FRELIMO HAS ALWAYS USED ITS VERSION OF HISTORY TO CLAIM A KIND OF ENTITLEMENT TO RULE

AN INTERVIEW WITH HISTORIAN PROFESSOR MALYN NEWITT FOR THE ROSA LUXEMBURG FOUNDATION SOUTHERN AFRICA

FREDSON GUILENGUE

Mozambique has experienced important, rapid and radical political and economic transformation since gaining independence in 1975. It transitioned from a single party state (1975-1992) racked by civil war, to a relatively peaceful multiparty democracy. Economically too, it changed from a centrally-planned economy to a market-driven one. Until the discovery of unrevealed loans of USD 1, 4 billion in early 2016, its political and economic reforms were said to have produced one of the fastest growing economies in Africa (GDP consistently growing at 7% per annum). The bombshell surrounding the hidden loans prompted some development partners to suspend further financial aid to the country, pushing it close to bankruptcy. Effective peace and stability remain elusive, especially with former rebel movement, Renamo (now the main opposition party) reverting to military means to demand political, social and economic inclusion – this against the backdrop of highly contested electoral processes.

To better understand the institutions of Mozambique's young and troubled democracy through its historiography, **Fredson Guilengue**, Programme Manager at the **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa (RLS),** interviewed Professor Emeritus **Malyn Newitt (MN)**. Professor Newitt is one of the leading historians on Mozambique. As the Charles Boxer Professor of History at King's College London, he taught the History of Portugal, Portuguese Overseas Expansion and African History. His research led to the publication of "*A History of Mozambique*. London: Hurst & Company", a must-read history book. This interview takes place in the context of his new book entitled "*A Short History of Mozambique*. London: Hurst & Company." RLS and the *Centro de Estudos de Democracia e Desenvolvimento* (CEDE) reference this book to introduce Professor Newitt as a speaker at a forthcoming series of public lectures where the challenges of Mozambique's state-building project will be discussed.

RLS: How and why were you interested in studying Mozambique's history?

MN: At the age of 22, my first academic post was in the History Department of the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. It was 1962 and the wars of independence in Mozambique had not yet begun. The Head of Department, Eric Stokes, wanted someone to teach Portuguese colonial history. I resisted in vain saying that I knew no Portuguese and nothing about the topic. I was told to buy a Portuguese dictionary. Subsequently, I spent considerable time driving around the

Zambesi valley and the north of Mozambique in the University's Land Rover. I took up my post as Lecturer in History at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in September 1962. In 1963-4, I took two journeys to central and northern Mozambique before the outbreak of the War of Independence. On the first journey I travelled with a companion from Rhodesia across the Zambesi at Tete. There was no bridge and the crossing was by ferry. At that time, the road ran through Malawi before it re-entered Mozambique. We visited Nampula and later Mozambique Island. There was no bridge linking the island to the mainland. We arrived with an introduction to the governor of the island and were taken to the finals of the local football competition before being given a bed for the night in the former Jesuit College, which had been made a Museum. Our journey then took us south to Angoche (then called António Enes). When we reached the Zambesi opposite Sena, there was no means to cross the river except by railway over the famous Lower Zambesi Bridge. This meant that we had to hire a steam locomotive. We loaded our land rover into a single truck and solemnly steamed across. The main impression of this visit was that Mozambique was then quite peaceful. A lone vehicle driving through the country was quite safe. Communications, however, were notoriously bad. There were no road crossings of the Zambesi and the north of the country was almost totally cut off from the south. The main road south from Mozambique Island was rough, bridges were either non-existent (river crossings being by a pontoon), or over very precarious wooden structures.

