

## Chapter Two

# A Luta Continua: Children and Youth in Mozambique's Struggles

*Ana Leão*

The focus of this chapter is a historical glimpse of youth involvement in Mozambican political change, where child soldiers seem to fall into a well-established pattern of youth involvement and youth mobilisation. The need for a historical perspective arises from the reality that children and youth comprise the largest demographic group in Africa and yet are the ones we know the least about. Research on young people has tended to focus on specific human security issues, such as child soldiers and HIV/AIDS, but there have been few attempts to profile youth socially, politically and economically. Having said this, youth is not a homogenous group; young people belong to different social economic strata and have different economic roles and political agendas.

Concepts such as childhood, adolescence and adulthood vary according to different social, cultural and economic settings. In many African societies, age was and still may be defined not by the year of birth but rather by the ability of the individual to perform certain tasks and carry particular responsibilities. African children and youth have established their social identity and position through their contributions to the household and community. Fetching wood or water, cultivating, tending livestock, hunting and fishing are some of the tasks through which rural youngsters, for example, establish themselves as productive members of their community.

But, although Africa's young people are not immune to historical changes, little is known about how concepts of childhood and youth have adapted to the changing conditions of African societies.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of our research, former child soldiers, none of whom had undergone any rituals of initiation in the traditional sense, were asked how age was defined in their community and none could really answer. They did admit that age had to do with their capacity to undertake particular tasks. Also, the rights and obligations

involved in the different age groups seem to be quite fluid and influenced by circumstances.

The impact of historical changes on the role of youth in African social systems is still to be researched and fully understood, but it is clear that young people themselves are often the engine for change. This chapter will examine the influence of historical events on young Mozambicans and how they have responded with the redefinition of their political roles and the development of survival strategies.

## **Youth and Change before Independence**

The participation of Mozambican youth in the different stages of their history seems to have begun long before the Portuguese colonist arrived. The kingdom of Gaza, in southern Mozambique, and its cattle-based economy is a case that comes to mind. Young men wishing to marry did not want to rely on the goodwill of the elders to make cattle available for marriages; thus they decided to resort to their own means by engaging in income-generating activities that would enable them to pay 'lobolo', or bride-price. Thus, when the Natal sugar plantations in the 1850s were in need of labour, seasonal work to earn enough cash to start a family seemed to be a logical step and young Mozambicans did not hesitate in seizing this opportunity. The Gaza chiefs welcomed this new source of revenue without realising that it was undermining their authority and thus enabling the easier establishment of the Portuguese authority.

The cattle-based economy of the Gaza kingdom was being weakened by the cash economy and by the autonomy that migrant labour conferred on Mozambican youth. By the time the Portuguese decided on a military intervention, in spite of the much-publicised Portuguese victory, the truth is that the Gaza kingdom was so weakened that it would have been only a matter of time until its total collapse. Income earned with wages cemented and expanded the cash economy, introduced alterations in the patterns of consumption and undermined the authority of the Gaza rule. Once the king was defeated, it was not difficult for the Portuguese administration to establish direct rule; the population was already familiar with taxation and the payment of tribute. What began as a means of getting resources to start a family became a feature of southern Mozambique that persists today: the tradition of migration to work in the South African mines. The colonial administration supported this migration since the export of labour meant revenue with little investment.<sup>2</sup>

Labour exploitation and living conditions in Mozambique created an essential contradiction in colonial policy: economic and social conditions forced the population to look for opportunities abroad, while the state simultaneously tried to isolate the colonies from the nationalist sentiments and independence campaigns spreading throughout the continent. Migrant workers could not fail to be influenced by nationalist movements abroad and brought home news of these efforts, which attracted the sympathies of Mozambicans who saw their social mobility constrained by the nature of Portuguese colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

There were several Mozambican communities and exile associations in countries bordering Mozambique. Inside Mozambique, the emerging peasant farmer class felt curtailed by the colonial administration. Samora Machel himself, in an interview with John Saul, mentioned in Iain Christie's biography of the Mozambican leader, described the peasants in his region:

Some were even rich. Certain people, considered very important, owned tractors and ploughs, were cattle breeders and produced a variety of cereals.... We wanted to understand the phenomena of trade, buying and selling and my father used to explain this to us through stories about domination. It wasn't the people who produced the crops who fixed the prices.... It was the colonial administration that recruited the buyers. All the cereals produced by Africans were bought by traders recruited by the administrators.... The administrators fixed the prices.... We were obliged to sell our products to the traders at prices fixed by the administration... We would produce and sell one kilo of beans at three and a half escudos while European farmers produced and sold at five escudos the kilo.... If on occasion, by special agreement, we managed to sell direct to a caterer or trader... we were compelled to receive payment half in cash and half in goods.... We couldn't become traders. 'Natives' couldn't enter into any form of commerce. They can only be producers for European traders. African cows are not registered and cannot bear their owners' brand. This enabled the European farmers to steal African cattle....<sup>4</sup>

These statements are considered to be the base of Machel's political ideas but, Samora was equally voicing the grievances of an emerging economic class, whose rooting and development were being constrained by the colonial administration. More so than political grievances, it was the economic constraints posed by the administration that were being voiced. The link of the constraints to the colonial policies was obvious and felt by Mozambican

farmers all over the country. Farmers who wanted to progress and have their children educated; farmers who wanted to develop their estates and their businesses; and farmers who wanted to diversify their economic activities. Social mobility and economic progress were being denied to them by the regime, hence their support to Frelimo during the liberation struggle.

It was from the discontents of migrants and communities abroad that the first proto-nationalist movements emerged, which would soon be joined (and led) by the educated and semi-educated Mozambican elites. Political parties were forbidden by the Portuguese administration but cultural, sporting and professional organisations were allowed. It was exactly these kinds of associations that were used to spread nationalist sentiments and to air grievances against the colonial regime. Colonial authorities were aware of this and would either try to co-opt or simply put an end to them. But the message had already been spread and eventually Frelimo was able to bring different factions and ideologies together under the same political umbrella.

## **Education and Liberation**

Frelimo was nonetheless aware of the need for educated Mozambicans if they were to win the war and run the country. Portuguese colonialism invested hardly anything in education and Frelimo knew they needed cadres. Thus, Frelimo did invest in educating its members and guerrilla fighters, providing basic education for most of them. Along with basic education, Frelimo also disseminated the idea of national unity. Uganda's President Museveni commented that whenever he visited a Frelimo base the first thing he would see was a mud map of Mozambique, so that fighters knew what they were fighting for. With the support of the USA and Tanzania Frelimo created the Mozambican Institute in Dar-es-Salaam, where Mozambicans could further their education and even apply for scholarships abroad.

Curiously though, some of the first internal struggles within Frelimo were connected to these two aspects of Frelimo's policy – education and national unity. It was a classic case of youth rebellion and challenge of the leadership. There was strong opposition between the Frelimo political leadership, represented by Makonde farmers and elders, who wanted to preserve the existing economic structure minus the Portuguese settlers, and the younger generation striving already to fulfil a Marxist vision of the movement.

The first congress of Frelimo, held three months after the foundation

of the movement, was the first victory of the unifying forces. These forces, led by Mondlane, included the young people who had come out recently from Mozambique after taking part in the clandestine struggle against colonialism. And not only were they opposed to tribal, regional and racial positions, their ideas on how to struggle were very different from those of the older men who had lived in exile in East Africa and Malawi.<sup>5</sup>

In the second congress of Frelimo, in 1968, youth (the "unifying forces") cemented their position, which made Nkavandame (one of the old Makonde leaders) and his group threaten to create a separatist Makonde movement.<sup>6</sup> This internal struggle culminated with the assassination of Mondlane and with Nkavandame defecting to the Portuguese forces and calling on his followers to put their guns down.

Later, still during the independence struggle, students who had studied abroad and in the Mozambican Institute did not want to join the army and fight. The young Marxist leadership, represented by Samora Machel and Marcelino dos Santos, who had the loyalty of their fighters, who had a dream of national unity and who wished to change the existing social and economic order, and to create a 'new Mozambican' could not tolerate this behaviour. The dispute was ultimately settled with the expulsion of reluctant students from Tanzania and with the final purging of the Makonde leadership. However, the concerns of education and national unity remained high on Frelimo's agenda.

