DecliNation of semantic spaces in *As Duas Sombras do Rio* by João Paulo Borges Coelho

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Abstract: The cultural heterogeneity of many African countries in post-colonial times makes it difficult to create a sense of national belonging. For this reason, the FRELIMO government in Mozambique focused on the devaluation of culture-specific traditions with the aim of homogenizing and "modernizing" the nation. Against this background, the novel *As duas Sombras do Rio* by João Paulo Borges Coelho deals with the loss of identity and the feeling of being uprooted. The aim of the present article is to examine the representation of nation building in the novel using Lotman's concept of semantic spaces.
Keywords: nation building; Moçambican literature; João Paulo Borges Coelho; postcolonialism.

DecliNação de espaços semânticos em *As duas sombras do rio*, de João Paulo Borges Coelho

Resumo: A heterogeneidade cultural de muitos países africanos torna difícil criar um sentimento de pertença nacional nos tempos pós-coloniais. Por esta razão, o governo da FRELIMO em Moçambique apostou na desvalorização das tradições culturalmente específicas no intuito de homogeneizar e «modernizar» a nação. Neste contexto, o romance *As duas sombras do rio*, de João Paulo Borges Coelho, trata da perda da identidade e do sentimento de desenraizamento. O objetivo do presente artigo é examinar a representação da construção da nação no romance, usando o conceito de espaços semânticos de Lotman.
Palavras-chave: Construção da nação, literatura moçambicana, João Paulo Borges Coelho, pós-colonialismo.

1. Introduction

With his 2003 debut *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (*The Two Shadows of the River*)*,* the historian João Paulo Borges Coelho became a leading voice in contemporary Mozambican literature. Along with Mia Couto, Paulina Chiziane and Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, he is one of the few authors who have managed to establish themselves on the international stage.[1] Borges Coelho was born in Porto (Portugal) in 1955; as a child, he moved with his family to Mozambique, where he lives today. After the declaration of independence in 1975, he took on Mozambican citizenship. He studied history in Maputo and received his doctorate in the same subject in Bradford (Great Britain) (Ventura 2010: 88). Today, he teaches at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane in Maputo.

The former Portuguese colonies in Africa were among the last countries on the continent to gain independence after the dictatorship of Estado Novo was overthrown by the Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974. From 1963 to 1974, the War of Independence raged in Mozambique, followed from 1977 to 1992 by a civil war between the socialist ruling party FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) and the conservative rebels of RENAMO (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana). Approximately three decades of war led to flight, internal migration, destruction of an already precarious infrastructure and considerable environmental damage, including the decimation of wildlife. Set during the civil war, *As Duas Sombras do Rio* narrates the fate and struggle for survival of the Mozambican border village Zumbo on the northern bank of the Zambezi river. The repeated attacks on the village and the expulsion of its inhabitants make them feel uprooted, which can be metonymically transferred to the condition of the entire nation.

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[1] When I speak of international stage, I refer to the fact that Borges Coelho has been published outside Mozambique, although mostly in Portuguese-speaking countries (in Portugal by Caminho, and in Brazil by Kapu-lana). Some of his novels have been translated to Italian (by Frontiere Perdute).

Proceeding from the assumption that the division of national space can shed light on the challenges and chances of constructing a nation, the novel will be examined in terms of its spatial design. In particular, the focus is on the semantic division of space into partly overlapping dynamic subspaces and the geographical and cultural location of the characters in their home space. Since most of them had never left the Zambezi valley by the start of the novel, "home" for them refers to a geographically extremely limited region. For the same reason, they are unaware of nation-building and the establishment of a national identity. In an interview, Borges Coelho emphasizes that his theme is the connection people feel to small specific areas. For him, Mozambique's territorial unity exists only politically, as a necessary defence mechanism against the outside world (Leite 2012: 131). Nevertheless, the narrator of the novel creates a meaningful image of regional spatial structure. The following analysis is mainly based on the model of semantic spaces developed by Jurij Lotman, which enables both geographical and cultural conditions to be expressed as spatial metaphors.

2. Semantic Spaces

Jurij Lotman's structuralist method of spatial analysis (1977: 209-284), along with further developments by Karl Nikolaus Renner (2004) and Hans Krah (2006), has proven productive for the study of narrative texts. I find Lotman's concept particularly appealing because, while originating in structuralism, it provides sufficient points of contact for post-structuralist models of thought, e.g. for a connection with discourse-analytical and postcolonial approaches.

