

Fiction across frontiers

David Brookshaw's translations of Mozambican fiction by Mia Couto has brought this intriguing work to an international audience, writes **Sarah Kent**



Sarah Kent is Joint Coordinator of the Western Regional Group and has been a freelance translator since 1992, working from Spanish, Portuguese & Catalan into English

David Brookshaw is Professor of Luso Brazilian Studies at Bristol University. He has a special interest in post-colonial literatures in Portuguese, literature and migration, and in literary translation. As a translator himself he has been responsible for bringing the fiction of Mozambique's best-known contemporary writer, Mia Couto, to an English-speaking readership. Here, he talks about this work and about African literature and literary translation in general.

Many people will be curious about how you became involved with Portuguese – it's not a language many English people have the opportunity to learn.

I lived in Portugal for three years before I went to university, so I learned the language. When I came back to do a course in Iberian Studies at London University, I already knew Portuguese and I had an interest in the language and went on to work on Brazilian literature as a postgraduate, and then I got a university post teaching Portuguese. So really it comes from a period of residence in Portugal as a young man.

When did you first meet Mia Couto?

In the mid-1980s, he published the first book of short stories that made him an international name within the Portuguese world, that was *Voices*

made Night, or Vozes Anoitecidas. At the time, I was external examiner at the University of Zimbabwe and colleagues there were very keen that this collection of short stories should be translated. I read them and was very impressed, and eventually got Heinemann interested in publishing them. I first met Mia when I went to Mozambique in 1988 to work on that translation with him, so I became familiar with his work a couple of years before I actually met him.

Do you think it's very important to have a period of residence in the country, to see the settings

for the fiction?

It certainly helps you to see how the language that he uses, which is Portuguese, interacts and interrelates with other local languages and culture, and how Portuguese itself is transformed. Whether you have to go to Mozambique to realise that is debatable – I think it helps, but if a book is worth translating then it speaks across cultures.

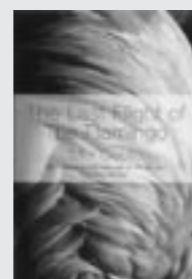
Turning to Mia's prose style. He uses language very inventively in certain passages; have you found that this has been difficult to translate?

I suppose English is a very different type of language; it's not a Latin language. Some people say that it's very easy to reproduce the sort of word plays that Mia uses in Italian for example, or in Spanish, because the languages are of the same family. What I find is that sometimes responding to a particularly inventive use of language doesn't work in English, so the translation might be a bit bland, but you try and compensate for that later on when Mia is using language perhaps fairly normally and you see a chance to be a bit inventive in English. So at least you're translating the spirit of the text, which is extremely important. For example, in *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, where he plays with a verse by the classic Portuguese poet Luis de Camões: *Mudam-se os tempos, desnudam-se as vontades*. Now, you could translate that literally into English ('*times change, desires are stripped naked*'), but few English

MIA COUTO TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

Fiction by Mozambican author Mia Couto that has been translated by David Brookshaw:

- *Voices Made Night (Vozes Anoitecidas)*, Heinemann 1990
- *Every Man is a Race (Cada Homem é uma Raça)*, Heinemann 1994
- *Under the Frangipani (A Varanda do Frangipani)*, Serpent's Tail, 2001



- *The Last Flight of the Flamingo (O Último Vôo do Flamingo)*, Serpent's Tail, 2004
- *Sleepwalking Land (Terra Sonâmbula)*, to be published by Serpent's Tail, April 2006.



'The translator always has to remember that he or she is the translator, not the author'

people would be aware of the context in which that particular word play occurred, so you have to find an equivalent in English. I did that by transforming a well-known English proverb: 'Time and mind wait for no man.' I felt I had managed to preserve the idea of time passing and its effects, suggested in the Portuguese original, while by inserting *mind* for *tide*, I remained more or less faithful to the Portuguese *vontade*, which as you know can mean *will, inclination, desire*. In another context, a short story I translated for a South African publication, he plays on the word *banco*, which is a bank, but also a park bench. You can't have the same play with that word in English, so I

played with the word *branch*. You can have a branch of a bank and you can have branches that make a park bench... Those are particular examples of the problems that may arise, and when you find a solution that you think is good then it makes your day!
But you need to know where to draw the line between being creative and allowing too much of your own input...

Yes, the translator always has to remember that he or she is the translator, not the author, and the role of the translator is to transmit the spirit of the text but at the same time remain faithful to it, and not to run away with it and use it for our own instinct to be exhibitionist.

