

ORAL FIELDWORK IN A WAR ZONE: MOZAMBIQUE, 1991- 1992

Luís António Covane

This paper aims at presenting a discussion of the main problems I faced during my oral fieldwork in Mozambique between July 1991 and October 1992. The first problem I had to solve was of selecting the area to work in. My general geographic delimitation of the research topic was initially addressed to the impact of migrant labour on agriculture in southern Mozambique. This meant that I had to combine the reading of archival and secondary sources with the collection of oral data in the three southern provinces of Mozambique namely Maputo, Gaza and Inhambane.

When I finally had to decide which area to visit I realised that there was a need to combine the research with the military security on the ground.¹ Up to 4 October 1992 Mozambique faced a devastating military conflict.² I selected the locality of Inhamissa.³

Inhamissa is near Xai-Xai (ex-João Belo), the capital of the southern province of Gaza. I chose this locality because it seemed to have the necessary conditions for my research: it is an area which traditionally supplied manpower to the mines and plantations of South Africa; from the 1950s, it was integrated into the Portuguese colonial plan of developing white settlement in the valley of Limpopo river (Inhamissa is in the lower Limpopo) and is therefore particularly important in studying colonial land tenure; it has an economy basically characterized by the combination of agriculture in the higher lands and in the valley; its proximity with Xai-Xai and Maputo (ex-Lourenço Marques) cities promised to provide valuable elements for the study of conflicts over labour between South African mining capital and the local Portuguese employers.

In February 1977 devastating floods in the Limpopo river valley left several hundred thousand peasants homeless and resulted in the loss of large quantities of food crops. Irrigation works, granaries, housing, roads and other transport infrastructure were destroyed. Inhamissa was severely affected. The floods accelerated the implementation of communal villages and cooperatives, defined by Frelimo as a strategic element in the process of reorganizing rural life.⁴ Hundreds of families from the valley were forced to seek refuge in the highlands. This was not the first such experience. During floods temporary migration to highlands had been a common practice for generations. The flooding of the Limpopo river in 1955, which completely destroyed all the crops in the valley, is an example. In the final decades of the colonial period, serious floods and other natural calamities also affected the area but without leading to new settlement problems: floods in 1958, 1964-65, and 1967; the Claude depression, in 1966; and a severe drought in 1968. But the floods of 1977 under Frelimo's government posed new social and economic challenges to the population of Inhamissa. For the first time people from the valley had to leave forever and begin a new life in the highlands.

Frelimo's policy of organizing people in communal villages found fertile ground in Inhamissa. The temporarily displaced people were not encouraged to go back to their original lands. New settlement schemes were designed involving people from the valley and the original inhabitants of the highlands. They formed the "Aldeia Communal Marien N'Guabi". Further administrative reforms led to the formation of the "Localidade de Inhamissa", in 1986.

From 1981 a catastrophic drought and war began to devastate the area. Tens of thousands of cattle died due to lack of water and pasture. Peasants from affected zones began to look for refuge in the surrounding Xai-Xai areas, including Inhamissa.⁵ Inhamissa (and Chokwe) received thousands of displaced people from different regions of Gaza and Inhambane provinces. Pasture lands were transformed in to agricultural areas and some farms simply disappeared to give space to new dwellings.⁶ Land had to be provided to the new comers.

As a consequence of the floods of 1977 and droughts of 1981 in 1992, the locality of Inhamissa was no longer inhabited only by its pre-1977 population. The combination of

the natural disasters with Frelimo's plan of socialization of the countryside and the war shaped the demographic picture of Inhamissa.

Population in the Locality of Inhamissa in July 1991⁷

Population	Inhamissa	Marian N'Guabi	Total
Local	11,898	32,200	44,098
Displaced - adults	1,929	2,350	4,279
Displaced-children	2,780	7,140	9,920
Total	16,207	41,690	58,297

In an attempt to clarify the social and political environment in which I worked, I need to stress that the process of conducting interviews in a time of war and famine led to significant emotional and ethical problems. It was clear that people were seriously preoccupied with the challenge of the instability of the economy and their lack of security. Any outsider was naturally seen as someone who would be able to help in solving or minimizing their difficulties, rather than as someone to talk with about what happened years ago.

However, from the quality of the data I collected and the social atmosphere of understanding I was able to create with the informants, I believe I succeeded in making people interested in talking about their past. The nature of the majority of my questions and the general objective of the study needed to be very well explained before starting an interview because they were not directly related to their day-to-day life. The fact that I speak Shangaan, the local language, and that I grew up in Gaza province made my contact with people easier.