Lotman's spatial theories can be described as both relational and topological.[2] Michel Foucault described the relational and topological

[2] "Topology" is the term used to describe approaches that are concerned not with the spatial or material aspects of elements, but with their relationship to one another. Their means of representation is the diagram. In compari-son, "topogra-

conception of space in 1967: "The site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids" (1998: 230). Foucault was concerned with relations that can be represented diagrammatically. For Lotman, literary texts constitute spatial conditions in the topographical sense, modelling the nature of a terrain or an interior. At the same time, texts also contain terms which are not spatial in themselves, but which can be expressed in spatial models (Lotman 1977: 218). For him, "cultural models" are created by spatially representable pairs of oppositions, such as "high-low", "right-left", "near-far", "open-closed". He is also interested in topological relations within the text, which diagrams can visualise. Meanings such as "valuable-not valuable", "good-bad", "one's own-another's", "accessible-inaccessible" and "mortal-immortal" can be connected to this structure of relations in the fictional world. Lotman thus treats linguistically conceived bivalence as a factor of human perception,[3] using it to postulate classificatory, spatially metaphorized "boundaries" that divide the semantic space of the fictional world into different subspaces. Renner (2004: 7-10) transfers this approach to mathematical set theory and proposes to describe the disjoint subsets created by the boundary as a series of sets of orders, i.e. to verbalise the norms and values prevailing in the subspaces as rules. Thus, the rule sets for the subspaces form the substructure or the primary structural level on whose basis the action unfolds (Lotman 1977: 238).

At this point, Lotman's concept can be combined with post-structuralist approaches: after all, what Lotman calls "norm" (1977: 234) can also be constructively discussed as "discourse". One can go a step further and defuse Lotman's concept of the "border", arguing that it affirms bivalent thinking, which poststructuralism had criticized and re-

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phy" is interested in the actual nature of a terrain and its representation in maps. It works with technical methods of spatial surveying (Günzel 2008: 222-223).

 [3] According to Lotman, "in the majority of cases visible spatial objects serve as the denotata of verbal signs; as a result verbal models are perceived in a particular way" (1977: 217).

jected as a patriarchal, colonial, racist and heteronormative coercive system. Instead of a border represented as a line, one can speak of a liminal space with blurred edges. Depending on the text, this space can have different characteristics and be described using different spatial concepts, such as those of a heterotopia,[4] a non-place,[5] a third space,[6] or a utopia.

However, cultural models or world views based on dichotomies remain fundamental to the perceptual structures of readers, despite all advances in philosophical thought. Thus, it seems justified to begin analysis in a structuralist manner, seeking the general structure underlying the text, i.e. the primary layer of the cultural model or the discourse prevailing in a particular social sector. The proposed modifications to Lotman's model appear most fruitful at a later stage, when examining deviations from this system, i.e. the secondary structural level, which conflicts with the primary one (Lotman 1977: 238). In other words, a second stage of analysis will explore points of resistance against the potentially coercive binary system.

[4] For Foucault, heterotopias (or "counter-places") are real places of the institutional sphere of society, in which "all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1998: 243). As examples, he cites cemeteries, psychiatric institutions, prisons, old people's homes, etc.

[5] For Marc Augé (1995), non-places are real transit spaces such as motorways, airports, railway stations, ATMs, duty-free shops, supermarkets, and shopping centres, which exist only in relation to specific purposes.

[6] For Homi Bhabha, the concept of the third space is closely linked to that of hybridity. The third space is often referred to as a liminal space, a stairwell or an in-between space. It is therefore not a real place as in the case of Foucault's heterotopias or Augé's non-places. Rather, the third space is to be understood as a metaphorical, topological space in which identities are not only renegotiated between different poles but can also escape the politics of polarization through hybridization. As a contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, it exposes the hierarchizing notion of "pure cultures" as unfounded. The third space is seen as a positive opportunity, since its pro-ductive power can bring about cultural changes (Bhabha 1994: 4, 37-39).

Lotman calls such secondary level deviations "events" (*sobytiya*); they cross boundaries that seem hard to cross according to the rules of the system. The *syuzhet* (plot) of the text emerges from a sequence of such events.[7] For Lotman, actions that take place within a subspace, i.e. in accordance with the rules of the primary structural level, are not "events" in this sense. "Events" as he defines them cause "inconsistencies" in the order of the semantic space. According to the consistency principle developed by Renner (2004: 371-375), these strive to be resolved.[8] In terms of reception aesthetics, inconsistencies build up a tension, creating expectations in the reader.

3. The Home Space and its Destruction in *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (2003)

3.1. The Topology of Home

As Duas Sombras do Rio is set in the border triangle of Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe during the civil war, with Mozambique at the centre of action. The first chapter is preceded by a topographic map (see Figure 1) which shows that the primary structural level of semantic space is based on juxtaposing "the home space" (the Zumbo region in Mozambique), which in its turn has a complex internal structure, to "foreign countries" (Zambia and Zimbabwe).