Did you find the first book of his that you translated was the most difficult because you were encountering all these technical problems for the first time?

Yes, and his first books are the ones where he was particularly inventive with the language – his first collections of short stories were ones where he was experimenting much more with language than he does in his later novels. So it may be that Mia's language has become slightly easier for the translator, or it may be that the translator has just become more used to the incongruities and quirkiness of his language and is not quite as intimidated as the first time around!

Question time: Sarah Kent in conversation with writer Mia Couto at last year's Bath Literature Festival



Each author has their own vocabulary and phraseology, I suppose in the first translation you find forms of English that translate these, and you can adopt the same forms when you translate subsequent books.

Yes, in the sense that his Portuguese has its idiosyncrasies, you develop equivalent or approximate idiosyncrasies in English.

What about the rhythm and the sounds of the prose?

Mia Couto is a very poetic writer – one mustn't lose sight of the fact that his first book was a book of poetry – and reproducing that in English is a challenge. Quite apart from the experimental language aspect, his prose has a deeply poetic quality that must be conserved and transmitted... that the translator must try and reproduce.

About the practicalities of translating a book: when you get the commission, how do you approach it to make sure you meet the deadline?

I try and head for a chapter a day in a rough translation. His chapters vary in length, but you try to do half a dozen to ten pages. Probably about 1,500-2,000 words.

Are there any particular procedures or methods that you have found work especially well?

I always follow the same procedure, which is to produce a raw translation, and then to put the original aside and do a second draft, trying to sort out the English, so it doesn't sound like translatese, and doesn't sound wooden.

You translate the whole novel and then go back – you don't do it in chunks.

Yes, and I still tend to write the whole thing out longhand and then put it on a computer. I do the second draft, tidying up the English, not looking at the original, on the computer. Then I feel I've got somewhere! It's on the computer, it can go onto a disk, it can go off to the publishers at any time. Then I print it

off and go through it, proofreading, but also looking at the English again, and sometimes looking at the Portuguese again at that stage, making sure I've got it right.

Approximately how long did it take you to translate *Under the Frangipani* and *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, which are both short novels of similar length?

About four months. And the last book, *Sleepwalking Land*, which I've just finished, took slightly longer simply because it's a slightly longer novel and was quite difficult to translate, and that has taken five months.

What was more difficult about it?

Sleepwalking Land was, I think, built up on various shorter narratives. He was becoming a novelist, and still experimenting linguistically in the way that he had in his early short stories, so that there were those challenges to be met, and also the fact that textually it was 20,000-30,000 words longer than the other novels.

Do you anticipate other works of Mia's in the pipeline?

There is a more recent novel, which was published in 2004, which is being made into a film, I believe in Portugal or in Mozambique.

Speaking generally about African fiction, what is your view of the way it's developing at the moment and the translation of it?


One of the problems of African fiction is how it circulates within African countries – what the readership is. But that's not a problem of translation, that's a problem African writers have, very often they're writing for a Western European readership. With regard to translation, there will be a future for translating from local African languages once they are put into a written form: into Portuguese, or in the case of Anglophone countries, into English. But there isn't a literary tradition in Portuguese-speaking Africa of writing in local languages. Translating from Portuguese into English, in fact launching works in English by African



David Brookshaw holds his translations of Mia Couto's novels

writers who've written in Portuguese, or for that matter in French, is an ongoing problem: it's very difficult to get an English publisher interested. That, I suppose, says something about the nature of English, there's so much literature in English. Because English is a world language, we're also imprisoned by it. And the English don't tend to take to translations, which is a pity because there's a whole world of interesting literature in other languages, untapped. In France, and particularly in Germany, there's a much longer tradition of reading translations, which is why the habits of the reading public in those countries are less insular than ours.

To end our conversation, have you any particular words of advice, encouragement, or indeed warning for aspiring literary translators?

Make sure you know the writer you're translating from, and you've got that writer's permission, or his/her agent's permission. There isn't a great deal of protection for translators; they're vulnerable to exploitation, to having their skills undervalued by publishers. Having said that, Mia's current English publishers have proved exemplary in their treatment of me as a translator. So it's an activity to be handled with caution, but it's a very rewarding one. 

Bristol University's Department of Hispanic, Portuguese & Latin American Studies offers Portuguese as a full degree course and is the only university department outside London to provide a taught MA course in Portuguese.

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