Still, Frelimo was greatly supported by young Mozambicans, who joined the movement not only as fighters but also as political activists, who rallied the support of the population. For many young people, Frelimo represented the only way out of a regime that prevented social mobility and also the only way for further education.

Students would spread Frelimo's ideology in schools and urban centres and young activists were sent ahead of guerrillas to sensitise the villagers and prepare the ground and gather support for Frelimo incursions. Sympathies to Frelimo were equally found among some sectors of the Portuguese community – intellectuals and students, who were against the Portuguese regime on the whole and against colonialism in particular. What was never clarified at this stage was which type of regime would Mozambique have, should the colonial regime fall – autonomy within a colonial framework or complete independence. Nor was the "new Mozambican" clarified. While the political leadership looked towards a classless society imbued with Marxist ideals, the emerging Mozambican middle class would probably rather

support the idea of a free market and capital accumulation.

The lack of common understanding on this point would prove at independence to be source of conflict and dissent, both among Portuguese and Mozambicans – it split Portuguese families when teenage children refused to join the exodus of their parents and it created the opportunity to purge once and for all those opposing Frelimo single-party rule.

After independence, both civil society<sup>7</sup> and youth were the main engine Frelimo used to implement the new social and economic order, and also to spread its ideology. Samora Machel, who had criticised Mission schools, as existing “...not to educate but to teach doctrine...”<sup>8</sup> would not hesitate, however in using exactly the same mechanisms to “indoctrinate” the “new Mozambican” – a Mozambican educated, free, committed to the common good, with no superstitions, refusing long-lasting tradition and with no hang ups to ancestors long dead – a patriot facing the future. The new Mozambican was to flourish under the single-party rule and to selflessly contribute to a centralised economy.

Whereas many Mozambicans, particularly young Mozambicans, shared this vision for the new nation and contributed actively for its formation, the vision of Frelimo for Mozambique scared the Portuguese settlers and also an emerging Mozambican middle class, who quickly fled the country leaving the economy in shambles. Mozambican farmers, who thought they could now replace the European traders and see their fortunes develop, saw their hopes cut by a regime which needed cheap food for the industrial class upon which socialist regimes were based. The fact that an industrial class did not exist in Mozambique did not seem to pose a problem; it would eventually be created.

However, the important thing is that Frelimo had the support of the majority of the population at the time of independence. Mozambicans felt empowered and youth responded with extreme devotion to the calling of the party. Whereas youth rebellion in Europe was demonstrating on the streets against “American imperialism”, youth rebellion in Mozambique materialised as a power structure which enabled ideological dreams and dogma. This social experiment had devastating consequences.

Frelimo also counted on the support of many young Western intellectuals who considered Mozambique a unique opportunity to put in place some of the trendy leftist ideologies. They were joined by many Chileans escaping Pinochet’s regime, as well as by cadres coming from Europe and Asia. These young people would turn out to be instrumental at the time of independence. They filled positions in ministries and other administration bodies; they

became teachers and political activists; they took over the management of factories and farms; they passionately helped to build a country within an ideological framework they firmly believed in. And, as the socialist dream started to fade, they brought racism into the equation. Not because of a racist position assumed by the regime (Frelimo never tired of stating their anti-racist drive) but rather because of deteriorating economic conditions, which turned competition for resources into a fierce game. The colour of the skin was only the "visible face" of the problem and raised within Mozambican society the debate of nationalism and citizenship.<sup>9</sup> But this was already in the 1980s and by then ties between Frelimo and large sectors of the population had already been severed.

In order to minimise the economic crisis created by the exodus of the more skilled population Frelimo had to step in and assume an increasing number of responsibilities through a programme of nationalisation. But its control over nationalised industries was limited due to the lack of capacity and to the limited resources, and Frelimo did not hesitate in engaging non-African supporters with strong Marxist and nationalist feelings, over Mozambican students studying in Western countries. In order to establish its rule Frelimo set up dynamising groups in factories, communal villages and neighbourhoods to pass on its message and also to make sure that people conformed to the accepted ideology. These groups, which integrated great numbers of young Mozambicans, were responsible for the running of factories and communal farms, for which they lacked capacity. The state was to dominate the economic process through central planning and the dynamising groups became production councils subordinated to the party.

