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Inclusivity and the construction of memory in Mia Couto's 'Under the Frangipani'

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CHAPTER THREE

ORALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POPULAR MEMORY IN POST-WAR MOZAMBIQUE

This chapter concentrates primarily on the manner in which oral forms are used in *Under the Frangipani* to depict both the construction of popular memory and its apparent tension with the methods of their leaders. Two issues come to the fore: firstly, the centrality of orality in the characters' construction of vernacular memories; and secondly, the manner in which such construction reflects on the history of Mozambique. In exploring the depiction of oral forms, the chapter treats the role that storytelling plays in figuring vernacular memories. An analysis of storytelling requires particular attention to the kinds of stories that characters narrate, the manner in which they narrate these stories, oral forms that shape these stories and last, but not least, the extent to which the stories may be considered as vehicles for vernacular memories. In this chapter, it is argued that oral forms in Couto's *Under the Frangipani* allow for a transcendental construction of memory, in that they transgress official parameters by drawing on a variety of experiences, beliefs and practices. In pursuance of this point, the image of water in the novel, 'talking' or telling (which is usually considered as an ordinary practice among human beings) and dreaming facilitates this transcendental propensity of orality will be examined. Given the leading role that specific oral forms such as proverbs and mythologies may play in storytelling, the chapter investigates their role in defying the tools that officialdom uses to constitute memory. Most importantly, the chapter establishes the manner in which these proverbs and mythologies open space for differing interpretations, and broaden the construction of

memory. The third part of this chapter focuses on orality's ability to sustain vernacular memories and the point at which these memories become vernacular histories. It underscores *Under the Frangipani*'s valorization of the role of oral forms in constructing memory. Couto's narrative syncretizes various approaches and grants space for a diversity of voices in making an intervention in the debate surrounding the problematic memory. In addition, it is also important to note that the use of orality in writing of the book is itself an allegorical tool as the writer seems to believe that orality is dominant in Mozambique.[148]

Under the Frangipani draws attention to the inclusive nature of the methods that marginalized groups use in the making of memory. The novel speaks from the periphery and positions itself on the side of ordinary people, especially the old people in the refuge. In doing so, it employs certain oral forms and projects them as images of the elders' cultural practices. Couto argues for the consideration of vernacular memories, which are ordinarily marginalized in the formation of public memory. He suggests that such exclusion limits the scope through which public memory is constructed.

In Couto's novel, orality is privileged for its receptiveness to a diversity of narrative modes and conventions and refusal to pin down a single version of *truth*. Couto's tendency to deploy orality and valorization of ordinary elements in his writing has been a trend among many postcolonial and contemporary African writers in the twentieth century. Immediately after the celebration of *uhuru*, most African writers felt that there is a necessity to 'africanise' their works both as a way of articulating (in a more pertinent manner) the experiences of the African people. They also wished to

[148] The information has been obtained in a personal interview with Mia Couto, a copy of which is attached at the end of the study.

ensure that the majority of African people who did not receive education could understand and identify with the content; and also as a way of fostering national consciousness.[149] Orality was assumed to be an African phenomenon, and to use Craig Tappings' words, "the distinctive parent of African literature."[150] Most African writers used orality strategically to authenticate their artistic productions. A typical example in this case is Ngugi wa Thiong'o who argues that his works draw on oral forms of the Gikuyu ethnic community in Kenya.[151] As already professed by multiple scholars of African literature, this view glosses over a number of controversial issues pertaining to the question of orality. For instance, James Ogude has criticized Ngugi for "presenting his use of oral forms as apparently authentic, although they are clearly synthetic."[152] Ogude continues:

> Although Ngugi claims to draw on the oral traditions of his people, meaning the Gikuyu people, his use of orality is basically a synthetic one since he has not done an extensive apprenticeship in an oral tradition context.[153]

His critique draws from Eileen Julien's emphasis of the intertextuality of oral forms, which contends against the homogeneous approach to their lineage.[154] Julien says,

[149] Finnegan, Ruth. "What is Orality – if anything? In: *Journal of Modern Greek* (14) 1990, p. 131.
[150] Tapping, Craig. "Voices Off: Models of Orality in African Literature and Literary Criticism". In: *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 21:3, July 1990, p. 74.
[151] See Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.
[152] Ogude, James. "The Use of Popular Forms and Characterization in Ngugi's Post-Colonial Narratives" In: *English in Africa*. 24 (1) May 1997, p. 71.
[153]Ogude, James. "The Use of Popular Forms and Characterization in Ngugi's Post-Colonial Narratives". p. 71.
[154] Although this view only received currency among scholars interested in the subject of orality in the late twentieth century, as already highlighted in the previous, chapter C. L. R. James had already enunciated this confluence of ideas. This serves to indicate that orality does not have a chronological lineage or rather a direct link with any particular community.

> There could be no doubt of the intertextuality and affinity of African texts with European texts, but, as we know, Eurocentric views of African literature did not stop at intertextuality and affinity; they appropriated African literature and "colonized" it completely.[155]

This demonstrates the amount of relativism involved in the deployment of orality in African literature. However, it is important to note that Couto's use of orality is not geared towards indigenizing the content, but seeks to highlight its significance in constructing memory. These oral forms such as storytelling, proverbs and myth are deployed in a way that depicts them as effective tools in the construction of memory.

Antjie Krog's *Country of my Skull* extends the emphasis on relativism in the use of orality. Krog stresses the complex nature of the relationship between orality and cultural or racial groupings. As Vincent Mtyende observes in his Masters Thesis, Krog does not use oral narratives for the purpose of authenticating her text; she merely wants "to render the testifiers' stories as close to their original form as she possibly can."[156] In his view, this indicates that there is a level of relativism in the use of orality, as oppose to an absolute attribution of oral forms to a specific cultural group. In other words most writers use orality as a narrative strategy in order to achieve certain ends, namely, to advance certain thematic concerns. For instance, as Russell H. Kaschula notes in his detailed studies of oral poetry that scholars interested in oral studies [such as Phaswane Mpe, Liz Gunner, and Ruth Finnegan] agree that

[155] Eileen Julien. *African Novel and The Question of Orality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 4.
[156] Mtyende, Vicent. *"To Every Victim Whose Story is Heard": The Quest for Orality and The Polemics of Narrativity in Antjie Krog's Country of My Skull* (Unpublished Masters Thesis). Wits University, 2000, p. 3.

such studies should not be divorced from their socio-political context.[157] In other words, as Mpe has noted, orality is sometimes used to achieve political ends.[158] Therefore, orality cannot always be associated with tradition and the culture of a particular society, but as one kind of narrative tool, one that is not immune to manipulation for subjective (and sometimes ideological) motives.

