

Mozambican Culture: A Crowded Canvas

BY ALBIE SACHS

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What follows are excerpts from a background paper on culture included as part of a new education kit on Mozambique. The kit is being produced by Cooperation Canada Mozambique (COCAMO), a consortium of eighteen Canadian NGOs working together to implement recovery and development programmes in Nampula Province and education programmes in Canada. In addition to background papers on several aspects of the situation in Mozambique, the kit will contain brochures, a poster, a map, a user's guide and a resource list. The kit will be available in the Fall of 1988. For more information contact COCAMO c/o CCIC, 1 Nicholas St., Ottawa K1N 7B7, phone (613)236-6037.

In the section of the Museum of the Revolution where colonial times are portrayed, there is a photograph of black children dressed in Portuguese folk-costume doing a Portuguese folk dance. It is a striking example of the colonial policy of assimilation. Black Mozambicans, to be considered civilized and cultured, had to adopt without reserve the ways, ideas and culture of the colonizers. Traditional indigenous culture was regarded as barbarous – at best, to be recorded as fascinating savage customs; at worst, to be denounced by missionaries and administrators as heathenish and backward.

When it began the struggle for Mozambican independence, the Mozambique Liberation Front, or Frelimo, recognized the important role which culture would play. One of Frelimo's strategies to break down tribalism within the liberation front was to learn and value the cultural forms of the diverse groupings throughout the country. Each locality had its own cultural forms and



Traditional Mozambican Warrior Dance, Magude District

Frelimo leaders saw the immense variety and vitality of a popular culture which, in the words of Samora Machel, had been buried but never destroyed.

Frelimo saw culture as an "instrument of struggle," a tool they could use to promote nation-

building and unify the country. But it was much more than that. Culture became a means whereby the nation discovered and expressed itself. People from the north did dances from the south and vice versa; people from zones with a strong Islamic influence learned songs from areas where the impact of the Christian Church had been great. Gradually the idea took hold that to be a Mozambican meant to break out of the narrow vision of the locality or tribe and to "take on the dimensions of the nation."

Culture continues to be deeply and directly integrated into the daily life of the community, and there is widespread popular participation in cultural activities. Although devastated by war, destabilization and hunger, Mozambique has managed to record outstanding achievements in dance, sculpture and painting and has produced music, theatre and literature of quality. The key problem now is how to develop a professional cultural sector without commercializing, destroying or making banal this popular base.

Dance

The only indigenous form of dance that was promoted during colonial times was the nightclub *marrabenta*, a Europeanized version of a popular African dance. Its lively rhythms made it good for the tourist trade and helped propagate the idea that blacks in Mozambique were content with their lot and especially happy to be Portuguese.

As resistance to the Portuguese began to grow in the north of Mozambique, old dance forms began to re-emerge. When Frelimo troops established a presence in a village, they learned the local forms of

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drumming and dancing, and passed on those from other regions. All political meetings were preceded and followed by drumming and dancing, which not only provided an entertaining counterpoint to the speeches, but allowed for extensive local participation in the proceedings and affirmed the African character of the Mozambican revolution.

When Independence was proclaimed in 1975, dance was already well established as an integral and creative part of the emerging national life. One of the first acts of the new government was to organize a National Dance Festival in which about half a million people from all over the country took part. In the first phase, competitions were held at local, district and provincial levels and eventually several hundred of the best dancers, grouped according to province, performed during an entire week at two stadiums in the capital city of Maputo. Nights were spent performing for the public in the stadiums; days included trips to factories, hospitals and schools, where the dancers were received with enormous enthusiasm.

The city buzzed with debate over the dance steps, groupings and music from the different areas. One hotly argued question was whether the dances should be adapted for the stage, with special costumes and lighting, or performed only in their "natural" state. The former position won out. As a result, a National Choral and Dance Company was formed, at first on a semi-professional basis, later as fully professional. The Company has toured extensively and generally has been warmly received. Its repertoire includes two full-length ballets created by its artistic director and based on traditional African myths, and new dances are being added.

More recently a National Dance School was started in an abandoned night club. It caters to school children, and in a few years has achieved a very high standard of performance.



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The group, "Eyuphuru" from Nampula, performing in Maputo

The instructors give equal emphasis to ballet, modern dance and traditional Mozambican dance. And the students, who represent Mozambique's many ethnic and racial backgrounds, learn all the different types of dance.

What was to happen to the night-club *marrabenta*? This became the liveliest question on the agenda at the 1976 founding conference of the Organization of Mozambican Youth. Some people contended that it had to be suppressed because it was a decadent dance used by the Portuguese as a cover for prostitution and oppression. Others declared that it was a popular dance invented and much enjoyed by the people, and that the people had to reclaim it as their own. There was no rule, they added, that having fun was anti-revolutionary. The most effective proponent of the latter view was Joaquim Chissano (now President of Mozambique), who attended the conference as Frelimo's represen-

tative. Today the *marrabenta* is so popular in Mozambique that it is difficult to recall the atmosphere that made its future an issue.

