everything and everyone. And because of this, right from the beginning, my parents made it perfectly clear that I was there to study and that I should not get involved in politics. This was one of the greatest fears of most of the parents of my generation.

I usually rang home every day, and, at least once a week, my father would warn me: “You know that whatever happens, we will be there for you, now don’t get involved in any politics.” At the time, it was more normal to hear fathers say: “If I find out that you are there”—referring to Caxias—“I will leave you there to rot.”¹ After having warned me off politics, he would paint the darkest picture possible of what the PIDE prisons were like. I think any youth

would have been terrified by his account. I was certainly afraid. But, despite these warnings, my relationship with my parents was very good. We have to see things in the context of the 1960s. There was nothing more natural than children asking for permission from their parents. In fact, I had no sensation of being tightly supervised. My requests were always granted, I don't think my parents ever said no to me. There was a natural and healthy hierarchical logic underpinning relationships. Of course, despite my father's entreaties, there was a palpable atmosphere of tension that engulfed the university and this tension was very important to me. He was, in fact, right, there were fireworks in the air and I had just arrived in a glass bubble. Today, it all seems like a caricature, but just to let you know what it was really like, I'm going to tell you about a small incident that happened. When I came to Lisbon to do the university entrance exam, I sat at my desk, and the attendants brought us ashtrays so that we could smoke during the exam. I was shocked. At school in Figueira da Foz it was absolutely forbidden to smoke. Our smocks had to cover up our knees, and although the classes were mixed, during the breaks, we were separated from the boys. Then suddenly, they come and place an ashtray on my desk so that I can smoke during the exam. This was my first shock, something as simple as that. But it was through that that I realized I was in another world, a world that intimidated me at first, but that also excited me.

As far as politics were concerned, I was pretty naïve. For instance, I used to believe, in fact I really believed, that what appeared in the newspapers was the truth. What total naivety! I could not imagine that a journalist would write a news article, and put his byline on it, and, in fact, be writing an utter lie, or a partial lie or a misleading truth by omission. Sometimes, we would argue over politics, and I, quite innocently, would say, "But I read this in the paper," to which the reply would come that it was an out-and-out lie. While at university, I became aware of my own naivety. I became conscious that things were not as I had assumed or as they seemed to be, and that there were certain things about which one did not speak, but that still existed. I did not like Salazar, but neither was I particularly critical of him, probably because I had nothing with which to compare him. My relationship to him was rather dubious, or ambiguous: I thought things were in a poor state, I was aware of this, but I had no clue of exactly where or how, even if I identified our lack of freedom and development as a pretty fundamental problem. I was conscious of the fact that we were stuck. When Salazar died and Marcello Caetano was named prime minister, I was really happy. There were

great expectations around him, he was a younger man, perhaps more in tune with the era. This was our hope.

All this acquisition of a more politicised perspective on the way we lived had a lot to do with the degree course I had chosen. The School of Economics [*Instituto de Ciências Económicas e Financeiras*], in Lisbon, was one of the most open-minded. First of all, because we studied aspects of development, and then, because we had professors who opened up our minds, not in an in-your-face way, but with the subtlety with which they positioned themselves in relation to the material studied and in regard to anything to do with economic development. We would talk about agriculture, trade, industry, and in so doing, Portugal's own backwardness became blatant. It was through our studies that we felt and thought that we ought to be in a better socio-economic position and the reason we had not attained it was due to political factors. The faculty at the school was one of the most irreverent, in fact, perhaps because the very material we studied showed us clearly our undeniable backwardness in all its glory. However much you did not want to notice it, it was impossible not to see it.

The majority of my colleagues were men. It was around the time that I went to university that there began to be more women, something that was a determining factor for the era. As well as politics, the discussion of which still terrified my father, we would go to parties, to the cinema, we would listen to music, and read a lot. At the time, French culture was dominant. We would listen to John Holiday, Greco, Aznavour, we would read French authors religiously. But I also remember reading Manuel Alegre, his *A Praça da Canção*, which was banned. I happened to buy a copy of *A Praça da Canção* here in the center of Lisbon, I can't remember the name of the bookshop any more, I remember the place, maybe it was Bertrand's. Anyway, it was one of those books that one did not ask for at the front of the store. We would have to go to the back, where we would ask for it, they would wrap it up, and then we would pay. I also read *O Canto e as Armas*. That was a book that was widely read at the time, although not by the general public, in fact I would say not even by most of those at university. Not every student read *A Praça da Canção*. The School of Economics was very politicised, as was the Technical College [*Instituto Superior Técnico*] and the Faculty of Medicine. I'm not really sure about other disciplines and faculties. I think there were small numbers of politicised scattered across the student population.

