

## HEROISM AND SYMBOLISM AS PRODUCTS OF POLITICAL INBREEDING IN MOZAMBIQUE

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*Talking about heroism and symbolism in Mozambique is equivalent, in a way, to taking a political X-ray of the end of the idea of Mozambique. Mozambican heroes are all colonial, and after Portuguese colonialism, Mozambique seems to have been unable to produce heroes. In a way, you could say that the proclamation of national independence on 25 June 1975 was also equivalent at the time, and without us being aware of it, to the proclamation of the end of heroism. The constant repetition and dissection of the deeds of colonial heroes by political and religious leaders, institutions and academic figures is a sign of an identity crisis that jeopardises national independence, as it is more an exercise in political consanguinity than a search for national consensus.*

### Purpose of the Briefing Note

This Briefing Note deals with the question of heroism in Mozambique, and shows how the definition of heroes and the identification of acts of heroism are still hostage to pre-colonial rationalities. On the one hand, it talks about how the political-academic attempt to identify criteria for heroism in the great national heroes does not successfully eliminate the possibility of other people in the post-independence period also being heroes. On the other hand, it shows how, in an attempt to block out other heroes and acts of political and social heroism, the country also ends up not valuing its sons and daughters who, in the post-colonial period, died defending the country. And in this paradox, the country's constant civil wars, which have seen hundreds of thousands of people die in defence of the state, have not produced any people of the calibre of the pastors, teachers, nurses, priests and soldiers of the war of independence.

### Defining the term

The concept of the Hero is intrinsically linked to the society that created him or her, as well as to the time of his or her creation. Thus, the hero is a figure who combines the necessary attributes to overcome a social problem in an exceptional way that few knew how or had the courage to solve (Campbell, 2007). Campbell also adds individual sacrifice as an important and primordial attribute, considering that the main defining characteristic of the hero archetype is the ability to sacrifice oneself in the name of the common good. In a traditionalist configuration, the hero is the one who performs a great feat alone and thus stands out from the crowd (Brunke and Nunes, 2018). For heroicity theory, the heroic condition is determined both by the hero's actions and by the recognition of his or her actions.

Symbolism, on the other hand, is a counter-current that aims to deconstruct heroes and re-discuss their meaning in today's society. In this vein, Farias (2022), conceptualises "hero" as an element that disseminates good social examples, which converge to learn and inspire humans to positive actions. The social struggles in various countries around the world over the destruction of monuments commemorating people linked to negative symbols of humanity such as colonisation ([Cecil Rhodes](#) in Cape Town, South Africa), Russian domination in the former countries of the Soviet Union ([memoriais ligados ao comunismo](#)), and American generals linked to slavery and the slaughter of native peoples in the United States ([General Robert E Lee](#) e [George Custer](#)), are an example of the destabilising impact of symbolism for those in power and their narratives.

It is generally the tradition of states to produce and evoke an imaginary and/or real political identity, made up of stories of Homeric struggles and resistance, with protagonists invested with an essential role in the process of building and establishing a national identity (Ribeiro, 2005: 257).

### **The context of heroism in Mozambique**

In Mozambique, the practice of elevating individuals to the category of national hero is intrinsic to the nation-building process, since the period of the national liberation struggle. The only problem is that the national imaginary has not been able to produce new heroes since then. All the heroes are practically linked to colonialism, and the Mozambicans who perished in the country's new wars never deserved to have their deeds recognised as acts of heroism.

The title of hero in Mozambique is awarded to individuals who have shown sacrifice, courage, audacity and self-sacrifice in (i) resistance against foreign occupation, in the fight against racism and other forms of oppression and domination; (ii) in exceptional acts of bravery and heroism in defence of the homeland and human life; and (iii) in exceptional acts of defence of national unity and promotion of the country's socio-political, economic, cultural and technical-scientific development.

However, the current emphasis in the country is still on showing that the heroes of the liberation struggle are still useful for thinking about the country. It is in this sense that the current President of the Republic of Mozambique, Filipe Nyusi, emphasises that the Mozambican heroes who perished in the national liberation struggle express a sense of reflection not only on the past, but also on the present and the construction of the country's future (Portal do Governo, 2016).