Liz Gunner's studies of praise poetry and history contributes to an understanding Couto's use of orality. Apart from articulating the fact that orality is imbued with political ideologies, Gunner has noted that praise poetry has the "ability to collapse the heroic past into the present" through its propensity to trace the lineage of past histories and thereby "mak[e] memory work for it."[159] She demonstrates the manner in which the *izibongi* draw on the past in praising the chief. In *Under the Frangipani* the use of orality takes a similar perspective to that of praise poetry in that they both have a tendency to infuse the past into the present. However, in the case of Couto's novel, the most interesting issue is the deployment of oral forms in the text as tools for constructing unofficial memory, or rather what has come to be known as vernacular memories. This would also explain the reason for a plethora of praises showered on Couto's peculiar use of orality.

Mia Couto's writings have been revered for their unique usage of orality. Scholars such as Patrick Chabal have praised the use of orality in Couto's works. In discussing Couto's *Terra Sonambula*, Chabal contends that the novel, as well as his short stories, in two anthologies, *Voices Made Night* and *Every Man is a Race*, "are fundamentally

[157] Kaschula, H. R. "Exploring the Oral- Written Interface with Particular Reference to Xhosa Oral Poetry". In: *Research in African Literature*. 28. 1997. p. 174.
[158] Mpe, Phaswane. *"Mine is but a sincere narrative of a melancholy situation": Sol Plaatje, Orality, and The Politics of Culture* (Unpublished M. A. Research Report). Wits University. 1996, p. 56.
[159] Gunner, Liz. "Remaking the Warrior? The Role of Orality in the Liberation Struggle and in Post Apartheid South Africa", In: *Current Writing* 7(2) 1995, p. 22.

oral."[160] He argues further that although the author is not the creator of oral literature, "his writing is rooted in a tradition of orality, as is (and for good reasons) much contemporary African literature."[161] Chabal urges the readers of Couto's works to consider the use of orality as a cultural framework for the narratives. However, this argument, which would amount to reading orality in Couto's narratives as a trope and an embodiment of unofficial memory, is constantly confronted with the possibility of falling in the trap of earlier anthropological studies which deemed orality to be an African phenomenon. It is important to emphasize that Couto's stories do not conceive of orality as inherently African, but suggests that it is part and a way of life, that it is one of the significant ways of constructing memory, and that despite its capacity in performing the role of constructing memory it is often marginalized.

These oral conventions, particularly the realization that the use of orality is a conscious exercise, suggest that it would be unnecessary to continue posing Mtyende's question, "where does one begin committing a writer of white heritage (though African by birth) to orality?"[162] To do so it would mean that although we realize that many writers consciously use oral forms in their works – an exercise which gives them an allowance to manipulate orality to advance intended thematic concerns – orality remains at its best an African phenomenon that only indigenous people of certain tribal groupings can express eloquently. While Couto recognizes in the novel and his short fiction that certain cultural practices may be associated with specific social groups, he is more interested in their spontaneous contribution to the formation of memory. Instead of generalizing – and so risk reproducing cultural stereotypes – critics needs to recommence an investigation of how each individual author uses orality for his or her particular purpose. How does a particular writer (in

[160] Chabal, Patrick, p. 83.
[161]Chabal, Patrick, p. 83.
[162] Mytende, Vincent, p. 1.

this case Mia Couto) present the use of orality? What does orality mean to him? How is orality used to intervene in and to imagine certain socio-political and historical occurrences?

In attempting these questions it is vital to begin with an analysis of the manner in which the debate about orality and literacy is deployed in the novel, as it shapes the depiction of the tension between official and popular memory. The debate on orality and literacy may be traced back to earlier anthropological studies in Africa. These studies initiated a topic that was to be contested among writers and scholars from the early twentieth century to date. It is however the form that these studies took that led to a plethora of literary analyses related to the topic of orality. Most African scholars perceived these studies to be informed by racial prejudice.[163] African literature emerges partly as a form of resistance to such disparaging racial theories disseminated by western studies. The history of African literature, since its beginnings, runs simultaneously with the history of resistance against colonial domination, and some popular themes narrated were aimed at deconstructing those discourses, which the colonized perceived as signs of western imperialism and hegemony. Among the stereotypes that were to emerge more powerfully, and which provide insight into the colonial reception of orality, was the idea that Africa is primitive and relies on oral modes for interaction. The first generations of African writers in the colonial era sometimes seemed to support broadly the colonial ethos. These early intellectuals were very concerned with actively making culture. They feared that colonization would erase African history and culture, and so collected proverbs, legends, folktales and so forth. African writers championed the idea that African history and its culture

[163] See Vail, Leroy and White Landeg. *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History***.** London: James Currey. The book provides a detailed study of the formation of racial stereotypes around the question of orality. It traces some of the anthropological and literary studies that have formulated and disseminated such disparaging remarks.

are embroiled in its oral modality, that is, to understand African history and culture one would have to listen to the folklore, poems, and songs performed among the African people.[164] Out of such celebration emerged an overabundance of literary material claiming to draw on oral traditions of the communities so defined. Some critics such as Ruth Finnegan and Eileen Julien have, however, noted that such utterances lack factual bases. They remain myths emerging from stereotypes fostered by earlier anthropologists. In their writings, they argue that there is nothing oral about Africa and its literature as much as there is nothing African about orality as it has been conceived.[165]

As Finnegan asserts, the debate on orality and literacy was not just another trivial dialogue, but reawakened both writers and scholars to some of the issues that previously had been unobserved or rather marginalized. As Finnegan says,

> …perhaps the most important of all, it gave a kind of validity to non-written material which could otherwise seem outside the pale of 'proper' academic disciplines. In doing so it was able to extend our sympathies and understanding of the range of human culture. It turned our attention to voices which before had so often not been heard – the colonised and remote, the underclasses long despised by those steeped in elite high culture.[166]

As in Couto's conception in the novel, it emerges from the debate that orality and literacy are not substitutes, but supplements. Although orality is now recognized for expressing the concerns of the masses, it is merely considered as such and nothing

[164] As Finnegan, Ruth has noted, African writers believed that national identity of the people can be found in oral tradition.
[165] See Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Claredon Press, 1970.
[166] Finnegan Ruth. "What is Orality – If anything? p. 132.

beyond. While most studies on oral history have tended to argue that oral tradition embodies certain cultural nuances and ethos, Couto's *Under the Frangipani* seemingly argues for the recognition of orality as a source of memory.

Couto's novel suggests that there is a mutual dependency between these technologies: orality and literacy; that one approach requires the quality of the other in constructing memory. Finnegan succinctly expresses the point when she says:

> Even in a society apparently dominated by the printed word the oral aspect is not entirely lost. Perhaps because of the common idea that written literature is somehow the highest form of the arts, the current significance of oral elements often tends to be played down, if not overlooked completely.[167]

Finnegan continues to contend that orality is not something strange or outmoded that needs to be explained away, but a concept which may help us to see not only others but ourselves more clearly.[168] *Under the Frangipani* also suggests that post-war Mozambique requires the combination of a variety of technologies.

