

EACH OF US WALKS WHERE WE CAN, WHERE WE ARE ABLE TO WALK: INTERVIEW WITH JOÃO RIBEIRO

Ana Cristina Pereira

I talked with the Mozambican filmmaker, João Ribeiro, on an esplanade in the city of Maputo, early one morning in April, since it's inadvisable to wait until the full heat of the day. During our conversation it became clear how different threads of the history of Mozambican cinema are embedded in the director's life and that in order to comprehend everything that he generously reveals requires an understanding of the context in which he has pursued his career. His parents were from Cape Verde and he was born in 1962 in Quelimane. João Ribeiro was 13 when Mozambique gained its Independence.

During the first fifteen years following Mozambique's declaration of independence, cinema was integrated within the political strategy pursued by the country's government. Between 1975 and 1991, the National Film Institute (INC) dominated Mozambique's film industry, in all stages – from production and distribution to film exhibition. Cinema, under the supervision of the Ministry of Information, was controlled by the Secretariat of the Department of Information and Propaganda (DIP). A national film distribution circuit was set up, led by the ruling party, dedicated to the dissemination of films produced and directed by the INC / DIP, together with other films (Russian, Italian, etc.) that had the same political orientation (e.g. *Convents*, 2011). João Ribeiro was the Provincial Delegate of the INC in Quelimane, where he managed five cinemas in the province. At the same time, he pursued his hobby of taking photographs and began to work with video.

At this point, the Mozambican government supported the liberation movements in Rhodesia and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, which at the domestic level led to a civil war that devastated the country. When Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, the neighbouring country's armed forces fought alongside Frelimo (Coelho, 2004). In 1987 João Ribeiro moved to Maputo where, still working for the INC, he was head of the film archive and later the coordinator of film production. In the 1980s, television broadcasting started in Mozambique and João Ribeiro worked for the three most important national TV channels, where he was responsible for the process of installation, modernisation, creation of national content, production of TV programmes and events. He then left for Cuba in 1989 and in 1991, and graduated in Directing and Production from the San António de los Baños Film and TV School.

At the same time, war and deterioration of Mozambique's economic conditions made it increasingly difficult to produce and import films. Lack of investment led to the deterioration of cinemas and in the second half of the 1980s the quality and quantity of films that could be seen in Mozambique fell substantially. Further intensifying the already fragile situation of film production in Mozambique, a fire broke out at the INC in 1991, and destroyed virtually all of the film archive, production material and spaces.

In the 1990s, the Mozambican economy and the media were liberalized. Filmmakers from INC and Kanemo¹ were at the base of the formation of new companies that continue to be the backbone of Mozambican film production to the present day. Access to new digital technology facilitated the emergence of new opportunities and by uniting to survive, the members of these small companies multi-tasked: they produced, directed, filmed, etc., each other's projects. Returning to Mozambique, João Ribeiro began to work for Ebano Multimédia, where he developed, directed and produced several documentaries for cinema and television. While working for Ebano he became a founding member of Southern Africa Communication for Development, one of the first regional organizations of independent producers. In 2000 he created the independent production company, COOL.

However, the degradation caused by civil war and above all the abandonment of protectionist policies towards the cinema, pushed Mozambican cinema into an even deeper crisis. This means that it is now more difficult to establish a film production centre in Mozambique with the importance and independence that it had in the 1970s, which even affirmed a different perception of history, of the world and art (e.g. Watkins, 1995). The “world cinema” produced in Mozambique – a label attributed by decision-making centres, i.e. the North America and Europe (Dennison & Lim, 2006) – now depends on international financing circuits and co-productions. João Ribeiro directed *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* (2011), which premiered at the World Pavilion in the Cannes Film Festival and has been selected by some of the world's leading film festivals, thereby becoming the first Mozambican film to be released theatrically abroad.

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Ana Cristina Pereira (ACP) – How did you start making films?

