



**Yann Karlen, Stefano Boroni.** *Capitão*. Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2019. 110 pp. EUR 22.00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-88901-164-3.

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*Capitão*, a story in comic strip form created by Yann Karlen (story) and Stefano Boroni (illustrator), is an allegory inspired by the experiences of Swiss missionaries in Mozambique. It is not intended as a factual history. It is, purposefully, a work of fiction, or rather, a fictional story.

The so-called Swiss Mission was a primordial player in the colonial history of Mozambique, and its presence had striking contemporary consequences for that country. The fact that Eduardo Mondlane, the father of the nation, had been educated by the Swiss missionaries is a symptom of this centrality. The protagonism of those missionaries began around 1890, a period of intense changes, both in the Portuguese metropole and in the colony. It was, above all, a moment marked by the military conquest of the present-day territory of Mozambique.

Before arriving in Mozambique, the Mission Suisse Romande set up missionary stations in the “Boer” province of the Transvaal, in what is now South Africa. Its main bases were at Valdezia, Elim, and Shilouvane. In Mozambique, the principal missions were those of Lourenço Marques, Rikatla, Antioka, and Mandlhakaze. Paul Berthoud, together with Ernest Creux, founded the mission at Valdezia; later, he would work in Moçambique. In 1891, his brother, Henri Berthoud (as a missionary in Valdezia) visited Mozambique

for the first time. The missionary doctor Georges-Louis Liengme also arrived in that same year. However, perhaps the best known of all the missionaries was Henri-Alexandre Junod, who produced a masterly anthropological work: *The Life of a South African Tribe*, along with numerous essays and public statements on the situation of the “natives” of East Africa.[1]

At the time, Gungunhana (or Ngungunyane), “king of Gaza,” ruled over a multiethnic empire in the central and southern regions of what is now Mozambique. The missionary physician Liengme set up base in Mandlhakaze, the very place where Gungunhana held court. For three years, Liengme had the privilege of participating in the local day-to-day life, winning the trust of Gungunhana himself. Technically, the “king of Gaza” was a Portuguese subject. However, he would become an enemy of the Portuguese from 1894, when the decision was made to occupy the territory of the Gaza empire. Liengme left precious annotations about his life in the court of Gungunhana. This diary has recently been organized and published by Eric Morier-Genoud.[2]

Let us recall that around 1895, the so-called “effective occupation” of the territory of Mozambique began. This was the war Portugal waged against the principal local African leaders, including Gungunhana. For the Portuguese, the Swiss

missionaries occupied an ambiguous, uncomfortable position. Whereas Portugal sought to take advantage by force of arms, the missionaries had won the trust of local populations. For this reason, these “exotic” philanthropists were viewed with suspicion by the Portuguese authorities.

The experience of the Swiss missionaries in Mozambique has inspired a vast bibliographic corpus. The work of Patrick Harries is perhaps one of the most notable on this theme.[3] Many Mozambican intellectuals have studied the legacy of those missionaries. The historian Teresa Cruz e Silva caused us, for example, to reconsider the role of the Swiss Protestants in the creation of a nationalist and anticolonialist conscience in Mozambique. Thus, the Swiss presence also encouraged further philosophical and sociological reflections concerning the construction of nationhood. Not by chance, perhaps, one of the authors of *Capitão* (Stefano Boroni) was himself a student of the Mozambican philosopher Severino Ngoenha in Lausanne.

We are not speaking therefore, of past histories, but of an educational, religious, and scientific intervention that left deep imprints on contemporary Mozambique. Today the ethnography of Henri-Alexandre Junod is debated by various intellectuals, film directors, missionaries, writers, anthropologists, artists, and philosophers. For example, the work of the famous painter and plastic artist Malangatana—originally from the region of Marracuene—cannot not be understood without taking into account this legacy. The experience of the Swiss missionaries in Mozambique was also taken up by film director Camilo de Sousa (with the collaboration of Licínio Azevedo), who released a documentary titled *Junod* (2006), about the legacy of the missionary-ethnographer. Hence, today the dilemmas of Mozambique, and therefore, of the construction of “Mozambique-ness,” cannot be discussed without evoking the heritage left by the Swiss missionaries. History books, personal diaries, paintings, documentaries, and now, a comic book!

But who is *Capitão*? Those familiar with the history of the Swiss Mission in Mozambique will be surprised—and entertained—by the comic strip. Those new to the subject will certainly be curious to know more about the experience of those missionaries. But it must be said that Yann Karlen and Stefano Boroni’s work is a “serious game.” At times, *Capitão*, the protagonist, reminds us of the unmistakable figure of Georges-Louis Liengme. But *Capitão* also appears to evoke the life of Henri-Alexandre Junod himself. The work of Yann Karlen and Stefano Boroni is replete with real historical and iconographic references. It is, as linguists say, a work replete with intertextualities. But it would be ungenerous for readers to limit themselves to merely seeking to identify factual references, as *Capitão* is more than a simple intertextual micronarrative. It is, above all, a great intellectual *bricolage*; a narrative and visual *collage* capable of generating multiple significations and polyphonies.

