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To Brother Azagaia

*A Letter of Remembrance from Mozambique and Beyond*¹



FIGURE 1. Azagaia in Maputo's Baixa (downtown). Photo by author, 2012.

1. This is a considerably updated version of my letter, written soon after Azagaia's death and published one year after in Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (IESE) series in Portuguese and English: "Rapper Azagaia Rekindled Hope for a Better Society. A Letter to Azagaia", *Boletim IDELAS* N° 156E, 2024, <https://www.iese.ac.mz/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Ideias-156E-JR.pdf>. Many thanks for colleagues in the CIPHER ERC CoG team at University College Cork for their support in mourning when I wrote the previous letter, especially professor J. Griffith Rollefson. And many thanks for JPMS editor Jonathan J. Leal for the support in this letter.

Dear Azagaia,

Believing, in good African fashion, that you are present wherever you are remembered, I once again address my words directly to you. Right now, here in Mozambique, crowds are contesting the landslide victory of the ruling party Frelimo in fraudulent general elections and protesting two high-profile political assassinations and over three hundred police killings between October 21, 2024, and January 15, 2025.² Amid this, you are remembered.³

We weren't very close. But we met several times over the last decade of your life. Over the years, I have listened to your music as a researcher and fan. I want neither to believe nor accept that you are, in fact, gone, that you'll no longer rap, move, or laugh, that you'll never release new tracks,⁴ that you won't be seen performing on stage or walking down the street. Personally, I feel like I've lost a close friend; thousands of other Mozambicans feel the same.

You were born near the border with Eswatini (former Swaziland) and South Africa in the Namaacha district where you lived until your tenth year, when you moved to the capital, Maputo. You will be missed by your father, a teacher who arrived in Mozambique from Cabo Verde, and your mother, who worked as a *mukherista* doing informal border trade, like my mother-in-law. You were exceptional: artist, public intellectual, versatile performer. Despite your fame, you were kind and modest. Your *joie de vivre* spread everywhere you went.

You died of an epileptic seizure at your home in the Kongolote neighbourhood in Matola City on Thursday, March 9th, 2023. 9th of March 2023. You informed the electrician working on the roof that you were going to your bedroom to rest for a moment. But your nap didn't end. And although your death was natural⁵, your passing has sparked still ongoing social protests across Mozambique, as well as in other former Portuguese colonies.

In Maputo, on every other *chapa* minibus and *chopella* taxi, on many electricity poles and walls, there are stickers and paintings of you and your lyrics. In Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau, a mural was painted in your honor.⁶ Your slogans can be heard and seen everywhere.

When I started conducting research on hip hop and political memory in Mozambique, you were the first Mozambican rapper to participate. This was just after September 2010;

2. Amnesty International, "Mozambique: SADC must take strong stand against spiralling police killings and assault on peaceful assembly," 14 November 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/11/mozambique-sadc-must-take-strong-stand-against-spiralling-police-killings-and-assault-on-peaceful-assembly/>; Plata-forma Decide, X (Twitter), <https://x.com/PDecide23/status/1879483217251848416>, January 15, 2025.

3. RFI, "Mozambique's ruling party hangs on to power in contested election," 25 October 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20241025-mozambique-s-ruling-party-hangs-on-to-power-in-contested-election>.

4. Azagaia recorded a lot of joint tracks with well- and lesser-known artists, many of which were still not released while he was alive. Many of these joint tracks have been released after his passing.

5. Natural death is my best guess and not fully consensual among fans and Mozambican intellectuals.

6. Fátima Camará, "Foi inaugurado em Bissau o mural 'AZAGAIA'", RDP África, 27 March 2023, <https://rdpafrika.rtp.pt/noticias-africa/foi-inaugurado-em-bissau-o-mural-azagaia/>.



FIGURE 2. Azagaia's ubiquitous image and a slogan "Povo no Poder" in *chopella* taxi in Maputo city. The sticker is between President Nelson Mandela and President Samora Machel stickers. Photo by author, 2024.

I came to your music when I noticed your song lyrics were being used as slogans in the uprisings of that year, which preceded later uprisings further north, designated as the Arab Spring. You were twenty-six then.

