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RAPPER AZAGAIA REKINDLED HOPE FOR A BETTER SOCIETY

A LETTER TO AZAGAIA[1]

Janne Rantala[2]

Mozambican rapper Azagaia (6 May 1984 – 9 March 2023) died in March at his home in greater Maputo. Only 38 years old, and especially loved by the younger generations, Azagaia was the country's most famous rapper, listened to in all of Portugal's former colonies, especially in Africa, but also in Portugal, Brazil, and other parts of the world. He was an outspoken critic of corruption, war, and the legacies of colonialism. Janne Rantala, an anthropologist who has studied Mozambican Hip Hop since 2010, directs the following words of remembrance directly to Azagaia.

Dear Azagaia. Believing that in good African fashion you are present wherever you are remembered, I address these words directly to you. We weren't very close, but we met several times over your last decade. Even more often, at times daily, I listened to your music both for my research and as a fan.

I want neither to accept nor to believe that you are indeed forever gone and no longer rap, move, or laugh-or that you don't release new tracks anymore and that you especially can't be seen anymore at a stage or coming across on the street. Like thousands of other Mozambicans from all walks of life, I feel like I've lost a close friend.

You were born near the border with Eswatini (former Swaziland) and South Africa in the Namaacha district where you lived until your 10th year, when you moved to Maputo. You will be ever missed by your teacher father who arrived in Mozambique from Cabo Verde and your mother, who worked as a *mukherista*, doing informal border trade, such as my mother-in-law. You were truly an exceptional artist, deep thinker and public intellectual as well as one of the most versatile performers (and people) I know. Despite your world fame, your behavior towards other people was kind and modest. Your *joie de vivre* and smile radiated and spread everywhere you went.

Even your enemies didn't doubt your will to fight for a better world - it just wasn't in their best interest. For those of us who loved your music, it is impossible to accept that your laughter and voice have been forever silenced.

You died at your home in the Kongolote neighbourhood in Matola city on Thursday, 9th of March, from an epileptic seizure. You had informed the electrician working on the roof that you were going to your bedroom to rest for a moment. That nap, however, never ended. Although the death was natural, your passing has already sparked social protests across Mozambique, as well as in other former Portuguese colonies. Everywhere in Maputo there are pictures of you painted on electricity poles and walls. A big mural was painted in your honour in Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau.

Political ancestors

You were the first Mozambican rapper to participate in my research on Hip Hop and political memory in Mozambique. It was soon after September 2010. I paid attention to your music when I noticed that your songs were used as slogans in the 1st-2nd September uprising of that year, which happened a few months before the later uprisings further north, which became designated as the Arab Spring. You were 26 at the time.

I soon discovered that there had been a campaign against you for several years already, by some Mozambican social scientists who sought to downplay the artistic and political value of your music. They argued that your music was not genuine social critique, but mere outburst. It was not difficult to show that they were wrong. As any good art, your music offered tools for people to address their own situation and understand society. This legacy of your poetry and rap remains even when you are gone.

Initially I became interested in your work because your songs present the history of Mozambique in the light of current social problems linked to the legacy of colonialism invoking the dead freedom fighters - figures who I have come to call "political ancestors." It never occurred to me that you yourself would become one of them: the topic of countless tribute songs, poems, other artworks - some of them very good - and protest slogans, already in the first weeks of your afterlife.

Over the years, I interviewed you for a total of several hours and we met otherwise many times, at discussions, at shows or peaceful protests, or on the street just by chance. In the beginning, my interview technique was, to be sure, quite clumsy with countless ready-made questions, which resulted in answers that always inspired a few new questions. I apologize for that and thank you for your patience.

At the Center for African Studies seminar in Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, to which I invited you in 2012, you refused all customary titles utilised in the Mozambican academy and asked to be called simply "brother Azagaia." Now, after you left us, it feels a little strange to call you brother, because the living don´t usually refer to dead people like that. Nevertheless, as you said in a TV interview, you only must be born to die. Therefore, it would be better to get used to the idea of trying to make one's life meaningful, as you suggested. You were an excellent example for us in this, brother Azagaia.

Your imagination of another world exhibited rare character. After an interview session in my home in the Malhangalene neighbourhood, you were drinking a second cup of thick home-made *mapfilwa* 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´ hostility, civil war, economic shortages, and later IMF imposed deindustrialisation. You were imagining an alternative future of your country´s past-time which was never lived by anybody, but which could nonetheless be imagined with a great utopic imagination like yours. Time, which could well be possible without legacies of colonialism and neocolonial destabilizations, which still prevent great dreams like yours to become reality. As you put it in one of your tracks: "We expelled the settlers, but not colonialism/ I saw the shit, put the lid down and didn't flush".

When I first arrived in my current home country of Mozambique in 2011, it was still one of the most underdeveloped countries on Earth, but rapidity of its economic growth was

[1] Many thanks for colleagues in the CIPHER ERC CoG team at University College Cork for their emotional and practical support in mourning when I wrote this letter, especially professor J. Griffith Rollefson.

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unprecented. In the music videos on TV, the topics were about dancing, paper money and expensive-looking drinks. Giant pictures of artists were put up on the walls of the skyscrapers, selling everything from insurance to soft drinks.

Your pictures weren't there, Azagaia. You made music for the oppressed, against corruption, economic inequality, neo-colonialism, and political violence. In your songs, you defended that majority of Mozambicans, the majority of whom have no salary and whose voices are usually not heard. For this reason, your music was censored on state-owned TV and radio channels. Even now, when your death is mourned in all the former colonies of Portugal, the state media hardly addresses your death.

