

THE VOICE OF THE MINER

The misery and underdevelopment of the place of departure, the humiliation and suffering in the depth of the South-African mines, are described in what follows by those, who for decades saw themselves obliged to sell their labour in 'Joni'. Through this narration, in the voices and words of the Mozambican miners, we transcribe excerpts from interviews and songs, that trace a process of going and coming, the socio-economic impact of which has become an integral part of culture and life of Southern Mozambique.



The interviews and songs were gathered by the Centre of African Studies. What becomes clear is that the miner is fully conscious of

the fact that he is exploited and that the victory of FRELIMO gave him new perspectives.



José Thonela Kumbe, 43 years of age, was interviewed at the Party Cell of Khambane, district of Homoine, Inhambane Province, on 15 September 1979:

— Where were you born?

I was born at Mheho. My father and my grand parents were all born in Mheho, and I came to live here after the death of my mother — I came to live with my aunt who brought me up. Her house was over there at that time.

— How long have you been living in this place?

I started building my home here in 1961.

— Can you tell us how you grew up at Mheho?

We lived in Mheho until the death of my mother. As a result we were all farmed out to different aunts because our father could not look after us as he was a mine worker (who stayed home for short periods only). I came here to live with the sister of my father, Falasi, who was married to Supa. She took care of me until I reached the age when I went to Joni.

— We would like to know how you grew up here — did you look after goats or cattle?

I looked after goats at my other aunt for 2 years.

— Do you know how many contracts your father worked on the mines?

I don't remember because I was still too young when he died.

— Did your grandfather work on the mines?

Yes, he worked on the mines. (...)

We grew up in poverty and I had to go to the mines. I first went to the mines in 1951. We went to the mines because of poverty and misery and there was nothing here at home (no food, no jobs). When time came we went to Five, the recruiting station of Maghalangu, and joined the queue. We were not certain if we would succeed because we were quite young, but they measured us and accepted us! (...)

Zulumiro Meciso, 61 years of age, was interviewed at Khambane on 13 September 1979:

I went to school, which was at Mheho, here in Homoine. This was in 1935, and I was already a grown-up, and in the following year, 1936, I was required to pay hut tax. I left school and went to the recruiting station to join the queue, but was rejected by the recruiter, Maghalangu. Maghalangu used to test the chests of the recruits who were all lined up, by tapping hard on their chests and pronouncing the result on the spot in his mother tongue, Bitonga: 'oyi mwama; oyi kandi mwama' — this one **is a man**, but this one **is not a man!** The experienced miners stood in the queue wearing their mining boots, and Maghalangu, also in boots, would step on the bare feet of the new recruits who would automatically step backwards screaming with pain while those who had shoes on stood erect with chests out! As the new recruits withdrew under the heavy foot of Maghalangu, the latter would say: 'this one cannot push the wheelbarrow', and to the one with boots on he would say: 'this one can push a wheelbarrow'. I kept trying, but it was not until 1938 that I was permitted to sign on for Joni ...

MAGHALANGU

This work song was recorded in Homoine at the Party Cell of Khambane on 11 September 1979:

Leader: Maghalangu, Maghalangu, Maghalangu

Chorus: Heeyoo! Maghalangu

Leader: Maghalangu has taken his son

Chorus: Heeyoo! Maghalangu

Leader: Maghalangu has killed his son

Chorus: Heeyoo! Maghalangu

Leader: Maghalangu has taken his wife

Chorus: Heeyoo! Maghalangu

Leader: Maghalangu, Maghalangu, Maghalangu

Chorus: Heeyoo! Maghalangu.

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Between the leader and the chorus the following comments or phrases are thrown in by members of the chorus:

- drive carefully, we are going to Joni (Johannesburg or to the mines)
- drive carefully otherwise our provisions will spill off!
- father, please buy your son a pair of trousers (woman)
- you must take good care of my field — cultivate it properly and plant every crop ...! (man)
- you must write letters, father!
- I will send the money for hut tax, I shall send the money!
- please, don't forget us here at home! (woman)



An interview with those who sang this song:

— **Do you sing this song when you are saying goodbye?**

Yes, we sang this song when we left Maghalangu's recruiting station.

