

By Alcinda Honwana

Sealing the Past, Facing the Future:

Trauma Healing in Rural Mozambique

The 1992 Mozambican peace settlement brought to a close a 15-year war between the government and the Mozambique National Resistance (Renamo). Three particular aspects of this conflict stand out: it was waged largely in rural areas, it revolved primarily around the control of civilian populations by both sides for tactical reasons, and it was extremely violent. Renamo, in particular, developed a reputation for the ritualistic use of violence aimed at instilling incapacitating fear in rural communities. These tactics served to severely disrupt the social fabric and to undermine the legitimacy of the government which was unable to protect large parts of the country.

Five years on from the signing of the Rome accord, peace continues to hold at the national level where the parliamentary system has become the primary arena of confrontation between Frelimo and Renamo. At the local level, however, particularly in rural areas, profound social unrest and intermittent violence pose a persistent threat to the fragile peace. These local-level tensions reflect both the deep social divi-

sions spilling over from the long war and the desperate survival tactics of many Mozambicans attempting to rebuild their lives in the face of overwhelming poverty. Consolidating peace in Mozambique is thus dependent on extending its benefits to all levels of society, especially in the rural areas where the majority of the population still live.

One aspect of this broader challenge is the healing of psycho-social traumas associated with war and upheaval. 'Trauma' includes a wide range of afflictions that have affected soldiers, peasants, women and children caught up in the war in many different ways. 'Healing' goes beyond the alleviation of individual traumas and includes the mending of the social divisions which exist both within and between communities. War-affected populations in rural Mozambique continue to draw on a wide range of traditional rituals to help them deal with the traumas of war and to open the way to reconciliation. To the extent that outside approaches have a role to play in promoting post-war healing, they need to build upon local strategies without necessarily seeking to replace them.

A Mozambican refugee is warmly greeted on his return from Zimbabwe to Manica Province

Ernst Schade/Panos Pictures



Culture and Healing

Cultural understandings of health, trauma and healing are important because the way people express and interpret their afflictions are very locally-specific. In the Mozambican context, as in many other parts of Africa, health is traditionally defined as harmonious relationships between human beings and their natural surroundings, between them and their ancestors, and amongst themselves. Far from being narrowly defined realms, the social world (comprising the spirits and the living) and the physical world are united within a larger cosmology. If this harmonious state breaks down, this is seen to result from the malevolent intervention of *valoyi* (witches and sorcerers) or a sanction by the ancestral spirits for incorrect social behaviour. Illness is therefore considered primarily a social rather than a physical phenomenon.

Moreover, the power of 'spiritual' entities remains paramount in both the causation of trauma and in community-based approaches to healing. It is by means of spiritual understandings that people can restore meaning and a sense of balance to

their lives following traumatic experiences. 'Appeasing the spirits' is thus a mechanism for redressing the wrongs of the past and restoring well-being both within and between communities.

Such models of health and healing contradict traditionally Western approaches in which individuals and their social context, the body and the mind, are often perceived as separate, distinguishable entities. These approaches typically locate traumatic distress in the mind of the individual, and responses are devised on a one-on-one basis between 'patients'/'clients' and health professionals. Recovery is often achieved by helping the individual 'come to terms' with the traumatic experience, usually by externalising it in some way. If such approaches prove unfruitful or problematic, drug therapy — typically a treatment for 'physical' afflictions — can be administered to control or repress distressing symptoms.

In cultures where they are widely understood and accepted, western approaches enjoy some success. In the Mozambican context, their suitability can be questioned. This is partly because western approaches

tend to be expensive, require specialist training, and are limited in the numbers they can reach. On the other hand, therapies which do not account for the role of ancestral and malevolent spirits in the causation and healing of trauma may actually hamper family and community efforts to provide care. This is corroborated by recent studies of war-affected populations in Mozambique which show that talking about traumatic experiences does not necessarily help patients 'come to terms' with their distress. In such cases, the performance of complex traditional healing rituals can prove significantly more effective.

It would be wrong, however, to paint a picture of homogeneity among the diverse rural communities of Mozambique, or to claim that universal agreement exists on the efficacy of traditional healing rituals. It is likely that, for many people, healing involves a combination of medical and religious practices, as well as appeals to the spirits. As Zionist, Apostolic and other churches have extended their activities into Mozambique's rural areas, their role in holding exorcisms, cleansing and other ceremonies has also become important.