I think I first heard of the colonial war while I was at school. But the first memory I have is of the problem in India. When the Indians took control of Portuguese India, in 1961, it terrified me, since, a little before, soldiers had gone to India, and there were already rumours circulating. My fear was because my father was still very young and people began to speak of the possibility of mobilizing conscripts for India. I was still young, and the idea of my father going to India was horrific. As far as Africa is concerned, what I first heard were stories of terrorists. Then, of course, from the moment that I met my husband, the war was ever present, it was something between us.

I met my husband while I was still at university. I met him through some colleagues, at some parties that we used to go to. He was a soldier, a pilot, in fact. Our affair was initially very short. We fell out after hardly any time, three or four months. Then he went to Guinea, and I more or less kept up with him while he was there. In the middle of his stationing in Guinea, he came back to Portugal, and he began to follow me around again. We got back together, and a short affair followed, a year or so.

At that time, our prospects for the future were not as clearly laid out as they are these days. My aim was to finish my degree and get a job, preferably a good job. Travel was out of the question, unlike nowadays. We may have thought of travelling but working and being married were what was expected, and what was more or less on every woman's mind. Everything was so different from today, when everything is planned out. People marry with fully furnished houses, in move-in condition. We used to marry and then go and live in rented houses, we would buy a little furniture, and then gradually things would be organized, we would bumble along. No one would dream of waiting until you had everything prior to getting married. Marriage was the aim, a liberation and an emancipation. It was the beginning of a new life, a life run by us, in accordance with our tastes, our actions and our wills. And that was really important.

The story of my marriage is interesting and obviously has a lot to do with the colonial war. In guerrilla warfare, helicopter pilots are invaluable. There were very few of them, and during the war, in Guinea, in some areas of Mozambique and in certain areas of Angola they were essential. So obviously, they were mobilized very quickly. After a few months in Guinea, my husband was transferred to Angola. It was then that he declared that he wanted to marry me. He did not want to go overseas again on his own. So he went to speak to my father. My father was utterly opposed, as was my mother.

Actually, my mother's reaction was really negative. My father was upset, he could not see how I would finish my degree, and he argued that the majority of people who interrupt their studies never finish. I think he imagined me married in Angola, having children, and he could not see how I would be able to finish my degree. For my mother, the issue was a lot simpler: she simply did not want me to go to Angola, because she was afraid. However, I thought that if I loved him, and I did love him, it was both my desire and my obligation to go with him. In fact, I thought it was terrible that he should go alone. We neither wanted, nor, if the truth be told, would we have accepted that possibility. And so I went. I packed my bags, interrupted my degree, and went.

We were married in October 1969 and went on our honeymoon with my husband constantly phoning his base to find out when he would have to go to Angola. So, I married knowing that very soon we would be leaving for Africa. My mother, once she had come to terms with the fact that my decision to marry was not negotiable, and having accepted that I would leave for Africa, made me a special trousseau to take with me. I already had a good trousseau, full of the nice things that girls have, but my mother thought it was not suitable for Africa. So, she bought me a suitcase with a red bottom (I can still see it today) and filled it with embroidered towels, kitchen utensils, all that kind of stuff. Everything was really pretty, all matching, but it was not as good as my original trousseau. When I married, I did not even set up a home here, because we were supposed to be going to leave immediately. However, we kept on having to wait. We eventually rented a house here, and since my godfather was an officer in the army, he arranged some furniture for us. We bought what was essential, and my parents lent us the rest, and we remained living in Portugal until July. I left for Luanda on 19 July 1970. My husband had left in June.

As far as I was concerned, in the beginning, the war was perfectly justified, but, actually, while I was still at university, falling in love with my husband, who was a soldier by profession, and even more so when I went to Angola, I began to be wrought by the complexity of the situation: it was so ambiguous, it really made me feel uncomfortable and worried me a lot. When I arrived in Angola, and saw what its reality was and heard that slogan "*Angola é Nossa*" [Angola is Ours], I remember saying: "Well the bit that is mine, I'm more than happy to give up completely, and get out of here straight away." Perhaps it was childish, now that I think about it, but there was in my innocent phrase a large dose of realism. So, my position, confronted with

what I was forced to live and faced with that land that they said was ours, became extremely ambivalent.

In my family, there was no tradition of being in the military, unlike in many Portuguese families. As far as my family was concerned, my husband was the first soldier we had had, unlike his side of the family, which boasted a military tradition. Both his uncle and his older brother served in the armed forces. Actually, both he and his brother were pilots. His brother passed away when he was twenty-two years old in an accident in Portugal that, as it happens, didn't even involve a plane. At the time, in order to be a pilot, the dream he had always had, meant being in the military.