Eventually, I learned that there had been a campaign against you for several years already by figures in Mozambique who sought to downplay the artistic and political value of your music. As you remember: they argued that your music was not genuine social critique, but mere outburst, and that it lacked artistic value. But it wasn't difficult to show how wrong they were. Many of us understood that your music offered tools to help people address their own situations and to understand society.⁷ Some of your principal critics even came around, eventually; Elísio Macamo⁸, for instance, recognized your talent

7. Anna Pöysä & Janne Rantala, "MC Azagaia, Maputon leipäkapina 2010 ja taistelu Mosambikin historiasta", *The Yearbook of Finnish Ethnomusicology* 2011 (December 2011): 7-35. <https://doi.org/10.23985/evk.66817>.

8. E.g. Elísio Macamo, "Crítica Social e desabafo", *Notícias*, 12 of November 2007.

while expressing his rejection of harsh police repression at marches organized in your memory.⁹

Initially, I became interested in your work because your songs present Mozambican history in the context of contemporary social problems linked to colonial legacies and dead freedom fighters—figures that many of us who research political memory in southern Africa¹⁰ call “political ancestors.”¹¹ It never occurred to me that you, yourself, would become one of them: a central figure in seemingly countless tribute songs, poems, other artworks—some very good—and protest slogans. This, already in the first weeks of your afterlife.¹² Since your death, your lyrics have frequently inspired headlines and news stories on police repression, corruption, and electoral fraud. As I write, your songs are accompanying nationwide protests of electoral fraud and the related shooting of two opposition figures: Elvino Dias and Paulo Guambe on October 19, 2024. Protest chants, banners, and opposition politicians’ speeches, quote your lyrics frequently.¹³

I interviewed you for hours over the years, and we met otherwise many times—at discussions, at shows or peaceful protests, on the street by chance. Our time together lingers with me: moments shared after a talk, after a show, over a beer. Once, in 2012 a smiling police officer, who was a fan, wanted to pose in a photo with you. Participating in the 2013 shoot for your music video, “Homem Bomba”, was unforgettable.¹⁴ Or, in 2016, a moment shared at your gig at a large peace demonstration. I remember especially the first time you played guitar in public, a bit shyly, at an open mic session at a poetry night (“Os Vampiros”)¹⁵ at the Maputo’s Goethe institute in 2014. I wonder, now, how you felt then.

In 2012, I invited you to the Center for African Studies seminar at Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo. You treated my colleagues and me to a premiere

9. Elisio Macamo, “FRELIMO tornou-se ‘fator de instabilidade’ para Moçambique”, Deutsche Welle, 30 March 2023, <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/morte-de-azagaia-frelimo-tornou-se-fator-de-instabilidade-para-mo%C3%A7ambique/video-65154980>.

10. See Manuel Guissem, “Hip Hop Activism: Dynamic Tension Between Global and Local in Mozambique,” *Journal of World Popular Music* 5/1 (2018): 50–70; Samuel Longford, “The Un/timely Death(s) of Chris Hani: Discipline, Spectrality, and the Haunting Possibility of Return” (PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2021); Vasco Martins, “‘A nossa lâmpada não se apaga’: The Mnemonic Return of Angola’s Jonas Savimbi,” *African Studies Review* 64/1 (2021): 242–65; Justin Pearce, “Simango, Gwenjere and the Politics of the Past in Mozambique,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47/3 (2021): 387–404.

11. Janne Rantala, “‘Hidrunisa Samora’. Invocations of a Dead Political Leader in Maputo rap,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42/6 (2016); Janne Rantala, “A Sonic biography of an After-Life. The expelled liberation leader Uria Simango in Mozambican rap,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 50/1 (2024): 153–177.

12. E.g. Escudo featuring Bhaka Yafole, “Escudo - Azagaia Vive!” 2023, [13. E.g. Brent Goff, “Police fire tear gas at protest in Mozambique’s capital”, Deutsche Welle, 21 October 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/police-fire-tear-gas-at-protest-in-mozambiques-capital/video-70559988>.](https://youtu.be/kQCQr7yucbU?si=19RtKlVxLxRukyHR; MC Chamboco (prod. 7 Kruzes), “Geração 18 de Março,” 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vot5X9haBzY; Iveth with Izlo H, Joe and Guto D’ Herculete (prod. Ell Negro), “Homenagem,” 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxrm3iikrVo&list=PLIacQTxYQIwTxPbFbaBhfqltNZ4VwYEV&index=2; Iveth featuring Zezé Christ, “Em Marcha,” 2024, https://youtu.be/sbTbc4VPjrw?si=xupE2YLWGnRhrqzy.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

14. Azagaia, “Homem Bomba,” *Cubaliwa*. Kongoloti Records, 2013, available in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLZCvJI453Q> (2014).

