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## **Review of the Book de Ataúro**

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## ***de Ataúro Kitabı İncelemesi***

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The book *Bonecas de Ataúro*<sup>1</sup> (Ba 2010) was the result of a project involving 30 female inhabitants of the island of Ataúro, East Timor, to produce dolls and other figures in fabrics typical of the country, such as *tais* (Instituto 2010). Piera Zuercher<sup>2</sup>, a Swiss artist who has lived in France, Italy and East Timor, but now lives in Portugal (Roque, 2024), realised that the island's inhabitants already had cutting and sewing skills and so decided to combine the tradition of the craft to create something typical of the place (Esectv 2009).

The dolls were the highlight of the production and were part of an educational exhibition/workshop organised by the Instituto Camões in 2007 (Ba 2010), which also sponsored the book, which is divided into four parts: “Álvaro Tilman”, “Manufacturing Process”, “Dolls”, “Districts and Dolls”. It is not known how the photographs were chosen aesthetically.

The chapter “Álvaro Tilman” is a mini-biography of Álvaro Tilman Soares, the photographer responsible for capturing the images of the dolls that take up most of the book. Born in Dili, the capital of East Timor, he studied Economics at the Catholic University of Parahyangan in Bandung, Java (Indonesia) and returned to his homeland when East Timor gained independence in 2002, working in logistics and as a film actor as well. He then decided to study photography at the Modern School of Design in Yogyakarta (Indonesia). Tilman's curation of photographs found in the book was one of his first authorial works, which should not be confused with amateurism, since the artist manages to both illustrate the step-by-step production process – concentrated in the “Manufacturing Process” chapter – and produce conceptual photographs – found in the “Dolls” chapter.

The next chapter, “Manufacturing Process”, shows a series of photographs with their respective captions, showing the reader the step-by-step process of creating the dolls. Some of the photos in the book appear in EsecTV's report on the dolls (Esectv 2009). This chapter is still a good source of knowledge about the process of creating the dolls, as there are still no tutorials explaining how to make them. However, an important record of how the social and economic implications of the project benefit the women of the community is missing.

After learning about the dolls' creative process, the chapter “Dolls” contains a series of conceptual photographs that illustrate the toys “moment”. Just like impressionist paintings, sometimes a doll, its origin and the sensation experienced when capturing the scene are named, as in “Gabbe, da família Coração<sup>3</sup>, feliz por estar perto do mar”<sup>3</sup> (Ba 39) in which the reader sees a smiling turquoise doll in a checkered outfit sitting on a rock (blurred background) looking at the horizon, or “Encontro dos casais de todos os distritos”<sup>4</sup> (Ba 67), a photo in which 13 pairs of dolls are mostly sitting on their sarongs on a fallen log in front of a hill, as if they were looking at the photographer. The photos communicate the story and essence of the project effectively.

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1 “Bonecas de Ataúro” translated as Dolls of Ataúro.

2 In the book, her name appears as Piera Zürcher.

3 “Gabbe, da família Coração, feliz por estar perto do mar” translated as Gabbe, from the Heart family, happy to be near the sea.

4 “Encontro dos casais de todos os distritos” translated as Meeting of couples from all the districts.

Finally, the last chapter “Districts and Dolls” is possibly the most interesting, as it seems to expand on the conceptual photography of the previous chapter. This is because it is divided into 13 sub-chapters, which correspond to the country’s 13 districts: Aileu, Ainaro, Baucau, Bobonaro, Covalima, Díli, Ermera, Lautém, Liquiçá, Manatuto, Oécussi, Same, Viqueque. In each of them, there was a photo of one (or more) doll(s) in the typical costume of the corresponding region and a short story. At the time, the authors were students studying for a degree in Portuguese Language Teaching at the National University of Timor Lorosa (Instituto 2010). An example can be seen below:

#### SAME – Manufahi

The smiling puppet has arrived from an imaginary country to meet Mrs Virginal Doll in Same, in the sub-district of Nada, in the Region of Inexistence.

But in this district, Inexistence is also imaginary after all, as the maize harvest is fortunately four times a year.

Mrs Virginal Doll took her friend to visit the mountain of Kablaki and another that gives this town its name - the walls of Don Bonaventura.

She also explained that the “Samenses” don’t go a day without having curry on their table. <<If you really want to savour this dish, take a walk through the city and enjoy the beautiful and unique landscape that surrounds us, with its huge stones, known by the name “fatuk-mamorak”, the “stones of God”.