— **And you say that Maghalangu is taking my son away?**

The women are saying that Maghalangu, the recruiter, is taking (stealing) their sons to Joni. Maghalangu was the recruiter for Wenela. Maghalangu is taking my son away who might get killed in Joni and never return. Maghalangu is taking the man away who, upon their return from Joni, may find that his wife has gone with another man!

THE COMPOUND AT LOURENÇO MARQUES

Zulumiro Meciso: ... We then reached N'walanga (in Lourenço Marques) and got into the compound (at Alto Mae). The cook at the compound in those days, in addition to cooking the food, also dressed our hair — he cut our hair with a hair clipper. We would spend some days here before we boarded the train to Ressano Garcia. The policeman in charge of the compound at Ressano Garcia was then called N'waxitihlwani (the man with a small eye - because he was blind on one eye). When we got off the train in Ressano Garcia, you would hear a man whistling and men would shout: 'new recruits, down!' We all jumped down and made for the compound, up the steep hill, running, with the policeman leading the way in front. Some got their toes cut by stones while running. We reached the compound so much out of breath that the doctor did not even have to ask you to breath out! The medical examination took place imme-

diately. It was most unfortunate if you have had your toe injured because you would then be **sold automatically to the coal and never to the gold mines!** ...

Mauricio Nkome, 24 years of age, was interviewed at the Party Cell of Khambane, district of Hhohho, Inhambane Province, on 14.8.1979:

We travelled and reached Ressano Garcia where we had blankets distributed to us. At that time (1975) the new recruits had still to face many problems; for example, in Ressano Garcia they made us, the new recruits, crush the peanuts (for the sauce, and this is strictly a woman's job!).

— Was this the only work they made you do while you waited for the train to take you to South Africa?

They also made us sweep the whole compound. When the time came we took the train to Komatipoort. After the train stopped, it was boarded by many Swazi policemen armed with hippo skin whips. We (new recruits) had no idea why these policemen boarded the train and entered our compartments, and therefore, when they confronted us, saying: 'hei, we want to see your clothes!', we were puzzled and simply gazed at them with mouths wide open! The old miners amongst us then said: 'to avoid any trouble, you better open your luggage for inspection!' We got off alright, we were not arrested because they did not find anything that they were looking for. We realised that 'colonialism' still existed over there because these policemen could take your provision and eat it in front of you but you could not do anything against them. If you dared ask why, they would arrest you, alleging that they had found some dagga (hash) on you.

THE ARRIVAL

José Thonela Kumbé: A few things happened while we waited at Komatipoort: we were made to open all our suitcases (by the police), and if they found herbs and medicines in your luggage, they immediately put you under arrest, but if you had some cash on you, then you offered it and you would get off with a strong warning: 'alright, you can go, but don't do it again! You are not allowed to take these medicines with you because you are going to kill your brothers on the compound!' Many people carried these medicines

with them in order to prepare themselves so that they may have good luck on the mines. Some would like to strike a well paid job; some would like to be appointed an induna and others would like to become bossboys. For all this you had to consult a bone thrower before you leave home: we engage in all this struggle for money! We arrived in Mzilikazi and waited for the sale to begin — when they would sell us (to different compounds). There was a man called Ncayi-Ncayi (Xai-Xai) at the Mzilikazi depot at the time.

— **Where did Ncayi-Ncayi come from?**

I heard (but not certain) that he came from Gijana (Guija) or Xokwe (Chókwe). They would then begin calling out the names of the compounds (where workers were required), and we would be squatting on the ground listening to whispered advice (from experienced miners): 'my brother, don't go to that compound — it is hell there!', they would say.

— **They would whisper this to your ears!**

Yes, they would say this surreptitiously. Those of us who were novices were heavily dependant on this piece of advice. Ncayi-Ncayi would shout: 'those who are going to Randfontein!, those who are going to Durban Deep ...! (stand one side etc. ...). If no one stood up in response to the call, Ncayi-Ncayi would move forward and say: 'from here to there, you all go to Randfontein!', and you had no choice but to comply. In this way I was sent to Durban Deep in Roodepoort where I worked a contract of 17 months. I went again to Durban Deep for another contract of 16 months.