The Zambezi, whose crossing involves many dangers (rapids, sandbanks, crocodiles and hippos), constitutes a topographical border within the home space, dividing Mozambique into a northern and a south-

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[7] The term *syuzhet* corresponds roughly to that of the plot and has been translated this way. According to Lotman, however, there are texts without a syuzhet and texts with a syuzhet. Syuzhet-less texts affirm the primary cultural model by linguistically doubling it (Lotman 1977: 236f.).

[8] Krah (2006: 313ff.) speaks of an "event cancellation" (Ereignistilgung), discussing various possibilities.

ern part, which are assigned certain characteristics in the traditional African world view. Within the local spiritualistic beliefs, the north stands for the spirit of the snake – the female principle, associated with wisdom and water. The south is conceived as the opposite pole, subject to the spirit of the lion – the male principle, associated with strength, anger and fire (Coelho 2009: 37). Relations of kin and friendship as well as lively trade connect the two banks, mediating between these spiritual poles, so that they feel balanced for the people living along the river. The nucleus of the plot proceeds from the village Zumbo, the seat of the municipal administrator, situated north of the Zambezi.

Figure 1 – Topographic map in *As Duas Sombras do Rio* (Ndjira: 2009) (detail)

The historical depth of the north-south division resonates in the novel. The Portuguese had concentrated the colonization of Mozambique on the area to the south of the Zambezi containing the country's two largest cities, Maputo and Beira. Economically, the south was oriented mainly towards South Africa and Zimbabwe; the north was practically a different country. This separation was continued in the post-colonial period by the FRELIMO government (Chabal 1994: 27-28). In cultural terms, the Zambezi also marks a separation based on pre-colonial African traditions. While different peoples live on both sides of the river, the south is predominantly patrilineal, and the north predominantly matrilineal. In the Zambezi valley, the centre, one can find a mixture of both cultural forms.[9] Consequently, the family relationships and social structures of Zumbo and the nearby village Bawa on the other side are very similar. Only the assignment of the male and female attributes (lion and snake) to these two subspaces points to a cultural difference between north and south. In the title of the novel, the two riverbanks are called *sombras* (shadows). Secco (2017: 79) sees this as a reference to the historical and cultural unconscious, brought to the fore in the novel. The cultural heterogeneity, in fact far more complex than a simple north/centre/south division, makes it particularly difficult to envision the post-colonial nation as a unit and to discursively generate enough connecting elements to enable the population to identify with the new nation state.

In the middle of the Zambezi, there is also a within-the-border liminal space – the island of Cacessemo, which lies between north and south, femininity and masculinity, wisdom and strength, water and fire. The river is thus not a linear border but an ambivalent, oscillating, non-binary liminal space in topographical, historical, and cultural terms. Apart

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[9] This is a frequent subject in Mozambican literature. For particularly detailed examples, see e.g. Chiziane, Paulina: *Niketche* (Lisbon 2002) or Ba Ka Khosa, Ungulani: *Choriro* (Maputo 2009, pp. 13 and 135).

from the river, the home space has yet another internal boundary that can be represented spatially, though it is not bound to any topographical landmark. Constituted by the parallel existence of modern administration and traditional, spiritualistic leadership, it moves further and further from the coast and into the region via the Zambezi traffic artery. The administrator from the capital, Dionísio Sigaúke, and the building of the municipal administration represent "modernity", European administrative structures, values, and models of action. The hospital and a small barracks, where the 450 Battalion and its commander Meia-Chuva are stationed, also belong to this subspace. The counter-space centres around the spiritual leader and medical man Gomanhundo, who lives in a ramshackle hut near Zumbo; another healer, Joaquina M'boa from Bawa, and the isolated rain priestess Harkiriwa. Most of the population – such as the main character, the fisherman Leónidas Ntsato[10] – believe in the powers of such figures and also belong in the "tradition" subspace.

Initially, characters are assigned fixed positions on the two sides of the Zambezi. However, the border between modernity and tradition, both dynamic and permeable, is crossed again and again. While Sigaúke and Gomanhundo remain in their respective subspaces, the inhabitants of Zumbo seek advice on one or the other side, depending on their needs. Consequently, the structure of the home space contains a certain inconsistency from the outset, tolerated by both sides. In accordance with Renner's principle of consistency, there is nevertheless a desire to eliminate this disruption, i.e. to harmonise or fuse "tradition" and "modernity". But no such fusion takes place in *As Duas Sombras do Rio*. Rather, the oscillation – inconsistency in Renner's terms – re-