Through its complex narrative, the novel proposes the recognition of both orality and literacy as necessary instruments for the construction of memory in post-war Mozambique. Ernestina's (Vastsome Excellency's wife) comment epitomizes this tendency to blend various methods in that her testimony is in the form of a written letter: she leaves the letter with Marta Gimo, the nurse responsible for the health care of the elderly people in their home. The letter covers versions of the stories and oral forms similar to those found in other testimonies that the respondents to the

[167] Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa.* p. 19.
[168] Finnegan, Ruth. "What is Orality – if anything? p. 140.

investigation of Vastsome Excellency's murder have narrated to Izidine. It draws on similar kinds of proverbs, mythology and folklore.

Yet, it is also important to note that despite the fact that *Under the Frangipani* suggests the use of multiple technologies in the construction of memory, it endorses orality strongly. The old people in the novel constantly discourage Izidine Naita from taking notes about their testimonies. As Navaia Caetano says, "don't write anything down, and leave that notebook on the ground. Be like water in a glass. He who is a drop always drips, he who is dew evaporates. Here in this refuge, your ears will grow bigger. For we live to talk."[169] The old people resist the transcription of their oral statements into writing. They believe that the official should engage with them on their own terms. It also appears that Couto takes pleasure in "de-stabilizing" the confident official expectation that all communication will be written. Orality, which Couto underwrites, unsettles that confidence considerably.

"In oral History the process counts as much as the contents."[170]

Storytelling and the construction of vernacular memories in Under the Frangipani

This affinity for and confidence in oral forms in the construction of vernacular memories is evident in the centrality of oral modes in the novel. Most of Couto's narratives assume the form of oral storytelling. Chabal succinctly puts this point:

> Both the structure and rhythm of the novel [*Terra Sonambula*] are profoundly oral. This is true of the story-telling – and of novel is in effect a succession of stories – as it is of the text which is substantially dialogue.[171]

[169]Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*, p. 22.
[170] Denis Philippe. "Introduction". In: *Orality, Memory and The Past: Listening to the Voices of Black Clergy Under Colonialism and Apartheid.* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000, p. 4.

Although Chabal's argument is based on Couto's *Terra Sonambula*, it is nonetheless useful in a more general assessment of Couto's use of story telling. This narrative style is evident in *Under the Frangipani*. The old people's use of oral forms in the novel is not just a tool used to reconstruct the past, but also a weapon used in challenging official discourses.

Couto suggests the use of oral forms as tools in the formation of memory may create space for popular interpretations of the past that are of particular significance to ordinary people whose voices may not be sufficiently powerful to challenge officialdom and its dominant version of history. Oral forms are cardinal sources of memory: people rely on them in relating their interpretations of memory. Elizabeth Tonkin succinctly expresses the idea in her book, *Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*, when she says:

> Orality is the basic human mode of communication, and although people all over the world now use literate means to represent pastness, and written records have existed for many hundreds of years, the business of relating the past and present for social ends has for most of the time been done orally.[172]

There is no doubt that the twentieth-century has seen an increasing dissemination of social modernization. However, as the extract clearly stipulates, orality remains a medium of communication, interaction and a vessel through which people exchange stories. Storytelling is not an exclusive narrative mode, but is an accessible privilege even to those in remote areas. As Balcomb says:

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[171]Chabal, Patrick, 84.
[172] Tonkin, Elizabeth. *Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 15

> …stories are not the domain of skilled or professional storytellers who brighten our lives with their gift of storytelling. Stories are the domain of all human beings who want not only to make sense of life but to open up to all sorts of possibilities in life.[173]

Storytelling, as already indicated, enables the characters to shift from the confines of officialdom to an exploration of issues that may appear banal to the officials. *Under the Frangipani* seems to echo this idea in that it dedicates much space to the testimonies of the elderly people.

Couto's *Under the Frangipani* privileges the use of oral storytelling, mainly because it is imaginative and has the ability to draw on a multiplicity of narrative modes. Storytelling, as Anthony Balcomb says "is something we do all the times:"[174] human beings rely on storytelling to make sense of their surrounding environs and day to day interactions. As Balcomb says, "Stories create meaning. And human beings cannot survive without meaning. Things that happen need to be explained. The best way to explain them is to link them together in a causal sequence that has a beginning and end."[175] He continues, "we do not only tell grand narratives. We also tell stories about everything that happens in between the Grand Origin and the Great end. We explain every day life through stories."[176] For Couto, storytelling has the capacity to re-create the past in Mozambique. This Mozambique has suffered a cycle of violence that tended to efface its people's identities. Couto's narrative praxis relies on the notion

[173] Balcomb, Anthony, 2000, p. 51.
[174] Balcomb, Anthony. "The Power of Narrative: Constituting Reality through storytelling". In: Denis Philippe. (ed.) *Orality, Memory and the Past: Listening to the Voices of Black Clergy Under Colonialism and Apartheid.* Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000, p. 49.
[175] Balcomb, Anthony, 2000, p. 49.
[176] Balcomb, Anthony, 2000, p. 50

that storytelling can de-archive and re-interpret the past, yet this should not be seen to glorify the past. He is not suggesting that at some remote moment in history, people possessed fixed identities. It should rather be seen as an endeavor to imagine the possibility for post-war Mozambique to redefine itself as a country that boasts a meaningful history.

The elderly people's stories in the novel have specific meanings that are valuable to them, and as Balcomb says, "Once we have invested our lives in the meaning given by a story we do not easily let go of it because if we do, we let go of a little of ourselves. If we give up a little of ourselves, we die a little. And none of us wants to die – not even a little."[177] As Balcomb notes, narrative or story is vital to maintaining a sense of identity. The inclusion of the old people's stories is not an attempt to erect yet another edifice of "truth", but simply a way of validating their view of their own condition.

Storytelling is one of the oral forms that for sometime were aligned with African traditions. Storytelling is a significant tool that old people in the novel constantly use as an attempt to gather the memory of the day Vastsome Excellency was murdered. The manner in which such a technique is applied in the novel varies from one character to the next, and the stories revolve around the question of poverty, deprivation of identities and the feeling of loneliness. Characters grapple with these stories in an attempt to narrate the nature of their relation to Vastsome Excellency and his leadership qualities. For instance, Navaia's testimony begins with a flat denial of theft, a confession to taking something from Izidine Naita's bag, and highlights some historical issues related to the character, such as his childhood experiences, and the

[177] Balcomb, Anthony, 2000, p.53.

complexity of his own identity and that of his family. Navaia achieves such an inclusive and diversified recollection of the past through the use of storytelling. This form of narration, adopted either in writing or in oral narration has the capacity to flatten time[178] (in the sense that it resists historicization), space (in that the narration does not situate an occasion within a particular locality), and the mind (in that it allows characters to access the past imaginatively). All these contribute in opening space for a diversity of memories shaped by various experiences, beliefs, anxieties and hopes of the Mozambicans.