Young students were engaged in literacy campaigns and vaccination programmes; young people were used to politicise populations and to promote government policies. Women's groups would spread the message against lobolo and against the traditional role of women.

Mozambicans who were young and engaged at the time speak still today of the pleasure they felt in being so much included in social change. They tell of the tremendous sense of empowerment that being involved represented for them. They are not shy to point out what a wonderful thing youth mobilisation can be. They stress the strong bonds and the deep social engagement that such a mobilisation can create. They talk about their very young cabinet, with ministers barely in their thirties. What they all failed to see though was the opportunity for the abuse of power that such mobilisation could create, and the erratic and at times contradictory policies that inexperience entails. What had started as an ideological drive for a new independent country soon

gave way to a control that permeated every layer of society and to a growing fear and sense of powerlessness.

What Frelimo failed to consider was the discontent that measures pursued until 1984 were to create amongst the peasantry (the majority of the population) and also among youth not close to Frelimo. Frelimo had the marketing monopoly and kept food prices low in order to feed the cities and urban constituencies. Private agriculture was banned and thus the peasantry had once more its expectations curtailed by state intervention. Dissidents or economic saboteurs were sent to 're-education' camps; cultural structures – polygamy, lobolo, and traditional healers – were to be eliminated; and the economic situation deteriorated by the day. Students not close to Frelimo felt they could not pursue their education; amongst other obstacles, they feared Frelimo scholarships, which would place them in military academies in the Soviet Union or Cuba. Non-Frelimo-conformist youth were also sent to education camps, such as young girls accused of prostitution. What were perceived as imperialist symbols (like jeans) or capitalist entertainment (like movies) were repressed.

## **The Civil War**

If we assume citizenship as the set of obligations and rights that binds and rules the interaction between the individual and the community, one can only assume that Frelimo was quick in alienating sectors of the society: all those in favour of a multi-party regime were imprisoned and killed; farmers were to give up their plots in exchange for labour in communal farms; communities would be displaced and resettled in communal villages, far from their fields and, worse far from the family graveyard. Traditional authorities, who had had to reach some compromise with colonial authorities in order to be able to minimally protect their communities, were now called colonial puppets and traitors; local spiritual leaders were vilified and prevented from practicing.

In the face of this situation it was not difficult for Renamo to capitalise on the discontent that Frelimo policies were creating. Initially with the support of the Rhodesian military, the movement was later able to sustain itself with the support of the population. Renamo started by attacking re-education camps and freeing those who were willing to join the movement. Another preferred target were the communal villages, where Renamo was well received by the peasants, who saw in Renamo the opportunity to destroy and

flee these villages.

If Renamo started with disenfranchised soldiers and was supported by peasants' discontent with Frelimo's policies, by 1977 its leadership was well aware that the movement needed educated cadres for its political arm. It is at this time that Renamo fighters received instructions to kidnap young students, such as Raul Domingos.

During the civil war many young Mozambicans also felt they could not further their studies because they were not close enough to the party in power. JG, a young Mozambican, felt that "there were few opportunities for further education, since I did not belong to the elite.... and I felt that there was no space for me in the existing social order".<sup>10</sup> After being forcibly recruited by Frelimo in 1989 he decided to defect and join Renamo instead.

Frelimo had an extremely efficient propaganda machine and in the spirit of the times – the 1970s – Frelimo was able to seduce a number of young Western intellectuals, who actively contributed to the building of the new nation, which became a lab for socialist theories and policies. They also contributed to the making of a history that deprived many Mozambicans of their voices. Historical research has been difficult and controlled by the party and many episodes remain obscure and difficult to research. The origins and trajectory of the 17-year civil war fought between Frelimo and Renamo (the Mozambique National Resistance), which culminated in 1992 with the General Peace Accord and a full-scale United Nations peacekeeping mission, are a case in point.

In an attempt to deny political legitimacy to the rebels, Renamo's external links were overemphasised, internal support was dismissed, and Renamo's fighters were called "bandits". Although Renamo leaders were unable to articulate a solid political agenda, it does not mean they did not have one. They opposed the single-party rule imposed by Frelimo and wanted political space. Several former Renamo fighters told us "we won the war because our goal was to create political space and change the economic setting of the Marxist regime". Confronted with the question "why do you think that peace has lasted so long in Mozambique" the standard reply was "because now we can fight in the political arena. We fought in the bush but now our leader has to fight in Parliament."