Music

Drumming and the *timbila* (a wooden xylophone, also known as the *marimba*) are the pride of Mozambican music. Every region of the country has its drums and drumming styles. In the south, the Xigubo warrior dance is accompanied by the powerful, heavy beat of giant drums; the sinuous dances of Ilha de Moçambique in Nampula province are helped along by a quietly hypnotic beat on smaller drums; the once-secret Mapiko dance of the north is animated by brilliant staccato tattoos quite different in character.

The *timbila* are instruments produced by the small Chopi-speaking group in Inhambane province. The best known *timbila* players are presently in Maputo, mostly garbage-collectors working for the

mozambique

City Council (a job reserved for the Chopi in colonial times). Whole orchestras of *timbila* provide profoundly intricate patterns of polyphonic percussion that amaze musicologists and delight audiences.

One feature of the popular music tradition is that the musicians make and care for their own instruments. The immense variety of popularly made instruments became evident when a National Festival of Traditional Music was held shortly after the Dance Festival. Literally hundreds of different types of flutes, drums, horns and rattles, instruments to be bowed, plucked, beaten and shaken, emerged out of the music festival. Several old men sang in accompaniment to their own hand-made instruments. They made complicated abstract harmonies, sad in tone and sadly poignant for the listener because many of these unique styles will disappear as these old men die out.

Yet, much as this ancient traditional music is admired, the real energy in musical development comes from what is called light music; that is, music performed on a stage or for radio or television, usually with a strong electronic component. The musicians have, on the whole, attempted to base their compositions on traditional musical patterns rather than to copy their music from elsewhere. Gradually a distinctive Mozambican style of popular music is emerging. It lacks the extrovert bounce of neighbouring Zimbabwean music or the warmth and confidently repetitive melodies of West African music, but it has interesting and rich possibilities of its own, precisely because it is rooted in Mozambican popular music.

Art

Carved in dark, ebony wood, the internationally famous Makonde sculpture from northern Mozambique has emerged in three principal forms. There is the compact *ujamaa*, the human family in close cluster, the open *ujamaa*, in which the

figures are more stylized, abstract and flowing, and the *shetani*, based on the devil, the spirit of mischief that can assume any form.

Makonde art was not always like this. Contrary to the idea that African art is primitive, anonymous and unchanging, the Makonde sculptors have totally transformed their "traditional" art from one generation to the next. Fifty years ago they were doing single-figured pieces and masks in white wood. All that remains of that style today is the spirit of satire; the actual appearance of the art has completely changed.

In the south, a completely different style of popular carving has emerged: animals, masks, reliefs, boxes – tourist art at its best (vivacious and portable) and its worst (mass-produced, without feeling or finish). At the same time, there is a strong movement of contemporary sculpture in Maputo. The leading figure is Alberto Chissano, who established a distinctive style of carving that has since been copied by dozens of others – vigorously worked wood, with the mark of the chisel still upon it, human faces and bodies projecting great sadness with great dignity. Chissano's works have achieved considerable international recognition. His house and studio on the outskirts of Maputo have become a gallery of contemporary Mozambican art. On more than one occasion, he has won prizes in international sculpture contests by going to the host city, buying a tree trunk on the spot, and in a few days of furious work, producing a piece of sculpture that became the winning entry.

A great friend and contemporary of Chissano's (in colonial times they worked together as cleaners in a club) is the painter Malangatana, whose Maputo home has also become a place of pilgrimage for art lovers. Malangatana, a cultural figure with great projection in Mozambique and abroad, was imprisoned by the Portuguese se-

cret police for belonging to Frelimo. He is presently a member of Mozambique's national parliament, the Popular Assembly. His distinctive style of painting and drawing has had a great impact on nearly all other Mozambican artists. His works feature a crowded canvas and strong colouring. Human and animal figures are mixed together in defiance of the laws of scale and perspective, their eyes looking back at the spectator. Malangatana's works have been exhibited on almost every continent.

Another proof of the vitality of Mozambican art can be found in the murals of Maputo. Large frescoes executed in public places – notably at the Hero's Circle near the airport, at the Ministry of Agriculture and in the gardens of the Natural History Museum (where there is also a giant sculpture by Chissano carved from a whole tree) – testify to the importance that Mozambicans attach to art.

Theatre

Immediately after Independence in 1975, a strong amateur theatre movement grew up in Mozambique. It emerged out of the struggle for independence and was based in the workplace. The themes and the styles of representation used became increasingly repetitive, however, and the groups began to die out. After a hiatus of several years, a new satirical/lyrical theatrical style is now emerging, with considerable movement and use of costume, lights and dance, to give it a popular character. Usually the scripts are prepared by the groups themselves. As an indication of the "popular" nature of these performances, sometimes pamphlets on health or education topics – like a how-to booklet on constructing latrines – are distributed to the audience.