As a consequence of oral storytelling's transcendental propensity, characters' stories are highly unstructured or disjointed. This challenges the systematic nature of detective work and its obsession with logic, in that it allows the narrative to unfold from either direction, going back and forth. The disjointed nature of the stories in *Under the Frangipani* is intended to demonstrate the selective manner in which memory is continually reconstructed. The old people are aware of this point, for as Navaia says, "what I am going to tell you now are disjointed episodes of my life. All in order to explain what happened here at the refuge."[179] Domingos Mourão, the novel's only white character, echoes Navaia's assertion when he says "and now leave me alone, inspector. I find it hard to summon up recollections. For memories reach me torn, in tattered remnants. I want the tranquility of not having to divide my memories. I want to belong solely to one life."[180] One may also observe such consciousness in Little Miss No's confession when she says that "all those I loved are dead. My

[178] The citation echoes Liz Stanley's assertion that the act of narration has the capcity to transcend boundaries of time, to fuse issues of different periods, and consequently initiate a narrative. In her discussion of the significance of time in the writing of autobiography Stanley contends that "writing flattens time. It removes time from its 'its time' into the time of the writing, which almost immediately becomes a kind of perpetual present locked in the perpetual and peculiar kind of past that are books, articles, book chapters – like so many flies caught in amber, but caught there on different days, weeks, years." p. 14.
[179] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 23.
[180] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 50.

memories are a grave where I am gradually burying myself."[181] In telling these stories, characters do not aim to excavate the truth about Vastsome Excellency's death, as Izidine and his superiors do. Instead, these characters often try to show that numerous factors may lead to one's demise; they even lay claim to being the ones who killed Vastsome Excellency. Most importantly they aim to demonstrate that memory cannot be filed and kept for future reference. They are saying that "what we discover in this life does not come as the result of our searching for it," but is the products of stories.[182]

The disjointed nature of the stories goes beyond emphasizing memory's selectivity; it highlights the idea that memory is a product of interpretation and tends to be highly subjective. This echoes Liz Stanley's assertion in her discussion of the role of representation in the writing of auto/biographies. She says,

> 'The past' is not a time and place that 'exists' (like Auckland in New Zealand; or Grahamstown in South Africa; Austin, Texas, in the USA) – it does not go on its own sweet way whether I visit it or not. Its time is over and done with and it exists, now, only in and through representational means. Its 'then' no longer has existence except through 'now' and those moments of apprehension which are concerned with it.[183]

These interpretations provide meaning to the past. It is clear that storytelling, as one of the oral forms, has the capacity to transcend boundaries and provide space in which to imagine the past.

[181]Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 75.
[182] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 37.
[183] Stanley, L. "Is There Life in the Contact Zone? Auto/Biographical Practices and the Field of Representation in Writing Past Lives". In: Donnell, A & Polkey, P. (eds.) *Representing Lives: Woman and Autobiography*. London: Macmillan, 2000, p. 6.

The transcendental propensity of storytelling emerges quite clearly in the image of water in the novel. *Under the Frangipani* refers continually to water, and such reference is different for each character. Its fluid nature is used frequently to highlight the impossibility of excavating the truth as expected by the detective. Martha Gimo's use of water as an image highlights the problematic of memory:

> She said that light weighs less than water, and its reflections pitch and toss on the waters like fish carved out of moonlight, like seaweed fashioned by fire. The memories of those old people are like that too, floating lighter than time.[184]

The pitching and tossing of light in the water, highlights its free play, and at the same time, echoes memory's selectivity. The association of light's liberated movements in the water with seaweeds is interesting in that it further demonstrates the transcendence of the elderly people's memory. Seaweeds represent diversity as they come in different shapes and colours. Seaweed has strands that move in all directions. If one reads this quotation carefully, it becomes clear that the memories of the elderly people in the novel are not fixed. The lightness and fluid nature of the elderly people's memories means that their modes of constructing memory do not have boundaries and certainly do not follow any logic. Storytelling resembles that fluidity in that it also regularly blurs any conventional boundary through the use of imagination. The argument echoes Finnegan's assertion that:

[184] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 97.

> …actually observing the process of story-telling brought home very clearly that these stories were not fixed artifacts – final and correct texts – which could be collected and dissected once and for all, but rather the changing and creative formulations of individual human tellers, putting forward their own interpretations of various traditional conventions and themes to particular audiences on particular occasions, different each time. These were not (as I had assumed on the basis of my earlier classical training) finalized texts, and they had to be studied as active processes, not frozen products.[185]

The construction of unofficial memory in Couto's *Under the Frangipani* is highly dependent on the forms of narration and has a tendency to infuse a variety of stories that on the whole appear to be representative of the memories of a diversity of cultural groupings.

The symbolic fluidity of water and its ability to draw on various experiences or memories is similar to that of dreams in the novel. Dreams and the process of dreaming are important in Couto's narratives; they demonstrate the spontaneity of memory. Dreams enable the characters to shift from one world to the next, to establish links with those on distant frontiers. As the narrator of the story in *Every Man is a Race* entitled "Woman of Me" says,

> Then I remembered the previous dream, conscious of the truth that she revealed herself only in a state of delirium. After all: the dead, the living, and those awaiting their birth, make up one large canvas. The frontier between their territories can be summed up as fragile, moving. In dreams, we are all

[185] Finnegan Ruth. "What is Orality – If anything?, p.133.

> enclosed in the same space, there where time yields to total absence. Our dreams are no more than visits to these other past and future lives, conversations with the unborn and the deceased, in the language of unreason which we speak.[186]

In Couto's narratives the capacity of dreams to fuse different domains enables the characters to experience past, present and future. As is evident in the above quotation, Couto's narratives suggest that dreams serve as a contact zone: a terrain which allows human beings space to transcend some of their realities or dogmas. Couto suggests that it is in dreams that the complexity of post-war Mozambique may be discerned.

We can also observe in this extract that dreams do not only enable the characters to shift between these conventional polarities, but also in the process enables them to speak "in the language of unreason."[187] In other words, dreams enable the characters to speak without any fear of or respect for authority, without any respect for logic. This is an indication that even the very process of remembering is one that does not recognize any boundaries. This realization contrasts with the officials' obsession with logic and rationality in *Under the Frangipani*.

To some characters, dreams perform a cathartic role, as they enable them to live out some of their fantasies or desires. A clear example is in the case of the narrator in "The Private Apocalypse of Uncle Gegue," in *Every Man is a Race*:

> I dreamed with eyes open. More than open: alight. I dreamed of my mother it was she I know, although I had never set eyes on her. But it was she, for there

[186] Couto, Mia. "Woman of Me". In: *Every Man is a Race*. p. 60.
[187] Couto, Mia. "Woman of Me". In: *Every Man is a Race*. p. 60.