Capitão, the protagonist, was, like Liengme, a missionary doctor. After curing the son of king “Ngou” (here we see an obvious reference to the historical figure of Gungunhana), he had won the trust of the natives. A series of conflicts ensued, among them, a quarrel with Chidzilo, the traditional healer (Nyanga). It amounted to a civilizational confrontation between the knowledge of the missionary and that of the Africans. There is a moment in which the linearity of Capitão’s task is threatened, when he falls in love with Ntsako, a beautiful young woman of the village. Its subjectivity is confronted with this unforeseen event. New conflicts and tensions emerge, until, finally, “romantic love” prevails: “Entre l’amour de Ntsako e ma mission, j’avais enfin trouvé un sens à ma vie [Between my love for Ntsako and my mission, I have finally made sense of my life],” says Capitão, almost at the end of the book (p. 84). But this apparently bucolic romanticized world is interrupted by the war: the effective occupation of Mozambique carried out, in real history, by Antonio Ennes and his “centurions.” The Portuguese are ready to invade the village. Ngou, the king, asks Capitão for his assistance. His mission will not be an easy one. Capitão travels to Lourenço Marques to talk to the Portuguese governor: “Je vous assure que Ngou ne veut que la paix! [I assure you that Ngou only wants peace!]” says Capitão to the governor (p. 85). We are, supposedly, at the end of the nineteenth century, but Stefano Boroni, the illustrator, opted to portray the Portuguese governor with the same facial characteristics as the dictator Salazar! What a provocation.

The end is near. Ntsako is pregnant. Capitão waits, anxiously, for his “African” son to arrive. But tragedy is imminent. The Portuguese destroy the village, and later, Capitão finds his beloved Ntsako dead, the victim of the invading forces. He is disconsolate and loses faith. Disillusioned, the missionary would later, in old age, become an alcoholic. In the book, this brief story is told in the first person, by Capitão himself, now aged and disenchanted. At a bar in Lourenço Marques, the

former missionary, getting drunk, narrates his past adventures. It is probably the 1950s. Listening attentively to these stories told by Capitão is a young African waiter. It is not until the end of the book that the reader discovers the name of the young waiter: Eduardo Chitlangu Mondlane!

Due to a primordial scientific imperative, historians and social scientists are accustomed to the tyranny of citations, factual evidence, the density of bibliographic notes. *Capitão*, obviously, is not a book based upon the social sciences. Neither is it a simple parable aimed at illustrating historical facts: something like “the Swiss Mission in Mozambique explained for children.” The authors took a different route. A more libertarian, and therefore, profoundly human route. After all, that is how art ultimately works: as an invitation to cross into other semantic dimensions and thus, amplify the range of human experience. It is almost a sarcastic irony that in this book, the young mission doctor (Capitão) later becomes an alcoholic. This is tantamount to the opposite of the “real” historical figure of Liengme! As Eric Morier-Genoud warns us in the introduction to Liengme’s diaries: “Il fut un des tout premiers militants du mouvement d’abstinence (antialcoolique) qui deviendra la Croix-Bleue [He was one of the very first activists of the abstinence (anti-alcoholic) movement that would become the Blue Cross]” (p. 15).

*Capitão*, as an artistic object, extends the possibilities of what can be said and imagined. Against the normativist, teleological, and linear imperatives of the missionaries’ lives, it shows us the contradictions of human subjectivity, friendship, love, passion. In other words, almost the reverse of Calvinist asceticism. In its own way, therefore, *Capitão* is a welcome provocation to exercise in the art of thought with a sense of humor and delicateness.

The book begins with a preface by the writer Mia Couto and ends with a “Survol historique” (historical overview) written by Eric Morier-Genoud and Yann Karlen. Those responsible for the

publication of the book, at the publishing house Antipodes, in Lausanne, performed a veritably coherent act in publishing *Capitão* and, immediately afterwards, *Convertir l'empereur* (Liengme's diaries, organized by Eric Morier-Genoud). The two works are symmetrically opposed, yet complementary. Those interested in the cultural and political history of the Mozambican region of Africa should celebrate this partnership.

#### Notes

[1]. *The Life of a South African Tribe* (London: Macmillan, 1913).

[2]. *Convertir l'empereur? Journal du missionnaire et médecin Georges-Louis Liengme dans le sud-est africain, 1893-1895* (Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2020).

[3]. *Butterflies and Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 2007).

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