15. Azagaia, “Declaração de Paz (Vampiros),” (live performance,) 2017, [https://youtu.be/C-hoWL3hkME?si=oJLiNYxMsFnBzwt8; Azagaia, “Declaração de Paz \(Vampiros\)” \(prod. DJ Aspenas\), 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KICVjghzxTo](https://youtu.be/C-hoWL3hkME?si=oJLiNYxMsFnBzwt8; Azagaia, “Declaração de Paz (Vampiros)” (prod. DJ Aspenas), 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KICVjghzxTo).

performance of your unreleased track “Cães da Raça”¹⁶ (Breed Dogs), which addresses Mozambique’s racial politics, taboos, and their historical legacies. You refused all customary titles utilized in the Mozambican academy, asking to be called, simply, “brother Azagaia.” It feels a little strange to call you “brother” now, since you’ve left us, as the living don’t typically refer to the dead that way. But as you once put it during a TV interview¹⁷: we must only be born to die, so it would be best to try and make life meaningful.

You often imagined another world. I remember, once, after an interview session in my home in the Malhangalene neighbourhood, you drank a second cup of thick, homemade *mapfilwa* (plural of *mpfilwa*, in XiRhonga), a fruit smoothie, prepared by my mother-in-law from undomesticated fruits gathered by local kids of the Marracuene district. You told me that in the early years after independence, the smoothie could have been developed as a healthy and delicious alternative to multinational soft drinks. Later, I understood that you were not so much referring to a glorious socialist past with innovative industrial products, which indeed never existed, but rather to your apartheid neighbours’ hostilities, to civil war, to economic shortages, and later, to IMF-imposed deindustrialisation. You were imagining an alternative future of Mozambique’s past, a timeline that could have been possible if not for colonial and neocolonial destabilizations, which still prevent dreams like this from being realized. As you put it in your “Cães da Raça”: “We expelled a coloniser, but not colonialism/ I saw the shit, put the lid down, but didn’t flush/ That’s because my home smells bad/ The black exploits the black, it smells like colonial past”¹⁸.

When I first arrived in my home country of Mozambique in 2011, it was still one of the most under-resourced countries on Earth. And yet, even as it experienced rapid economic growths, substantive issues went unrepresented. In much popular culture—music videos, for instance—what one saw most were paper money, expensive-looking cocktails; on the sides of skyscrapers and across illuminated screens, one saw giant photos of artists selling everything from insurance to soft drinks. But your pictures weren’t there, brother Azagaia.

And of course they weren’t. You made music for the oppressed, music that stood against corruption, economic inequality, neo-colonialism, and political violence. In your songs, you defended a Mozambican majority who have no salary, whose voices are usually not heard. Your voice was, in effect, censored on state-owned TV and radio channels. Even as you were mourned across virtually all former Portuguese colonies in those days immediately after your death, state media barely acknowledged anything was happening.

The Minister of Culture of Mozambique offered condolences just after your death, yes. But media close to Frelimo did everything they could to downplay the news. The newspaper *Notícias* first published a short piece that focused on your alleged personal issues.¹⁹ The

16. Azagaia, “Cães da Raça,” *Cubaliwa*, Kongoloti Records, 2013, (live performance in RTP África,) 2019, <https://youtu.be/DGc5dR4DAd4?si=fi6tjAqfoqX7zqvS>.

17. RTP África interview, sampled into Escudo’s tribute track “Azagaia vive!” among others.

18. Original lyrics: “Expulsei colonos, mas nunca o colonialismo/ Vi a merda, baixei a tampa e não puxei o autoclismo/ Por isso é que a minha casa cheira mal/ Preto explora preto, cheira a tempo colonial”.