The second journey I took was in the company of the famous archaeologist, Peter Garlake. We investigated the site of the Aringa at Massangano, the scene of so many battles during the wars of the nineteenth century. Peter Garlake drew a plan of the ruins and we subsequently published a joint paper in the Journal of African History. We took a

Professor Malyn Newitt

canoe across the river to Bandar, the site of another Aringa. One night was spent with the *Chefe do Posto* in the old fort at Tambara. Again, driving through Mozambique was quite safe and peaceful but the roads were so bad that a land rover was essential. I took a subsequent journey to northern Mozambique in 1973 towards the end of the war travelling in a private yacht across the Mozambique Channel from the Comoros Islands. We reached the Mozambique coast at Ibo where the yacht ran aground and we had to go ashore across the mudflats. We landed inside the walls of the fort which at that time was used as a prison. We walked out through the gate but, not surprisingly, were stopped by the guards who wanted to know how we got inside in the first place. We were taken to the police station and Peter Garlake, who again was with me, had his camera confiscated. I hid mine under my jacket. Later Peter Garlake and I went by canoe through the mangrove swamps to Querimba Island to view the ruins. Ibo was then very sleepy and extremely picturesque with flowering trees and old houses along the main street - but silent and rather deserted. We then cruised among the islands before sailing into Pemba and flying from there to

Lourenço Marques. As we took off we had a good view of the parks of wrecked trucks and other vehicles, a silent but eloquent image of the war.

RLS: Do you believe we need more "history" to help us understand present day's political challenges in Mozambique and elsewhere?

MN: In all countries historical knowledge is vital for those concerned with public affairs. History will never provide model solutions for economic, social or political problems, but knowledge of past events is nevertheless essential in the same way that general medical knowledge is essential for any doctor trying to diagnose and find a remedy for a specific illness, or general engineering principles are vital for an architect planning a specific construction. Looking at it another way – lack of historical knowledge can be as disastrous as trying to navigate in a sea without any charts. Evidence-based historical studies should be a compulsory requirement in all educational institutions.

RLS: In many African countries, including Mozambique, there is an apparent clash between official historical narratives and those emanating from historical research. Do you believe that the clash between "official" and the "historical" narratives will eventually lead to a more historically correct narrative in Mozambique, or are we just witnessing narratives moulded to political circumstances?

MN: There is no such thing as a "correct historical narrative". The past will always be subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. However, some interpretations will always be more closely aligned with the evidence than others. As narratives of the past are used to legitimise or de-legitimise politics in the present, it is the vital task of historians to test these narratives against the evidence. It cannot be the case that all versions of the past can be given equal weight, as some post-modernists seem to maintain. All appeals to the past, if they are to be taken seriously, must be supported by the weight of the evidence but, as research into the past is carried out, there is bound to be some change in where the weight lies. In Mozambique, research is bringing about major shifts in interpreting the early history of Frelimo and its relations to other nationalist movements and in understanding the early post-independence years. Studies of the earlier history of the country have led to an increased understanding of the role of clientilism and domestic slavery in the formation of ethnicity and the institutions of society and have provided a more nuanced understanding of the origins of migrant labour.

RLS: In Mozambique, narratives seem to be instrumental in legitimising access, control, and exercise of state power. Some conclusions in your most recent book contradict the official narrative of the liberation struggle in which Frelimo is portrayed as a permanently victorious movement. For example, you point out that in late 1970 Portugal was winning the war and that Frelimo's victory was, to some extent, a phony victory as the colonial regime had capitulated before suffering any significant defeat. But officially it was during the same period that the narrative claims victory over operation Nó Górdio.[1] This narrative about the power of the liberation movement has been used by Frelimo to legitimise and justify the use of state power in post-independent Mozambique against other existing forces "connected" to the "defeated" Portuguese army. In this current "battle for narratives", do you envisage revised narratives that are not only historically more correct, but that would also lead us away from power politics narratives towards ones with stronger normative

---

[1] Nó Górdio was the largest and the most expensive military operation against the liberation movement in Mozambique during the Portuguese colonial war (1961-1974). It was led by the Portuguese General Kaúlza de Arriga (1915-2004) and mobilised thirty-five thousand soldiers and a considerable amount of other military means.