João Ribeiro (JR) – I started making films as a result of photography. I had a photography lab, and I got into to moving images through it... I sometimes even say that I got into the pictures by watching films. In those days going to see a film, you could see the posters outside, photographs of individual scenes. As kids, we had to imagine the story that we saw on the posters, because we were not allowed to go inside [they were too young]. We invented stories by looking at the posters. It seems to me that this was a good way to start making films. To watch, discuss it, talk and then take photographs. Later I started making videos, then television. I started editing videos at home, I cut the magnetic tape and glued it together ... I still worked with VHS ... at home. And then I had the opportunity, a big step forward, to work in a film studio. There I began in distribution, in exhibition, in management and then moved to the film archive. Then I moved into production, but always connected to television. Making a television program, even before working in a film production, understand? I started ... I started taking photographs when I was very young, I was 15 or 14 years old when I started taking photographs, but I started working in television in 1985. At first I was making television in my home city, in Quelimane, which was

¹ Kanemo was an official film production company established in 1983 to meet the country's film production needs, since the INC was unable to meet all the demands (Nogueira 1986).

then used by the public TV channel, Televisão de Moçambique, when reporting on events in the province, but more from the point of view of the image, not from a journalistic perspective. We even produced a short programme that we sent here.

ACP – And then you went to Cuba, in the late 1980s?

JR – Yes I went to Cuba in 1989/90 where I studied film and television. Directing and production.

ACP – How long did you stay there?

JR – It was a two-year course. Two years. Back then. Now it's a three-year course, but at the time it was only two years.

ACP – And when you returned to Mozambique? It was a difficult time in the country. How was your reintegration?

JR – Yes. When I arrived in Mozambique, the Film Institute had closed down. There had been a fire ... a year before ... almost a year before ... that was a complete disaster. There was no activity at the Film Institute. People met outside, but the same people had started to do some things individually. They had started a cooperative, that at the time was called Copymag. They had made a cooperative where they were already producing some work. There was Ébano Multimédia that had already been set up by Pedro Pimenta, Sol de Carvalho, José Luís Cabaço and Licínio Azevedo. Since I had returned before producing my short film, because I made a film while I was still here at school ... I returned to make a coproduction that was my thesis project. I came with some colleagues. We made a short film here and I used ... I put together a co-production between the School, Kanema and INC, because I had been sent by the National Film Institute to study in Cuba, understand? As an INC worker, I made this co-production, this little film, with the School where I was in Cuba, Kanema and INC. And at this point, I already knew him, but I got very close to Pedro [Pimenta] who was the managing director of Kanemo. Even at that time he had already said that he aimed to create a company with Licínio and that therefore when I returned I could probably join them – we could work together.

So when I came back from Cuba and encountered this situation, the first thing that occurred to me was to start working and keep on producing, right? I asked the Film Institute for leave without pay. There were people who were being paid at the time. Without having anything to do. There were many people in that situation. All of the INC's employees had no work, but they were nonetheless paid. They were film professionals. At the time I asked, together with one or two people, probably, for a period of leave without pay, which was granted. Therefore, until today, I'm still on leave without pay (laughs). I asked for unlimited leave, so to speak ... and I started to produce a documentary, at the time, that I had set up as a project and I went to work in Ébano. Not with Ébano, in Ébano. They already had the production space, I made there ... I rented a room and set up a kind of a small production company, but working inside Ébano. I produced this project, which took me quite a long time. During the production process I got even closer to Pedro, Licínio, Cabaço, Sol ... and we started to work together, so I started to produce some projects for them. Then Sol left Ébano to open Promarte and at the time I received his stake in Ébano and then I joined this group. And then I never went back ... later I returned to

the cinema. Then I started working as an independent ... I worked in Ébano and then in other producers. This was my integration process after finishing film school...

ACP – In relation to political issues that, whether one likes it or not, involve the cinema. Are you less politically involved than your other fellow workers and colleagues, perhaps because you are younger? Or isn't it true that you're less politically involved?

JR – That's your opinion...

ACP – I'm asking a question.

JR – I think we all have some political responsibility. And I think that all my films have a fairly strong component of critical analysis. I only make fiction films as a director, but as a producer I have worked on countless projects, all with a major political dimension. I don't think that any film I've made can be said to lack a political element... all the documentaries, most of the documentaries are about "truth and reconciliation", peace, war ... xenophobia ... access to water ... living conditions ... I have two strands in my career. I'm a producer and a director. As a filmmaker, I like to make fiction, I don't like to make documentaries. I feel that I'm not a documentary person. I like to make fiction. I like to direct actors. I like to work on the script. I like to work on the preparation. I like to work with fiction, as a director. As a producer, I work on several different projects. I work in fiction and documentary. I have made numerous documentaries that I have produced myself, that I have coproduced or for which I provided services. And even in my fiction films, the themes chosen are political, except for one of the shorts. For example, *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* is a political film, i.e. it's a fictional story. But it's a story that counts the post-war process, including fierce criticism of the governments, of the past ... so I think we all have that capacity or responsibility. Let's say, then, the fact of producing entertainment or making a fiction film does not mean that it can't have a political connotation, or sometimes even have more than one that its apparent connotation ... the objective is this dimension.

