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The Culture Vulture in Mozambique



It is an august occasion: the opening meeting of the third session of the Assembleia Popular, highest organ of popular power in the People's Republic of Mozambique. The delegates are seated in formal rows, behind desks, facing a colourfully decorated podium. The ambassadors are there, and the press. It is ninety minutes past the announced starting time. Has bureaucratic arrogance set in? Has revolutionary spontaneity departed? Where is the president?

Finally the platform party files onto the podium. And at last, the president. All the delegates rise and applaud. The president beams. He gazes about with satisfaction. The applause subsides. The president lifts his arms to the lectern. He is about to speak, perhaps proclaim the onset of proceedings. He opens his mouth and . . . the president . . . sings!

Kani-mambo, kani-mambo Frelimo . . . ("Thank you, thank you Frelimo . . ."), a simple lilting song in Shangan, the dialect of Maputo province.

The delegates join in. Everyone in the country knows this song. The

end of the verse comes round. In the breath at its finish, the president chants "Viva, Viva-", and the delegates carry on with *Viva Viva, Viva Viva Frelimo . . .* The president is all delight, not an ounce of self-consciousness in him. In some of the delegates perhaps, but not a hint of it in Samora Machel.

The song concludes. The president says, "I solemnly declare this session of the People's Assembly open." He lays a thick sheaf of pages before him, his opening address. He presses it flat, winces with concentration, looks up at the delegates and — sings again!

This time in two-part harmony, the president carrying one line and the delegates the other. If anything he is even happier than in the first song. But then this is a country where everybody seems to sing all the time whatever they are doing. After *this* song, they will get down to serious, even acrimonious, discussion of the nation's progress and possibilities, but first it is important to sing well.

For as another comrade, chief of the armed forces Chipande, said in

another setting — reprimanding some of his troops for lacklustre musicmaking — "Not to sing well is a political error."

What's In a Street Name?

I have always felt that street and place names are not insignificant in the formation or retardation of a proud and independent national self-awareness. It must have some effect on Canadians to grow up on streets named after British ministers of war (Bathurst, Bloor, Yonge) or British prime ministers (Wellington, Gladstone) or even pseudo-British Anglican ministers (Strachan). Not to mention all the Kings and Queens strewn throughout all the cities and towns of the country. Or Victoria, Regina, and *British* Columbia. Or that most odious of all Ontario place names, Bond Head.

One of the first acts of revolutionary nationalists in power in Mozambique was the renaming of the streets on which the people of the country live — by a process of popular nomination, discussion and election. Formerly those streets trumpeted an assortment of Portuguese colonial references.

Now you might well begin a trip across Maputo (formerly Lourenço Marques) at the intersection of Lenin Avenue and Kenneth Kaunda (or more to the point, Patrice Lumumba), proceed via Kim Il Sung, stop for an ice cream on Mao tse Tung Boulevard, continue to Julius Nyerere, or cross over it until you reach your destination on Frederick Engels Street.

Some street names have been retained, 24th of July Avenue, for example, which had some meaning in the pre-Independence colonial lexicon. But Frelimo took care to pass a major nationalization measure (Law, Medicine, Education) on its first 24th of July in power, so that the significance of the reference was transformed (or, if you prefer, *aufgehoben*) by revolutionary action.

There is also the case of the capital of Cabo Delgado, the northern province which was the bridgehead for the liberation struggle starting in 1964. That city used to be called Porto Emilia but, as I was told, "the people didn't know who Emilia* was," so the place was renamed Pemba.

*Some Portuguese queen.

Gorongosa

Gorongosa is a large game park in central Mozambique.* It was the site of a noteworthy battle during the war of liberation. Frelimo troops penetrated it and shot up the tourist compound, firing very intentionally *over the heads* of the many South African and Rhodesian tourists who regularly thronged there in the days of Portuguese colonialism. It was a statement by Frelimo that they had the capacity to operate deep in what was still considered a secure colonial zone and the *discipline* to warn rather than kill a white racist clientele.

Gorongosa is still a game park and tourist resort. But it exists mainly for Mozambicans now. The park workers have their mass organizations and representative organs. New facilities for them and their families are being built in the compound, and on Sundays after the soccer match the bar is filled with players and spectators who are all local residents, mingling with the tourists. The head of this operation is the same man who ran the park in the days before independence.

