

## MOZAMBIQUE: In search of a cultural identity

MAPUTO. Tuesday, August 3, 1993 (Elias Cossa/AIA) — A conference on culture was recently held in Maputo at the end of which a rather peculiar acknowledgement was made — that Mozambique was an African country.

It is believed this was the first conference of its kind to be held on the African continent.

The early period of Mozambique's independence, up to recently, was characterized by the domination of political over cultural values. It was against this background that Mozambique held the national conference on culture at which the admission was made that the country was, after all, still an African country.

The main conclusion of the conference, hosted by the Mozambican Ministry of Culture and Sport, was that Mozambican culture was an African culture with its roots going deep into the history of the Bantu peoples. This culture had, however, been subject to European and Asiatic influences.

Although Mozambique has been independent for eighteen years, this is the first time that it has been recognised in official documents as an African country. Under the influence of the Frelimo party which proclaimed independence and which for more than a decade governed the country through a highly centralised bureaucratic system, cultural policy was guided by the Marxist dream of building the "new man", that is, the Mozambican citizen who has risen above all questions of different ethnic groups and languages, most of which are Bantu.

The recent conference should have taken place immediately after independence, says Ana Elisa de Santisana Afonso, a historian and secretary-general of the UNESCO National Commission.

The five-day conference lasting from July 12 to 17 was preceded by two months of hectic preparation, during which the various provincial cultural directorates conducted popular debates. They tried to involve artists, research institutions, provincial administrations, religious institutions, non-governmental organizations, and ordinary members of the public.

More than 500 delegates attended the conference whose main themes were: cultural identity and the building of a Mozambican nation; Mozambique's cultural policy; the role of institutions engaged in artistic production; contribution of teaching and research institutions in the development of cul-

ture; culture and development; culture and sport and culture and international exchange.

The issue of a cultural identity was the most controversial question. It divided the participants into two factions. One faction led by Col Sergio Vieira, a researcher at the Centre for African Studies, argued that all the various components of Mozambican society should be accorded equal status when defining Mozambican identity.

This assertion was, however, overruled by the majority of the participants and a consensus was established by the President of the Republican Assembly.

He said during the debate. "The fundamental root of our culture is the Bantu and all other manifestations are like drops of water which help the root to develop. From now on there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about this."

This argument was first presented in 1990, during the debate on a new constitution for Mozambique. But then it was only in political terms, not cultural or scientific. At that time, certain politicians within Frelimo refused to accept the fact that the majority of Mozambique's population is made up of black people of Bantu origin, with the remainder having originated from Europe or Asia.

Meanwhile, the common denominator in all the debate was the division - common to the whole African continent - between tradition, as represented by the African values, and modern culture, as represented in western values. According to the historian, Alexandrino Jose, from the Eduardo Mondlane University's Centre for African Studies, "this contradiction will persist in Mozambique as long as the country has to depend on external assistance."

One of the Conference resolutions states that before any development project is implemented it should investigate the socio-cultural conditions of the people it will affect.

"But will the (international) donors really consider this important aspect?" asks Alexandrino Jose.

On the other hand the conference called for the state to effectively support all efforts to promote Mozambican culture, as well as the level of knowledge of the Mozambican people.

Christopher Waterman, a North American musicologist and anthropologist invited to the conference, summed up the greatest preoccupation of Mozambicans engaged in cultural activities. Waterman arrived in Maputo two weeks prior to the conference, and had contacted musicians, poets, writers, sculptors and teachers.

In his address to the conference, Waterman said, "Mozambican artists are still waiting for the sun of Mozambican culture to rise."

The late president Samora Machel was fond of saying, "Culture is a sun which never sets."

The Ministry of culture is trying to get the resolutions of the conference passed by parliament as an official regulation, so that for the first time Mozambican cultural policy will have the force of law.

But artists and other people engaged in Mozambique's cultural activities, especially those who were absent from the conference, told AIA that their work was not waiting for the passing of any law by parliament. They would continue to operate just as they had done in recent years.

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