Radio, cinema and television

Radio is by far the most important medium of cultural transmission in Mozambique, reaching the whole country and using all the indigenous languages, as well as

Portuguese, the language of national unity. Apart from news and educational programmes, Radio Mozambique broadcasts a considerable amount of music. In fact, the appropriate mix between international pop music (often justified as having African roots), music from Africa and Mozambican music is a constant source of controversy, and each variety of music has its own strong supporters.

All Mozambican towns have at least one cinema, and given the extreme limits of foreign exchange available for importing films, those that circulate are of a relatively high standard. They are usually fairly old and come from all parts of the world (including Canada). Film festivals are held regularly in Maputo, consisting of half a dozen to a dozen recently made films from a particular country - India, Brazil, Italy, and nearly all the socialist countries have been the main contributors. Two highly successful festivals of films from the African continent have also been held.

Mozambique's National Cinema Institute produces a regular newsreel programme that is shown in cinema houses, but it has also been responsible for producing a number of documentaries and two feature films.

The Institute holds a vast library of raw film but lacks funds to edit and produce finished films. Canada's National Film Board has been involved in helping to train people at the National Cinema Institute.

Television is broadcast only in Maputo four nights a week and is still called Experimental Television, as it was when it first went on the air in the early 1980s. Its programmes have a relatively high local content (many having been made by the Bureau of Social Communication of the Ministry of Information). Good

quality films and serials and highly popular socio-satirical soap operas from Brazil are also broadcast.

Literature

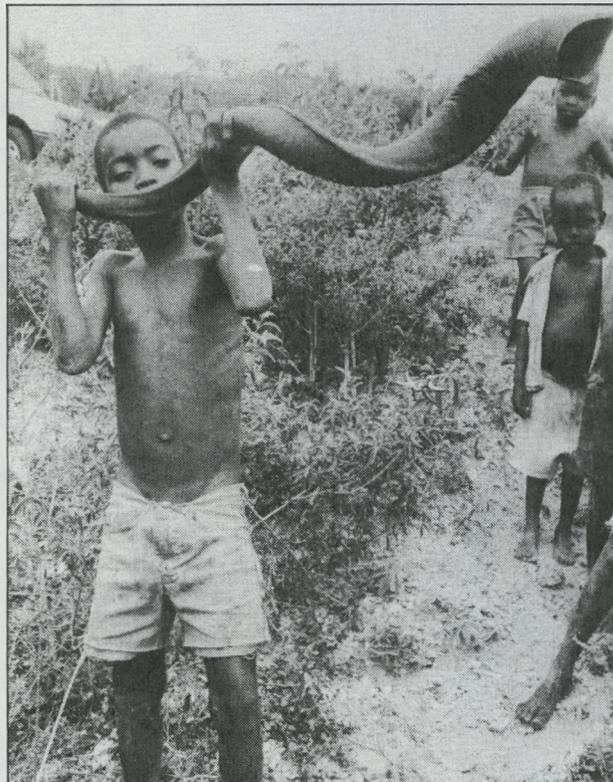
Given the strong cultural sensibility of the Mozambican leadership and the rich tradition of poetry writing in the period leading to Independence, the current state of literature in Mozambique is disappointing. The only major literary achievement

lished. The weekly magazine *Tempo* has a lively cultural section. The Writers' Association puts on regular debates. From time to time young writers get together to publish literary magazines, and Mozambique is one of the few African countries with a considerable output of original cartoon-strip stories.

Yet, without doubt, post-Independence literature has lagged behind dance, sculpture and painting in terms of vigour, innovation and variety. Virtually nothing has been done to publish the extensive records made of oral tradition (tales, riddles and proverbs). Hardly any publishing has been done in the indigenous languages. The fine short stories of Luis Bernardo Honwana, first published in colonial times, are used over and over again, while very little new prose appears. Some powerful post-Independence poetry by Craveirinha remains unpublished, although it has been declaimed several times at the monthly public poetry sessions held in Maputo's Central Park.

Many factors have contributed to this situation: a lack of paper, the failure to develop a clear language policy, a tendency at a certain stage in the struggle for liberation and development

for some Mozambicans to choose anonymity and the collective and to repudiate individual authorship. But given that the public hunger for artistic expression exists and the printing capacity is there, the main reason would seem to be editorial timidity and a failure to encourage the discipline and strength of vision that, for example, good novel-writing requires. This would seem to be an area where, once clarity could be achieved on how to give writers their head, a major breakthrough could be made.



The traditional instrument from Inhambane is made from a Kudu horn

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of the post-Independence period has been the publication of the works - hitherto suppressed by the censor - of pre-Independence poets. Notable among them is Jose Craveirinha, Mozambique's outstanding national poet, and Rui Nogar, both at one time imprisoned by the Portuguese secret police. Other prominent poets of the liberation struggle are Marcelino dos Santos, Jorge Rebelo, Armando Guebuza and Sergio Vieira - now all senior members of the Frelimo Party. Works of younger poets have also been pub-