He stayed when his six white assistants left, at the time of the transition to independence. What did they think of him for staying? "They called me crazy. And they said I am a traitor." He came here from Portugal 23 years ago, when he was 17. He has never returned since to Portugal. "I think I am a Mozambican. I have applied for citizenship." (The whites of Portuguese ancestry had a choice at the time of Independence: to remain Portuguese citizens or become Mozambicans. Many families split down the middle over this decision.)

In the days of the Portuguese he did what he could. "Nobody ever got away with any racism when I was in charge of the park," he says. "I had the authority to throw them out. But the worst problems were with my assistants — the way they ordered the park workers — and as I say, they have now all left." There was no clear colonial policy on priorities for the park: whether it was primarily for tourism, for conservation, ecological studies, or whatever. He was dissatisfied but committed to his work.

* African game parks are not like big zoos that you ride around in. In a zoo, the animals are guests in an environment constructed by people. In a game park, humans are (sometimes barely) tolerated by the animals.

With the departure of the Portuguese a crisis in park management occurred. Many inhabitants of the area flooded into the park, joining others already living there, and began killing the animals for food. "They thought this had been part of Portuguese colonialism: that they couldn't hunt the animals." It is similar to the attitude that occurred in some factories, where workers carried home armfuls of clothing, sewing machines or the like — following abandonment by the owners — on the ground that the exploiters had now left and the wealth belonged to the people. In this crisis Frelimo sent a contingent of 50 soldiers to the park to protect the animals and explain to the population that — and *why* — they could not go on a massive hunt.

The process continues now, when poaching remains a problem and thousands of people are still settled in the park. They will be resettled, when they have understood and agreed to the process, and when proper locations, corresponding to those they presently inhabit, have been found.

The park director is an interesting transitional figure, a slightly offbeat participant in the Mozambican revolution. His access to it is through the land itself and its non-human inhabitants. Ecology and animal husbandry are the ways he relates to this historical process. In the old days he played the role of a man of conscience, doing what was possible — taking the most jagged edge off the racism for example — in an essentially hopeless situation. He says he is now much happier in his work. Priorities are being established, a park network is being set up, people are being trained. From the Frelimo point of view, he is another instance of the success of the policy of anti-racism which has been fought for repeatedly during the last 15 years.

And though on the surface he may seem an eccentric entrée to a revolutionary process, it is also integral. There is even something peculiarly Canadian — or recognizable to Canadians — about it. It is not just a matter of attachment to the natural world, but of attachment to a country and its people through the natural world. In Canada it has often been the representatives of culture who express this kind of attachment, whether it is done in terms of the landscape (the group of 7) or the animal inhabitants (The Loon's Necklace, Farley Mowat). Such elements

of the natural setting seem to provide a particular touchstone for national self-expression in Canada. They — the animals, the terrain — are literally the ground on which a national culture is built. Institutions such as Gorongosa, or our own parks, make this ground itself into a cultural artifact, like dances, songs or poems. And just as those traditional cultural forms and artifacts are being transformed in the process of the Mozambican revolution, so is Gorongosa game park.

Theatre

At the time of Independence there was apparently a flowering of theatre in Mozambique: expressions in play form of the victories won and the battles yet to be fought. It did not seem to extend much beyond that moment. Currently there is not a great deal of theatrical activity. I did encounter the following:

1. The polyvalent group of the National Directorate of Culture. This is a student group operating within the ambit of the Ministry of Education, which performs dances, songs, and plays on special occasions within the country and also at such events as the World Youth Festival in Havana. Their plays are collectively produced and deal straightforwardly with topical themes. For example, 'Why There Are Lineups' — about the reasons for the scarcity of various commodities; or 'Xiconhoaca'. Xiconhoaca is one of the fine creations of Mozambican revolutionary culture: the type of ambitious individualist who joins the party as soon as he senses the wind is blowing in a revolutionary direction. He first appeared as a comic strip character, generated as a warning to the population about the opportunism which would appear almost simultaneously with the success of Frelimo. In the play Xiconhoaca appears drunk and slothful at work, beating his wives and children at home, and in a particularly harsh light at a decadent Western-style nightclub, where all the patrons are drug-crazed, the band has no rhythm, and the dancers are frantic and uncoordinated. As theatre it communicates with its audience, though it is technically undeveloped. It is not so much that it has no real theatrical style or values, as that it has no awareness of such elements as style. That of course can come in the

future.