Heroism has been a matter of political inbreeding. Discussing new heroes would mean legitimising new struggles and new political regimes, something the country doesn't seem ready to do. Heroes are perceived in Mozambique as lines of political consanguinity, creating heirs and lineages that carry on their ideals. Greater success than this in the process of governance is not allowed to exist, much less be thought of.

Until now, exalting the figure of the national hero has meant concomitantly associating that figure with the image of that same political elite. In other words, this elite, in this process, seeks to convey the idea that its members are legitimate heirs and followers of the values and ideals of the exalted heroes - in other words, instrumentalised - in order to gain the legitimacy to lead the process of materialising their agendas, of which the construction of the idea of the nation is the most important (Posse, 2020:98).

It is characteristic of the liberators to usurp the history of the new states. According to Matsimbe (2017), the use of historical narratives to exalt the heroism of liberation fighters, both living and dead, is one of the strategies that the liberation party has used to maintain its hold on power. In the wake of the mystification of the liberators, it can be seen that in Mozambique almost all the historical



dates that have become national holidays are linked to the achievements of the liberation movement and today's political party, Frelimo. It is in this sense that Ronguane (STV, 03.02.23) argued that there is a need to broaden the concept of hero, that is, to increase the pantheon of heroes, and to open the way for the various political micro-communities to propose their own heroes.

Memory as political inbreeding is justified in the construction of collective memory, even if not in the absolutist and static models implemented in Mozambique. For Jorge Jairoce (2012), the work of heroification is inseparable from the production of a collective memory with a national dimension by the state and its agents. Collective memory is, as Pujadas (1994) apud Jairoce (2012) explains, both the depository of the set of attributes and symbols of a society and one of the instruments for legitimising the dominant social order.

Talking about collective memory implies calling on tradition. History teaches us that there is a clear distinction between collective memory and historical memory, because while there is one history, there are many shared memories. And while history represents distant facts, memory acts on what has been lived. In this sense, it is in this void that space opens up for official and/or ideological history, which according to Yussuf Adam, is historiography produced with the aim of defending the interests of either a political regime or a religious authority. This type of historiography is an instrument that aims to publicise a positive image of those who are interested in it, but it can also be written to deconstruct a previously established narrative.

While memory, tradition, antiquity, etc. are important in defining a category of heroes, they rarely help us to understand today's world and guide the concrete struggles of everyday life. To this end, the idea of symbolism, as a concept that gives value to current social relations and to the agents who live their immediate daily lives, has come to the fore in the discussion of heroism. Invoking tradition without accepting social and mental transformation creates serious challenges in the process of nation-building.

In the next section, we present the process of heroism in Mozambique, based on Eduardo Mondlane, and problematise other figures who, having contributed in their own way (by resisting), have not achieved the status of heroes, being excluded or remaining in a category of symbolism.

### **Political heroes and symbolism: Mondlane, Gwengere and Dhlakama**

The work of heroification is inseparable from the production of a collective memory on a national scale by the state and its agents. It is difficult to link the legitimacy of a hero to material facts such as their popular impact. Mozambique had several figures who also made a significant contribution to the process of national liberation and independence, but who do not enjoy the status of merit or national hero. Mondlane, Gwengere and Dhlakama can be seen as paradoxical examples of this problem.

We consider excluded heroes to be figures who have been cast aside even though they contributed to actions that changed the normal course of building the Mozambican state. These figures appear in processes involving the country's independence, the establishment of democratic rule and political pluralism, and in the defence and promotion of human rights. In this category we have figures such as Father Mateus Pinho Gwengere, André Matsangaissa and Afonso Dhlakama.

For example, the concept of national unity defined after Mondlane's death is more important for heroism than the concept of democratic diversity established after the Rome General Peace Accords. In the vision of the Frelimo leadership that triumphed after his death, and after national independence, [Eduardo Mondlane](#) was and remains an unquestionable reference when discussing



*national unity*. In this vision, Mondlane dreamed of building an inclusive, strong and sustainable nation-state in favour of all Mozambicans, without exclusion.