MN: This question poses the problem confronting Mozambicans in understanding the current political and economic situation in their country. Frelimo has always used its version of history to claim a kind of entitlement to rule and this raises obstacles in achieving reconciliation or compromise. This in turn raises questions about whether the norms of 'western style' democracy either could or should prevail in the country. However, it is worth pointing out that, although Frelimo has ruled Mozambique since 1975, it has responded to criticisms that have been directed at the earlier versions of its narrative. This can be most clearly seen in the way it has tried to make room for 'traditional' authorities in the new post-1992 order when the early rhetoric of the party was directed at eradicating 'traditional' institutions and mentalities.

Scholarly criticism can, and should, hold the government to account by judging it against its stated policies and ideals – particularly where these affect such fundamental issues as human rights and protection of the environment which are of worldwide significance. Achieving transparency in interpretations of the past as well as the present is one of the major tasks of the historian and commentator. Moreover, a more nuanced view of Mozambique's early history may help to shift emphasis away from always viewing 'Africans as victims' and more towards 'Africans as agents in their own history'.

This change in mental attitude is of some relevance today as Mozambique moves away from simply reacting to the outside world in order to secure the flows of aid towards a position where the country takes more responsibility for its own destiny and the welfare of its own people.

RLS: FRELIMO has a remarkable history of fifty years both as an armed front in the liberation struggle, a "revolutionary movement" after independence, and a political party guiding/ controlling the political fate of the Mozambican people. This supremacy is understood by many as connected to its ability to withstand profound change both within the country and within the party itself. As a historian, do you believe that Frelimo's fifty year track record allows us to draw inference that the party is a special political entity? Can we use Frelimo as a benchmark to better understand political organisations elsewhere in Africa and perhaps promote internal stability in other similar organisations in Africa?

MN: I am not sure there are many lessons to be drawn from Frelimo's history. One factor, which may be distinctive however, is the degree to which Frelimo has refused to become an ethnic party. The ethnicity of Mozambique is very complex and no ethnic group has anything approaching a majority position in the country. This reality underlies the early ideology of Frelimo as being a non-tribal and non-racial movement.

The more recent moves to bring traditional authorities into an active role in government can also be seen as a policy that is ethnically inclusive. Frelimo acts in a patrimonial manner but its patrimonialism supports followers who are not defined exclusively in ethnic terms – though regional disparities are easy to see.

In its early days Frelimo prided itself on trying to reach internal consensus before decisions were made, and on its tradition of self-criticism. These traits were prominent under Machel but some trace of them still survives and helps the party maintain some cohesion between rival factions. Important also is the adherence to the constitutional provision that allows a president only two terms of office. This allows aspiring rivals and

their supporters to 'wait their turn' rather than stage coups or bring about splits in the party.

Two other factors are also crucial in holding Frelimo together. The existence of Renamo as a potential electoral (and military) threat convinces members of Frelimo to close ranks, while the party's long tenure of power means that it can sustain its client base in a political system that has become increasingly patrimonial.

RLS: Peace agreements and peace keeping missions follow readymade frameworks adjusted to decades and even centuries of western political brinkmanship. In your research in Mozambique, did you find an example of indigenous peace making processes that could serve as tools to bring peace and stability?

MN: I believe there is a distinctive pattern in Mozambique's history. The most important institution has always been the lineage, the so-called 'small society'. Here the role of ancestral (and other) spirits, exercised through established spirit mediums, remains central in the making of important decisions affecting the community, as well as in conflict resolution.

This traditional form of mediation and 'peace making' remains crucial at the local level and was most recently demonstrated in the way that child soldiers and other combatants were reincorporated into communities at the end of the civil war. But it is not clear how this traditional form of mediation can operate at a national level. From as far back as history provides a record, the 'small society' has been dominated by large state systems imposed by outsiders who establish a system of paramountcy – Karanga, Maravi, Ngoni, Portuguese, Muslim.