Nevertheless, because traditional practices are strongly embedded in daily activities, they offer an important starting point for the healing process and a backdrop against which the strengths and limitations of other models can be evaluated. Three ritual healing processes are discussed below.

Mpfhukwa Spirits

During the war, both fighters and civilians had recourse to traditional healers, diviners and spirit mediums to protect them. In the post-war period, these links remain important because people fear the spirits of the dead will return to haunt and punish them. *Mpfhukwa* are the spirits of fighters and civilians killed during the war who did not receive the proper burial rites to settle them appropriately in the after-world. They are spirits of bitterness with the capacity to torment, provoke illness and even kill those who mistreated them when they were alive.

Revenge can even extend to people's families who have to pay for the behaviour of their relatives. *Mpfhukwa* spirits may also be nasty to passers-by, especially those who cross their path.

Local people recall that during the Nguni wars in southern Mozambique in the 19th century, the spirits of Nguni and Ndau warriors killed far away from their homes afflicted local Tsonga families. Ndau spirits are reported to have been the most dangerous ones. In the tradition of the Ndau, every individual has to drink a liquid derived from the *Mvuco* plant just a few weeks after their birth. This is believed to make the individual stronger and, when he or she dies, to ensure that vengeance will be sought if the proper burial rituals have not been observed.

The war between the government and Renamo had a strong Ndau component as the support base of Renamo was largely within this group, especially in the early years. Moreover, since there has been significant inter-marriage between the Tsonga, the Nguni and the Ndau, the secret of *Mpfhukwa* is now widely known in south-central Mozambique. For these reasons, fears that *Mpfhukwa* spirits would emerge following the war were more widespread and pronounced than in the past.

Rituals to appease the *Mpfhukwa* are generally performed by the *Tinyanga*, local spirit mediums who know how to capture, exorcise or appease them. The rituals must be performed where the battles took place or where people died. Locals recount that in April 1993, the *Tinyanga* from the locality of Munguine in Manica province was asked to perform a ritual along the road linking Munguine to the village of Manhica. The *Mpfhukwa* spirit of a Renamo commander who had been killed there was afflicting passers-by and preventing them from using the road after dark. Local people reported that when they used the road, they often felt something beating them, heard voices telling them to go back, or became blind and could not see their way forward. The *Tinyanga* performed a ritual called *ku femba* to catch the spirit. The spirit identified himself and asked for

Women members of the Association of Mozambican Traditional Healers greet the National Conference on Culture, held in Maputo, July 1993

Ferhat Momade/AIM



money and *capulanas* (traditional garments), and to be accompanied to his home in Ndauland.

The local population contributed money to give to the spirit and to buy the *capulanas*. A week later, the spirit was caught again, tied with the pieces of fabric and buried with the money far away from the locality. The *Tinyanga* also placed some medicine in the fabric to prevent the spirit from returning. According to the local people, there have been no more problems along that road since the ritual was carried out.

Cleansing and Purification

In the post-war period, many families in rural areas have also performed a cleansing ritual to purify and protect their relatives from the atrocities they experienced during the war. Ritual cleansing, like ceremonies to bar the way to malevolent spirits, is tied to the notion of 'social pollution' which must be eliminated before the links to the past can be cut. The healing process consists of several symbolically-charged rituals aimed at restoring the identity of the individual and reintegrating him or her back into the community.

Nine-year-old Paulo Macovo was kidnapped by Renamo soldiers during an attack on his village and spent eight months at the Renamo military base at Chinhanganine. Just weeks before he was due to start military training, Paulo managed to escape from the base. When he finally arrived home, he was taken to the *ndomba* (the house of spirits) to be presented to the ancestors of the Macovo family. His grandfather addressed the spirits, thanking them for protecting Paulo and returning him alive. A few days later, Paulo went through a ceremonial purification. His father, Boaventura, described it:

"We took him into the bush about two kilometres from our house. There we built a small hut covered with dry grass into which we put him, still dressed in the dirty clothes he was wearing when he escaped from the Renamo camp. Inside the hut he was undressed. We then set fire to the hut and Paulo was helped out by an adult relative. The hut, the clothes and everything else that he had brought with him from the camp were burned in the fire. Paulo then had to inhale the smoke from some herbal remedies and was bathed with water treated with medicine to cleanse his body internally and externally. Finally, we made

him drink some medicine, *ku thlavela*, to give him strength and protect him.”