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[10] In an interview the author gave me in Maputo in 2014, he said that both the main character, Leónidas Ntsato, and the healer Joaquina M'boa are based on real people he had met and interviewed during his field research in the region (Wieser 2016: 152-153).

flects the current state of Mozambican society, in which different cultural systems coexist, albeit not without points of friction. In Figure 2, the primary structure of the semantic space just described is shown diagrammatically.
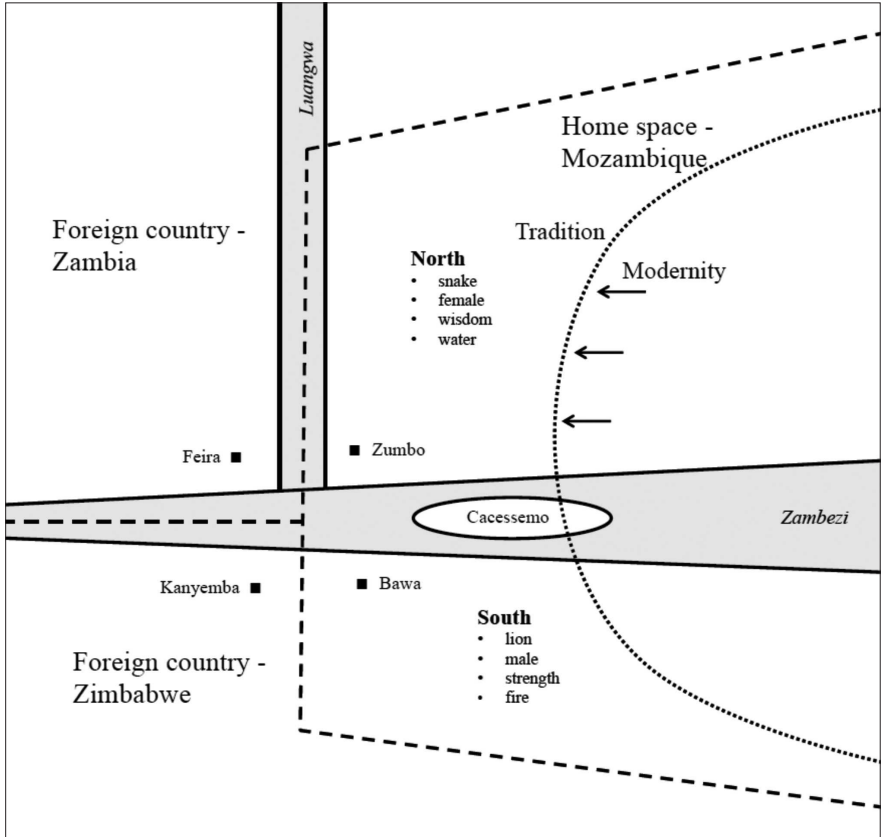

Figure 2 – Primary structural level of semantic space

3.2. Incomplete Border Crossings

A decisive structural dislocation (and thus a secondary structural level) is created at the beginning of the novel by the unexplained disappearance of the fisherman Leónidas Ntsato, found unconscious on the island of Cacessemo several days later. Although he regains physical strength through medical treatment in a hospital (thus encountering the subspace "modernity"), his spirit remains trapped in the liminal world of Cacessemo. Thus, he does not recognise his relatives and cannot speak. Since nobody at the hospital knows what to do about this, his relatives fall back on the traditional knowledge of the healer Gomanhundo (returning to the subspace "tradition"). This crossing is of little import in terms of plot scale (*syuzhetnost'*), since, as mentioned above, the boundary is relatively permeable, and the persons concerned are rooted in the "tradition" rather than in the "modernity" subspace from the outset.[11] But it does illustrate an important circumstance: even if the coexistence of the two cultural systems permanently produces conflicts, it also has its advantages – the subspaces can take on different tasks, complementing each other, such as taking care of physical versus spiritual health.

The healer diagnoses that Leónidas's spirit is trapped between the female principle of the north and the male principle of the south, probably due to a curse. The opposing spirits of the snake and the lion, he says, had both taken possession of him and were fighting a deadly battle in his body.[12] According to Gomanhundo's prophecy, Leónidas would repeatedly flee toward the river – the border between the incompati-

[11] "The less probability that a given event will take place [...], the higher the rank of that event on the plot scale" [*syuzhetnost'*] (Lotman 1977: 236).

