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Interview by **Zadie Winthrop, Yale University '26**

In this interview, I spoke with Professor Benedito Machava, a historian of colonial and post-colonial Africa and the politics of decolonization in his home country, Mozambique. We discuss Mozambique's transition from the Portuguese colonial government to the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the tenets of FRELIMO's socialism, their attempt to construct a decolonized "new man" through "re-education camps," and the similarities between the mechanisms of social control employed by the Portuguese colonial government and FRELIMO's post-colonial government. The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

To start, I was hoping you could give us a brief history of the transition of power from the Portuguese colonial government to FRELIMO.

Mozambique became independent in 1975, after 10 years of armed struggle. During this period, the wars in the Portuguese colonies in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau exhausted the resolve of the Portuguese army. Consequently, a revolution in Portugal overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship and led to talks for decolonization in the Portuguese colonies. One of the agreements declared that a year-long transitional government would be established in Mozambique to prepare the country to transition to independence. This transitional government included a majority of members from FRELIMO and a few from the Portuguese government. During this period of transition, the FRELIMO dominated government decided to implement re-education camps, targeting so-called anti-socials, prostitutes, vagrants, and people deemed to be leading wayward lifestyles. The first camp was created precisely a month after the transitional government came to power, and so you can glean from that the centrality of this policy to this regime and the FRELIMO government's attempts to create what they called "the new society" in Mozambique. That was the context in which these camps were created—they were part of the entire package of decolonization and the making of independent Mozambique, of course, under the mantle of socialism.

Can you describe the formation of FRELIMO and its relationship to Tanzanian or African Socialism and African Marxism?

In 1963 the recently independent countries of Africa decided to create the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and within it a committee for the decolonization of the continent, especially to support liberation struggles in those few countries still under colonialism, especially in Southern Africa. Tanzania's proximity to Southern Africa was precisely why the committee was established in the Tanzanian capital city of Dar es Salaam and not in Ethiopia's Addis Ababa, which was the headquarters of the OAU. In addition, Julius Nyerere, the prime minister of Tanzania from 1964 to 1985 was an uncompromising supporter of these nationalist liberation movements and was willing to host them in Tanzania. He, in fact, played a very important role in the creation of FRELIMO because he became friends with Eduardo Mondlane [who later became the founder of FRELIMO] when Mondlane was working at the UN to supervise processes of decolonization in Africa. During that time, Mondlane learned that the UN as a forum would not provide Mozambicans any support against the Portuguese because Portuguese interests were deeply entrenched in the UN. He left the UN and received an invitation from the various nationalist movements and from Nyerere to join and lead the nationalist movement for Mozambique's independence. Nyerere understood that these different movements were well intentioned but didn't have good leadership.

FRELIMO evolved during the struggle. They learned a great deal from Tanzania and assimilated a lot of things from Tanzania's socialist experiment. However, FRELIMO grew increasingly more radical, particularly due to influence from Maoist principles of popular struggle. The general consensus is that you have a first generation of African socialists who advocated this idea of Africa being already socialist because of the nature of pre-colonial African societies. The idea being that they were communal, and because of that they were already socialist. What they needed was to actually recuperate that communalism which had supposedly been eroded by colonial rule. Nyerere was one of the key figures in this generation of African socialists. In the 1970s a new generation, a second wave of African socialists emerged. They advocated for what they called scientific socialism – the claim being that there is one socialism and that is the socialism of Marx and Lenin, which is scientific. FRELIMO belongs to this second way of so-called Afro-Marxists. By the time Mozambique became independent, FRELIMO was quite critical of the ideological orientation of Tanzania along the lines of what is known as African socialism, versus, say Afro-Marxism.

I noticed that when discussing your new book, you mentioned that the political parties that emerged following the April Coup expressed the political imagination of those who witnessed the end of colonial rule. You note that their democratic aspirations did not only come from international aid organizations and that a desire for civil rights did not just come from external actors, but from a national feeling that FRELIMO had betrayed the country. Could you talk about why you believe it is important to differentiate and acknowledge the factors that were endogenous to Mozambique and those which were exogenous?

The period of transition, as FRELIMO was preparing the conditions for Mozambique's independence, has always been described from the perspective of the victors. FRELIMO triumphed, and they inherited the state from the Portuguese. In the six months in which there was a void of political authority in Mozambique, before FRELIMO assumed power, a lot of political parties were able to think about the future of their country and what was going to happen next.

Our understanding of that period until now has been that these alternative parties were puppets of colonialism, that they were created by the Portuguese to harvest the fruits of FRELIMO's labor. What I'm trying to say in this new project is that this view is not entirely correct. There might have been a few groups that were inspired or influenced, or financed, by some sectors of colonial society. But not all of them. And even those who were financed by those colonial forces had a considerable degree of agency and independence of thought and action. I'm essentially recuperating that period to show how the end of colonialism opened a space for political activism that was absent in Mozambique for a long time, one that took place in the highly policed urban spaces in the south as opposed to the armed struggle led by FRELIMO in the northern countryside. As a fascist dictatorship, Portugal did not allow for the kinds of civil liberties and political freedoms that other colonial subjects enjoyed. So, suddenly there is this opening of the political field in 1974, and everyone seemed to have something to say about the future of the country. From my studies, I have not seen a more dynamic and more plural period in the short history of Mozambique than that period. And that political dynamism was spurred by endogenous aspirations for a more plural society than the one delivered by FRELIMO's independence. Recouping those aspirations is important for understanding the current challenges with democracy in this young African country.