Paulo’s case illustrates two related points about customary trauma healing. First, it shows that trauma is perceived as a collective affliction affecting not only individuals, but also their relatives, both living and dead. Correspondingly, purification rituals also involve the entire spiritual community. Secondly, Paulo’s case indicates that customary healing involves making a clean cut with past traumas. While modern psychotherapeutic practices emphasise verbalising the affliction until a way to deal with it can be found, the Macovo family felt that dwelling too much on the past opens the way for malevolent forces to return and afflict them. The objective of their cleansing ceremony is not to ignore past trauma, but to acknowledge it symbolically before firmly locking it away and facing the future.

Venerating the Spirits

When Mozambican fighters and displaced people returned to their homes following the war, the first rituals to be performed were often the *timhamba*. These rituals, also known as *Ku pahla* or *mhamba*, venerate the ancestral spirits buried on the family land or symbolised by the *gandzelo* (the sacred tree). In a post-war context, they are intended to restore severed ancestral links and to obtain spiritual guidance and protection to face the challenges of social reconstruction. *Timhamba* are acts of communication and communion with the dead. They represent a process of collective healing and the re-establishment of balance between the living and the spirit world.

In Mozambique, some fighters and displaced people returned to their homes following the war to check on conditions and prepare for the return of their families. Even during short stays, however, they performed rituals to honour the dead. Xitoquisana, who left his home in Mukodwene in 1987 after being tortured by Renamo soldiers, first returned in January 1993:

“I went to see the place and gave it a good clean. Next June I will return again, but this

time to make *mhamba*. I will go with my family and I will take everything for the ceremony: goats, chicken, maize meal, etc. We are going to present ourselves to our ancestors and thank them for their protection because most of us managed to survive the war. We will move back home for good probably at the end of the year as we want to make sure that the war is really over.”

Damião Matsinhe, from the locality of Manjacaze, is a demobilised government soldier who took his entire family away to live with him, including his mother, brothers and sisters, following an escalation of Renamo attacks in the area. He said they would not rush back home as he wanted to see what would happen after the elections:

“I have heard about what happened in Angola, so I would rather wait here. Nevertheless, we will go home for visits and prepare the fields. The elders in the family are organising a *mhamba* for next month.”

Timhamba rituals usually take place at dawn at the *gandzelo* tree or in the family cemetery where an animal is sacrificed. In times of peace and prosperity, the most common sacrificial beast is an ox but, with the poverty caused by the war, a goat or even a chicken may be used. The person presiding over the ritual, who is generally the senior family member, speaks to the ancestors. He invokes the names of all deceased relatives, informs them about the state of the family and thanks them for their protection and guidance. He also asks the spirits to continue looking after the family. After he has spoken, other family members are also allowed to express their feelings to the ancestors. The sacrificial animal is then shared between the living and the dead, representing the reciprocal nature of their relationship. At the end of the meal, drums are played and everyone sings and dances. It is a festive occasion for the entire family. *Timhamba* rituals are also very common in more urban environments, especially where modern institutions cannot deal with all the psychological traumas caused by years of war and upheaval. Many non-rural people forget to venerate the ancestral spirits when everything in their lives goes well and fail

to perform *mhamba* for years at a time. In moments of crisis, however, they often seek solace in traditional practices.

Customary Practices in the Balance

The prevalence of customary healing rituals attests to the capacity of many Mozambicans to harness local cultural and institutional resourcefulness to address their problems. These people are not assuming that the government or other outsiders will meet their needs, but are using the means available to them to heal the social wounds of war and to restore stability in their communities.

While these local processes of healing need to be recognised and accommodated, it is also important to acknowledge their limits. The extreme disruptions of the past three decades in Mozambique in terms of economic hardship, social change and displacement have been important factors shaping and inhibiting healing processes. In com-

munities where people were killed by their neighbours, where families were divided for long periods of time, where people can no longer muster the resources necessary to carry out ceremonies properly, and where the reputation of traditional leaders was compromised during the war, the effectiveness of customary remedies has come into question.