[12] In terms of discourse analysis, one case also claim that within the dispositive of the "tradition" subspace, the healer's diagnosis and prophecy are accepted as "true", but within the dispositive of the subspace "modernity", they are necessarily interpreted as "false", since they are incompatible with Western science and culture.

ble forces – which in the end he does (Coelho 2009: 38). As Fonseca (2017: 98) points out, Leónidas himself recognizes his disease as a symptom of the failed identity politics in the post-colonial nation state (embodied by the administrator Sigaúke), which is not able to hear the different cultural voices of the population and thus brings on an identity crisis. As Leónidas puts it, "O problema é que não há ninguém para me ouvir, para ouvir o que os espíritos querem dizer" (Coelho 2009: 48).[13] In other words, the problem is that the subspace "modernity" does not listen to the subspace "tradition".

Leónidas's illness becomes an "event" by questioning his belonging to his ancestral subspace (the north), which is dissolved in the blurred, homogenizing project of the "modern" nation. It stands allegorically for the incomplete colonization and modernization process of the country. The past, i.e. the period of colonization, enslavement and Christianization, repeatedly comes to the fore in analepses, culminating in a depiction of the civil war, interpreted as a direct consequence of the violent past with its disruption of the population's spiritual balance. The figure of Leónidas also indicates that the national integrative project of the struggle for independence was unable to bridge the gap between the economically more developed, patrilineally organized south and the economically more backward, matrilineally organized north (Franco 2011: 35). Against this background, the event of Leónidas's illness ranks high on the plot scale, forming as it does a point of resistance to the homogenizing political discourse. According to the principle of consistency, the figure's imprisonment on the borderline or in a liminal space seeks resolution.

Leónidas himself tries to contribute to such a resolution by offering the administrator Sigaúke, a representative of the "modernity" subspace, to work for him and to tell him about the prophecies of the serpent and the lion, thus sharing with him knowledge from the "tradition" subspace. He thus demands that "modern" Mozambique listens to the voic-

[13] "The problem is that there is no one who wants to listen to me, who wants to hear what the spirits want to say".

es of "traditional" Mozambique and considers the cultural diversity of
the country. But his request is rejected: the rules of the modernity sub-
space do not allow for an institutionalization of an African tradition.[14]
As a result, Leónidas imposes a *m'fiti* – a curse – on the administration:
"Amanhã é o último dia desta terra e vão chover pedras na Adminis-
tração!" (Coelho 2009: 49).[15] The central figure of the novel thus experi-
ences a clash with both borders – the one between north and south, and
the one between modernity and tradition. This double conflict is also re-
flected in his name. The blurb explains that his last name, "Ntsato",
means "snake" in the local Bantu language; the first name, "Leónidas",
contains the Latin for "lion" ("leo"). Thus, "Ntsato" stands for the north
(the snake) and at the same time for tradition, being of African origin. The
name Leónidas, on the other hand, symbolizes the south (the lion) and
also modernity due to its Portuguese (and originally Latin) origin.

3.3. Home Space Destroyed

Before the inconsistency caused by Leónidas's disease can be resolved,
another, even more serious event occurs, forcing protagonists to cross
the border from their home space into foreign space: the village of Zum-
bo is attacked and destroyed on 16 October 1985, soon after the curse,[16]
by a troop of civil war fighters.[17] The locally stationed Battalion 450 and

[14] Alice Cruz (2008: 205) speaks in this regard of a "silenciamento da diversi-
dade cultural interna" ("total silence of internal, cultural diversity").

[15] "Tomorrow is the last day of the world, and the administration will be show-
ered with stones".

[16] Within the tradition subspace, Leonidas's curse is realized here; within the
modernity subspace, the temporal succession of the curse and the village's de-
struction are simply a coincidence. As for the precise date: the author has dealt
intensively with the region. On the close connection between the author's work as
a historian and as a writer, see Franco (2008).

[17] Which grouping the troop belongs to is not explained. However, since the
military forces stationed in Zumbo were deployed by the FRELIMO government,

its commander Meia-Chuva (representing the modernity subspace) cannot counter the surprise attack. Most inhabitants of Zumbo try to flee via the Luangwa river, which separates Mozambique from Zambia. Many lose their lives in the water. Those who manage the crossing are first welcomed warmly by acquaintances in the village of Feira but then taken to a reception camp in Unkwini, which institutionalises their status as strangers (Coelho 2009: 84). In this way, they disappear from the view of the heterodiegetic narrator. The narrative space remains restricted to Mozambique; the border to Zambia is only permeable to a small degree: one can see some of the foreign country on the other bank, and there are trade relations between Zumbo and Feira. Beyond glimpses enabled in these ways, the further fate of the refugees remains hidden from the readers.

The attack on Zumbo shows that the narrower space of the homeland, i.e. the space of personal roots, is demarcated not only against foreign countries, but also against neighbouring regions of Mozambique, from which the attackers come. Thus, another border, one that is in constant motion, separates the home space (associated with peace) from the neighbouring regions (associated with war). This border has now moved; the space of war devours a substantial part of the space of peace. The attack on Zumbo can therefore be described with Krah (2006: 310) as a meta-event: it destroys the semantic order of the home space. Although the intruders move away again, the fear of another attack remains, and the refugees do not consider returning to Zumbo for the time being.