Nevertheless, there were additional problems. Access to people was to some extent restricted and those who were interviewed were initially selected by the local authorities. Indeed, these precautions were important from the security point of view but led people to believe that the interview was an official or semi-official enquiry and that the interviewer was a representative of the ruling party or of the central government. Unfortunately the permanent lack of security could not allow for any other procedure. Under the prevailing circumstances total freedom of movement was very difficult: it was clear that without express authority and collaboration with local officials, it would have been impossible to conduct interviews at that particular time.

The role played by the local administrative authorities in the process of identification and selection of informants, and in organizing the dates and times of the interviews, was difficult to bypass. They seem to have taken advantage of the fact that I was a university researcher and postgraduate to exert their influence and authority on the important families of the area under their control. After some interview sessions it was apparent that people I had access to were the more respectable and prosperous in the area. When I tried to persuade the local officials to diversify the target population I noticed that they were openly hostile to the inclusion of poor and unsuccessful migrant labourers, whether active or retired, and even their families. It was clear to me that they believed that poor people did not have anything of interest to say regarding local history or even about themselves. This seems to confirm Paul Thompson's observation:

...there is an equally strong tendency for a community project to record its central stratum - normally the respectable working class and the lower middle class - at the expense of both top and bottom (...) And again and again, the very poorest, the 'rough' elements which were a vital part of the community, prove equally elusive. They are not suggested as informants because the more 'respectable' old people either positively disapprove of what they would say, or simply regard them as too pathetic or unintelligent to have any worthwhile memories at all.⁸

The people I was able to interview without any prior knowledge or indication of the authorities were those who appeared while I was interviewing the selected person. It was through using this strategy that I was able to interview some women, for example.

I conducted interviews in the locality of Inhamissa and in the district of Chókwe in Gaza province. Indeed, I visited Gaza province four times and interviewed more than fifty people. The interviews were organized both individually and collectively. Individual interviews were preferred on the first trip because it was important to have full control of the interview process and of recording and note-taking. In addition, to ensure more confidence with my informants, I preferred to conduct the interviews privately.

I found that life stories were more suitable for face-to-face interviews because of their spontaneous nature. However, when I began to ask more general questions, I found that getting people together in big or small groups, men and women, could help to achieve a synthesis of the popular and general social and economic knowledge of the events. Using this interview method I soon discovered that men pretended to know more, although in actual fact the women were as knowledgeable about specific aspects of economic and social life, and in detail as well.

In addition, I generally observed that when husband and wife were interviewed together, the man spoke more and quite openly tried to prevent his wife from saying anything. This is partly a reflection of the traditionally assumed minor and secondary role reserved for women in rural societies. This was in contradiction to the more active role played by women during collective interviews involving men who were not their husbands. Unmarried or widowed women were particularly active during the interviews. Furthermore, I encountered a similar situation when I interviewed a group in which an important former traditional chief took part. The men invited behaved as the married women did when interviewed in the presence of their husbands.

I collected a considerable quantity of evidence on the influence of migrant labour on subsistence and even sometimes on commercial agriculture. It is not correct to argue that men never had anything to do with agriculture as many of my informants asserted. Nevertheless, from my interviews I initially concluded that agriculture was one of the less important motivations for migration. In fact I do not remember anyone telling me that he decided to migrate because of lack of land, or because he wanted to earn money to buy agricultural implements.

Despite this, there is sufficient evidence supporting the view that migrant labourers invested their savings in agriculture by buying ploughs and cattle. Migrants belonging to this category often sold their agricultural surpluses on the colonial rural markets. Indeed, from the interviews I discovered that the shopkeepers, commonly known in Portuguese as *cantineiros*, often treated African peasants dishonestly, and there are many stories referring to *cantineiros* who acted almost as authorized thieves: they never weighed or paid properly for the commodities produced by African peasants such as maize, peanuts, beans, cotton, cashewnuts, etc. These practices acted as disincentives to the development of African commercial agriculture. This needs to be explored in various ways.

When I tried to establish the main reasons for the almost total lack of interest in agriculture among men, I was informed that agriculture had never played an important role in their lives, and that migration was not a direct result of problems associated with agriculture. A non-economic explanation seemed to dominate in the minds of my informants. The majority told me that the men went to South Africa in order to travel and experience new challenges. Agriculture was openly and generally assumed to be a woman's job.