ACP – Is *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* a postcolonial film?

JR – Yes. This approach ... if we look at the time in which it was made, at the moment when it was made and the subject matter it addresses, obviously it rests on a threshold, right? In a passage of time, we are there at a time when we have emerged from the liberation struggles to independence, from independence to another internal struggle, a fratricidal struggle [he says "fratricidal" with particular violence], right? A struggle ... a civil war! After this war there was a kind of complete rebirth, so to speak, there was peace, the entrance of new forces, right? The United Nations peacekeeping force. From that world power that comes to stabilise the country, or establish a new nomenclature, a new state, right? A new order, therefore, can obviously have this interpretation, this is the political interpretation, that is the positioning. I agree. I don't know whether we can call this *postcolonial* [he laughs – because of the excitement that the word engenders in this part of the world ...] but which obviously addresses this theme. And it talks about a new kind of colonialism, a new kind of dominant power and the role of that power before society, obviously and it questions that power. Therefore: who are you, who are those who look at the country with the UN symbol emblazoned on their foreheads and who see...

ACP – Would we be extrapolating if we said that this reflection on society and on politics in general also applies to cinema? That the cinema you produce depends on international agendas, powers and interests that surpass your requirements as an artist and the needs you sense in the audience here?

JR – [Visibly stuttering, given the delicacy of the question] There are postures ... I mean ... it's a bit ... contradictory, in the sense that you can make a film without anything. Glauber Rocha once said ... with a camera on your shoulder and an idea in your head you're ready to make a film. It may be the best film in the world, i.e. the lack of resources, or the lack of financial or technical resources doesn't prevent you from making a great film. Now, these are different paths. Each person chooses his own path... each of us walks where we can, where we are able to walk. If I'm working on a fiction project, if I immerse myself in a project, I want to make a film with this working group, I want to have a team, I want to have resources, I want to have the capacity to produce, to create ... I want to have this experience of cinema – this experience of holding a camera in my hand – ... and ... I've also had that experience. I have already participated in this type of project, and I really enjoyed it. When we're going to make a documentary, I like to have this experience of working with a few people, to improvise, etc., but to make the short films or feature films that I want to direct, I believe in this type of project. This implies this path, but it's not the only path. It doesn't mean that this is a rubber stamp and is the only way to do this.

So I'm not worried about the number of films I'm going to make in my life ... I want to make the projects that I identify with, so I don't have any problem following this path: to look for this funding and be dependent upon it. But there are other paths. It's necessary to understand this possibility, because if I have a camera and two actors and have the minimum conditions, I can make a film. I can tell a story and nothing can stop me: that's the path I now want.

I'm now developing another project. This first film, this first feature film took me ten years to complete, between the idea and its final screening. Maybe this second project will take eight, ten or twelve years. But I'm not worried about it, because I want to do it the same way. I want to have a team, I want to have money, and of course there is no other alternative, because unfortunately in Mozambique and within the options available to us, there are no forms of financing, there are no forms of production, there are no possibilities of exhibition other than raising finance abroad, which makes us dependent on these agendas, the agendas of the funding bodies. Who gives the money, what kind of film do they want to see on the screen, what kind of countries are they going to support. This is also part of the decision-making process ... because if they supported many films from Mozambique last year, they won't support more this year. I mean there are many different issues... it's not just a question of whether it's a good project. In theory that's the key issue: the best project will be chosen. But the jury consists of many people, and these decision makers, each one has his or her agenda, his or her objectives, and these dependencies exist. That's how the game works.

ACP – And after raising the money, did you feel a lot of pressure from the production in your work, or were you free?

JR – I don't think that applies in these cases. I think that this concept of freedom is utopian. I think that all of us ... in order for a filmmaker to have this freedom he must own most of the money raised, which is why so many American directors and directors of fiction films produce their own films. I also produced this film but my investment wasn't the majority stake. The money that I raised in Mozambique is not ... it doesn't give me this ability, so in this production game, with this set of factors, that involves dealing with several producers, from all the countries which funded the film, each with its own stake, you have to make different commitments. You have to know how to manage the entire process, of which you are part, but perhaps, assume a less important position in the overall funding. From the creative point of view, yes, from the aesthetic point of view, yes, but not from the point of view of the financing and the money. So this freedom doesn't exist, does it? And I think that's the way it has to be. Because professionally you have to work in coordination, and you have to depend on decisions taken from all sides, because every decision costs money, right? Each option costs money and you have to get to the end of the project and sometimes you have to make a few compromises: you have to accept that sometimes you can't attain the ideal solution. We have to work like this because otherwise, we won't be able to finish the film. Or we have to compromise ... we receive pressures from everywhere, it's the kind of emphasis you have to give to a specific phrase, the kind of image you show in a scene, the type of actor you're going to choose ... all this is a complex game...

