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Mortu Nega, Death Denied. Fora Gomes, director.

Reviewed by Mustafah Dhada
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Mortu Nega: A Deadly Cinematic Discourse on Love and War

In response to my earlier posting concerning the forthcoming release of <cite>Mortu Nega, Death Denied</cite> by California Newsreel under the co-directorship of Lawrence Daressa, I promised to get a review written and released to interested colleagues and scholars. Here it is. <p> <cite>Matu Nega, Death Denied</cite> is an hour-and-twenty-two-minutes long film about the liberation war in Guinea-Bissau broadly defined. It was made in 1988, fourteen years after Guinea-Bissau's independence from Portuguese colonial rule.[1] Scripted by the writer Nina Neves Alma, the film is directed by the Guinea-Bissau film maker Flora Gomes. Gomes was until very recently in Bissau before his flight to neighboring Senegal to escape the conflict in Guinea-Bissau between the Vieira loyalists, backed by military forces from neighboring states, and the mutinying military commanders led by Ansumane Mane. <p> The film is a major collaborative effort entailing the cooperation, monetary, material and moral support from numerous (actually over thirty three) Guinea-Bissau state agencies and overseas institutions in Portugal and Nordic Europe; all of whom are duly acknowledged in the credits at the end of the movie. The actual shooting of the film was done in several locations to capture, and faithfully reproduce, the flavor of the liberation war–and the aftermath. The sites that made the final cut are predominated by scenes from the mangrove-rich Balanta territory, south of the Geba Estuary, a rice growing area of Guinea-Bissau.[2] <p> The film bears the hallmark of the cinematographer Dominique Gentil, who is particularly drawn to softening the horrors of intense emotions cleft asunder by war and rural dessication under drought conditions. This softening is achieved with calculated unconsciousness in several ways: through shades of pastel shots; through wide angle shots of greyish brown rice paddies; through portrayal of delicate wisps swaying to and fro painting imagined landscapes in the wind; through black-and-brown clad fighters trampling through squidgy silver-grey mud carrying dull-metal arms and munition for the front-line; and through haunting shots of motionless rivers fusing into sunless skies in blankets of mist, pregnant with unknowns. <p> The film itself chronicles several things: the liberation struggle after January 1973, just a month before Amilcar Lopes Cabral's assassination, life behind the front-lines, and the aftermath and the post-partum politics in Guinea Bissau. Here Gomes specially focuses on revolutionary death knells, that is to say factors trammeling the march to a new and independent social order for Guinea-Bissau. Particular attention is paid to the role of bureaucracy in corruption, the corrosive influence of the invisible markets in centralized planning, and environmental climatology as factors undermining planned economies geared for socially-responsive sufficiency in production; all factors that in their totality led to the sorry state of rebellion and dissension in nationalist politics that we so sadly witness today in Bissau. <p> <cite>Mortu Nega</cite> is more than just an exercise in critical cinematic history. It is also a story of commitment and mature love. It is a story of two fighters and their companions, of Diminga, and Soko, her husband, both of whom sacrifice, home, rice fields, and children to fight for a cause. It is a tale of passion unconsumed by war. It is a chronicle of love in the trenches affording little privacy for expressions of tenderness between two adults seared by physical separation. It is a tale of defiance untold; a tale in which death is postponed so that the more serious business of crafting a new personal and national life can be carried out. It short, it is a tale negating self-indulgence with approval, and thus turn it as payment in return for an assured prospect of a liberated future. <p> This side of the story is handled with the delicacy that it so justly deserves. Nuances within this story line explore several things: pangs of separation between husbands and wives; sudden departures of aged mothers away from their extended family relations; the lost of one's children; death of one's lover from bomb blasts; and, destruction of one's home and hearth. All of the nuances are pro-