These large paramount political systems have provided the means by which the rivalries of small scale lineage-based systems can be controlled and peace maintained. However, the stability of these larger political systems has always ultimately depended less on force than on the co-option of spirit cults and the partial absorption of the 'conquered' through marriage and clientilistic relations. Looking back into Mozambique's history one can see repeated occasions when warlords established their power through warfare and violence and subsequently sought recognition and acceptance through traditional means like assuming traditional titles or co-opting spirit cults. In the search for home-grown ways of achieving mediation, it is to be noted that civil society is, in general, weak in Mozambique. In the past the Catholic Church was able, to some extent, to play a mediating role but it is difficult to see its influence as being strong enough to perform this role today.

RLS: Wars (and civil wars in particular) are extremely violent and brutal processes that create trauma and its assortment of crimes and war criminals. To deal with the aftermath, when it comes to reconciliation, we can mention the examples of South Africa and Rwanda. When it comes to punitive justice, we can refer to the Nuremburg trials in Germany as agenda-setting (and shifting) in the field. The Mozambican model of promoting reconciliation without either exposing the truth or punishing eventual perpetrators of violence is an approach that seems not to have been properly theorised. Can it be because this approach is endogenous to Mozambique's proto-states or is it merely a modern expedient reflecting a political stalemate?

MN: I suspect that Mozambique's way of adjusting to the violence of the civil war – just mention it as little as possible – emerged as the simplest way of moving ahead at a vital stage of the peace negotiations. It was not theorised but was an ad hoc arrangement. Any Nuremburg Trials solution would not have been possible where there was no distinction between a victorious and a

defeated side. Who would prosecute whom in a situation where both sides committed atrocities? However, the danger of this Mozambican policy of 'forgetting' is clear. It removes the threat of establishing any accountability for criminal acts in the political arena. In Angola, where there was a clear winner in the civil war, the victorious side also did not institute a system of retributive justice. Instead MPLA went some way towards co-opting leaders of the defeated UNITA into its clientilistic network.[2] This makes Angola's experience different from that of Mozambique where there has been little attempt by Frelimo to co-opt and incorporate individual Renamo figures into the ruling elite. Power sharing of any kind has been rejected in Mozambique, though it is easy to see the importance of power sharing agreements in other conflict resolution situations.

RLS: Historically, as you also point out in your most recent book, Mozambique has been administered in different ways for a very long time. Could current demands for further decentralisation answer the challenges of these differentiated historical legacies in Mozambique?

MN: I don't think history by itself can provide ready-made answers to current problems, but it is clear that the debate over decentralisation needs to be informed by Mozambique's historical experience. Until 1942 different regions came under different administrative regimes. To this might be added the close links that formed between different regions and the neighbouring countries, the extremely undeveloped internal communications in Mozambique and the isolation

of the capital in the extreme south of the country, all of which have contributed to the existence of sharp regional differences. The plea for more decentralisation has, therefore, roots in a historical reality and would constitute a form of power-sharing which so far Frelimo has refused to contemplate.

RLS: Democracy seems to exacerbate identity politics in Africa and elsewhere. You conclude in your book that ethnic and regional tensions lie just beneath the surface in Mozambique but politicians seldom play the ethnic card. Looking at the history of Mozambique, is it possible to understand this aversion to playing ethnic cards by politicians as a product of the country's history, or is it a more recent attitude inherited from the armed struggle process (both the liberation war and the civil war)?

MN: I argue in the book that the relative lack of ethnic tensions in Mozambique (relative when compared with so many other African countries) can be partly explained by the country's history, i.e. the diversity and fluidity of ethnic identities, particularly in the central region, the multiplicity of languages and dialects, the predominance of the lineage based 'small societies' linked to spirit cults, state formation by warlords (Afro-Portuguese, Muslim) with a distinct ethnicity from those subject to them and the overrule by large, multi-ethnic state systems (for example the Monomotapa and Gaza kingdoms). Recently, Frelimo made a point of playing down ethnicity, while Renamo owed much to the tradition of warlordism, neither party making ethnicity central to its modus operandi.