> was no sweetness like it. She held my arms and called me: son, my son. I trembled, for those words had never come to rest in my soul. What did she want? Nothing, she was just coming to ask me to be good. Not to turn my back on my heart…Then she offered me the tender shelter of her hands. At the moment, as if by some enchantment, I shed my orphanhood.[188]

This fulfilling contact with the mother is a clear demonstration of the narrator's desire to have one. Dreams help characters achieve their selfhood. At the same time it is also important to note that this dream highlights a historical circumstance in the country. This dream speaks of the prevalence of orphanhood in post-war Mozambique. It seeks to negotiate space for the memories of those left on the periphery. Most of Couto's characters are often deserted and find themselves confronted by states of solitude, a sense of not belonging. They feel, as the narrator in Rosa Caramela says, "dispeopled."[189]

Dreams are themselves experiences. A dream is an activity or occurrence in the mind that enables the characters to experience comfort, loneliness, unhappiness and so forth. Rosa Caramela's story is a typical example of dreams' experiential capacity. The vividness of the dream – "she dreamed wide awake"[190] – highlights the experiential capacity of dreams. Rosa "had dreamed of a reception all her life. A dream of glitter, a cortege, and guests. A moment that was to be hers alone, she a queen, pretty enough to inspire envious thoughts. A long white dress and the veil straightening her back."[191] The narrator says that when the time came Rosa waited for the imagined spouse and he never arrived. Although the narrator questions the validity

[188] Couto, Mia. "The Private Apocalypse of Uncle Gegue". *Every Man is a Race*. p. 12.
[189] Couto, Mia. "Rosa Caramela". *Every Man is a Race*. p. 3.
[190] Couto, Mia. "Rosa Caramela". *Every Man is a Race*. p. 2.
[191] Couto, Mia. "Rosa Caramela". *Every Man is a Race*. p. 2.

of the story, it seems clear that the dream had a drastic impact on Rosa's life. The disappointment damages her mental state and ultimately her life in general. Clearly, this experience is an important part of her past. It remains central to her history as it seems to coordinate her life experiences. Couto's stories seek to negotiate space for these kinds of memories.

The old people's various stories introduce alternative narrative voices that invite a critical reading of Mozambique's authorized versions of memory. As stated, Couto seeks to make the novel's narrative structure broadly representative through the inclusion of the old people's stories. Virtually, all the stories depict the circumstances that these elderly people are subjected to in the refuge. For them, the death of Vastsome is not a major spectacle. This is not only because, as Little Miss No says, "here in this refuge, death is so common that I sometimes ask myself: what use are the dead,"[192] but mainly because there are a wide range of personal histories and various plights that impact on their personality on a daily basis. For instance, Navaia's confession is mainly about his childhood experiences and the manner in which it has impacted on his endeavor to redefine his identity. He likens himself to "a pain without flesh to suffer in...a nail that persists in growing on a severed foot."[193] He tells of his mother's "tainted fate;"[194] that "when she bore a new child, the previous one would disappear. But all the ones who followed were identical, drops feeding the same water."[195] He says, "I, Navaia Caetano, am the victim of a curse that weights heavily upon me: I suffer the illness of premature age."[196] All these anecdotes in Navaia's confession demonstrate that there are multiple memories that are of special significance to the people who, at given times, continuously reinterpret them in order

[192] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 81.
[193] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 23.
[194] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. P. 24.
[195] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. P. 24.
[196] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 23.

to make sense not only of their historical background, but also of the broader community. They realize that personal histories or experiences cannot be detached from that of the community as they reflect the community's image.[197]

Navaia's story also allegorically depicts a "tainted fate" of Mozambique. It is possible to read the mother's troubles as reflecting the cycle of violence that had become synonymous with the country. The birth of Navaia may be interpreted as the birth of a new society. However as it seems even this new society, which Navaia symbolise is not stable. It is continually confronted with various ailments that make its growth difficult. Navaia's stories symbolise the complexities of the challenges facing post-war Mozambique. The author portrays Navaia symbolically to suggest that the history of Mozambique is highly intricate and that the labour of capturing and storing that memory as a matter of public record should not depend on officials alone.

The old people's stories also point towards the decentering of memory. Beyond rendering alternative memories, these oral tales also shift the focus from the murder of Vastsome Excellency to the old people's lives and experiences. While the officials are swimming in their obsession with identifying the murderer of Vastsome Excellency, the old people invite them into their own stories. These issues that authorities may consider secondary to the task at hand are expressed in the oral medium. The old people's stories also engage with racial stereotypes, gender violence and class differentiation. For instance, Old Gaffer's confession to the murder of Vastsome

[197] The idea resonates with that of Judith Lutge Coullie in her discussion of poststructuralist readings of contemporary autobiographical writing. She underscores that post-structuralism contends that autobiographies are inevitable influenced by certain external forces of the communities where the autobiographer is born and those of the areas he has at some point visited or lived. Coullie says: "Poststructuralists, however, argue that the author can no longer be conceived of as the autonomous creator of her or his own identity or text, but as someone who is interpellated into available subject positions. Language and culture determine the range of subject positions available to the author in her or his life experiences, as well as in the composition of textual identity." Coullie, J. L. "'Not Quite Fiction': The Challenges of Poststructuralism to the Reading of Contemporary South African Autobiography". In: *Current Writing* (3), 1991, p. 3.

Excellency tells mostly of his conversations with Domingos, the novel's only white character. Their conversations reveal a great many racial stereotypes that, one may safely assume, have been perpetuated under colonialism. The following conversation highlights this point:

> [Old Gaffer] - *You're always trying to order me about. Colonialism's over, you know!*
>
> [Domingos] - *I don't want to order anyone about…*
>
> [Old Gaffer] - *What do you mean, you don't want to? I don't trust whites. A white is like a chameleon, it never unfurls its tail completely …*
>
> [Domingos] - *And you blacks, you find fault with whites, but all you want is to be like them…*[198]

> [Old Gaffer] - *Sidimingo, my friend, I'm more than a little grateful to you.*
>
> [Domingos] - *Why?*
>
> [Old Gaffer] - *I would have met my maker without ever having hit a white man*[199]

These excerpts project some of the racial tensions that remain in existence even at the end of colonialism. They further demonstrate the multiplicity of issues and personal memories that seek to be considered in the formation of public memory.

