

The Machel I knew

What Frelimo's leader taught me about racism

IN A clearing in the bush of northern Mozambique 13 years ago, the bearded guerrilla leader addressed a gathering of local peasants with a message that was, for me at least, something of a surprise.

It was, he said, vital to define the enemy correctly. The enemy was not the white man. The enemy was Portuguese colonialism and those who served its interests.

"You must recognise the enemy even when he is black like yourselves," he told the attentive crowd. Back in Dar es Salaam, where I was based as a journalist, I had heard that the guerrilla leader, Samora Moises Machel, was vehemently hostile to any kind of racism. But I had not expected him to make an issue out of it in a meeting with peasants who had suffered so cruelly at the hands of white men.

During my two-week visit to Frelimo's liberated areas in Cabo Delgado province in 1973, Machel returned to the theme time and time again. And while at first I thought I was there simply as a newspaper correspondent, it gradually dawned on me that my presence was being skillfully used by the president to illustrate his point.

After all, if the white man was the enemy, why would the president of Frelimo be treating this white journalist as an honoured guest? In the years since that tour, I have listened to Machel expounding on a thousand themes, at rallies, in interviews and

AIN CHRISTIE, a Maputo-based journalist who came to know President Machel well, assesses the man



press conferences and in private conversation.

But my most lasting memory of the man is that demonstration of "colour-blindness" in the heat of what many foreigners construed as a racial conflict. Machel's vision was of a southern Africa free of what he called "racial complexes of superiority and

inferiority", a region where the colour of a man's skin would have no more significance than the colour of his shirt.

He lived to see that in his own country at least, blacks, whites, Asians and people of mixed race live in harmony and equality. And he played an important advisory role in the negotiations that led to Zimbabwe's independence under a government committed to racial reconciliation.

Machel had an absolute loathing of white racism in South Africa. But in conversations I had with him on the subject he always insisted on one thing: the white South Africans are Africans, not foreigners.

For Machel, almost every issue could be distilled into politics or ideology. For him it did not matter that South African generals were white. What mattered, as he put it to me a few days before his death, was that "these people are trying to destroy my country".

Machel's Marxism was a source of great consternation for Americans and Soviets alike. When he defined Mozambique as a "socialist country" the Americans didn't like it because it might be true and the Soviets had a problem because they thought it wasn't true.

He had a very African approach to Marxism. I once put it to him that winning over the Mozambican people to Marxism might be rather difficult since the majority were illiterate peasants who would have difficulty in understanding such concepts.

I think that was the only time ever he lost his temper with me. "That question," he said, "is based on a misconception of what Marxism is."

He went on to explain that Marxism is not something learned in books but a product of experience in struggle. He refused to accept that the Russians, the Chinese, the Cubans or anybody else had a monopoly on Marxist thinking. His idea was that Marx provided a scientific framework within which people from all over the world could work out policies and strategies.

Fitting Marxism into the traditions and conventions of African social and political life was Machel's great concern. He knew the complexity of the issue, and his speeches exhorting people towards socialism were frequently laced with appeals to tradition.

Machel knew how important he was as a charismatic leader in southern Africa. At a briefing for editors, including myself, on October 11, he was asked if he thought he might be a target for assassination by external forces. "Yes," he replied, "and they have already tried."