19. Notícias, “Morreu rapper Azagaia”, 10 March 2023.

Domingo, a Sunday magazine belonging to the same media group, published a cover story about a different artist who, according to the headline, sings history, effectively decentering your life and work, drawing attention away from the ways you not only sang, but effectively made history.²⁰ Non-state media publications, by contrast—Savana, Canal de Moçambique, for instance—ran your image or your lines on their covers.



FIGURE 3. Savana's cover page soon after Azagaia's death.

20. Belmiro Adamugy & Pretílio Matsinhe, "Mingas Jamisse. Uma voz com História," *Domingo*, 12 March 2023, cover, 16-18.

The silencing wasn't anything new. As you mention on "Calaste"²¹ (You kept Quiet)," the first track off your second album, *Cubaliwa* (in the Sena language: "Birth"), you were once called to the public prosecutor's office and questioned on suspicion of threatening the security of the state after you released the song "Povo no Poder"²² (People in Power). The track was inspired by large demonstrations in February 2008. In the end, the prosecutor was persuaded that your track was recorded after the revolt and, logically, couldn't have incited anyone. The charges weren't filed. You were twenty-three years old.

This kind of "music of rapid intervention"—a creative rhythm that involved studio work immediately after events and releases of topical songs as sonic reportage—became your trademark. Many events, including a police raid against former combatants demonstrating for subsidies²³ and City Mayor Mohamed Amurane's assassination²⁴, remained in our otherwise ephemeral historical imagination because of your tracks and music videos. Many of us are grateful for this.

Despite the style of music you chose, despite the media boycotts, repeated threats, and fierce campaigns against you, you became one of the biggest stars in the Portuguese-speaking hip hop world. Your death was mourned across continents and commemorated in dozens of languages.

Reflecting on all of this now, I can't imagine the chaos Mozambique would've faced if you'd died from the death squad's bullet as many of us feared for over fifteen years. Even a mere conspiracy theory about your death could've thrown the country into tumult. Things are that tense; power is that threatened. But, knowing you, you would've opposed this. You wouldn't have accepted revolution on the basis of unsubstantiated claims, on the political manipulation of history. (Your music speaks to this directly: listeners might pull up "As Mentiras da Verdade" (The Lies of Truth, 2007), for instance.)

To me and others, your song "Os Cães da Raça" remains a brilliant encapsulation of the history of racial discrimination during colonialism and its impacts in contemporary Mozambique. And your album *Cubaliwa* (2013) as a whole is one of the sharpest diagnoses of the legacy of colonialism in recent memory, both in Mozambique and elsewhere in the world. I remember you were happy about this album's reach among Mozambicans; sonically, it remained true to the spirit of hip hop while incorporating local elements such as instruments and the choral sounds of Islamic Makua communities of the northern Mozambique²⁵.

21. Azagaia, "Calaste", *Cubaliwa*, Kongoloti Records, 2013, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnK8CTujbWs&list=PLOVKRigOZ_ttpE9FU2bhqqWGPezvycQEps.

22. Azagaia, "Povo no Poder", 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhSKixT-now>.

23. Azagaia, "MIR Música de Intervenção Rápida" (Video produced by Case Graphics), 2013, <https://youtu.be/VtOruPqnG2Y?si=EROtNzBhoETUZ4lf>.

24. Azagaia, "Sétimo Dia", video by Kumpocha Multimédia, 2017, <https://youtu.be/FkeWOY6oFNQ?si=KBo8U2sdYcGO4ZME>.

25. Azagaia featuring Banda Likute & Guto, "Maçonaria," *Cubaliwa*. Kongoloti Records, 2013.

Even from afar—I was in Ireland when you died—I saw through traditional and social media platforms how important your music and civic courage have been to Mozambicans, as well as to Angolans, Guinea-Bissauans and Cape Verdeans, people in Portugal’s former African colonies. In the days after your death, social media was filled with video clips of memorial services, where fans cried amidst a sea of candles while listening and singing your songs, like “Povo no Poder”. In the Namaacha district, where you were born, even representatives of the women’s organization of the ruling party Frelimo participated in these events. The slogan, “povo no poder”, was chanted by multitudes during your funeral marches, and it has become especially hated by the powerful. In current protests, widest and largest since colonial times, “povo no poder” is chanted once again.