Ah, it was an invitation that the Smiling Puppet couldn’t refuse.

<<The traditional dances will accompany us on stage, as salt and spice for our sensations, while the curry is once again placed on the table. Be careful not to spill it, as it’s very “slippery”. If you “slip” on it and “fall” to the ground, you’ll be left lying with your eyes on the attic where the flowers stored in it (the dreams), which taste like love, will smile down at you. Come too! Don’t waste any time, if you want to get to know Timor a little deeper (Soares 94).

Although they are narratives invented as part of the project and its publication, it is possible to see that the narratives have a strong influence from Timorese oral literature, which shows that the authors’ literary creations, even if unconsciously, maintain the

country's literary tradition. The short story *Suco*<sup>5</sup> *Saboria* (2018) can confirm this fair comparison, starting with the presentation of the district, followed by the title and then the narrative<sup>6</sup>:

## AILEU

### Region of *Saboria*

[...]

There used to be a region called Sarilihu where many people lived. There lived a grandfather called Maubere and his wife, grandmother Maria, who lived in a house that was on top of a mountain and had a roof made of grass. They had three farmer sons called Leki Malik, Mau Leki and Ber Lelo.

Maubere and Maria loved their sons so much that they went to work every day. Leki Malik went to look at the buffalo, Mau Leki went to the vegetable garden and Ber Lelo helped his parents at home. In this house, Grandpa Maubere and Grandma Maria put an object called a fildaun<sup>7</sup> in a basket and placed it on top of a tree. At night, the fildaun would always light up and the people who lived at the foot of the mountain would see the light, but they didn't know what it was.

Over time, the fildaun would light up as if it were a star, and people would get scared and want to know what that glow was that always appeared at the top of the mountain. There were many comments about that light and Grandma Maria didn't know if it was true or not. So one night she went to find out if the glow that people said they could see was real. She knew that the fildaun was sacred, but she didn't know that it lit up at night. On seeing the bright light, Grandma Maria called Grandpa Maubere and asked:

– Hei..! Tat Leki Bere sabid fe leo na?<sup>8</sup>

Grandpa Maubere replied:

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<sup>5</sup> “*Suco*” translated as Region.

<sup>6</sup> All footnotes have been kept in the original text.

<sup>7</sup> Word from the Mambae language: glittering sacred object that has a form of an earring.

<sup>8</sup> Mambae language: “Hey...! Old Maubere, what's this that's glowing?”

– Hai...! Saun Luli fuis ni taka fe hodan leo na<sup>9</sup> .

Worried, Grandma Maria said to Grandpa Maubere:

– Ohh...! Au kal tu se o fe sauba<sup>10</sup>.

From then on, Grandma Maria and Grandpa Maubere learnt that it was the fildaun that shone every night, so they didn't worry any more, as they knew that the fildaun was a sacred object that brought them luck.

When their three children went to play, their mates always called them witches and said they couldn't play with them. Leki Malik, Mau Leki and Ber Lelo would come home and tell their parents that the other children had called them witches.

It was then that Grandpa Maubere and Grandma Maria called everyone to tell them that they weren't witches, but that they possessed a sacred object called a fildaun that stood on top of a tree on the mountain and at night it lit up with its glowing light.

From then on, the community realised that they weren't witches and because they possessed that sacred object, the population chose Grandpa Maubere to be liurai (traditional ruler) of that region. He became liurai and changed the name from Sarilihu region to *Saboria* region, which in the Mambae language literally means “village of witches” (sabo: witch; ria: village), but in reality it is not a place of witches but a place where people have been unfairly judged as witches. This region still exists and is in the area of the administrative post of Aileu Vila, in the municipality of Aileu (Pinheiro 29-31).

As with the book *Stories of My Origin*<sup>11</sup> (2018), which rescues and collects stories from the Timorese oral tradition itself, *Bonecas de Ataúro* was published in a bilingual Portuguese-Tetum format, given the global reach that Lusophony provides.

The book *Bonecas de Ataúro* is an interesting record of local art and culture. Through

<sup>9</sup> Mambae language: “Hai...! It's the sacred object we put in the basket and it's glowing at night.”

<sup>10</sup> Mambae language: “Ohh...! I thought you were a witch”

<sup>11</sup> “Histórias da minha origem” translated as *Stories of My Origin*.

it, we can learn a little about the folk art of a small part of its territory, bringing together cultures that are so diverse and distant, but united because they share the same Lusophone space. This book contributes to the promotion of East Timor's art and culture in a global context, showing the world some of the country's material heritage.

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