It is also evident that the horrors experienced by many Mozambicans cannot simply be erased from the collective memory as customary practices sometimes require. If drawing a line under the past fosters denial and impunity, there is also the risk of facilitating further human rights abuses. The establishment of a variety of interest groups to safeguard democratic principles in Mozambique and ensure that no dominant group seeks to vindictively 'settle accounts' from the past is perhaps the best guarantee that this will not occur. In the meantime, the practical and moral case for accommodating customary modes of healing and reconciliation, especially at the local level, is very strong. ■

Epilogue: 'Purification' versus 'Reconciliation' amongst Ex-Combatants

João Paulo Borges Coelho

A comparison of the events following Mozambique's anti-colonial war in 1974 and its civil war in 1992 provides a thought-provoking case-study of the trade-offs between 'remembering' and 'forgetting', and between justice and reconciliation.

In the early 1970s, at the height of the wars it was waging against nationalist movements in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau, Portugal lacked sufficient numbers of combatants to defend its colonial rule. As a consequence, it increasingly began to rely on the conscription of Africans to fight against the nationalist forces. This strategy was also encouraged by military counter-insurgency doctrines that aimed to increase indigenous involvement in order to transform the anti-colonial wars into local ones. Thousands of Mozambicans were integrated into the

colonial army, often in units created along ethnic lines. By the end of the war in 1974, a situation was created in which Mozambicans were, in effect, fighting their own countrymen.

Following independence and the withdrawal of the Portuguese colonial army, the Frelimo nationalist guerrillas moved out of the 'liberated zones' under their control and seized the rest of the country. They saw themselves as winners of a long liberation war and were highly suspicious of other Mozambicans, particularly those in the cities, which were then unknown to the liberation movement. As Frelimo established a new administration to replace the colonial system, it made a broad appeal to its countrymen to staff it. The best guarantee of a position in the new political and military dispensation,

however, was to have been part of the nationalist struggle.

A principle of 'purification' was adopted whereby Frelimo sought to establish a 'pure army' and 'pure society', untainted by the colonial past. This led to the direct marginalisation of thousands of Mozambicans who had been involved with the colonial regime. While some of these people were offered the chance to reintegrate into post-independence society, this was on condition that they publicly reveal their records as former colonial agents. This was ostensibly to 'wipe clean' their past and render them less vulnerable to blackmail or pressure of any kind. However, the effect of coming clean was often humiliation. 'Collaborators' were persecuted for their past and saw their careers and attempts to rebuild their lives blocked. As a result, many fled the country, with some subsequently offering their services when Renamo was formed by the Rhodesians in 1977.

These were the origins of a new armed conflict which would once again pit Mozambicans against each other. While this civil war was at least as brutal as its anti-colonial precedent, its outcome was different in that the 1992 peace accord avoided a 'winner-takes-all' scenario. The United Nations force which oversaw its implementation was sufficiently flexible and firm in its mandate to ensure that neither Frelimo nor Renamo gained an advantage which might prompt a resumption in fighting. A fortunate combination of local circumstances also ensured that the principle of 'purification' adopted by Frelimo following the colonial war would be replaced by a more conciliatory stance towards Renamo. With 'reconciliation', space was created for the coexistence of all political forces. This included new political parties, a variety of civil and religious groups as well as a more independent media, all of which publicly supported the new message of peace.

The manner in which demobilisation of the two armed forces and the formation of a new national army occurred also reinforced the dynamic of reconciliation. All government and Renamo soldiers went through the same phases of assembly, disarmament, registration and demobilisation. Unlike their government counterparts, Renamo combatants were ineligible for army pensions and lacked experience of urban life. Nonetheless, ex-combatants from both sides shared the hardships of reintegrating into civilian life, a challenge which reinforced reconciliation at all levels.

The new national army, the Mozambican Defence Force (FADM), also became a stabilising institution in post-war Mozambique. The Rome Accord explicitly called for equal representation of government and rebel forces in the FADM, from the leadership down to the rank-and-file. Joint training courses have engendered a sense of belonging to the same team. The equal benefits which both sides now receive in the FADM further serves to blur the differences between the former enemies. Evidence that the new army is shaping up as a genuinely national institution is given by a former Renamo supreme commander and now deputy chief-of-staff of the FADM, Mateus Ngonhamo, who said that his political affiliations are now subservient to his loyalty to the national army.

It would be wrong to deny that during the peace process the two parties at times reneged on their commitments, both to cover their backs in the case of 'enemy' duplicity and to retain certain military advantages from the past. However, with growing war weariness, this issue has become less and less important. In Mozambique today, the people remember the horrors of war and social stability is highly valued. ■