On 29 November 2002 we interviewed N, a former Renamo fighter who joined in 1977, still under the leadership of André Matsangaissa:

André had a political agenda from the beginning. When he decided to defect and run away to Rhodesia, he and a handful of likeminded colleagues attacked a re-education camp and freed some inmates, who joined him. These inmates had fought for independence but

afterwards they opposed Frelimo rule and were punished for it.<sup>11</sup>

When asked about the accusations of theft and corruption with which Frelimo legitimised incarceration in re-education camps, N replied: "... at the time, to go to a re-education camp all you had to do was to be alive."

The same comment, articulated in different ways was heard during the research. TL, interviewed on 17 March 2003, said:

One of my neighbours went out of the house to drop the garbage in the street containers. At the time we had regular garbage collection in Maputo. Just around the corner of the street she is stopped by two soldiers, who ask her for her identification. She was wearing nothing but a housedress and slippers and told them she lived around the corner and could they please come with her. She was hauled into a truck, driven to the airport and flown to Niassa for a couple of years.<sup>12</sup>

Over the course of the research and often in reference to the period from the late 70s onward, we were often told that once out of the house one could never be sure of returning home at the end of the day. João Cabrita, in his book "The Tortuous Road to Democracy", presents several examples of people sent to these camps for lack of documents, as well as anecdotal episodes of escaping incarceration by presenting the car registration papers to the authorities. The re-education camps were one example of the kinds of mechanisms used to control dissent, social deviation and other risks, in the name of security.

The analysis of the role of Mozambican youth during the civil war is quite illustrative of the misinformation generated in the name of control and would in itself provide ample scope for research. Much of the literature on child soldiers during the civil war perpetuates misinformation. Officially, Frelimo never had child soldiers and thus silenced the voices of those young people who gave their youth over to fighting and who are now struggling to survive.

This "non-existence" of Frelimo child soldiers has been so firmly rooted in literature and in people's minds that during interviews with former child soldiers, those who had been recruited by Frelimo expressed the idea "...we are not child soldiers; we were only recruited under age". They firmly believed that only those who had fought for Renamo were child soldiers. Nor has it been admitted that some (under recruitment age) youth joined Renamo voluntarily, mainly to avoid forced conscription or because they were promised opportunities denied to them by the party in power.<sup>13</sup>

Frelimo did resort to forced recruitment. Young people were conscripted if

they were perceived to be big enough to hold a gun. Students accepted scholarships abroad, only to join military academies in the host countries, instead of the promised universities.

Others were lured into special national training programmes, which also turned out to be military training. J was 15 and her dream was to become a medical doctor: "My mother was always very sick and my dream was to become a doctor and heal her". When Frelimo came to her school advertising a special schooling programme for those who wanted to study medicine, she went home and convinced her parents to let her go to Maputo and join the boarding school hosting the programme for medical students. Permission granted, she and several of her friends boarded a transport truck, which dropped them two days later in military barracks close to Maputo. J was demobilised only in 1992 after the peace agreement, without her medical diploma.

Students abroad and in Mozambique could only get their schooling certificates once they had completed their military service, which, according to our sample, could last between two and 16 years, or even longer. S, in an informal conversation said:

... we had to come back to Mozambique. First, it would have been difficult for us students to go anywhere then our scholarships were given by Russia, Democratic Germany, and Cuba. These were all "friendly" regimes – they would not let us escape and surely did not want us there once we graduated. Second, because our diplomas would be sent by the foreign schools to Mozambique, we could collect them only once we had finished the military service.<sup>14</sup>

When youth were not recruited by Frelimo, they were expected to join the militia; groups of civilians with guns and training provided by the army who were supposed to defend and secure their neighbourhoods and villages. According to OJM (Organização da Juventude Moçambicana), Frelimo's youth league, OJM, would itself mobilise rural youth to reconstruct and defend their villages, schools and clinics. In all fairness, many communities spoke with admiration of these militia groups, and recognise that they served a purpose. During a group discussion with community leaders on Ilha Josina Machel on 19 February 2003 we were told: "The militia were very important, because the soldiers... they move along with the war, but the militia... they stay behind and help the population."