As argued in the book, differences based on geographical regions are, and have always been, more important than ethnicity per se and this has been tacitly understood and acknowledged by the political class. In few regions of the country would an appeal based on ethnicity be likely to succeed. In the centre-north, for example, where the vast

---

[2] MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) is the former liberation movement of Angolan and currently the country's ruling party since independence in 1975. UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*) was founded by Jonas Savimbe and others in 1966 as a liberation movement. After the independence of Angola, it became a rebel movement that fought against the MPLA government until 2002 when it was transformed into a political party after a military defeat. Today, UNITA is the second major political party in Angola.

majority of the population speak a dialect of Makua, there is probably little ethnic solidarity because part of the population is Muslim and part non-Muslim creating divisions other than along ethnic lines.

RLS: Your view is that the winner-takes-all system poses challenges to African countries, including Mozambique, as ruling parties expect to rule indefinitely without any sort of power sharing. The Mozambican context has been exacerbated by the fact that the peace process did not secure an effective disarmament of Renamo. In this context, which type of electoral system or arrangement would accommodate or address the current lack of political inclusiveness in Mozambique?

MN: In every country some form of power sharing is essential if all sections of the population are to feel that their views are represented and their interests are catered for. But there is no one model of power sharing that can meet the needs of all countries.

In the West, governments are generally formed by the winners of national elections, but power sharing is built into political systems at a number of levels: a) it is expected that there will not be the long-term dominance of a single party and that opposition forces will, in time, win an election and have their turn in office; b) in most Western countries it does indeed happen that coalition governments are common and the need for them is widely accepted; c) proportional representation in some form enables all sections of the community to have their voices heard; d) federal structures (e.g. in the US, Canada, Britain and Germany) mean that power is shared between central government and local communities. In Northern Ireland, as a result of a peace accord, there is formal power sharing between the two dominant parties; e) in the United States there is a well-established Federal constitution which gives extensive powers to the States and with power at

the centre distributed between President, Senate and House and Supreme Court.

So power sharing, vital to maintain national cohesion, takes a variety of forms, but it is only reasonable to note that power sharing can limit the ability of a government to pursue necessary policies.

In Africa there is one interesting variant. The small Union of the Comoros consists of three islands, not all of equal size. To achieve power sharing, seen as vital in holding the republic together, the constitution provides for the office of president to revolve between the three islands. Each island provides the president in turn. Power sharing, of course, does not always work. The power sharing government in Zimbabwe was not, on the whole, a success. What is essential in any power sharing agreement is that everyone accepts its value and the determination to make it work.

Effective power sharing cannot be imposed, it must come from a genuine desire by all parties to make it work. At the time of the Peace Accord Frelimo was under pressure from the international mediators to establish some form of power sharing but in the end Mozambique emerged from the civil war with a winner-takes-all constitution which leaves significant sections of the country permanently out of power and provinces, where the ruling party does not have a majority, without significant control over their affairs. The situation is made worse by the fact that Renamo has not renounced force as a political lever and by the fact that promises of decentralisation made at the time of the Peace Accord have not been realised.

There are various ways in which this situation might be addressed: a) a formal revision of the constitution to give the country a federal structure; b) the implementation of effectively decentralised local government; c) formal power sharing at the centre through a coalition between the dominant

parties; d) a revolving presidency (as in the Comoros).

However, the level of distrust between the major parties seems, at present, to make a power sharing central government based on a coalition, impossible to achieve.

Mozambicans will need to work out arrangements that meet their needs but none of the approaches outlined above will work without a renunciation of violence and the complete acceptance by all parties of the need for some form of power sharing and a willingness to accept the consequences.■