During my leave at home in 1958, I was arrested by the white colonos who took me to the army where I remained until 1961. I then stayed at home until 1964 when I resumed my work on the mines. But this time I did not go to Durban Deep, I went to the Bracken Mine in Bethal where I worked until 1970. I came home for good in 1970, and when Frelimo arrived I was selected secretary of the Grupo Dinamizador, and I held this position until 1979 when I decided to stand down. However, I still do Frelimo work at the Party Cell.

Zulumiro Meciso: When we arrived at Mzilikazi they ordered us to take off all our clothes which they burned. They then poured 'sopa-sopa' (delousing agent) in our hair and arm-pits and sent us to the baths. After this we then stood in the queue for medical examination. If they put a cross on your back and on your chest with a chalk, then you had been 'arrested' and you would be sent to bed to spend the night waiting for a chest x-ray. After this we were given some

clothes to wear but we had to spend the night at Mzilikazi. We were 'sold' early the next day and you had no choice but go where they told you to go.

— How did they actually sell you?

We stood in the queue and they came and called out the name of a compound. The novices were made to sit down separately and apart from the experienced miners. They would give first priority to those with valid bonus certificates in accordance with the number of workers required by the particular compound that day. The novices would then be distributed to the different compounds according to requirements.

— What happened if a novice refused to go to any particular compound — could he refuse at all?

How could he refuse? The novice has no direct knowledge about conditions in the different compounds. Has he been to the mines before? Has he any bonus certificate? He cannot refuse!

ON THE FLAT BARE PLACE

This is a work song by wives of miners. It was recorded at the Party Cell of Khambane in Homoine on 11 September 1979:

Leader: Oh! on the flat bare place

Chorus: Stay there/remain there

Leader: Even if they leave me there

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: With the rains falling on me

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: Even when they insult me/swear at me

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: Even if they hit me/beat me up

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: Even if they kick me

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: Even if they bewitch me

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: Even if they throw you out

Chorus: Remain there!

Leader: Oh! on the flat bare place!

Chorus: Remain there!

Interview with the woman who led the singing, **Filomena Mathayi**:

– What is the meaning of this song?

This song means that after I got married my husband left and went to Joni after building a small hut for me on an open space with no trees. The hut is badly constructed and it leaks when it rains. My in-laws are not nice to me: they insult me, they swear at me and they even kick and beat me up. But in spite of all these problems, I do not pack up my things and return to my own family — no! I stay here, I remain here on this bare place and wait until my husband returns from the mines. He must find me here when he comes home!

ON THE MINE COMPOUNDS

José Thonela Kumbe: ... (in the compounds) they used to keep the Shanganas in one dormitory; Xhosas in another; Mpondos (sub-section of Xhosa) in another and Sothos yet in another, and so on. The long dormitory was then subdivided into self-contained units on this basis. These units were numbered and occupied in the following way: 1 - Xhosas; 2 - Shanganas; 3 - Sothos; 4 - Zulus; 5 - Shanganas; 65 Pondos; 7 - Tswanas; 8 - etc.

Each unit has its own separate door and members of the same ethnic group are not permitted to occupy units which are next-door to one another, for example, since the first group of Shanganas (all Mozambicans!) occupy unit 2, the second Shangana group cannot occupy units 1 and 3, but any of the remaining units. They (authorities) were afraid that if they allowed too big a group from the same 'tribe' to live as very close neighbours, then this group is likely to hatch out some trouble!

– How many inmates in each unit?

There were 20 persons in each.

– Is this still the arrangement today?

It is still like this; it has not changed.

– What do the workers have to say about this arrangement — do they accept it or do they wish to be allowed to choose their own room mates?

The workers accept this arrangement — they think it is a good arrangement: there is a big cupboard divided into two equal parts with each group of 10 inmates sharing a section of the cupboard. Each inmate has his own key to the cupboard, and all these are provided by the mine. In the past workers had to put their work clothes inside cardboard boxed under their beds.

— The dirty work clothes?

Yes, the dirty work clothes. They (authorities) have now come to realise that this caused friction or dissatisfaction, and this is why they have built wash houses on the minehead where workers can wash and change into fresh clothes before they come to the compound. The dirty clothes are left in the wash house and a worker who wishes to wash his work clothes then goes back to the wash house to do so.