I have to confess that I really didn't like the time I spent in Luanda. I spent much of the time at home, and, if I could, I would erase that time from my life. I didn't like it because my husband was always flying dangerous missions, and so it was a high-risk lifestyle. For instance, in every month, he would be at home maybe ten days, and those ten days would be scattered over the month, he would go away, then be back for three days, then go away again. And as well as the missions he had, there were the emergencies, the urgent evacuation of the wounded. There was no such thing as Saturday or Sunday. Twice during his posting, so that I could spend Christmas with him, I had to fly four thousand kilometres by plane to the ends of the earth, to Cuito Cadaval. It was a tiny village of three houses made from limestone and rock.

I ended up feeling really isolated, so I decided to matriculate in the university, because I wanted to finish my degree. I had promised myself this, and also my father. So, I matriculated, over there, in the university. I started attending the classes, but, in the meantime, became pregnant, and had a really difficult pregnancy. I would vomit every day several times, without fail. In the fourth month of the pregnancy, the doctor suggested the possibility of an abortion, because I was even thinner than I had been at the beginning of the pregnancy. I couldn't go anywhere, because I spent all my time vomiting. At the time, I was twenty-two. Then, there was a cholera outbreak in Luanda. Up until then, my mother had been taking all the vaccines to come and help me in Angola but, faced with the outbreak of an epidemic, it was more sensible for me to go to Portugal, to the metropolis as we used to say then. My daughter was born in 1971, in Coimbra. I vomited immediately after she was born, and thus I brought a close to the whole process—of my pregnancy and of my vomiting. Then I went to my parents' home, and after a month, I returned to Angola. Today, I would never go to Angola with a month-old baby.

My mother wisely advised me to stay in Portugal for a few months, but I could only think of my husband, and the work he was doing all alone. I neither wanted, nor was able, to leave him over there all alone. And despite the fact that he was away a lot, as I said earlier, it was so great when he arrived home, and we were there waiting for him. So I went back. I always, or nearly always, flew with TAP. The Air Force had houses over there, but there were not enough for the number of people stationed in Luanda. We had to rent a house, and the Air Force gave us a fridge, a stove, and a few other things that I can't remember any more what they were. I never liked the atmosphere in the mess. Only when I first arrived did I go there, but I stopped going almost straight away. There was a lot of gossip and a type of social life that really didn't interest me.

I centered my life on my home: I had a black maid with whom I got on well and who was indispensable for me with the baby. Now that you ask me, I never had the sensation that she could be the enemy. We had a normal relationship, and in spite of that dreadfully tense situation in which I lived, I never looked at her with distrust. Actually, in regard to all this stuff about relations between blacks and whites, it's really interesting because they were always saying that racism does not exist, and this was a blatant lie. I remember an incident, which really impacted me and showed me the true nature of interpersonal relations in Angola. I went to the pharmacy, and there was a black girl there. The pharmacist, as soon as he had seen me, asked me what I needed, completely ignoring her. I pointed out to him that that lady was there first. He said to me without thinking that that was irrelevant, she could wait regardless. I was shocked, and thought that his attitude might explain a certain animosity among the settlers against the military. The arrival of the military in great numbers, and often with their families, profoundly altered the pattern of social relations that had been followed by the settler community. The way they thought that one being was inferior to another, in other words, the way they based their social structures on inequality. The main argument that the settlers used against the military was that the soldiers were there to make money and nothing else. This judgment of theirs right from the start did nothing to foster good relations with the soldiers, especially since it was not true in most cases. I never saw blacks mistreated, but racism definitely existed, you just had to open your eyes to see it. Only once did I see a black driving a good car, apparently as its owner. Blacks drove the taxis or buses, and went by bus. There were no blacks in the cinema, for example.

In Luanda, my circle of friends was greatly reduced. I would hang out with some of my husband's colleagues, and their families when they were there. But no one mentioned the war. The war was a topic of concern, of anguish, of fear, and of silence, however paradoxical that may seem. There was an enormous amount of worry about it. To quote the mantra of the era, the more involved in operations our husbands were, the more discrete we should be. Sometimes, my husband and I would talk about it, but that was extremely rare, mainly because I was not in favor, as I said earlier, I always thought that land simply wasn't mine. But my position was ambiguous. Obviously, what I wanted when there was an offensive was that our side would win. My husband was on our side. But to me it was very obvious that that land had to be independent, and in my opinion, as it was causing me a great deal of pain, the sooner the better. As far as I was concerned, the end of the war meant independence. That the Africans should get their land was absolutely legitimate. When I saw the settlers arguing against us—I knew two or three couples—I would say to them: "So why don't you arrange your own army to defend what you think is yours?" Let them take the fate of that land into their own hands. Of course, that would not have been a good idea either. It would have been like the Rhodesian solution, a solution that did not work. But it was really easy to criticize when others had gone over there, and were the ones who suffered the ambushes, the ones who lost their friends, the ones who saw the mutilated corpses. I rarely spoke of politics, but I did blurt that out, so that things became a little tense. But even among my natural peers, that is, among the colleagues of my husband, mine was a lone voice; my views were not shared and I was well aware of this. At a certain point, given everything that was going on, I really wanted to go home.