ACP – Later the teams also ... everyone wants to bring someone from their country ... whether an actor, a make-up artist ...

JR – Yes, some countries make you enforce rules, right? For example, if you have financing from France you have to achieve x points. In order to get these points, you have to satisfy certain precepts, you have to have one ... that doesn't mean that you have to have a sound operator, but you have to have an operator, you have to have a technician, you have to have an artist, you have to have a creative element, or you have to do something and that gives you points within the coproduction. It also doesn't make sense to make a coproduction to raise funding, thinking that things should be otherwise, because the entity funding the film won't get any money back. It's different in a commercial project, we're going to make a film to sell, we predict so many tickets, we and so many people and will divide up the profits. In that case it's obvious that creative participation may be a minor factor for those who put up the money. But in cases where these films are made for our audience and are not primarily intended to make a financial return, the countries that invest require a creative return. They may say otherwise: but if they're going to put up the money, they want French people to work on the project, they want Brazilians to work, they want artists, technical resources, production services to be provided by these countries.

ACP – And do you enjoy this kind of game?

JR – Yes of course. I think that we all benefit from this. I think if I also had the possibility to fund something from which I wouldn't have any financial return, I would also like to have an influence on the creative process. Obviously within the limit of my investment

and respecting the initial work that led me to invest. So there is an initial idea, which attracts an investor, and this idea has to be respected, because otherwise it also wouldn't be worth investing, would it? So if you respect the idea and trust the team's leadership capacity or ability to implement the project, you will fund it, your participation has to be managed within this principle. If you want to change the project, if you want to do something else, then you should find another director, or another production team, right? It works like that, of course it gives me pleasure, because it's a complex thing ... it's an entire process. It starts with the script, from what you have written in the script, to the post-production process, everything depends on this discussion. It is necessary that your co-producers are happy with your edit, it is necessary that your co-producers are happy with the film's cast and crew, music, colour, with ... in other words there is a tremendous set of factors that you have to learn how to manage. In principle, unless you are fortunate enough to be told: hey, do whatever you want ... luck or bad luck, because sometimes you do what you want, and there's something that does not attain any objective ... I think that discussion and collective participation generates fruits, right? Obviously it's not the only way.

ACP – Mozambique is enjoying a good period in terms of fiction films ... with one film a year ...

JR – Well ... I don't know if one film per year counts as a rhythm ... because one film per year means one filmmaker, right?

ACP – But in a country that experienced years and years without producing a fiction feature film ...

JR – But in the past we've already produced five/six films a year, including national and foreign films ... Now not only do we have no national production, we have no fiction to be filmed in Mozambique from other countries, right? So this is a major retraction ... I don't think that means we're enjoying a good period. And if we also see that these projects are opportunities that arise, because for example, Sol's film was produced within the context of Doc TV and Film TV, which is something that happened three/four years ago, so we don't know if it will happen again next year, or if it will take another three/four years to have this funding possibility again. Licinio's film comes from a different situation. There is an annual call for proposals in Portugal from which he received some money and then he went to raise, as I did on another occasion, other international funds. My film was also financed by Portugal, largely by Portugal. I had to raise the rest of the money, then you have a fund that you know that you can apply for every year... you may or may not get the funding, it's a cyclical thing. Now this other call for proposals is sporadic. It happened on one occasion. So I don't know whether we really have had an average of one film a year over the last two years. But if we go back two years ago, nothing had been filmed for three or four years ... so if we count the last ten years, that means we've made one film every three or four years. And that's not good for any country in the world. I think cinema is part of the cultural process, the process of recording a country's life and the lack of films constitutes a gap for the history of the future. People won't have this history, this memory ... of fiction, of fantasy, will they? They won't have this kind of criticism,

satire, a different way of looking at people's lives. I don't think it's a good rhythm, I think it's a pretty low rhythm, and I think there's a downward trend because there is less and less funding, and every time the geopolitical situation worsens in the world, right? There are crises everywhere, and this has a direct influence. For example, my film was funded last year and but we haven't signed the contract yet, so I don't even know if I'm going to shoot in one or two years from now. ICA² hasn't yet signed a contract, and because it hasn't signed the contract, it hasn't released any money, so since I don't have the contract, I can't go to other financiers to ask for completion funding, because I can't prove that I already have some guaranteed funding ... and it'll soon be a year since the funding was approved. A second call for proposals is already open and they haven't yet signed contracts for the previous call. So the international crisis affects production. If we produce little and if we depend on this funding we will produce less.