jected in the film as an exigency of a war in pursuit of liberty from colonial rule. Each nuance is handled carefully, to explore a gamut of human emotions against the background of a revolution gone awry. Needless to add, the love story angle is very subtly woven into the fabric of the historical narrative. And the latter is done tastefully. <cite>Titanic-ization</cite> is thus very skillfully eschewed.[3] <p> Having said this, is the film worth a dime? Every bit of it, you bet! The movie follows the historical jugular very closely–and does so with an eye to revisiting some closely-held canonic views in nationalist politics and history in Bissau. The events that Gomes selects for depiction are treated sensitively. The economy of style is designed to pack a punch in as few a number of frames as possible. Great care is given to critical assessment of facts and to interpretative history. In a sense, Gomes proves himself to be a true scholar here; as good an interpretative historian with a celluloidal quill at hand as many of us could ever dream of being. <p> <cite>Mortu Nega's</cite> historical narrative covers substantively the period after January 1973. This is not to suggest that the film ignores events and personalities of historical importance prior to that period and after. These events important though they are, are embedded into the film either through melodic devices or through cinematographic allusions to life behind the front lines. <p> Haunting melodies and songs are used to good effect as these undergird the film in a sonorous continuity highlighting key points in the history of Guinea-Bissau's struggle for independence.[4] Two such key points merit mention here. One is the Portuguese siege at Komo, an island south of the Geba Estuary in the Balanta region in which the fighters were left with a gauntlet to escape. The Komo siege presaged the first internal crisis over military strategy and political correctness and which led to purges within the Cabral-led party. The other key point was the repeated saturation bombardment under the Portuguese commander Spinola and his predecessor focusing on the highly sophisticated guerrilla base at Mores situated deep in the Oio forest this time north of the Geba Estuary in what was then called the northern front.[5] <p> The film makes good and very passionate use of scenes behind the front line. It depicts a field-hospital in the southern front, the border supply line from Guinea-Conakry to the southern front, and the dispersal of provisions through barter with an eye to faithful historical reproduction of what existed then and to suggest that the fight was as much military as it was <cite>reconstructive</cite>; that is to say, a fight to build an infrastructure supportive of both, the war effort and, future needs for a new and independent Guinea-Bissau. Similar treatment seeking faithful reproduction is granted to the ambush at Bula–an important military operation that set the stage of the success of military strategy that was to follow, and the attack at Guiledge under the appellation of Operation Abel Djassi where anti-aircraft guns were used. <p> Likewise, the film's coverage of the assassination of Cabral is replicated with accuracy. Fighters did sit, as we now know, between ambushes to listen to radio broadcasts from Guinea-Conakry shocked to hear the news. Cabral is said to have been "[...] assassinated by traitors in the pay of the Portuguese". "But [...] nobody can kill Cabral," says Sako, one of the two principal characters in the movie. <p> In fact, the reference to Cabral's assassination is tackled sensitively, with little rhetoric, with a healthy disregard to Cabralist hagiography, and with an open recognition of dissension and discord. In short, Gomes here openly recognizes that the fighters combated the enemy outside, that is to say the Portuguese military, and the enemy within–contumacy instigated by comrades-at-arms with sub-national or ethnically divisive visions of a post-colonial future for Guinea-Bissau. <p> One crucial point the film focus on in the post-partum politics of Guinea-Bissau is the recurrence of drought–a topic which Gomes then uses as a dramatic device of convergence. He brings together two strands of the story underpinning <cite>Mortu Nega</cite>, the historical tale and <cite>Mortu Nega</cite>, the love story. And he does this by focusing on the search of an ancestral past to resolve personal issues facing his characters (namely the possible death of Soko, the fighter) and ecological death of a nation in the present–in the form of endemic droughts.[6] <p> Gomes however, is too subtle, too sophisticated to attribute Guinea-Bissau's ill after independence at the colonial structural doorstep–a kind of reductionist reasoning blaming the colonial past and export-driven policies for the failures of the present. Gomes knows full well that such an interpretation would have let the present leaders, formerly guerrilla fighters at arms, off the hook easily. Instead Gomes sees the droughts as a symbol of post-partum depression–and perhaps more. <p> Bearing in mind that the film was made in 1988, 14 years after independence, Gomes provides very subtle clues as to what imperils the nation and why the struggle is nearly betrayed. This is alluded through vivid character portrayals, and in the personal narratives.[7] <p> Further, Gomes delves into political corruption that set in very early on and this is depicted in a marvelous sequence of events in the movie.[8] Gomes uses subtle and very effective cinematography to show two things: the obfuscating bureaucracy that set in to make the common people inaccessible to high offi-