2. The Mueda pageant. This is an extraordinary and spontaneous phenomenon. Mueda is a town in the northern province of Cabo Delgado; in 1960, 600 people were murdered there by Portuguese troops for daring to petition the colonial governor for a mild redress of grievances. It was a trauma that made the outbreak of armed struggle inevitable. (As a district administrator in the province said one night, "The Portuguese made revolutionaries of us.") Since Independence three years ago, the people of Mueda have performed an annual pageant commemorating this event. I did not see the performance itself, but a film of it made by the National Film Institute. It is a striking mix of styles: some naturalism: the arrival of emissaries to petition; some very non-naturalistic techniques: false noses and stomachs to caricature the Mozambican puppets; some ritualistic reenactment: a conversation within the old administration building where the audience, gathered outside, simply cannot see or hear it; some very emotional spectacle: the massacre and massing of bodies. The unquestionable impact of this piece comes from its direct relation to its locale and the people who recreate what many saw and still remember. It is a transformation of historical experience into a form that can communicate to people elsewhere what happened there, then. The limitation is that its entire power comes out of a single tragic event in that community; it has generated this play but it is so specific it is unlikely to generate a general theatrical movement or other plays — in Mueda, that is. But it can be very useful to people elsewhere in the country by indicating the kind of theatrical transformations that can be worked on immediate historical experiences.

3. The former Grupo Scenico of the armed forces, a theatre company which originated while Frelimo was still based in Tanzania. It is now being reconstituted as the nucleus of a national theatre company. Its previous work is the most self-assured and theatrical of any produced in the country. It tackles ambitious themes: it examined, for example, the fortunes of a bourgeois family under the new regime shortly after independence; and it engages in various non-naturalistic, highly theatrical techniques (which I might as well confess serves for *me* as a criterion of aesthetic advancement and



sophistication). Its current members are all workers and students with two exceptions: its leader, who doubles as head of immigration in the country; and the minister of justice.

4. An incipient group formed by a journalist and an Italian 'cooperant' who teaches drama at the national institute of culture. With a group of women workers from the central market in Maputo, they are developing a production based on folk-tales and themes which have been 'collected' in various oral culture projects. They consider the other theatre projects bureaucratic and overly dependent on non-indigenous models; they take their own work to be genuinely democratic and popular in its content and method. The interesting thing about this undertaking is the assumption that *if* they are correct, their work will eventually be recognized and become a model, replacing the other models. Instead of the kind of entrenched oppositional stance our alternate theatres tend to take, they assume the establishment at its centre is susceptible to radical change.

None of these theatre operations is fulltime, or anything like 'professional' in our sense. Furthermore theatre seems to be a relatively low cultural priority in Mozambique today. Other popular forms, particularly dance, are more developed and receive greater attention. The first national dance festival, held last June, enlisted the participation of literally millions of people.

Yet theatre is, to use Sartre's description, "the political art form par excellence". In the development of

other revolutionary cultures, such as China, or the early Soviet Union, it has played a central role. Why this relatively low profile in Mozambique?

I would say the answer lies in the problem of language. The people of the country at the time of Independence spoke ten or twelve different tribal dialects, with no single one predominant. A national language was indispensable for the forging of unity and the overcoming of tribal divisions, and the choice made was Portuguese. Yet fewer than 10% speak it even now, and for only a minority of that minority is it anything like a natural form of expression.

But theatre, of all the dramatic forms, is primarily a matter of speech. Not so film, or TV drama, where the insistent manipulation of the field of vision by the camera is so important. The core of live theatre is the speech of actors going out to the audience. Of course the play is not the text; it is much more. But it is the text which lingers between productions, and which is the scaffolding on which all else is erected. It establishes the centre of the matter that is to be transmitted.*

To attempt to act, and do theatre, in a language not native to the writers and actors is an excruciating task. For actors to speak lines that do not flow naturally out of them puts a heavy burden on them, the audien-

*There may seem to be exceptions. Hrant Alianak's plays, for example — often very effective — sometimes have almost no dialogue. Yet their effect I think is largely due to our awareness that language is in principle and almost always the core of theatre. His plays are an exception whose impact depends on the rule.