My husband held a more ambiguous position: he heard what I had to say, but defended the view that that land was ours. I never told him that he should not go out on a mission, but I did not like it when he did. Everything was so riddled with contradictions, not just at the personal level, but also in public too. For example, with the outbreak of war, previously inconceivable rights were granted to blacks, in terms of educational possibilities, employment and health benefits. My husband would talk all about this, about the great work being done, showing me that without our presence, these were populations that would be more vulnerable, more unprotected, less developed in medical and educational terms. I recognize that this is true, but to

use this as an argument to justify that war, and therefore, all those sacrifices on both sides... I simply was not convinced.

My husband's job was really hard work; it was physically and emotionally exhausting, since it was so closely linked to the worst consequences of war. He was in high-risk situations, but also rescue missions. Maybe because of this, I don't know, despite the way the war developed, he never became discouraged in his dedication to his work. His actions were crucial, and meant a great deal to the lives of people who were most vulnerable and in danger. The helicopter pilots in the places where they were stationed had a really hard life—I'm not saying that other types of posting were not difficult too. But, they performed the evacuations of the wounded from active conflict zones. As well as this, they airlifted the parachutists and the mail to remote areas. They worked with the paramedic nurses, who were women of immense courage, admired by everyone. In Guinea, all the helicopters worked with these nurses. My husband never spoke to me about what he had been through or what he had seen. He only told me about the nice things. Even today. The other day, we were talking about those days, and he even said to me that he really had to stop talking about the overseas provinces the way he did, because when he talks about them it is only to say good things: to reminisce about the parties, the fun, the sunny side of our stay in Africa, giving the impression to those who are listening that it was all a big jamboree. And it certainly was not. Not at all. But, at the time, we had to cling to the positive things, since the harder life became, the more important it was that we were united and that we got along. I think he never told me about his missions, because they were really hard, and he wanted to spare me, he did not want to add to my anxiety. I think that the fact that I was over there, at his side, was fundamental, a determining factor that allowed life to retain some degree of normality. There were battles, there were bullets, there were dead and injured. One killed or one died. We were at war. I saw from the commendations that my husband received that he really was in high-risk situations. I went with him to receive his awards, and so I saw via the commendations the horror of war. I went twice with him to the June 10 celebrations, to receive his honors.

The June 10 ceremony was very well organized and a bit of a drag. I understood that my husband's commendations were very well deserved. They were the public recognition of him as someone who was professionally competent. They were the recognition of someone who had put his life in danger. But this is all very contradictory: I still thought that that land belonged

to the Africans, but, on the other hand, my husband had been in very dangerous situations, and I thought it was appropriate that this should be publicly recognized, even if I disagreed with the war, and was not favourably disposed to the regime that promoted it, and that, in essence, clung to the war as its only means of survival.

With regard to this monument that they recently erected to commemorate the dead from the colonial war, I don't want to comment.² I am not nostalgic: I really don't think that land was ours, nor that it should be ours, and I never thought it should have been. Theoretically, decolonisation should have been handled better, but for that to have happened, it would have had to have been prepared properly by politicians. They should have conducted it in a different way. Given that no preparation was made for decolonisation, I really am not sure that it could have been done any differently.

Even today, I have the experience of that period I lived in Africa firmly shut in my unconscious. I have never spoken about it with my children or my relatives.

When you asked me to do this interview, I said yes straight away without thinking that reliving those times would be so difficult for me, which it has been.

In retrospect, I'm sure that I haven't changed how I viewed my time over there, although the consequences of decolonisation are, even today, so negative. The situation in the countries that gained independence really hasn't improved as much as we had expected. In some cases, it is even worse, with wars that have broken out. In fact, independence is not everything. What is essential still needs to be done: education, health care, and development, things that should be so easy for such rich countries....

Notes

¹ Caxias was a prison where many political prisoners were detained by the Salazar/Caetano regime.

² This refers to a monument inaugurated in 2002 in Lisbon, in which those who died in the so-called "Guerra do Ultramar" [Overseas War] rather than the "Guerra Colonial" [Colonial War] were supposedly honored. As well as the whole issue of the monument itself, there is the problem of its designation and how we term the war itself.