Even the few who have remained in their home village, among them Leónidas Ntsato, are in a state of homelessness: "Porque, ficando na sua terra e no mesmo lugar, atravessaram a linha para o lado do inimigo que agora reina e domina aqui em erráticas deambulações? Estranho mundo este em que para ficar teria sido necessário partir" (Coelho

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they must be enemy RENAMO troops (Coelho 2009: 64f.). The author also confirms this in an interview (Wieser 2016: 153).

2009: 99).[18] The occupation of Zumbo gives rise to a paradox: to stay on "their own side", people have to flee – only the cohesion of the community can protect the shared roots, i.e. the group identity. Seen in this light, the refugees as a group have taken the semantic space of "home" with them. Those who remained in the territory of the attackers, with the exception of Leónidas, are soon killed in an air raid from Zambia. The area north of the Zambezi River is completely deserted, with Leónidas wandering aimless and alone (see Figure 3).
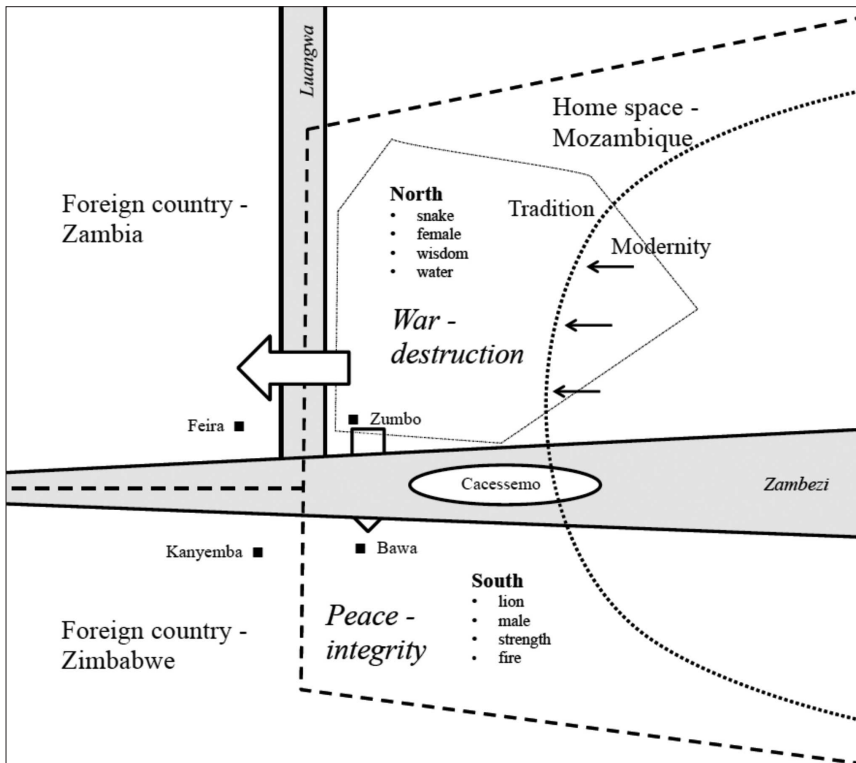

Figure 3 – Secondary structural level of semantic space: meta-event

[18] "Why, by staying in their own country and in the same place, have they crossed the line to the side of the enemy, who now rules and reigns here and wanders about in confusion? It is a strange world in which one must go away so as to stay".

In the further course of the story, the plot focuses on the refugees who find themselves in a part of their homeland that had been spared by the war. They had fled not west, to Zambia, via the Luangwa, but south, to Bawa, via the Zambezi, remaining in Mozambique. The border between north and south now carries the additional semantics of war vs. peace and destroyed vs. intact. Unlike the refugees in the Zambian reception camp, those in Bawa are integrated into the village community as equals. Consequently, the crossing of the Zambezi is lower on the scale of *syuzhetnost'* than that of the Luangwa, and the urge to dissolve the inconsistency is weaker. Moreover, a return is easier insofar as it involves no international legal implications.