Censorhip made you even greater

Even if the Minister of Culture of Mozambique justly presented her condolences right away, the media close to Frelimo have done everything in their power to downplay the news. The newspaper *Notícias* first published especially short story, which nevertheless had space to describe your alleged personal problems. The *Domingo,* a Sunday magazine belonging to the same group, published a cover story about another artist who, according to the headline, sings a history. This way, the issue tried to decenter your death and your life's work, which *not only* sang, but *also made* history - and will still make it during the decades to come.

They censor you even when you are dead. This way they emphasize their own insignificance as the news media.

As you mention in the intro track to your second album *Cubaliwa* (Renaissance), you were called to the public prosecutor's office and questioned on suspicion of threatening the security of the state, after you had released the song "Povo no Poder" (People in power), inspired by the large demonstrations of February 2008. You were only 23 years old. In the end, the charges were not filed.

This type of "music of rapid intervention", which required studio work immediately after the events and a release of topical songs as a kind of sonic reportage as "CNN of the ghetto", became your trademark. Many events remained in our historical imaginations because of your tracks and music videos.

Despite the style of music you chose, the media boycott, repeated threats, and fierce campaigns against you, you became one of the biggest stars in the Portuguese-speaking Hip Hop world, whose death is mourned on all continents and remembered in dozens of languages.

As a tribute to the greatest Mozambican rap artist of all time, the anniversary of your death, the 9th of March, will be forever celebrated as the International Day of Mozambican Hip Hop.

For truth

I can't even imagine the chaos Mozambique would have faced if you had died from the death squad's bullet that many of us feared for over 15 years. Your music was considered so dangerous by those in power; so dangerous that there have been severe attempts to attack your legacy and prevent public mourning.

A mere conspiracy theory about your death could have thrown the country into chaos. If the ruling party, Frelimo, with such a great history as a liberation movement today had any understanding of contemporary society and citizen´s social reality, it would do everything possible to thank your family and the Hip Hop community for quickly and effectively cutting off the wings of any rumours and disinformation concerning your death. Conspiracy theories would otherwise easily spread in these kinds of situations.

Even if you wanted everyone to at least have food, you wouldn't have accepted a revolution based on a lie. During your career, you actively opposed the political manipulation of history. The track about this theme, "As Mentiras da Verdade" (The Lies of Truth, 2007), initially provoked a wave of public attacks against you.

Your song "Os Cães da Raça" (Breed Dogs, 2013) will go down in history as an exceptionally sharp description of the history of racial discrimination during colonialism and its impacts in contemporary Mozambique. Your album Cubaliwa (2013) as a whole, is one of the sharpest diagnoses of the legacy of colonialism, both in Mozambique and elsewhere in the world.

Revolutionary hymn as an intro

Even from far away - where I am here in Ireland - it can be seen through media and social media platforms how important your music and civic courage were to Mozambicans, as well as to Angolans, Guinea-Bissauans and Cape Verdeans. In the research centre for global Hip Hop studies: CIPHER at University College Cork, we talked about you and listened to your tracks almost every day for weeks, despite everyone's busy schedules. Ever since you died, brother Azagaia.

Days immediately following your too-early death, social media was filled with video clips of memorial services, where fans cry 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 have participated in these events. The slogan, "Povo no Poder", was chanted by large multitudes during your funerary and following marches, and it has become especially hated by the powerful.

In Matola - a satellite city of the capital Maputo - as well as many other cities and villages, the intro of your album *Babalaze* (2007) was played in the memorial service, held the requisite seven days after your death. The intro is a combination of the anti-colonial movements' pan-African protest song, widely known as "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", sung by church choir and your polemic statement about the explosion of an ammunition depot in the capital.

In the original hymn from 1897, God is asked to bless the African continent, which at that time suffered from the genocidal wars and mass killings of the post-Berlin congress "military campaigns of the effective occupation". It later became the theme song of the struggle against apartheid and colonialism and the national anthem of six southern African countries in total – as well as the great intro to your first album.

Tear gas to memorial procession

The police have tried to prevent your commemoration in Angola and Mozambique. In Maputo, the police stopped even the convoy from following your final journey and tried to prevent commemorative marches on Saturday 18 March in most of the 11 provincial capitals.

Also, on the other side of the continent in Luanda, the capital of Angola, hundreds of people gathered to honour your life work. The paramilitary police forces armed with assault rifles tried to stop mourners there. In Maputo, the funeral urn was not allowed to follow the planned route, which would have passed close to the president's palace. The paramilitary police forces dispersed the mourners with tear gas grenades.

Even your bones cause fear for those in power.

Police used tear gas against peaceful and authorised memorial marches of the 18th of March at least in Nampula, Beira, Maputo and Pemba. Entire neighbourhoods within these cities were thick of tear gas. People - whether involved or not - were arbitrarily beaten and arrested.

Nevertheless, silencing your legacy has become increasingly difficult. Five days after the police violence, the president Filipe Nyusi came to the public, trying desperately to defend the police repression he seems to be responsible for himself. An absurd conspiracy theory was launched by the police and state media, where demonstrators were said to have been infiltrated by the political people who planned to realise a *coup 'd'état* using memorial marches as a cover.

If your gifts were not enough to ensure your immortalisation, efforts at repressing your memory guarantee that your legacy will live on forever.

Thanks for everything, brother Azagaia. I remember you not only as a great artist, but also as a person bursting with a great smile, laughter and joy; who wanted to live a normal life with his family; but who also had a strong need to make art defending human rights of those whose voices are usually not heard.

Your goals didn't sound unreasonable, but maybe their modesty was a reason that made certain people label you as a dangerous agitator and revolutionary: you wanted people at least to have clean water and food, and you expressed this demand through your art; music whose equal is impossible to find.

In your last words you said you were going to rest. Therefore, rest in peace, brother Azagaia. And rest in power. May the hope you brought to society and your courage leave a living legacy in Mozambique and beyond.