But even so, it can't be said that what Mondlane symbolises in the discourse of heroism corresponds to reality. In fact, far from it. Mondlane's experience in the USA nurtured democratic ideas in him, which is why he idealised a federal state in Mozambique (Ngoenha, 2020). In this sense, Mondlane's symbolism was more of a utopia created after his death to legitimise FRELIMO's new leadership than a personal reality for the leader.

*Symbolism* seems to be more important than facts when it comes to being a hero. For example, Eduardo Chivambo Mondlane is also considered a hero because of his popularity and the degree of respect the Portuguese authorities had for him at the time. Cruz e Silva (2001) emphasises the popular enthusiasm that surrounded Mondlane's visit, thus highlighting the political dimension and the prestige that he acquired as an international personality, being recognised simultaneously as a son of an oppressed people and their representative.

Ribeiro (2011: 100) points out that Mondlane skilfully mobilised all his diplomatic know-how in his dealings with the Portuguese top brass, so there was no other solution for the latter than discreet surveillance, while at the same time maintaining dialogue and providing logistical resources. However, on the criteria of popular acceptance and reluctant acceptance by the regime, Afonso Dhlakama would also be a hero on the level of Eduardo Mondlane and Samora Machel.

For instance, Father Mateus Pinho Gwengere also had a historical journey, if we follow the tendency to heroicise the places and processes that were part of the heroes' lives (even before they committed the heroic or treacherous acts). Father Gwengere was born on 19 November 1933 in the town of Murraça, in what is now the district of Caia, in Sofala. He was ordained a priest on 15 August 1965 by the Bishop of Beira, Dom Sebastião de Rezende, in the parish of Macuti, in the city of Beira. He was the first parish priest of African origin in the Murraça Mission. He left the Murraça mission and joined Frelimo in April 1967, with the aim of defending the freedom of Mozambicans. Within Frelimo he taught at the FRELIMO school (Mozambican Institute in Tanzania) and presented an excellent report at the United Nations headquarters in October of the same year. He played a key role in recruiting young people to the Frelimo cause (See Francisco Gimo, interview with DW, cited in Barroso, 2014).

By the similarity of their trajectories, what makes Gwengere a villain and a traitor, and Mondlane a hero, is a matter of interpretation resulting from the power struggles within FRELIMO, and not necessarily a truthful representation of their acts of political heroism.

### **Conclusion: for the democratisation of heroism**

Heroes are a relevant category in the process of building a nation and belong to a collective memory marked by a past of bravery and particular actions that managed to change the normal course of life in societies. Mondlane was considered a hero for having managed to unite the different ethnic groups in a common project (Mozambique) and establish the idea of unity in diversity. This way of seeing and thinking about Mozambique led Mondlane to be considered the architect of National Unity. In the opposite direction, the process of categorising heroes in the post-independence period has not reached a consensus, despite efforts to do so in legislative terms.



Analysing the facts behind Mondlane's heroism and Afonso Dhlakama's banditry or Father Mateus Gwenjere's betrayals, we see that political inbreeding is the only criterion that seems to help define who is a hero and who is not in Mozambique. The facts used to heroise Mondlane and demonise/silence others have the same methodological weight academically and do not allow us to say that Afonso Dhlakama is any less of a national hero than Eduardo Mondlane.

From the point of view of heroism, the time has come for civil society and academic leaders to dedicate more and more of their congresses and symposiums to other figures who, even if they don't fulfil the criteria of political inbreeding in FRELIMO, have fulfilled the factual criteria used to define a hero. Democratizing the pantheon of heroes in academia could be a way of building a democratic state.

And finally, did the civil wars not produce any heroes in defence of the homeland and territorial integrity? Teachers who lost their lives on the way to the classroom in war zones, or nurses who lost their lives because they stubbornly stayed in war zones to serve the people?