Another turn with the potential of a meta-event takes place almost two years after the attack on Zumbo, on 27 May 1987. Now, Bawa is under attack by the same invaders. However, the attackers are outsmarted by the healer Joaquina M'boa,[19] who conducts a ritual to become the medium of the lion's spirit, Kanyemba, and predicts the attack – precisely to the day. While the modernity subspace does not succeed in fending off the attack on Zumbo, the tradition subspace now manages such a feat, stressing the practical value of African rites. At this point,

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[19] Kanyemba is another name for a historical person named José do Rosário de Andrade. At the end of the 1860s, he recruited a group of Achicunda, former slaves on the prazo estates (hereditary land concessions), who had been entrusted with police and military duties and then worked as elephant hunters. He conquered land in the Bawa area and replaced elephant hunting with the even more lucrative slave hunting, transforming himself into a feared local ruler. According to the Achicunda belief, Kanyemba transformed into a guardian spirit, a *mphondoro,* after his death, associated with the spirit of the lion (Isaacman 2000: 131-135). In an interview, João Paulo Borges Coelho tells of his encounter with Joaquina M'boa. According to him, in a ritual, in which she purported to be a medium for Kanyemba's spirit, the thirty-year-old woman was able to name the administrators of the region from a century ago and specify their terms of office (Wieser 2016: 152). Another local ruler said to have also transformed into a *mphondoro* was Chikwasha (Isaacman 2000: 126f.). He became the model for the character Nhabezi in *Choriro* (2009) by Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa.

it seems that the dislocation of the space continuum between modernity and tradition is decided in favour of the latter.

Four years after the destruction of Zumbo, the inhabitants who had fled to Bawa dare to return. This event is symbolized by the sailing ship Estrela-do-Mar and its captain Ricardo Mar-Picado. "The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*", writes Foucault (1998: 236). As a self-dependent floating space, it is the greatest reservoir of imagination. In the novel, the image of the ship is strongly connected with hope and thus with fantasy. Both the name of the ship and the captain contain the word "mar", sea: and indeed, the Zambezi has now swollen into a veritable sea – another meta-event that permanently restructures the semantic space of the homeland. The historical background is as follows: between 1969 and 1979, the Portuguese built a 165-metre-high dam at a narrow near Songo (to the east of the novel's space). In 1974, they began to dam the water; in the course of the 1980s, the artificial lake swelled to reach the level of Zumbo, about 300 km away. The villages along the banks were flooded; the basis of many people's lives was destroyed – in material terms, and also in spiritual ones, as many cult sites were flooded (Coelho 2009: 229 and 260). Ricardo hardly dares to navigate on this changed river. Just like him, Leónidas Ntsato is suffering from the massive change, especially because people on the two banks can no longer communicate with each other (Coelho 2009: 193). His illness – or, in traditional terms, the conflict between the spirits of the north and the south – now becomes readable as a symptom of this communication disorder. The gap between the two banks keeps growing, making Leónidas's cure less likely:

> [O desmedido inchaço do rio] afastou as margens uma da outra de modo que as pontes se tornaram projetos impossíveis, que as vozes e os olhares deixaram de ter suficiente alcance para vencer o obstáculo dessas largas águas, que passou a ser muito difícil a reunião dos seus pobres habitantes (Coelho 2009: 260).[20]

[20] "[The unbridled swelling of the river] pushed the banks away from each other so that bridges became impossible projects, so that the voices and looks no

Like him, the rain priestess Harkiriwa (part of the tradition sub-space) also wonders whether the change of the Zambezi is the ultimate reason of the fratricidal war (Coelho 2009: 226). The border itself is widening into an increasingly dominant boundary area. The familiar – the river as the basis of life – is increasingly being transformed into something alien that threatens the community, which is why the return of the refugees to Zumbo is proving much more difficult than expected.

Finally, the crossing of the Zambezi succeeds, seemingly dissolving the inconsistency for the refugees. But after an initial euphoria, they experience bitter disillusionment: the place is attacked again. A plane from Zimbabwe comes to the rescue; the attackers flee. But this is by no means a victory. The initial meta-event, which had changed the se-mantic space so profoundly, intensifies:

> O novo ataque ao Zumbo foi duplamente nefasto. Nefasto na repetição da catástrofe e também por ter acabado com a esperança. Se nos tempos re-centes se instalara a ideia de que os dias da frente seriam melhores que os de trás, ele reinstalou o muro opaco da descrença entre a gente e o futuro (Coelho 2009: 247).[21]

The repetition of the event wreaks havoc from within. The uproot-ing now seems irreversible. Most of the refugees try to cross back to Bawa on the Estrela-do-Mar. Only the troops loyal to the government remain, representing modernity; the representatives of tradition seem to have been driven out forever.

But the return to Bawa, too, is denied to the inhabitants of Zum-bo. The ship runs aground on a sandbank off the island of Caces-

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longer had enough reach to overcome the obstacle of these wide waters, which made it very difficult to bring their poor inhabitants together".