Little Miss No's confession addresses the trials that she as a woman endured on a daily basis. She says, "We women always live under the shadow of a knife: hindered

[198] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 58.
[199] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 58 – 59.

from living when we are young, we are blamed for not dying when we grow."[200] We also learn from the stories that Little Miss No was repeatedly sexually harassed by her father, who believed that by sleeping with his daughter he would recover his sexual potency. In the same story, we learn that women had to develop certain strategies in order to gain power from their oppressors. Little Miss No, for example, was often called a witch and also blamed for killing her own children. In the wake of such accusations, she decided to use them to her own advantage. She says that "…nowadays, I take advantage of such accusations. It's convenient that they should think I am a witch. In that way, they are frightened of me, they don't hit me or push me around. Don't you see? My powers are born out of a lie."[201] Her experience epitomizes that of other women in the novel, as Ernestina and Martha suffer similar degradations. On a broader scale, they highlight the fear of the unknown and the need to transcend the dogmatic and stereotypical views of other cultural groupings in a society. Therefore, the novel articulates the need to recognize the plight of the society's subordinate groups – like women – and, more importantly, to render the boundaries between social and even political groups permeable.

These alternative stories of the novel's elderly people serve as a window through which the readers of the text may understand the nature of Vastsome Excellency's character. Practically all the characters seem to have something to say about their relationship to Excellency. Old Gaffer hated Vastsome for sexually harassing Martha Gimo, because as he claims, she is the object of his affection. He even mentions at the end of his confession that he killed Vastsome because of his affection for Martha. However, it is through Ernestina's testimony that the reader is introduced broadly to

[200] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 76.
[201] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 76.

the character of Vastsome Excellency. Ernestina tells of her husband's corrupt and greedy methods. In the letter, she says,

> When I got to the refuge, I came face to face with my husband's wickedness. Excellency was selling the provisions destined for the refuge. The old folk weren't even being fed the basic necessities and so they were wasting away. Sometimes I had the impression they were dying skewered by their very bones. But Vastsome really did not care about their suffering.[202]

Vastsome's rationale for this greed, careless and malevolent behaviour was that the "old people are not used to not eating anything…if they start eating now, it might even be bad for them…"[203] Vastsome also transforms the fort's old chapel into a storeroom in which he hides food, blankets and soap meant for the old people. Ernestina is amazed by Vastsome's behaviour because officials are always "talking in the name of the people,"[204] and yet they deny these masses access to privileges that they deserve.

However, unlike the elite's belief in empirical knowledge, Ernestina seems to share Little Miss No's view that things are not always cut and dry. While Ernestina resents her late husband's actions, she is conscious of the impact of war on his behaviour. She says:

> Vastsome had served in the war. He had taken part in campaigns I would rather not know about. He saw many people die. Who knows whether it wasn't during such experiences that his last trace of kindness was extinguished? What

[202] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 102.
[203] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 103.
[204] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 103.

> was strange was that most people had been rendered homeless by the armed conflict. In Vastsome's case, the opposite occurred: it was war that had been made homeless and so it lodged inside him, a refugee in his heart. And now, how was such wickedness to be expunged from deep within him?[205]

While Vastsome is presented in the former extract as an immoral and gluttonous character, the latter quotation suggests that his malicious behavioural patterns reflect the vicious conditions of the entire society. Ernestina refuses to underplay the impact of war on Vastsome. She attempts to demonstrate the complexity of Vastsome's behaviour; that his behaviour is a reflection of the cruelty of war. As Martha Gimo says that war shapes Mozambicans' consciousness of time, it also has a tendency to normalize brutality among certain people.

This depiction of adversity, racism, gender violence, corruption by the officialdom, and the debasement of character's identities, emerges as a potent allegory of post-war Mozambique. In telling these stories as a response to Izidine's investigation of the murder of Vastsome Excellency, the characters seemingly aim to show him that certain events are the consequence of the conditions or circumstances in which people find themselves. To comprehend them, even with the intention of formulating public memory, would require a mechanism that would allow for the inclusion of a variety of stories told by people of different backgrounds. The oral testimonies in Couto's novel, narrated as stories, appear to achieve such inclusivity as they are able to shift from one dispensation to the next without any consideration of limitations and contributing a multiplicity of stories.

[205] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 103.

Thus, *Under the Frangipani* adopts the postmodernist assertion that "the past cannot be directly and unproblematically known in this way: it can be known only through the narratives, or stories, which particular people under particular circumstances write or tell about it."[206] And as Liz Stanley further argues: From this perspective, the study of the past becomes the study not of what actually happened in the past, but of the crucially different subject of what people say happened in the past, and of why and how they say it. To assert this is not to argue that the past did not happen; it is to argue that we cannot know the past except through the medium of words, of language, written or spoken.[207]

Proverbs are among some of the oral forms that African writers have deployed in their narratives. This happens mainly as writers seek to crystallize a thematic concern, the need to highlight some of the cultural ethos of the represented societies and to portray the richness of African tradition. This thesis follows on Finnegan's definition of proverbs as "a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms draw, a saying in more or less fixed form marked by 'shortness, sense, and salt' and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it."[208] Proverbs may be "described as self-contained, pithy, traditional expressions with didactic content and fixed, poetic forms."[209] This definition may be understood in two ways: firstly, that as a source of imagery, proverbs lends themselves to multiple interpretations; secondly, that they have a particular meaning popularly accepted in a community.

[206]Wright, John. "Thinking Beyond "Modernist" History." In: Denis Philippe. (ed.) *Orality, Memory and the Past: Listening to the Voices of Black Clergy Under Colonialism and Apartheid*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000. p. 124.
[207] Stanley, L. 2000, p. 6.
[208] Finnegan Ruth. 1970, p. 389.

[209] Norrick R. Neal. *How Proverbs Mean : Semantic Studies in English Proverbs*. Berlin : Mouton Publishers, 1985, p. 31.

Proverbs are constantly used during communications in most communities. According to Finnegan, "…proverbs…occur on *all* occasions when language is used for communication either as art or as a tool – i.e. on every sort of occasion imaginable."[210] They are an integral part of the old people's testimonies. Proverbs seem to perform a significant role in coding and restoring their memories. The proverb has a dual purpose of telling and at the same time highlighting an image that may reflect on cultural practices. It reflects stories that are significant in a community, and as a result requires knowledge of the community in order for them to become intelligible. As Martha Gimo says, in echoing the views of the novel's old people, "the only ones who know the true colour of the sea are the birds, who look down on it from another realm of blue."[211] Martha uses this saying to demonstrate to Izidine that while the old people may be telling him "things of great importance," he may not understand them because he does not speak their language." Izidine is clearly bemused by this continual use of figurative language: "I don't speak their language…but we always speak in Portuguese!" [212] This sense of confusion continues because even when Martha clarifies that these old people speak "another Portuguese," Izidine simply dismisses their dialogue by labelling it as a "stupid conversation."[213] The use of figurative language emerges as a protestation against, and subversion of, official discourses. Proverbs are usually seen as a cultural resource of the aged, because they emerge out of accumulated wisdom. They are the bearers of the points that each elderly storyteller puts forward. This makes it difficult for Izidine Naita, the detective to piece together the stories that they tell. Therefore, these proverbs in the novel demarcate further the official domain from the domain of the weak. The coding element of proverbs helps in defying Izidine's modern investigation.