— So these are the changes which have been made in an attempt to improve living conditions?

Yes, these are the changes they have brought about.

— These changes have not taken place for many years, and it costs the mines money to make them. What do the workers think are the reasons why the authorities are making these improvements?

About the changes to improve our work conditions, we have to say that it was Frelimo which has liberated us from slavery because we have not seen these changes for many, many years. All these changes to improve our work conditions have taken place since the arrival of Frelimo. We also get more money now than before — there was no money on the mines in those days; we worked for nothing, and anyone who earned 1.000\$00 (per month) was thought to be earning a fantastic wage, but in fact that was nothing to him! But the wages have improved since the arrival of Frelimo and we therefore conclude that it was Frelimo which has liberated us from slavery.

— We have heard that one of the things which worried the compound manager in the past was the possibility of some workers deserting the mine to seek employment outside the mining industry. One way of preventing escapes or desertions was to illuminate the compound with very powerful lights so that during the night the compound looked like day. Did this happen and does it still happen?

The lights in the compound are indeed placed in the same way as they have done at the prison in Homoine — with the lamp posts planted a short distance from one another, and indeed these lamps brightly illuminate the compound when it is dark so that when you walk around to visit friends, you really walk in brightness! Even in the dormitories the lights are not switched off; the rooms are kept bright and the lights are only switched off in the morning ...

THE WORK AT THE MINE

José Thonela Kumbe: ... After arrival at the mine, you are sent for aptitude testing. Some of those who pass the test are then sent to the mine school for training as bossboys. It often happens that you fail your test simply because the person testing you is from another ethnic group. In some compounds the testing is done by a white man (who does not discriminate), but in other compounds the testing is done by a Xhosa or Sotho who often fails the Shanganas because they think we are vain and pompous. If this happened, you still have a chance of becoming a bossboy because the whitemen in charge underground always keep a lookout for a good worker. When they discover your good qualities they then realise that you have been failed on purpose, and consequently they will send you back to the mine school to train as a bossboy. The training takes one month and if you pass, then you become a bossboy.

— What are the duties of a bossboy?

If you are a bossboy you must work together with the gang in that particular section. If you are a bossboy in the tunnel, or where they instal pipes, or where they lay railway sleepers — then you must work together with the gang. If you are lashing in the tunnel — of course the lashing is now done by the ‘busimani’ — the mechanical shovel ...

Mauricio Nkome: ... We went underground for the first time on a Monday. We were standing in the queue on the mine head when I noticed the group in front of us enter the lift. A red light came on followed by a clicking noise and the lift went down! I saw big wheels and long cables turning round and round right above us and I could not understand how this lift worked and who was operating the whole thing. When I tried to find out from my companions, they were not cooperative: ‘you ask too many questions; remember you have come here for money and nothing else’, they said while they pushed me into the lift. After our lift started descending, it suddenly jerked violently, shot up again and came to a halt right on the mine head! I was terrified, and nobody could say what was the matter with the lift. I was relieved when I realised that the ‘boers’ in the next compartment below were chatting and laughing amongst themselves because I thought, ‘well, if they are not worried, then we are not in danger.’

Once underground, we were taken to our work site and all the time we were flooded with warnings: 'you see those tunnels? If you get lost that will be the end of you because you can never find your way back to the underground station.' We were now becoming very frightened and many of us started asking questions which only irritated the bossboy ...

PULL - PUSH

This work song was recorded at the Party Cell of Khambane in Homoine, on 11 September 1979.

Leader: Push, push to my side again!

Chorus: Push it!

Leader: Push, (and) lift it again!

Chorus: Push it!

Leader: Push, push to your side again!

Chorus: Push it!

This song is accompanied by a great deal of whistling during which the following comments are heard:

— hei, hold here!

— Oh! oh! I am squeezed / got my finger caught (under thing being lifted)

— stop! stop! this person is injured!

— quick! first aid! he is badly injured! stop the blood!

— he is a fool, he is stupid! why did he work like that?

— no! no! don't hit him, don't hit a patient!

— do you see this Shangana? he is too stupid!

— do you think that this is Portugal (Portuguese East Africa)?

— be damned! black Samse kaffir!

— do you think this is your mother's place?