I was informed on several occasions that revenue from cotton enabled the women to buy implements such as ploughs and oxen. This helps highlight the important role of women in the economy and suggests that migrant labour was not the only way of purchasing agricultural implements. Some of the interviews supported the proposition that the production and commercialization of cotton led to the relative economic freedom of women. Indeed, informants told me that some women were able to pay back *lobolo* in cases of abuse by a husband. My male informants referred to cotton as a crop which came to destroy families and to weaken others by facilitating women's access to cash.

On different occasions, I also tried to ask men about their involvement in agriculture. From the general reaction, I realized that they thought that there was something wrong with me for asking such a question. I could tell from their facial expressions that I was asking men about women's issues. Most men were unable to provide me with relevant information concerning agriculture.

During interviews, I discovered that the majority of families who had ploughs and cattle were Christians. I asked people about this distinction between Christians and the non-converted. The general response was that Christians were more open to innovation than non-Christians. Superstition was given as the main reason for objections to the introduction of new technologies and methods of production into these communities. I was told that among non-Christians the introduction of ploughs, gramophones and bicycles came to be accepted with some difficulty.

This ideology needs to be investigated further, because what people believe and say is not necessarily the best explanation for events. Nor am I arguing that all progressive African farmers were Christians. I have assumed that it is also possible to invert the interpretation. Indeed, there is evidence supporting the view that "progressive" African farmers became Christians for particular reasons and that "heathen polygamists" sent their sons and even their daughters to school.

My interviews reveal that the role played by women in the rural economy has been extremely important. In addition, there is sufficient evidence to show that the main source of income and of family subsistence was agriculture. In many cases feeding and dressing the family as well as sending children to school seems to have been dependent on women's activities rather than on men's earnings from the mines. A considerable number of women told me that they did not receive anything from their husbands while they were in South Africa. When asked if they supported or were against the emigration of their husbands they simply answered that it was a tradition for men to emigrate and that despite all the dangers they had nothing against it.

Another important issue has to do with the displaced population which appears mixed with the original inhabitants of the highlands.⁹ Sometimes the authorities were more sympathetic to people who are or were migrant workers but not originally from the area. I encountered some embarrassing moments when I discovered that my informants were not able to provide information because they were simply from different areas. To check the area of origin of the informant became crucial when I realized that I could be led to collect and use information wrongly. To some extent this population mixture enabled me to gather information referring to different areas of Gaza and this has been useful for purposes of generalization.¹⁰

The combination of droughts and war and their negative influence on Frelimo's attempts at socializing agriculture generally seem to have undermined people's capacity to read the colonial period. Their current unfortunate and difficult economic situation gave rise to very positive memories of the past. People apparently considered the colonial period as having had more to offer than the post-colonial era. Clinging to past memories seemed to be a reflection of their lack of positive hope for the present and future. Their reading of the past was a reflection of the pressure of war and famine. In some interviews I found that reference to the past emerged out of a sense of nostalgia. Everything in the past seemed to have been better than now. This was more significantly stressed when the interviewees were from the former ruling classes.

While I was conducting interviews in Gaza, I visited the archive of the *Serviços Provinciais de Cultura*, and consulted documentation concerning historical, economic, cultural, and political events which occurred in the province. In the 1980s the *Serviços* had promoted a campaign aimed at collecting provincial data, in order to facilitate the historic and cultural reconstruction of the area. The fact that Gaza has been one of the most important suppliers of labour to South Africa is clearly reflected in all these documents.

I paid special attention to the collected songs, mainly those sung by wives of migrant labourers, and selected more than two dozen such songs. Their main subjects are the difficult working conditions in the rural areas; problems raised by the generalized practice of polygamy; and the social implications of *lobolo*. Most of the selected songs show clearly

that in this society a married woman is seen as part of man's property and not as a human being in her own right.

When I returned to Maputo, I tried to get as many copies as possible of recorded songs on "Radio Moçambique" concerning migrant labour. Unfortunately all the tape-recorded songs are sung by men. This category of songs is mainly concerned with educating migrant labourers on saving money and the best use of it in South Africa or on the way back home. They try to persuade and help people to establish a bridge between their family and their home country's needs with the earnings they get in South Africa. Most of the songs ridicule those who have been less rational in spending their salaries, or who have bought unusable items such as very old and unsuitable cars for use in rural areas. There is evidence that most of these cars were unable to even reach the regions of their owners.

The songs exalt migrants who have been able to look after their wives and children. They also differentiate in life styles between migrants who have good and well-paid jobs in South Africa and those engaged in hard and poorly-paid occupations. They try to show that money is not everything to build up a happy and comfortable family. In highlighting the differences in workers' behaviour they stress that the majority of those holding very good jobs, such as team leaders are not necessarily good administrators. They usually fail to reproduce or to ensure their important social status in the rural areas.