cials, and what Cabral referred to as creeping "mountain-topism," or proto-kleptocracy. <p> "Mountain-topism" was a real issue for the party during the war and the former was to fight against it with varying degrees of success. Some party workers and cadres stationed in localities when in power had began using power for personal gains and or for consolidating ethnic solidarity–interests deemed to be too narrow for national liberation of Guinea-Bissau.[9] <p> The depiction of "mountain-topism" is most effective in the film–and does drive the point with an eye to color and detail. When Diminga, the heroine, is asked to go in search of one of her husband's two comrades-in-arms she is led to a suit of offices. She arrives only to find that she has to pass through a gauntlet in the shape of a peon guarding the portals of power as she heads up a narrow fight of stairs, so befitting someone with "mountain-topist" proclivities. Estin, the comrade-in-question when asked to come to Soko's rescue cannot remember him, nor is he sympathetic to Diminga's <cite>cri de coeur</cite>. "Sako, Sako, the name means nothing. What does he want? Money?-" <p> In contrast, Diminga is portrayed as unique, as Diminga–a sensuous blossom, a ferrous baobab yet vulnerable to impediments of inequities in a man's world. When she is told only one person at a time can go up to see Estin, she casts a glance at her husband's friend as if to imply she is a woman going up into a man's politically personalized sanctuary. Is she likely to be safe as a woman? Very clearly, Diminga is a decade behind times, perhaps light years removed from the predatory world of zipper politics <cite>a la maison blanc</cite>. Her husband's friend and guide stays behind. She gathers her wits, tightens the folds on her dress as she always does throughout the film as an act of self-determination to march forward. And the marked absence of G-strings here is refreshing, I might add! For we are told so very subtly, she is a comrade in arms. She has nothing to fear. She is a fighter. She cannot give up! <cite>Nunquam Dedere</cite> as the title song in the background tells her.[10] <p> Once upstairs, Diminga finds Cabral's intellectual nemesis, Estin!; a new Estin, an Estin in power, a pipe smoking "mountain-topist" to boot–exactly where Cabral feared the revolution would end up if the fighters were not careful. <p> In effect Gomes uses the pipe smoker as a symbol of a new kind of oppression–a semiotic counter-epiphany of revolution gone awry. Diminga's disappointment is conveyed in speechful silence, with the cameras panning on her eyes as she casts these away from betrayal. In a way Gomes is providing a semiotic interpretation, a text of resistence in silence–that is how most intellectuals and ordinary people felt and feel as they saw the revolution and the struggle betrayed. <p> This leads one to ask, what could the people do? Should they join in the betrayal of the revolution or should they uphold the struggle? If the latter, how can holding steadfast to the ideals set during the liberation struggle answer the pressing needs of the people–food, schooling, equal access to power, a new society? Clearly, as Gomes points out, upholding the ideals has its price–and does not meet the everyday needs of one's existence. Witness Diminga as she tries to find support for her cause now personalized in the form of a husband at death's door. Should she betray the revolution? Given what she sacrificed, namely her children, the sole possession of her house in her absence, her friends who have gone on to have families and fields of rice, she cannot stomach the prospect. <p> There is an alternative–the beckoning of the past, of the spirits of ancestors. And it is in this light that the ceremony of the dead is introduced at the end of the movie. Does this imply that Diminga is also betraying the revolution by regressing to traditional belief systems? No. In fact she is not. During the revolution, traditional dances, rituals, theater and other cultural media, including the use of palavers, were used extensively for mobilization, for re-crafting a new national identity.[11] Gomes does make us aware of this point by using melodic verse, rhythms, songs, and poetic renditions as the scenes preparing for the ceremony beckoning the dead are played on the screen. <p> In short, when all is said and done, when the struggle is betrayed, when the people who do not wish to betray their own ontology of life as they lived during the war, there is only one thing left: the resort to any past, particularly a past that can instil meaning into life. It is this a-colonial past that then liberates in spirit and deed the imprisoned condition of the post-colonial present. <p> The ceremony of ancestors is Balanta-based–the ethnic group that abound south of the Geba estuary. The invocation of the dead through the Diancongo deity is conducted as was depicted in the film. The film's interpretation however is more purposefully political than religious and is there to suggest that in the end neither the revolution nor the revolutionaries and/ or the revolutionary at death's door is granted death–death is denied. In that sense, Gomes uses the wounds on the revolutionary as a symbol of the gangrene setting in the state's <cite>body-politique</cite>. Amputation, however, is not an option in either case–that of the revolutionary or that of the state. <p> In short, a break of the state is not an option–a more holistic solution is called for; a solution that seeks to treat the malaise from within and without–hence the beckoning of a socially acceptable and sanc-