ce, and the point of whatever they are attempting to communicate. Occasionally in other cultural forms in Mozambique, such as dance, theatre elements obtrude in the form of actual short scenes of dialogue. Whenever I saw instances of these, they seemed far more effective and theatrically vivid done in the local dialect, than they were when performed in Portuguese. The interchanges took on a vitality when they were in the language the actors and audience had grown up in. Groups like the former Grupo Scenico can probably overcome these limitations, but for the most part the development of theatre in Mozambique may have to await the development of the national language into a natural language.*

An interesting example of the problem of 'native language' exists in Canadian theatres these days. In their never-ending search for the surefire hit, Canadian producers are turning with frequency to some of the newer American dramatists: David Rabe, David Mamet, Thomas Babe. These writers are marked by what is usually called the 'pungency' of their dialogue: language drawn

*A seeming exception here is the case of Mozambican poetry written in Portuguese: an accomplishment which simply shines. But the best of the Frelimo poetry was written by those members of the movement who often originated in fairly assimilated petty bourgeois backgrounds, had studied in Portuguese, and were fluent. It is true a great deal of popular poetry on revolutionary themes is being produced today throughout the country; yet it seems to many observers that it clearly lacks the vigour, originality and combination of personal passion and political commitment which so marks the Frelimo poetry of five or ten years ago — precisely because of this problem of language.

from the streets and lowlife of New York or Chicago.

Few things are more saddening than seeing Canadian actors try to cope with this language. They are good actors; they have craft; they are committed. But it is like taking a play about blacks in Harlem and casting it with white actors. They would try valiantly but in no way could they do it with the identification and therefore the impact of black actors with personal experience in such situations.

Language is not a matter of vocabulary, or even of fluency in terms of expressing meanings. Language is a matter of expressing a whole relationship to the world, a way of social existence. Until its drama can speak in a language natural to and rooted in its social and national existence, Mozambique will not really develop a national theatre. And neither will Canada.

Culture and Underdevelopment

The contradictions of underdevelopment affect a country's culture, not just its economy. The horrors of underdevelopment are among the main forces that motivate a national liberation movement. Once successful there is a very keen desire to develop as quickly as possible; masses of people have sacrificed a great deal for just this chance. One — perhaps the most important — route to fast development appears to be reliance on foreign aid, expertise and guidance: Mozambique currently has foreign 'cooperants' working in almost all areas, including culture. Some are sent officially by socialist countries; others come individually or through support organizations in the west.

But the desire for swift development and the tendency to rely on outside help runs in contradiction to another current: the drive to develop one's own capacities and rely on one's own experience as the basis for development. Especially in Mozambique where what John Saul calls "the Frelimo experience" in the liberated areas became the basis for an entire indigenous philosophy and practice — informed by Marxism — but Mozambican in its heart.

Consider the national music school. At the moment it gives courses in piano, but not in *timbili*, a traditional keyboard instrument of Inhambane province, which has a

highly developed technique and repertoire among the musicians of that province. The reason is largely the availability of expertise in piano in a form that can readily be taught; not so the *timbili*. It is much easier, and faster, to get a course in piano rolling, with foreign expertise and also foreign-trained Mozambican expertise, than to undertake the process of developing a *timbili* course. But at stake is the whole future of musical culture in the country; the graduates of the music school will become teachers throughout the nation.

Another instance: the recently opened Museum of the Revolution in Maputo. This was properly considered a cultural priority as a way of maintaining the spirit of the War of Liberation, now that the actual fighting is over. The four-story building recounts the tale from colonial oppression, through formation of Frelimo, then the fighting, to Independence. Cooperants from (North) Korea were advisors in this project and to an extent their influence shows. The first floor contains very moving photos and memorabilia of the humiliations of the colonial past: the *palmatoria*, which was a notorious whip; a very heavy litter chair in which the colonial governor was carried. There are effective evocations of the years of struggle: a Frelimo soldier's field kit; a reconstruction of the hut in which an important conference was held. But, especially in the displays about more recent times, the tone becomes increasingly reverential, with the sort of leaden emphasis on the leader — and a certain lack of emphasis on the initiatives of the people — that one associates with the Korean approach. It is always difficult to assign responsibility for particular aspects in such a joint effort, and it is true that Mozambicans themselves undoubtedly stress the leadership of Samora Machel. But this is usually more in accord with the Frelimo commitment to 'popular power', and with Machel's own personality, which is of a more spontaneous and effusive character than one generally associates with Kim Il Sung. In fact one photo of Machel in front of a radio mike — visibly enthused and facially animated — seems a slight embarrassment to the solemnity of the inspirational quotations on the walls around it. Furthermore the opening mural of the display gives a distinctly Korean cast to the facial features of some of the Frelimo lea-

ders depicted, and there is talk that some touching up by the locals may occur once the foreign comrades have departed.