To “mentally decolonize” is a trendy notion you hear around issues such as beauty standards or implicit bias. It intrigued me to see how this process of corrective labor, political education, moral rehabilitation, and cultural enlightenment was intended to produce a similar “mental decolonization.” Will you talk a bit about this initiative prior to and following the 1976 National Seminar on re-education?

This idea of education and mental decolonization started when the revolutionaries became familiar with the Chinese model of revolution and Maoist ideas about popular struggle and the ways in which these liberation struggles were meant to affect the social fabric as a whole. Therefore, from 1963-64, but certainly 1965, there were Chinese military and political instructors in Tanzania, some of them stationed in FRELIMO



Figure 1: The guerrilla fighter featured on this poster is FRELIMO leader Samora Machel, who, following Mozambique's independence became the President of Mozambique. The quote at the bottom of the image is attributed to him, and the Portuguese slogan "FRELIMO VENCERA" translates to "FRELIMO will win." Citation: Committee for a Free Mozambique, *Mozambique Will be Free*, ca. 1970, accessed Sept 10th, 2023

training bases. They did not just teach guerilla warfare, but also ideological principles of what the revolution is meant to do in society. What emerged, in fact, during this 1976 seminar on re-education, was the triumph of the idea that FRELIMO's struggle was not just meant to defeat the Portuguese and replace their government with a simple independent Mozambique. This was a revolution that aimed at transforming society—on all levels.

In the material sense, the revolution was meant to offer better living conditions. But it was also meant to affect the mental and spiritual dimensions of a decolonized society. A new society was supposed to emerge from the revolution, one that thought, behaved, and acted differently and totally anew from the previous society which had putatively been infected by the vices and decadence of colonialism and its bourgeois culture. You can argue that, in its essence, the kind of society that FRELIMO envisioned was in many ways a kind of Victorian society – a society of virtue. They imagined a moral society, of people who behave well, who dress in a certain way, that is, with decency, who present themselves respectfully, who work hard, etc. They called this type of individual “the new man,” which is a concept

that has circulated for a long time in revolutionary circles from Europe to Asia to Latin America. There were a number of procedures to produce this new man or this new woman, and one of them was these reeducation camps. They were not meant to eliminate life, as some people have claimed. There are a few people who write on these camps, but they tend to describe them as death camps similar to Auschwitz or the Soviet Gulag. Of course, people suffered and died in these camps. But they were not designed to eliminate life. Their initial purpose was precisely to affect changes in people's behavior. That's why the people targeted by these programs of re-education are precisely people viewed as being amoral, as being wayward, and as not presenting themselves in the ethical ways in which FRELIMO defined Mozambican citizenship. For example, the caricature that the FRELIMO government used to illustrate the non-citizen, the “old man” was precisely an image of Jimi Hendrix, understood as the epitome of bourgeois decadence. It was the image of the social degenerate. And that is what the new citizen of Mozambique was not supposed to look like.

In your paper on the reeducation camps, you talk about how conditions of austerity kept FRELIMO from establishing the strict disciplinary institutions they desired, and instead resulted in sort of less structured arbitrary reeducation camps. I was curious: how do you understand the relationship between the conditions of austerity and the lack of civil rights under the FRELIMO government—so you see them as causal, cooperating, or randomly coinciding?

This question speaks to the gap between ambition and reality. A lot of the dynamics that shaped these camps were based on precisely this gap between what the regime wanted to accomplish—which is to really rehabilitate people that they viewed as wayward, immoral, and anti-social—and the reality of austerity—the lack of resources in both materials and in humans to actualize

this ambition. And so, the camps, rather than being centers of social rehabilitation, as they were designed, became sites of social abandonment where people were simply dumped without the most basic means of survival. They did not have an erected infrastructure, detainees had to build their own barracks and shacks with local materials. There was a constant crisis of hunger, the idea was that the detainees were supposed to clear and cultivate the land in order to transform their environment. But, they didn't even have the implements to do it. So, what was viewed as a project inspired by really high ideals of reform became a place of punishment and rustication of people.

However, I don't think austerity as such has anything to do with the lack of civil rights. There were no civil rights because this was a dictatorship. And it's a dictatorship that was inspired by a particular brand of socialism. And it didn't provide any space for political and social freedoms. It's what the regime thought was right for the people. And I have to be cautious here not to use austerity, the lack of resources, as an excuse as to why these camps were bad.

You describe the process by which the FRELIMO government replicated authoritarian aspects of Portuguese colonial governance as a means of asserting power despite being an organization founded out of anti-colonial sentiment. How do you understand their focus on “moral behavior” through their, for example, high punishments for petty crime and “antisocial behavior,” focus on decency in dressing, temperance, and asceticism in political situations to be related to colonial scripts for asserting power? Do you understand them to be related?

Yes, they are actually intimately related. Even though these regimes would not accept my assessment, they end up reproducing the same dynamics of social control as the colonial power because they are not operating from a totally different perspective. Of course, the goals are different. Colonial powers also talked about the moral obligation of Africans to work and earn their way as the justification to use forced labor, for example, as a means to force Africans to 'modernize.' In many ways, that is similar to what the independent FRELIMO government did: they were reforming people inspired by social transformation, but the thing is that these visions produce the same effect. In the end, those who are

victims of these schemes of social engineering faced the same kind of violence as those who fell under the same schemes under colonial rule. One of my goals in that book on reeducation is to show that the regimes end up reproducing the same mechanisms of social control precisely because they are operating from the same kind of framework, that is, that those in power know better, that they have the knowledge and the power to go and direct society to be what they think is best. ♦