tioned higher sense of consciousness through the ceremony of the ancestors. And the ancestors do answer the call. Rain comes, the children dance for joy, and Soko smiles, the gangrenous wound rescinds. Diminga proves to be a vanguard again–the most effective protagonist in celebration of both–traditional wisdom, and traditional wisdom crafted and tempered by the revolutionary struggle. <p> All in all, a film worth watching. But be warned: <cite>Mortu Nega</cite> does not have cheap thrills. It does have cute photorealism. It does have wooden performance by some actors. It does not have that "Spielberg-esque" execution of war scenes. It is singularly bereft of virtual-reality. No pyrotechnics can be found lurking anywhere in the movie. All these factors of omission notwithstanding, the film has ticklish and sensuous moments–a heroine that conveys so much, with such sense of overt tactility, with so few props. Diminga played by Ba Gomes shows herself capable of demonstrable affection without moving a muscle. She is coy and displays it with dignity intact in the face of battle and trench warfare. She can catapult from one abrupt interruption of emotions to another equally emotionally charged situation and do so with felicitous grace. Diminga can search for a solution amidst corruption and chaos without losing her sense of struggle for human freedom. <p> In conclusion <cite>Mortu Nega</cite> is about a deadly discourse on love and war. As such it is a welcome anti-dote to Cameron's <cite>Titanic</cite>. No Di Caprios here, thank heavens! Just a celebration of dichotomies, of rift emotions, of contending paradigms crafted with strokes of subtleties executed with frugality imposed by a pauper's budget. The marked absence of pyrotechnic cinematography is to be welcomed, a change indeed in a genre of films dealing with utopia, revolutions betrayed, and dystopian works aping <cite>Blade Runner</cite>. Do see it if you can. Better still use it as an introduction to Lusophonic contemporary Africa in your classes. You will be surprised how well it will go down as a teasing introduction to liberation struggle in Africa. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. Several works are now extant outlining this struggle for independence. One of the first books to appear was by Basil Davidson, <cite>The Liberation of Guinea, Aspects of an African Revolution</cite> (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968). <p> It was followed by: Gerard Challiand, <cite>Armed Struggle in Africa, With the Guerillas in "Portuguese Guinea"</cite> (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1969); Oleg Ignatiev, <cite>Amilcar Cabral Filho de Africa Narracao Biografica</cite> (Lisbon, Prelo, 1975); Oleg Ignatiev, <cite>Tres Tiros Da. PIDE: Quem, Porque e Como Mataram Amilcar Cabral?</cite> (Lisbon, Prelo, 1975); S. Urdang,<cite>Fighting Two Colonialisms; Women in Guinea-Bissau</cite> (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1979); Patrick Chabal,<cite>Amilcar Cabral, Revolutionary Leadership and People's War</cite> (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983); J. McCulloch,<cite>In the Twilight Revolution: The Political Theory of Amilcar Cabral</cite> (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); R.E. Galli and J. Jones, <cite>Guinea-Bissau: Politics, Economics and Society</cite> (London, Francis Pinter, 1987); R. H. Chilcote, <cite>Amilcar Cabral's Revolutionary Theory and Practice A Critical Guide</cite> (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1991); and, Lars Rudebeck, <cite>Guinea-Bissau, A Study in Political Mobilization</cite> (Uppsala, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1974). <p> [2]. In addition to shooting locations in Bissau, the sites in the interior included the areas of Bandin, Mentem, Malafo, N'xale, Bubaque, Tchokmon, Pecixe, Caio, Ganmamadu, and Candjiafara. <p> [3]. In any case, "Titanicization" would have proved impractical for Gomes. It would have cost millions which Gomes couldn't have access to. Further, such a <cite>Cameronian</cite> depiction would have been truly infelicitous rendering <cite>Mortu Nega</cite> somewhat "Marquez-esque" in fictional sensitivity: too fantastic for historical comfort. In hindsight, such a rendition a propos, <cite>Titanic</cite> the recent movie, trivializes the tragedy as a tale of two headless romantics on rampant heat. In the case of <cite>Mortu Nega</cite> a treatment similar to the <cite>Titanic</cite>would have in effect, desecrated the memory of Cabral and his life which was about to be terminated in February, a month after the film opens with its first scene of January 1973. <p> [4]. The first melody, <p> "I remember how Mores received my spirit/ I remember how Komo received my spirit/ The rebellion grows apace/ It spreads on Komo Island" is sung by Diminga, the film's principal female character, and her elder companion. The melody is syncopated by foot as they march ahead against the afternoon setting sun. <p> [5]. Several of the above works, in particular works by Basil Davidson and Patrick Chabal make reference to the two key events mentioned here. <p> [6]. Droughts did occur periodically during the struggle and that explains to a point the failure of the party's agricultural policies, in particular the collectivization process that the party instituted during and after the war. A general discussion of the policies during the war is to be found treated in Professor Lars Rudebek's book as a glowing success story. Gomes's film seems to counter such an interpretation albeit symbolically. <p> [7]. One

good illustration of this is given when the party truck arrives to dispense food which is then promptly turned into merchandise for the informal sector. <p> [8]. At one stage in the movie, Diminga visits Estin, a former-comrade-in-arms who now occupies an influential position and has offices in an elevated office in downtown Bissau. <p> [9]. Several references abound during the period which led to numerous purges, the most notable of the two were once after the siege at Komo/Como and then in 1969 which was to lead to a major conference in Conakry headed by Cabral himself. See, Mustafah Dhada, <cite>Warriors At Work: How Guinea Was Set Free</cite> (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1994), pages 18 to 20; and then pages 34, and 46 onwards.) <p> [10]. The song goes: "Diminga, mother of guerrillas/ You have wept enough/ Diminga, you must put up a fight/ That's what struggle means." <p> [11]. See, M. Dhada, <cite>Warriors At Work</cite>, pages 6 to 18. <p>

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