

The Scars of Colonial Warfare Memories of Colonial War in Portugal

Portuguese Sea

*Oh salt-laden sea, how much of your salt
Is tears of Portugal!
To cross you, how many mothers have wept,
how many sons in vain have prayed!
How many brides-to-be, maids remained,
So we could make you ours, oh Sea!*

*Was it worth it? Everything is worth,
When the soul is not small.
Whoever wants to go beyond cape of Bojador,
Must also pass beyond pain.
To the sea God gave peril and the deep abyss,
But in it is what mirrors heaven.*

Fernando Pessoa – *Mar Português*
(translated from the Portuguese)

The territory which forms the modern Portuguese Republic has witnessed a constant flow of civilizations since prehistoric times. Early influences range from the Celtic inhabitants to the Roman and Germanic peoples who made an imprint on the country's culture, history, language and ethnic composition.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, with its global empire, it was one of the world's major economic, political, and cultural powers.

The Portuguese Empire was the earliest and longest lived of the European colonial empires, spanning almost six centuries, from the capture of Ceuta in 1415 to the handover of Macau in 1999.

Since the beginning of this Empire Portugal is characterized by a culture of endless departures and the feeling named as "*saudade*," a very special Portuguese word for longing. Fernando Pessoa shows this Portuguese archetype in his poems and writings as in his famous "Message" presented above.

Saudade permeates the hearts of all those who stayed here in the country waiting and dreaming of their beloveds as well as the ones that went away as explorers and warriors from this little country bordered by [Spain](#) and by the [Atlantic Ocean](#), across the endless sea onto which Portugal forever gazes. The ocean was our only way to expand and this became the Portuguese myth or

Fado, fate: to spread over all the oceans, to conquer every distant country. So it was that Portugal spearheaded the exploration of the world and undertook the Age of Discovery. This Age was when the tears of Portugal first began to flow and they continue right down to us today with those clients that we see who tell us the grim stories of that last battle to echo in all our lives: The Colonial War.

Between 1961 and 1974, Portugal played the lead role in the colonial war against independence movements that arose in the colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea. Portugal didn't want to lose its colonial empire so several fronts of war were opened - Angola in 1961, Guinea in 1963 and Mozambique in 1964 -designed to suppress the struggles for independence in these African countries.

Soldiers were sent to the African continent in increasingly bigger numbers to fight what became a bush war against the guerrilla insurgents. The war came under severe criticism, inside and outside of the country. It was a cause of discontentment for the population, which was seeing their children dying in a war that had no end, and was lowering standards of living in the draining financial effort to support the conflict.

The colonial war finished in 1974 with the revolution of 25 of April, known as *The Carnation Revolution*. This revolution itself was a result of the discontent of some sectors of the Armed Forces who no longer tolerated an interminable and unwinnable war.

Figures show that of the 800,000 who were sent to Africa, 8,807 died, 30,000 became clearly physically impaired but a huge silent majority without visible scars came home in terrible mute torment. Few of them talked about what they had experienced there, how many they had killed and how many friends and enemies, soldiers and innocents civilians they saw suffer and die. And if they do talk, few are prepared to listen, even now.

After the *Carnation Revolution* to assume that one had been in the war was considered "reactionary", no one wanted to talk about, it was and remains to this day, a taboo. Even today there are still people grieving and trying to claim the bodies of their beloveds missing in action.

Only in 1999 the Portuguese government begin to legislate about the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a legitimate cause of impairment and initiated improved research in this field. The impact of the PTSD on war veterans plus PTSD in the second generation has finally started to be studied in the last few years. Pereira and Ferreira (2004) and Pereira (2003), confirmed in their researches that the veterans' wives present symptoms of the secondary post-traumatic stress disorder.

Psychiatrist Afonso de Albuquerque said, in an interview with *Público Magazine* (1993), that Portugal should have as many as 100,000 men affected throughout the country, a whole generation of men who are now between 54 and 65 years old .

In my clinical practice is common to observe families affected by the war experience of a veteran. Conflicts are common and even domestic violence. Wives or descendants, as a population, have a

generalized disposition towards anxiety and/or depression and/or fears.

Manuel Alegre, a nowadays Portuguese poet and politician, is one of those who spoke out against the war. He had been conscripted, and sent to Angola, where his involvement in an attempt to stage a military mutiny led to his imprisonment. In 1964 he went to exile. He would live the next ten years in Algiers, where he was one of the main voices of a radio station broadcasting to Portugal, *Voz da Liberdade* (The Voice of Freedom). Distribution of his first books was forbidden by Salazar's government, so they were circulated in samizdat form. Alegre returned to Portugal in 1974, one week after the Carnation Revolution.