In Matola—a satellite city of the capital Maputo—as well as many other cities and villages, the intro of your album, *Babalaze*²⁶ (2007) was played at the memorial service held the requisite seven days after your death. The intro combines a choral rendition of “Hosi Katekissa Afrika” (in XiRhonga)—the anti-colonial movements’ pan-African protest song widely known as “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika,”—with your polemic statement about the explosion of an ammunition depot on the outskirts of the capital, which killed over one hundred people and injured hundreds more. In the original 1897 hymn, God is asked to bless the African continent, which at that time was enduring genocidal wars and the mass killings of the post-Berlin congress’s “military campaigns of the effective occupation”. It later became an anthem of the struggle against apartheid and colonialism and the national anthem of six southern African countries. Too, in the vigil for the previously mentioned victims of assassinations, Elvino Dias and Paulo Guambe, the Pan-African hymn was sung soon after mourners chanted “povo no poder”. That you begin your first album with the spirit of all of this is significant.

In Angola and Mozambique, police tried several times to prevent your commemoration. In Luanda, the capital of Angola, hundreds of people gathered to honor you, and paramilitary police forces armed with assault rifles tried to stop the gathering. And in Maputo, police blocked a convoy from following your final journey and attempted to stop commemorative marches in most of the eleven provincial capitals. The funeral urn was not allowed to follow the planned route, previously agreed upon with police, which would have passed close to the president’s palace. Police forces dispersed the mourners with tear gas grenades while the crowd shouted: “Just kill us!”.

The same kind of events played out in Nampula, Beira, Pemba, and Chimoio.²⁷ Entire neighborhoods were swallowed in tear gas. People were beaten and arrested

26. Azagaia, *Babalaze*, Cotonete Records, 2007, accessible: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6JBp3t5-gE&list=PLPQAaVBrfmXDJKxcjVXfAkQQmjsvbR4BR>.

27. Amnesty International, “Mozambique: Arbitrary arrests, teargassing and brutal assault of peaceful protesters a violation of the right freedom of assembly,” 18 March 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/mozambique-protesters-assaulted-and-teargassed/>.



FIGURE 4. The poster for an event with an impressive roster of invited artists, ultimately cancelled by police.

indiscriminately, whether they were involved or not. Video clips of a distinctive tall man in civil clothes running with heavy weaponry in downtown Maputo as he hunted mourners circulated throughout social media platforms. And in Chimoio, known in

local hip hop circles as Vila Perygoza²⁸, police halted a march they had authorized the previous day, arresting about twenty participants, threatening some of them with employment dismissals and heavy charges related to state security. (A year later, it seems authorities are still worried about your legacy there; a notable event was cancelled by SERNIC (Serviço Nacional de Investigação Criminal), which was concerned that protestors would appropriate the event to pay you tribute.)

Writing to you now, I wonder what you might have thought about all of this. Here, it seems even your bones stoke fear in the powerful.

In any case, silencing your memory has proved itself untenable. Five days after the police violence of March 18, 2023, then President Filipe Nyusi addressed the public, trying to defend the repression for which he himself seemed to be responsible. An absurd conspiracy theory emerged; demonstrators were said to have been infiltrated by political agents who planned to use memorial marches as cover for a *coup d'état*. A grand irony: the vice-commander of the police who gave voice to this conspiracy theory prior to the president's speech had only ten years earlier participated in one of your music videos, "Homem Bomba", alongside me and hundreds of other fans of yours. Maputo rapper MC Chamboco, in a tribute track entitled "Geração 18 do Março" (Generation 18th of March), captured the spirit of all of this beautifully, singing that on that day, you didn't die. You multiplied.

I will always wonder what you would have done next, brother Azagaia, and how you would feel about the current uprising in Mozambique. Rest in peace, rest in power. May the hope you shared continue to guide. Thank you for everything.

Yours,
Janne Rantala
University College Cork

This letter is accompanied by this public playlist:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbTbc4VP1jw&list=PLIacQTxYQIwTxFpFbaBhfuqlNZ4VwYEV>.

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28. See Emilio Cossa, *Ritmo, alma e poesia: A história e as estórias do hip hop em Moçambique*. (Maputo, TPC Editora, 2019); Milton Conqui & Janne Rantala, "My space trips from Chimoio". Notes about space and temporality in sampling," in *Global Hiphopography*, ed: Quentin Williams and Jaspal Naveel Singh (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

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