[21] "The new attack on Zumbo was doubly nefarious. Nefarious in the repeti-tion of the catastrophe and also for having destroyed hope. If in recent times the idea had been installed that the days ahead would be better than those behind, it reinstalled the opaque wall of disbelief between us and the future".

semo, where everything had started. The circle closes. Situated between the spirits of the north and the south – as well as between environmentally deforming modernity and traditional fishing – the island becomes a no man's land outside of time and (habitable) space. Cacessemo is the only possible place of retreat, but it offers no prospects for the future: «Cacessemo é uma ilha afastada do tempo, protegida dos invasores, longe dos começos abortados de uma prometida nova era» (Coelho 2009: 250).[22] The priestess Harkiriwa ultimately attributes the violent uprooting of the people to the destruction of the traditional rules of African life: «Interrompemos a cadeia natural das coisas e o resultado está à vista: ninguém respeita as regras, é o caos» (Coelho 2009: 253).[23] While traditional necromancy was able to thwart the attack on Bawa, it now seems to have lost its power for good. The priestess remains helpless.

In the end, the wandering Leónidas Ntsato sees no other way out but to drown himself in the Zambezi, thus fulfilling Gomanhundo's prophecy. Only by dying in the liminal space can he restore his inner balance. When Leónidas disappears in the water, the Zambezi, once the giver of life for the entire region of Zambézia, is transformed into an allegory of destruction. The narrator compares the river with an open carotid artery, from which the homeland bleeds humanly and spiritually. The background for this simile is multifold: it was not only the Portuguese with the tradition-destroying "modernity" who entered the country via the Zambezi; the river had also been used to bring slaves to the coast and ship them to America. Due to their deportation they are said to have irretrievably lost access to the spirits of their ancestors. For representatives of the modernity subspace, a forced change of location does not necessarily mean the destruction of identity. For spiritualist-animistic Africans, however, it leads to a threatening uprooting, as

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[22] "Cacessemo is an island far away from time, protected from the invaders, far from the failed beginnings of a promised new era".

[23] "We have broken the natural chain of things, and the result is clearly visible: nobody respects the rules, chaos reigns".

the change of location is believed to cut the connection to the local spirits, which is vital to their faith. The identitary attachment to a home-land through the spiritual connection to the dead is a recurrent motif in Mozambican literature,[24] used by Borges Coelho at the end of the nov-el to heighten the pain of the uprooting and the identity loss through colonisation, slavery and civil war.

4. Conclusion: Trapped in the Third Space

According to Renner's principle of consistency, every plot-bound text strives to erase its own events. Thus, if the primary semantic structure with its norms and values is disturbed by boundary transgressions and thus overlaid by a secondary, semantically inconsistent system, the read-er wishes for the systems to once again become congruent. In *As Duas Sombras do Rio,* this wish is only partially fulfilled: the event cancella-tion (*Ereignistilgung* in Krah's terms) stops halfway.

Along the "at home-abroad" boundary, the inconsistency persists; the refugees do not return from Zambia. Nevertheless, we can as-sume that, in a hypothetical future beyond the fictional world, they could acculturate and become Zambian citizens or come back to Mo-zambique after the end of civil war. Both possibilities would be forms of event cancellation. Within the home space, three main semantic boundaries could be identified: first, between north and south, with a spiritual, cultural and infrastructural semantization; second, between modernity and tradition; and third, between war and peace. Ultimate-ly, all three can be located on the topographical border of the Zambe-zi, since the river not only physically separates north and south, but through its swelling into a reservoir also becomes the venue of the struggle between modernity and tradition – and finally, through a me-

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[24] It is also the subject of *A Varanda do Frangipani* (1996) by Mia Couto, for example.

ta-event (the destruction of Zumbo) – also the boundary between war and peace. At the same time, the Zambezi is more than a borderline. It is itself a semantic space, a hybrid third space in Homi Bhabha's terms,[25] i.e. a space where differences are negotiated. But while for Bhabha, a third space symbolises the possibility of liberation for oppressed subjects, for Borges Coelho, it represents a hopeless impasse. In the novel, the third space is not colonial, like in Bhabha's writings, but post-colonial. It is not a space of encounter between colonizers and colonized, but a stage for postcolonial struggles between internal and external forces with no good prospect of an equal, tolerant and peaceful society, in other words, with no good prospect of effective event cancellation. In the end, no viable balance between north and south, modernity and tradition, war and peace can be achieved: the survivors are stranded on an island, thereby evading all three dichotomies, but at the same time robbed of their future, as they no longer have any space to call home.

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[25] It is neither a heterotopia (because the island is not an institutionalised place with a social function) nor a non-place (because it is not a transit space of the modern world). Of the possibilities mentioned at the beginning, only that of the third space fits the text, albeit with some limitations.

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