

<RRF> Savage | Introduction to “Cultural Offensive of the Working Classes”

<VRF>ARTMARGINS 13:1

DOCUMENT INTRODUCTION

## **Introduction to “Cultural Offensive of the Working Classes”**

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In April 1977, plans were laid out for the culture of an independent, socialist Mozambique. Pitched in military terms and announced in the document translated here, the “Cultural Offensive of the Working Classes” sought to define a new, revolutionary culture for the nation and to deploy this culture as a weapon in the ongoing struggle to build a postcolonial, postcapitalist society.

The announcement, published in the weekly periodical *Tempo*, came at an intense moment of change, less than two years after the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) had taken power, ending a decade-long struggle with the Portuguese. Still buoyed by the euphoria of independence, yet also facing significant threats from both the nascent Rhodesia-based insurgent group RENAMO and major challenges to production caused by the rapid departure of the Portuguese, FRELIMO took this moment to stake a decisive geopolitical position. At the Third Party Congress in February 1977, the Front formally announced its transition to a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party (henceforth Frelimo, rather than FRELIMO), along with its “historic mission . . . to lead, organize, orientate and educate the masses.”<sup>1</sup> A huge raft of policies and statements ensued, including strategies for a centralized planned

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<sup>1</sup> Bulletins 9 and 10 (Congress Special Issue), *Mozambique Information Agency* (1977): 19.

economy and village settlements as well as a position on culture that would prompt and inform the announcement of the Cultural Offensive two months later.

The announcement of the Cultural Offensive begins with a survey of urgent problems, including the legacy of colonial historiography and cultural values, a disunited and disparate population, and the insidious, enduring presence of the bourgeoisie. Pitching culture as a key battleground in the transition from colonization to revolutionary autonomy, the anonymous author turns to historical materialism as a methodology to redress these problems, deploying Marx's understanding of culture as an expression of the economic superstructure, and hence of class dynamics. Referencing French theorist Louis Althusser's 1970 notion of the ideological state apparatus<sup>2</sup> to explain the ongoing threat of cultural hegemony in Mozambique, the text ultimately concludes that culture is inevitably one of two things—either revolutionary and working-class, or reactionary, colonial, and bourgeois. Like many of Frelimo's official statements, the text seeks on these terms to cleave the people from their undesirable "other," as part of an attempt to define and produce *o homem novo*, the "new man." The undesirable is not simply colonialism and capitalism, but a constellation of attributes that include ethnicity, individualism, religion, the sex industry, Western consumer culture, and local authority.

The Cultural Offensive is pitched here as a multipronged campaign that will direct the population toward the correct form of culture through initiatives that will include seminars and festivals (such as the National Festival of People's Dance in 1978); the establishment of local cultural centers, or *casas da cultura*, to stimulate and consolidate artistic practice under the guidance of party representatives (*grupos dinamizadores*, or dynamizing groups); and a major, nationwide survey of existing cultural production. The revolutionary culture that will

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<sup>2</sup> Althusser, Louis (1971). "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. pp. 121–176

inevitably emerge from such initiatives, it is argued, will be a key engine of social change that will not simply be reflective of society but will work to reconstruct society on radical new terms.

While Frelimo was not alone in turning to socialism as a resource for rebuilding society in the wake of anticolonial struggle, this deployment of both orthodox and more contemporary Marxist theory to develop a postcolonial cultural policy was in many ways particular to Mozambique. In contrast to approaches such as that of Julius Nyerere, who argued for the indigenous origins of socialist society in precolonial Tanzania, from the early years of anticolonial struggle, FRELIMO's thinkers had advocated for a radical new society, casting local authority and tradition as a counterrevolutionary force. This position on culture was consolidated in the context of the liberation struggle, in a series of discussions and seminars held in Tanzania in the early 1970s, and received its trial in the northern liberated zones, where FRELIMO had formed collectives of blackwood sculptors and issued specific directives for artists.<sup>3</sup>

In many respects, this announcement therefore follows clear, long-established party lines. On closer reading, however, the text also gives insight into some of the major dilemmas and ambiguities that FRELIMO's policymakers were wrestling with at this pivotal moment.

While it was agreed that culture should be revolutionary, what was less clear was the form that this culture should take. The text hints at least three tensions around this question. First, while the Cultural Offensive sought to generate and gather culture from the ground up, it was also issued as a top-down, centralized vision of what that culture should comprise. Second, Frelimo had to navigate a line between an official declaration of international socialist

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<sup>3</sup> See Bortolot, Alexander, 2013: 'Artesãos da Nossa Pátria: Makonde Blackwood Sculptors, Cooperatives, and the Art of Socialist Revolution in Postcolonial Mozambique' in Sidney Kasfir and Till Forster (eds) *African art and agency in the workshop* Indiana UP pp252-273

friendship and solidarity and an incumbent need to foster national unity and autonomy from perceived neocolonialism. Finally, the text hints at an ongoing tension around the role and place of tradition. The fact that neither tradition (comprising culture that was seen to be overtly religious, ethnic, or regional) nor colonial culture (understood as art for art's sake and bourgeois, individualist, commercial, or decorative artworks) was to have any place in the new culture of Mozambique raised a particular dilemma for policymakers, who were cognizant that they would nevertheless need to rely on both local practitioners of visual, religious, and performing arts and long-established artists in Maputo as the main body of workers who would build this new culture.

One solution was a repurposing and resignifying of existing practices for national, revolutionary ends, of which an oft-cited example was the adoption of dances from one region by troops from different parts of Mozambique during the liberation war. The Casas da Cultura and other new cultural institutions, such as the Centro dos Estudéis Culturais, which would open in the following month, were intended as nodal points that would allow such questions to be resolved under the guidance of the Party. These questions would nevertheless continue to plague FRELIMO over the years that followed and would be intensely debated at the cultural seminar convened later that year by the minister of education and culture, Graça Machel.

Frelimo's vision for a new, revolutionary national aesthetic found enthusiastic support in some cultural circles, but the centralization of culture was bitterly resisted by others, and the Party's ongoing tension with local authority was at times leveraged by RENAMO to gather support. In 1984, seven years after this announcement had been published, a group of artists staged a protest in Maputo against the government's collectivist cultural policy, demanding compensation for the work they had produced for the party. Around this time, FRELIMO began quietly retracting many of its socialist policies, ultimately abandoning Marxism-

Leninism in 1989 and systematically erasing archival traces of its former leftist commitment. Nevertheless, documents such as this survive as evidence of a brief moment in which it was hoped that culture could, and would, be used to produce a brighter and fairer new postcolonial world.