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Interview with those who sang this song at the time:

— **When a worker is injured, would they go on to pile insults on him, calling him a stupid Shangana, etc?**

They would beat him up.

— **They would?**

Then someone would intervene and appeal for mercy on behalf of the injured worker. The would tell you that this was Joni and not Portuguese East Africa. The bossboy (from another ethnic group) would say this. He would say that you are feigning injury and you should stand up and continue with the lashing. And the 'boers' would call you a stupid kaffir!

ACCIDENTS

José Thonela Kumbe: The popular mines are at Bethal where I worked from 1964 to 1970 — all the mines in that area are good because in a good mine you don't see the stretcher very often; you do see it but only from time to time. But all the mines in Johannesburg — we do not know if it is due to their old age — are bad because you see stretchers far too often!

What do you mean when you say that there are too many stretchers to be seen?

It means accidents, when people are injured. The mines in Bethal are good because 6 months may elapse without an accident, and sometimes even a year can go by without an accident. But the mines in Johannesburg — from Durban Deep (Roodepoort) to ERPM — Angelo (East Rand) are bad.

— **So a good mine is one with less accidents?**

A good mine has no accidents.

— **What other things are considered to make a mine a good mine?**

Other things which make a mine a good mine — oh! well, the fact is that in those days it was hazardous working on the mines because the white men with whom we worked, the boers, did not handle or deal with the workers properly. They would make workers go into parts of the mine which were faulty and dangerous and make them work there. As a result there would be a collapse and many people got killed that way. There has since been a great improvement with the introduction of iron props which are more effective in preventing collapses and rock falls. The foremen are also more conscientious about their work because they now examine the sites more thoroughly to make sure that adequate propping with timber or iron is done before they send workers to do their work ...

THE RETURN

Mauricio Nkome: It is very tough at Mzilikazi (Wenela depot in Johannesburg) on the way home because you are now loaded with so many things. You have to drag all these goods from the train to the compound, and once in the compound there are all the formalities to go through, for example, passports have to be endorsed. And this time there is no food; if you have not brought your own provision, you have had it!

— **Is there no food at Mzilikazi?**

There is no food. They give you food on your way to the mine because you are going to work for them; it is then that they give you the soft porridge which, if you decided to throw away because it is so bad, is then given to those at the back of the queue. When you are no longer their employee, there is no food for you in Mzilikazi. They give you your train ticket, and they give you half a loaf of stale bread — dry bread which is three days old and impossible to eat. Eventually we boarded the train home but it is not safe on the train. Money gets stolen on the train. They did not steal any of my things because I knew and I took precautions. After washing my feet in the compound I put my money in my socks: first, the money, then two pairs of socks and then shoes. My passport also goes in there, on the side of my leg.

— **Don't the thieves know about this?**

They don't know because nobody talks about it. When you join nobody tells you how to take care of your things.

— **How much money did you carry in your shoes?**

I carried £45 (sterling) And I reached home safely with all my goods intact. I took the money out at Ressano Garcia and exchanged it for escudos.

— **When did you return to Mozambique?**

I returned in 1977.

— **Are you going to try and go back to the mines? Have you tried?**

I cannot go back. I have tried but without success.

— **But you are still keen to return to Joni?**

I am.

— **Even with all the problems and sufferings you have experienced?**

What is that? Even our fathers who travelled to the mines on foot — and that was real suffering, but they did not give up!

I AM HAPPY TODAY

Leader: Oh! what a joy! I am happy to see my husband today!

Chorus: Oh! what a joy!

Leader: I am so happy to see this father today!

Chorus: Oh! what a joy!

Leader: Oh! what a joy! what a joy!

Chorus: Oh! what a joy!

Leader: I am so happy and content to see this father today!

Chorus: Oh! what a joy!

Leader: Oh! what a joy! what a great joy!

Chorus: Oh! what a joy!

Interview with the leader of the singing, **Angeleina Fulawa:**

— Why are you so happy today?

I am happy because my husband has returned from Joni and I welcome him with joy because we are going to do many nice things together ... He is back and we shall go visiting together. We shall visit his people and we shall visit my people, what a joy! what fun! My man has returned from Joni!

**Interviews and songs recorded and translated from
Shangana to English by Alpheus Manghezi**