ACP – Are you pessimistic in relation to the future?

JR – If you talk about cinema, yes. Because there also isn't any movement on television to create new opportunities. Television broadcasting began in Mozambique around 36 years ago, and private television began around 10-15 years ago. There is no initiative on these national television channels to create alternatives, a path for production that will encourage national fiction. There are no theatre productions on TV. There is no drama on TV. There are no national series. There are no signs that this might happen. There are no steps being taken by the government. There is a sponsorship law that allows companies to provide some funding for culture. This law hasn't been enacted yet, it doesn't have any regulations yet. People don't know how to use it. They don't believe that it exists, that it works. It is necessary to educate the institutions. But even then the institutions won't release the money based on the law. They don't believe in it, because the tax authorities will charge them for what they say have paid through this sponsorship law. So until there is a whole set of laws and regulations that make it possible to invest in the film industry, this situation won't change.

ACP – There was a levy, which made it possible to set up a fund, but it disappeared?

JR – There was a levy which was charged on the film ticket, and the money raised from film tickets was entirely channelled to the INC.

ACP – It wasn't related to television?

JR – No, it was never about television. There was the INC, that was also a film distributor and exhibitor? And there was a value of each ticket that was channelled to a production fund. But this hasn't existed for around 30 years, this system ended...

ACP – And in terms of schools? There is no film school in Mozambique ...

JR – Now there is a film course within the ECA³. There is a film course that began this year.

ACP – I asked when I was there, nobody knew about this course there ... no one told me about this course ... how many years does the course last?

² Instituto do Cinema e do Audiovisual, I. P. (Portugal).

³ ECA – Escola de Comunicação e Artes (Arts and Communication School) of Universidade Eduardo Mondlane.

JR – I think it's a 3-year course. There is also an Audiovisual Academy that trains some people linked more to operational issues, more to technical aspects of production, than to the creative dimension or content management, or screenwriting ... but I don't think that's the right path...I do think it's very important, it opens doors, it's a sign, but it can't be the only way. I think that training can't go beyond just creating a study plan, a university cinema course, that will train theorists, people who won't have any contact with production.

ACP – Why? Don't the students make films at school?

JR – I don't know, we will see what will happen. It's the first year. It has a curriculum, it will train people. But I don't believe that this is the only way or that it's the most democratic path, shall we say, the most democratic path in the sense of spreading and generalising production. Because there would have to be another type of training. A more basic training, audio-visual studies should be included within school curricula ... we have a school of visual arts, that teaches drawing and other artistic practises, but this should be part of the school curriculum from childhood, the visual arts ... but not in Mozambique.

ACP – There is no visual education in public schools in Mozambique?

JR – No, there isn't. None at all. So if you had these classes and these cycles that will foster interests and other parallel courses, the situation might be very different, and you would have more people interested in audiovisual questions. Now only one university course ... that can't be seen as the solution to the problem. You have to make a prior investment. From primary school onwards, with film projections, etc., there is a whole body of work that has to be done. If there isn't any visual culture how can there be cinema? There are very few schools that pursue this path ... maybe a private school or another school may have, film projections on a regular basis, but it's normally very sporadic. Okay, a film is projected from time to time... but there's no regularity that might spark genuine interest. Commercial screens don't show cinema. There is only one commercial screen that shows cinema – one in Matola and another in Maputo – in the rest of the country there's nothing. It's expensive. So where can people see cinema? On TV ... there are very few film screened. That's another way of seeing films ... but it's rare for them to be shown.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ana Cristina Pereira is a doctoral student in Cultural Studies at the Communication and Society Research Centre at the University of Minho (CECS/UM); She has a M.Sc. in Education from the University of Aveiro. She has a B.A. Hons degree in Theatre from the Lisbon Film and Theatre School and the Porto Music and Performing Arts School. She has a scholarship from the FCT to pursue research in the fields of cinema, race and gender.

E-mail: ana.c.pereira@outlook.com

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, Instituto de Ciências Sociais,
Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal

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