[210] Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature*. p. 418.
[211] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 127.
[212] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 71.
[213] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 71.

Proverbs affirm the cultural belief system of the novel's old people. In as much as they believe that things begin even before they happen, the old people also hold on to the belief that "the snake does not swallow its own saliva."[214] Little Miss No uses this saying to demonstrate the difficulty in remembering. As she says, "it is hard for me to summon up my memories. Don't ask me to unbury the past."[215] The reaction of Little Miss No to Izidine's investigation is an attempt to convey the impossibility of the mission he has undertaken, that of establishing the culprit in the murder of Vastsome, because the past, as with the snake's saliva, cannot be brought back to life. This figurative maxim also emphasizes the danger of swallowing back as the snake's saliva is venomous. She asserts her standpoint by insisting that if Izidine forces her to speak, she will simply say anything that comes. Little Miss No says, "are you obliging me to talk? Very well. But mark my words, sir, people only pretend to obey. Don't try and order my soul around. If you do, only my body will talk."[216] Little Miss No is suggesting that even the most stringent forms of authority cannot reproduce authentic past. Instead such methods are likely to derive a mere interpretation of the past that is informed by the desired motive on the part of both the investigator and the respondent.

The use of animals and birds in the proverbs also accentuates the old people's cultural beliefs. Finnegan has noted that in most African communities, the intended comment in proverbs with animals and birds relates to certain aspects of human life.[217] Navaia uses the following proverb to highlight the symbolic significance of the bird on human beings: "the hoot of an owl echoes through the hollowness of our soul."[218] The howling of an owl, let alone seeing the owl itself, is scary to the characters. This is so

[214] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p.75.
[215] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p.75.
[216] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 75.
[217] Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature*. p. 418.
[218] Mia, Couto. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 28.

because characters believe that an owl is a messenger, a sorcerer and, as a result, its appearance is associated with bad news or a curse. Navaia says that "folk shudder when they actually glimpse the holes through which we drain away."[219] In his investigation, Izidine is called upon to these kinds of cultural relationships with other species of the world. These relationship is further indicated in Little Miss No's confession when she says, "When we tell stories in the dark, we give birth to owls. By the time I finish my story, all the owls in the world will be perched on the tree you are leaning against."[220] The owl is feared because it speaks to their conscience. This is a connection that Izidine fails to understand, because as Little Miss No says, "even though you are black, you're from the city. You don't know about such things, nor do you have any time for them."[221] According to Little Miss No, Izidine's 'whiteness' distances him from understanding the meaning of the relationship between the owl and his respondents as alluded to by the proverb above.

The relationship between animals, birds and human beings also manifest in Couto's short stories. In the story "The Ex-future Priest and His Would be Widow", *Voices Made Night*, the narration is shaped by the following proverb: "life is a web weaving a spider."[222] This figurative maxim echoes the manner in which life connects different aspects. It emphasizes the connectedness of things, behaviour, occurrences, histories and so forth. It also highlights the intricacies that come with such coexistence of various elements of people's existence. This blending of differing elements shapes the old people's confessions in *Under the Frangipani*.

[219] Mia, Couto. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 28 – 29.
[220] Mia, Couto. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 75.
[221] Mia, Couto. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 75.
[222] Couto, Mia. "The Ex-future Priest and His Would be Widow". In: *Voices Made Night*. p. 95.

In some of the proverbs used in the stories, the author also indicates the areas in Mozambique in which they are frequently used.[223] The fact that these proverbs used in Couto's stories were collected from different parts of the Mozambique further highlights the connectedness of life and therefore the need for inclusivity. It is also important to note that despite the fact that Couto encountered these proverbs in different communities, they seem to have a universal meaning. For instance the following proverb, "each man's boat is in his own heart"[224] suggests the uniqueness of individuals and their history. It suggests that individuals are the driving force behind their lives. Broadly, it emphasizes the novel's suggestion that representative public memory will come out of diverse stories told by different people.

Some of the proverbs in Couto's narratives allude to obstacles that hinder the development of Mozambique. In *Under the Frangipani*, Little Miss No says that "milk cannot flow from where blood has come."[225] Milk represents welfare, while blood represents the consequence of atrocity. The word "flow" in the proverb signifies an uninterrupted movement or distribution of things. Little Miss No uses this figurative maxim in describing her brutal assault by Vastsome. In using the saying, she implies that as a mother she will not be able to feed Mozambique's next generations. Little Miss No says, "never again would I suckle my grandchildren, whether they were truly mine or merely of my flesh."[226] She views herself as a mother of the nation, whose ways of providing for the children have been tainted. This saying

[223] In an interview conducted electronically, Couto says, "Of course I am more related with the communities around Sofala province (the place were I was born) and from the southern Mozambique (the place were I am living since 1972). But it is my express purpose to mixture everything (names, proverbs, myths) from every part of Mozambique. The idea is that I am talking about a nation which is still in process of formation." Couto therefore believes that for Mozambique to emerge from its troubled past it needs a combination of stories/memories told by people of different descents.
[224] Couto, Mia. "The Blind Fisherman". *Every Man is a Race*. p. 51.
[225] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 86.
[226] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 86.

metaphorically asserts that it is impossible for sanity or welfare to prevail in corrupt and brutal society.

While proverbs perform the dual purpose of encoding and depicting the memories of the marginalized, mythology also contributes to shaping the past. Myth, like proverbial language, is inseparable from everyday stories. It has a powerful influence on the way in which people view themselves and their surrounding. Myth may be defined "as a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form."[227] It is as John Ruskin states, "a story with a meaning attached to it, other than it seems to have at first; and the fact that it has such a meaning is generally marked by some of its circumstances being extraordinary, or, in the common use of the word, unnatural."[228] It is also important to note that over time the term has come to be associated with falsified ideas about people's origins and their spiritual being. As a consequence such developments tended to render such narrative as merely gossip or rumour. The term myth, as stipulated, "means both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood. We therefore use it relationally; one person's belief is another's myth."[229] As William Bascom says,

> Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be faithful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith, they are taught to be believed and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief.[230]

[227] Dundes, Alan (ed.) "Introduction". *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1984, p.1(The critical adjective *sacred* distinguishes myth from other forms of narrative such as folktales, which are ordinarily secular and fictional.")
[228] Ruskin, John. http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/atheories/5.5.html
[229] Van Baaren, TH. P. "The Flexibility of Myth". In: Dundes Alan. (ed.) *Sacred Narrative: Reading in the Theory of Myth*. London: University of California Press, 1984, p. 221.
[230] Bascom William. "The Form of Folktale: Prose Narratives". In: Dundes Alan. (ed.) *Sacred Narrative: Reading in the Theory of Myth*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1984, p. 9.