Regardless of how necessary they are perceived to have been, these militia groups also meant that the line between military and civilian (along with the line between adults and children) was blurred and communities were made military targets. These communities were then "made an example of" to show

the world the atrocities committed by the “bandits”. According to N communal villages were often built around military barracks, Frelimo thus using the civilian population as a human shield and thereby dramatically increasing civilian casualties.

According to N:

... sometimes when the population realised we were winning the battle and Frelimo soldiers were retreating, the population themselves would put fire to the houses and destroy infrastructures, so that they would not have to come back and live there. You see, most of them hated the communal villages!<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Youth in Mozambique have been closely involved in historical change. Youth have been requested and forced to participate in political and social change, as did civil society. This close association and inclusion of youth in broader civil society mobilisation is important, because today in Mozambique there are no youth-specific organisations. According to a young Mozambican nearly every young person in Mozambique is a member of some kind of group or civil society association – cultural groups, dance or theatre groups, members of NGOs. But, whereas during the one-party regime youth were organised into a single association – the OJM – the opening up of a multi-party regime created a void, in the sense that no specific apolitical youth organisations were created.

Today Mozambican youth is too diversified to be considered a single category. Young urban people interviewed during the fieldwork showed dissatisfaction with the difficult access to education, the lack of economic opportunities, and in their perception that the options open to them are very limited:

Youth have a voice – they express their wishes and grievances, they talk on the radio, they talk on TV, but they are not heard. They feel powerless against a regime that does not listen. Even Cardoso’s trial happened not because of Mozambican civil society, but rather due to international pressure.<sup>16</sup>

This sentiment, however, is not exclusive to Mozambican youth; civil society representatives complained about the same thing: they may talk but they are not being heard. Still, and in spite of all the difficulties young people face, young Mozambicans are proud of their country:

I feel proud in being a Mozambican because we are resilient, we fight and that makes us feel good inside.<sup>17</sup>

And they are very aware of the role they could be playing in their country:

I am proud of being youth, because I know what I want. My life is very difficult but I know what I want and I do my best to achieve it, without being a criminal. But we youth of today are suffering due to the mistakes of those who were young before us. We now have another vision and another attitude. Look at Siba Siba and other young people who are honest and not corrupt. That is why he was killed, because he was a young man trying to bring morality. We are now the victims of the previous generation, who lost their ideals. That is why today we are worse off than before independence. They made independence, but only for a minority. They even declared some heroes, but what about the anonymous people, like my parents, who also suffered and contributed to the independence efforts. Are they not heroes too? But no, the regime only cares for the minority of heroes and forgot completely the people. They used youth to fight their wars but at independence and at peace they forgot the youth.<sup>18</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 N Argenti, Youth in Africa: a major resource for Change, in N Argenti and A De Waal "(eds)" *Young Africa: Realising the rights of children and youth*. Africa World Press, 2002.
- 2 P Harries, Work, culture, and identity: *Migrant laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, C.1860-1910*, Greenwood Press, Westport 1994.
- 3 Forced labour was abolished from Portuguese legislation only well into the 1960s, although it went on being practised after that.
- 4 I Christie, *Samora Machel – a biography*, Zed Press, London, 1988.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 We use "civil society" here for lack of another term, then under Frelimo single-party rule the so-called civil society organisations were all under the umbrella of the party – OJM (youth league), OMM (women's association), OTM (workers' association), amongst others.

- 8 I Christie, *Samora Machel – a biography*, Zed Press, London, 1988.
- 9 V Ferrao, *Compreender Moçambique*, DINAME, 2002, p 70.
- 10 JG, personal interview.
- 11 Personal interview on 29 November 2002.
- 12 TL, personal interview, March 2003.
- 13 JG, personal interview.
- 14 S, personal interview from March to December 2003.
- 15 Personal interview, Maputo, October 2004.
- 16 Personal interview with D.
- 17 Personal interview with D, 2003.
- 18 Personal interview with S, 2003.