Despite the clearly revolutionary role of migrant labour in the rural economy there are popular songs showing interesting contradictory expectations in the relationship between migration and the rural economy. David Sitoe is a Mozambican migrant worker, who in the sixties became one of the most important popular singers critical of the impact of migrant labour on the lives of Mozambicans. Other important popular interpreters, who have recorded songs on migrant labour are Alberto Mucheca, Mário Ntimane, Luís Sibanyoni, and Mateus Vilanculos. Their work covers a wide range of social topics involving migrants' lives including family disorders, the rural economy, the difficult working conditions in the mines, the prostitution of migrant's wives and drunkenness.¹¹

In one of Sitoe's songs, he expresses the commonly accepted material expectations of the women who are left at home towards the results of migration, and ridicules men who brought implements rather than buying clothes for their wives.¹² He tells the story of a woman who was disappointed by the baggage her husband brought after a contract in the mines. He says that she had received the news that her husband was returning home very happily and waited to greet him at the bus stop and to help him carry the baggage. The husband brought very heavy baggage.

Her first reaction was of gratitude, satisfaction and pride but then she confesses to having suffered in carrying the bags. When they arrive home and open the bags, her surprise and disappointment were total; none of the items she was expecting to have, such as silks, were in the bags. Hammers, saws, metal chains, ropes, axes, nails, screws, and rakes constituted the whole of his baggage.¹³ Finally, she says that she will no longer be able to continue living with him if it means she merely has to assist his friends in bringing home radios, trousers, motorcycles, and sewing machines. Every year he went to South Africa but the results were invisible and she did not even receive help with food from him.

The picture presented above seems to contradict the view that migrant labour was an important means of purchasing agricultural or other productive implements. Oral interviews show that the majority of those who brought metal tools instead of clothes were those who failed to save money. Generally such tools did not reflect any plan of investment, but a strategy to minimize the shame of returning home without baggage. It was a way of having something to pack to take home rather than a reflection of a long-term project. In many cases nails and hammers were not bought. Used tools or equipment rejected due to manufacturing defects by the mining companies were collected free of charge by workers. In other cases, tools had simply been stolen. This is not to neglect the existence of a small number of migrants who brought these implements for jobs such as building new houses or reparations.

In summary, I would like to stress that despite the then prevailing unfavourable economic and political situation resulting from war and natural calamities, I did succeed in collecting important oral data. The comparison and complementarity between oral and written

sources has enabled me to have a better understanding of the economic and social history of Inhamissa in particular and of southern Mozambique in general. However, in the near future, I hope to return to Inhamissa and revisit some of my informants for a re-examination of the information under the present improved political atmosphere.

NOTES

- 1 At that time Inhamissa could be classified as a safety zone. I did not have any information or evidence referring to direct Renamo's military activities there.
- 2 On 4 October 1992 Frelimo and Renamo signed a peace agreement in Rome to bring an end to the war. The re-organization of the rural production is beginning now.
- 3 Inhamissa comes from word *missi* which in Shangaan means leopard. There was in the area a small lake known as *Inhammissa* because its surrounding bushes were inhabited by a considerable number of leopards.
- 4 Mozambique, Frelimo Party, *Mozambique out of underdevelopment to socialism: report of the Central Committee, IV Congress* (Maputo, 1983), p 20.
- 5 Frelimo Party, *Mozambique out of underdevelopment to socialism*, p 22.
- 6 During an interview with in Chókwe, when I asked about agriculture, someone told me, almost in tears, that in addition to the lack of rain his plots had been occupied by displaced people.
- 7 These numbers were kindly provided to me during an interview with Boavida Samuel Cumaio, Administrator of the Locality of Inhamissa, 24 Jan. 1992.
- 8 Paul Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history* (Oxford, 1978), p 159.
- 9 For more details on the literature on the war and the consequences of the droughts in Mozambique see K. B. Wilson, *Internally displaced, refugees and returnees from and in Mozambique* (Stockholm, 1992).
- 10 These two districts are the major suppliers of labour to South Africa in the Gaza province.
- 11 Ricardo Dimande, Chief of the Inter-Provincial Maputo and Gaza Radio Transmission of Radio Mozambique, kindly provided copies of songs dealing with some aspects of my work.
- 12 The title of the song is: *Uyo xava ti-hamele* ("You only bought hammers").
- 13 During the interviews, I was told that this kind of item characterized the luggage of *mamparra-magaiças*.