In books like "*Praça da Canção*" (Singing Square) and "*O Canto e as Armas*" (The Song and the Weapons) he documents the absurdity of war and the impotence of poetry. How it is to face this absurdity can be found in the following poem:

*De súbito três tiros na memória.
Apagam-se as luzes. Noite. Noite.
De súbito três tiros nas palavras
Um poeta calou-se apagou-se a canção.*

*Suddenly, three shots in the memory.
The lights go out. Night. Night.
Suddenly three shots hit his words
A poet is silenced, his song muted.*

De súbito um poema foi bombardeado.

Suddenly a poem is bombed.

*Um poeta fechou-se nas vogais
Cercado por consoantes que talvez
Caminhassem cantando para um verso.*

*A poet hides himself among the vowels
Surrounded by consonants that perhaps
Marched forward singing till they reach a verse.*

*Eram granadas? Eram sílabas de fogo?
E de súbito a guerra. Noite. Noite. E um poeta
Com seis letras escreveu no chão: porquê?
Com seis letras do seu próprio sangue.*

*Were those grenades? Were those syllables of fire?
And suddenly war. Night. Night. And a poet
With three letters written in the ground: why?
Three letters of his own blood.*

He also wrote:

"Wars are different, and so are the stages of soul...

We knew that, before the 4th, February in Luanda and the 15th, March in the north of Angola, thousands of Angolans had been massacred in *Icolo* and *Bengo* and in the *Baixa de Cassange*. Before it had properly started, the war was already a dirty war, as if there really is a war is that is clean. But from the beginning this was a war outside time and against all the time.

... The war was then a taboo, to discuss it was a kind of crime. I was morally against it, as were many of my friends. But we were there, sharing the destiny of a generation.

The rest of it is in my poems and romances that I wrote: in the bush, among all mines, the terror, the ambushes, and time passed so slowly. *Nambuanguongo*, *Quicabo*, *Quipedro*, *Zala*, they rhymed with "death" and "bullet". And the fraternity of weapons, the fellowship, the shared risk, the

shared smoked cigarette, the distributed water, the courage, and sometimes bravery. The dust, the blood, the first shots, the first dead. The feeling of that something had been broken forever. Morally we rejected the war and at the same time we loved the seduction of the danger and the combat.

War is not an algebraic operation, much less a computer game. Nor it has technological superiority that can dispense with the decisive element of any war: man. Any war combatant who was in Africa knows this. That war was, on both sides, a war of artfulness and patience. And, mainly, of much sacrifice, many pieces of body and soul left behind in the tracks.

This is the memory I have from the war that I went to: the memory of the men and their fears, the memory also of their courage, their flashbacks, their thirstiness and fatigue, their fury and tears, their faces and their many deaths..."

Manuel Alegre tells us about "*many pieces of body and soul left behind in the track*" it is what shamans calls "*Soul Loss*".

We cannot but imagine how all these young men who suffered physical or psychological trauma also lost part(s) of their souls, that vital essence that leaves the body and found a safe haven in some the realms of non-ordinary reality. Such a protective measure helps them to survive without having to experience the full impact of the war, these soul parts sometimes return on their own but, sometimes need assistance finding their way back.

We also know that even those that died in these wars, always in some violent way, in shock and confusion, never find rest and peace, but remain connected with the place of battle, or with comrades or commandants that are still alive.

Inevitably there is a huge amount of energy that is out of place, disrupting the collective soul of the country itself. It is weakened not only by the colonial war but also by the migratory movements that took place to and from the continent and the colonies.

After the Carnation Revolution and the independence was declared, Portuguese were persecuted by the native peoples. Having been forced to escape, leaving all their properties, dreams and "*maybe the own soul*" behind, as Adriano Gominho tells us in his e-book (<http://retornados.home.sapo.pt/>) they needed to begin with nothing. But coming back to their country they were not welcomed, they were discriminated against and named "the returned/refugees". The Portuguese Government claimed that this process was successful but the wound can be felt in the histories that we read on internet, in books and in the stories of clients and friends.

The consequences of this history are shown by recent research. The European Commission reported last year in their studies that Portuguese people are the most pessimistic people in Europe out of 25 nations (Diário de Notícias, 07/07/2006). That the great majority had no interest in their own country and declare themselves unhappy is demonstrated by an inquiry done by TSN Portugal, it confirmed that the Portuguese people are among the most pessimistic in Europe.

A research named “The seductive Force in Portugal” concluded that 85% of the people that were born and lived in Portugal are not involved with the country and 42% were unhappy (Lusa, Agência de Notícias 03/05/2006).

The experience of being Portuguese is to feel broken. Portugal is a country with many pieces of its soul scattered all around the world, a deep wound to be healed. We can listen to this in the sad poetry of Portugal and in the *Fado*, that sings of fate... Deeply buried feelings, disappointments in love, and endless sense of sadness and longing for some person who has gone away, the melancholy of everyday events, the ups and downs of life... such music captures what is to be Portuguese.

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