Another interesting case is in the Film Institute. A decision to develop in film at all meant inevitable heavy dependence on outside help. But the choice was made against giving the project to *one* country, and for bringing in a variety of individuals from different places instead. This at least diffused the potential influence rather than concentrating it in one direction.

It is a situation in which a combination of motives in themselves meritorious: sentiments of international solidarity, the desire on the part of foreigners to help, the desire on the part of the Mozambicans to develop out of the current impoverished state as quickly as possible — can nevertheless lead to a negative result, i.e., the derailment of the formation of genuinely Mozambican forms of popular, socialist culture. What a loss that would be for the rest of us, who have most to learn precisely from the original, not the derived, accomplishments of the Mozambican revolution.

Speaking of Foreign Aid

I was told while in Mozambique that what the country needs more than anything else from outsiders is criticism. Criticism from friends but criticism nevertheless. That, aside from the forthright fabrications of South African journalism and its functionaries, Mozambique receives a positive press around the world, but helpful criticism is at a premium.

This is suggestive and challenging. We are familiar with the standard supportive reporting by friendly foreigners in socialist countries. Full of good will, it so often sounds the same: rural development is being emphasized, indigenous solutions are being sought, popular energies are being released — you feel you could sometimes just substitute the name of the country and carry on. Some of this may be unavoidable — witness the preceding sections — due to genuine similarities. Some of it as well serves a purpose: to counteract the distortions of the bourgeois press about socialist countries. But to make a contribution to the understanding of people within those developing socialist nations — when they ask for it — requires something

more. Requires criticism.

It raises the question of *how* to be critical. Is it a matter of being 'constructively' critical, as we were so often admonished in home and school? Surely it is not a matter of being critical in the liberal sense: striking a balance between the good points and the bad points and issuing a report card on the revolution's progress so far this term. Or of whipping out a handy universal standard and applying it like a leftwing tape measure. I would say it is a matter of being *dialectically* critical: setting accomplishments in a social and historical frame, assessing the forces at work, judging the general direction(s), and taking a stand on which concrete forces are moving forward and which back. If that sounds vague and general, it is because it doesn't mean a damn until you see how it is implemented in specific cases.

Still, it has application in our own culture, where 'criticism' is always an issue. We bitch about it a great deal, but I don't know anyone in the cultural field who is seriously trying to make a contribution, who does not *yearn* for criticism in much the same terms as it was mentioned in Mozambique. Approval is good for morale, but criticism makes for progress.

Back Home Again In . . .

The fall edition of *Canadian Motorist*, which you get for belonging to the auto club, contains an article on South Africa by editor Jerry Tutunjian, which contains this passage:

Johannesburg boasts the biggest hotel (600 room Carlton) in the southern hemisphere, but night club acts and theatre suffer from an acute case of the Timid Fifties. The gags of a standup comedian at the Carlton would make even Henny Youngman squirm. Example: "Do you know why the Ugandan cabinet collapsed?" Answer: "The branch broke."

Tutunjian adds that though the entertainment is weak, the food in the "first class restaurants" makes up for it. No mention of the social relations which observant tourists might find less than humanly firstclass. As it stands then, a (not so?) subtle appeal: Come to South Africa where racist jokes are in bounds. Nor is there any mention of what connection, if any, Tutunjian's article has

with the recently much-expanded P.R. campaign on behalf of white supremacy which the South African government is conducting in Western countries.

I suppose it's what you have to take along with all those free tows and boosts that come in so handy during the winter. Something good, something rotten.

Canada Carries On.

Jorge Rebelo

Liberty

from *Poesia de Combate*
1967

Liberty,
you must arrive one day
I know.
If you come late,
after my time of struggle
and conquest,
don't forget
that I loved you
in all ways
and sought you without losing heart
throughout my
unknown
sojourn.
So pause a while
by my graveside:
though dead, I'll feel you there
and recognize you
and return to death
then
peacefully.

translated from the Portuguese by Rick Salutin