Bascom is saying that despite the fact that meanings derived from myths are culturally determined, it is difficult to ignore the element of relativism in them. As a text, therefore, myth allows for multiple interpretations. It allows for flexibility in the formation of individual's histories.

The fact that myth is largely stored in the oral medium makes it difficult to restrict it within bureaucratic institutions. As T. H. P. Van Baaren observed in his discussion of myth's flexibility, "In non-literate societies changes in myth are comparatively easy to make, because oral traditions are easier to manipulate than those which are fixed in writing."[231] In *Under the Frangipani*, myth is another pivotal tool that the elderly people use in an attempt to recoup their past and shape their identities. For instance, Old Gaffer uses myth to inform Sidimingo about the beginning of the world:

> So I told him about the origins of time beyond time. In the beginning, the world only contained men. There were no trees, no animals, no stones. Men alone existed. But so many humans were born that the gods realised there were too many and they were all the same. So they decided to turn some men into plants, others into animals. And some, even, into stories. The result? We're all brothers, trees and animals, animals and men, men and stones. We're all related, created out of the same matter[232]

As is evident in the extract, mythical stories often do not provide the reader with a precise historical period. This makes it difficult to trace their genealogy. This ignorance of historical time gives those who tell these stories unlimited independence

[231] Van Baaren, TH. P. "The Flexibility of Myth." In: Dundes Alan. (ed.) **Sacred Narrative: Reading in the Theory of Myth**. London: University of California Press, 1984, p. 217
[232] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 63 – 64.

to formulate their own versions. The transformation of men into animals and plants is magical, and highlights the illusions that come with an attempt to forge links with the past. At the same time, it speaks of the relations between people and their environment. The interrelation between human beings and all crafts of this universe builds on to narrative's attempt to blend various elements.

Myth performs an important role in transmitting the history of a particular group of people from one generation to the next. It assists people to understand their origins and clarifies their current situations. These mythologies are indeed significant for people who believe and adhere to their demands. As Luise White cogently observes,

> It may be more useful, particularly for historians, to try to find out what these phrases meant to those who heard and repeated them, over time and over space. Not everyone hears or appreciates or understands gossip or rumors the same way – some gossip and some rumor may be unreliable to some people while sounding perfectly reasonable to others.[233]

Couto's characters often rely on myth to establish links with their history that is continually being obliterated by the cycle of violence. For instance, the elderly people insist that "we are already being born beforehand. People awaken in a preceding time, prior to being born. It's like a plant that, within the secrecy of the soil is already a root, before proclaiming its greenery in the world above."[234] This mythic explanation creates for them a stage through which they can make sense of themselves and their surrounding origins. Their belief in human existence prior to birth accords them space to broaden their imagination of their identities.

[233] White, Luise. *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 2000, p. 58.
[234] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*, p. 28.

Myth also seems to perform the role of preserving traditional practices of cultural groups. For instance, the old people believe that certain values should be observed during funeral rites. For example, the Muchangas in the novel believe that it has a negative impact on the entire society if specific traditional practices are not followed in the cause of a funeral. The narrator's complaint epitomizes such beliefs,

> No one unclasped my hands as I grew cold. I crossed over to death with my fists clenched, summoning curses upon the living. And to make matters worse, they didn't turn my face towards the Nkuluvumba Mountains. We Muchangas have obligations towards time gone by. Our dead gaze at the spot where the first woman jumped the moon, causing her belly and her soul to take on its roundness.[235]

The narrator's distress relates to his mythic belief that the frontier between past and present, between the living and the deceased are permeable. Mythology has, both in the novel and more generally, the capacity to embody and transmit traditions and histories of the community.

Bascom argues that although it has this capacity to transmit history and tradition from one generation to the next, myth is also susceptible to misrepresentation, "in passing from one society to another through diffusion, a myth or legend may be accepted without being believed, thus becoming a folktale."[236]This diffusion does not depend on whether the society is oral or literate, as such misrepresentations may be found in both categories. Myth may exist in a variety of symbolic and sacred formats, and are

[235] Couto, Mia. *Under the Frangipani*. p. 1.
[236] Bascom, William. 1984. p. 9.

conceived and related through stories. In essence myth is able to cross borders through the act of telling and, in the process of telling such mythologies, it often generate numerous viewpoints.

It is important also to consider the motive of the person relating such origins located in the remote past as it predetermines such adherence. In other words, it is not as important to establish the authenticity of mythologies as it is to understand their significance to the people who propagates and insist on them. This research report, therefore, concurs with Luise White when she argues that "an understanding of mythology is feasible only when as analysts we do not try to determine the authenticity of such vampires/fairytales, but only if we consider their meaning."[237]Mythology as it appears operates as a yardstick in the formation of unofficial memories and identities.

Overall, the novel suggests that the construction of public memory in Mozambique requires the inclusion of a variety of voices. This chapter has analysed the use of oral forms in Couto's narratives and their impact in the formation of official memory. It demonstrates that orality is central to elderly people's attempts to recover their memories. Storytelling also performs a cardinal role in the formation of their identities and, most importantly, in their attempts to recover the memories of Vastsome Excellency's demise.

Oral genres serve as narrative devices in *Under the Frangipani*. Through storytelling, proverbs and myths, Couto inserts alternative voices and elements of older cultural beliefs – which post-war officialdom is trying to extrude – into the novel's investigation. Thus, these narrative aspects advance a detective investigation as well

[237] White, Luise, 2000, p. 58.

as the search for inclusivity in the construction of memory. The stories also seem to assist the characters to cross boundaries of space and time. This is mainly because, although stories evolve from reality, they still allow space for imagination. Imagination allows characters to share their dreams and fantasies. Dreams are important in characters' lives. They help transport not only the narrative from the world of the living to the dead and, by extension, the future. They are themselves experiences or memories that are often ignored, but exert a considerable influence on characters' conceptions of themselves and their history.

In addition to storytelling, the chapter has dealt with the significance of proverbs and myth as they are prevalent in Couto's novel, *Under the Frangipani*, as well as his short stories. Both the proverbs and mythologies are part of stories narrated by the old people in the refuge and increase its transcendental capacity. However, proverbs and myth also create a buffer for the unofficial domain in the novel. The elderly people rely on proverbs to make it difficult for officials to enter into their domain. Such oral forms also assist them in recreating their identities and memories of the day Vastsome Excellency died. In reading the narratives of the elderly people it becomes clear therefore that the novel seeks to demonstrate that there is a need to recognize a variety of stories told by people of various descents in the formation of public memory. It argues that storytelling is a significant tool in the formation of memory, as it allows for the inclusion of other voices that are often ignored. Clearly, these narrative devices are vital to the novel's attempt to syncretize a variety of approaches to the formation of public memory. Briefly put, the novel thematizes the importance of including popular memory in the construction of public memory in post-war Mozambique.