**END**

### **ANNEX: Legislative evolution of heroism in Mozambique**

With the achievement of independence and the establishment of the Mozambican state, the first Constitution of the People's Republic of Mozambique (CRPM) was approved in 1975. The first article recognises that the Republic of Mozambique is the result of the secular resistance and heroic and victorious struggle of the Mozambican people, under the leadership of Frelimo (CRPM, Art 1, 1975). Interpreting this article, three elements can be identified that are emphasised in the process of awarding honorary titles, which are (i) resistance, (ii) struggle and (iii) victory.

Also during the one-party period, Law no. 8/81 of 17 December, the Decorations System Law, was passed by the Frelimo Party and approved by the People's Assembly. This law, in its general provisions, stipulates that "the People's Republic of Mozambique" awards "Decorations, Honorary Titles and Distinctions to citizens, bodies, organisations, institutions, military units, economic units, cities, towns and villages."

Such honours, according to Article 3 of Chapter I, could be awarded for seven reasons: during the Homeland Liberation Struggle, in organisational work, in armed struggle, in action, underground, in the fight against racism, regionalism and tribalism, in the struggle for the emancipation of women; in the consolidation of national independence and the construction of socialism; in the defence of the Homeland, sovereignty and territorial integrity; in the consolidation, strengthening and development of the armed defence and security forces; in active internationalist solidarity with the struggle of peoples for independence, democracy, socialism and peace, against colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, fascism, racism and the exploitation of man by man; in production, agriculture, livestock, industry, construction, services, health, science, education, art, culture and sport; and in heroic acts in defence of human life and socialist property.

As for nominations and proposals, the law states that only the People's Assembly can create and award Decorations and Honours. As far as Distinctions are concerned, the People's Assembly creates them, but the Council of Ministers, the central organs of the State Apparatus, democratic and mass organisations and institutions award them. The law also points out that Decorations and Honours can be awarded posthumously. And with regard to who can propose them, Article 15 of Chapter III lists the Frelimo Party Committee in the first line of the list of bodies that can propose Decorations and Honorary Titles. The Standing Committee of the People's Assembly appears in the second line. Then there are, in descending order, the Council of Ministers and the central organs of the State



apparatus; the People's Assemblies, the Mass Democratic Organisations; the Higher Education and Research Institutions; and the scientific, cultural, artistic and sports associations.

In the midst of this period, the National Resistance of Mozambique (Renamo) emerged. In its discourse, it sought to put an end to one-party rule and ensure that all Mozambicans could participate in the process of building the state. With this in mind, the General Peace Agreement was signed on 4 October 1992, putting an end to a civil war that lasted around sixteen years (1976-1992), and which resulted in the amendment of the Constitution, introducing a multiparty one in 1990, revised in 2004 and 2019.

The approval of a new Constitution meant that Law 8/81 of 17 December had to be adapted to the country's current reality, as well as establishing a more comprehensive mechanism for awarding honorary titles and decorations in the Republic of Mozambique. Under this law, the following relevant merits are among the acts eligible for honours and decorations (art. 4): in national liberation; in the defence of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; in the building of a society of social justice and the creation of material and spiritual well-being and quality of life for citizens; in the defence and promotion of morality and human rights and the equality of citizens before the law; in the consolidation of democracy, freedom, peace, stability and social harmony; in the area of youth associations; in the establishment and development of relations of friendship, cooperation and solidarity with other peoples and states.

In this sense, the title of hero in Mozambique is awarded to individuals who have shown sacrifice, courage, audacity and self-sacrifice in (i) resistance against foreign occupation, in the fight against racism and other forms of oppression and domination; (ii) in exceptional acts of bravery and heroism in defence of the homeland and human life; and (iii) in exceptional acts of defence of national unity and promotion of the country's socio-political, economic, cultural and technical-scientific development.

Looking at the legal provisions, we can consider that since 1990 the legislation has endeavoured to adjust to the changing context, although it is still deeply associated with the issue of the liberation struggle. The initiative to propose heroes has been removed from the Frelimo party, remaining with entities such as the Assembly of the Republic, the Council of Ministers, local governments and higher education and research institutions, and the final decision rests with the President of the Republic, which makes the process of awarding honorary titles highly politicised.

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