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# Flag Independence without Flags? Mozambican Decolonization on the Periphery of the New Nation

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## Abstract

This article examines the history of Mozambican decolonization on the periphery of the new nation, in the province of Niassa. The article offers new insights into our understanding of Mozambique's decolonization process “on the ground,” complicating Frelimo's still dominant liberation narrative. As a central argument, the article challenges the romantic idea of the pioneering role of Niassa's so-called “liberated zones” in Mozambique's nation building process. It shows that it was not local (wartime) practices that informed national plans, but rather national directives that were imposed on local experiences. Drawing mainly on sources from the *Arquivo Permanente do Gabinete do Governador* in Lichinga, the article also hopes to highlight the potential of post-colonial archives in Africa, which continue to be neglected.

## Keywords

Mozambique – Niassa – decolonization – independence – Frelimo

## Resumo

Este artigo examina a história da descolonização moçambicana na periferia da nova nação, na província de Niassa. O artigo oferece novas perspectivas para a nossa compreensão do processo de descolonização de Moçambique “no terreno,” complicando a narrativa de libertação ainda dominante da Frelimo. Como argumento central, o artigo desafia a ideia romântica do papel pioneiro das chamadas “zonas libertadas” do Niassa para o processo da construção da nação em Moçambique. Será demonstrado que não foram as práticas locais (do tempo de guerra) que informaram os planos nacionais, mas sim as directivas nacionais que foram impostas às experiências locais. Baseando-se principalmente em fontes do Arquivo Permanente do Gabinete do Governador em Lichinga, o artigo espera também destacar o potencial dos arquivos pós-coloniais em África, que continuam a ser negligenciados.

## Palavras-chave

Moçambique – Niassa – descolonização – independência – Frelimo

### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In colonial times, Portuguese administrators had to record their daily activities in service diaries.<sup>2</sup> This included recording repetitive routines, such as the habitual Sunday flag ceremony. The entry of the administrator of the District of Lago in northern Mozambique for Sunday, June 1, 1975, reads as follows: “Hastear e arrear da Bandeira Nacional com as formalidades habituais”<sup>3</sup> (“Raising and lowering of the national flag with the usual formalities”<sup>4</sup>). Just over a month later, the same administrator recorded almost the same thing: “Hastear e arrear da Bandeira Nacional com as solenidades devidas.”<sup>5</sup> What may appear to be boring entries of colonial routine take on a more interesting

1 This article is based on archival research I conducted as part of my dissertation project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (funding scheme no. 162216).

2 The usefulness of these diaries for reconstructing the everyday life of the colonial administration has recently been highlighted by Pedro Cerdeira (2018).

3 Arquivo Permanente do Gabinete do Governador do Niassa (APGGN), QJ: Alfredo Filimone Lituri, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Junho 1975” (Metangula, July 10, 1975).

4 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

5 A week later, the wording was even “solenidades habituais.” See: APGGN, QJ: Alfredo Filimone Lituri, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Julho 1975” (Metangula, August 4, 1975).

dimension when we consider the significant event that occurred between the two Sundays. Surprisingly, the moment of Mozambican Independence on June 25, 1975 had changed little in terms of administrative procedures, except from the fact that the national flag was now that of the new nation. The transition was somewhat less smooth in the more peripheral areas of the district. In the locality of Maniamba, for example, the “usual ceremonies” could not be held on July 6, 1975 because the locality had not yet received a Mozambican flag, a situation that would continue for another eight months.<sup>6</sup> Based on these events, one might be tempted to think that independence on the Mozambican periphery was flag independence without flags.

Narratives of decolonization that emphasize continuities are in vogue. Colonial legacies and continued dependencies have been discussed and analyzed both in politics and academia under a variety of terms, of which “flag independence” is only one, alongside others such as neo- or post-colonialism.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the pattern of continuity just described for northern Mozambique deserves attention. For if the idea of a clear break with the colonial past has been particularly pronounced anywhere, it was in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa. This had much to do with the violent nature of the decolonization processes in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, which contrasted with the more peaceful transitions of power in the former French and British colonies. The political radicalism of the liberation movements of the former Portuguese colonies certainly gained further strength because of the belated decolonization of the Portuguese Empire. After all, the dangers of “flag independence” were already visible elsewhere by the 1970s. The pattern of continuity described above is also striking with regard to the standard version of Mozambique’s national historiography, which tends to conflate northern Mozambique into one large liberated zone, where the political, economic, social, and cultural contours of the post-colonial nation were already drawn

6 APGGN, QJ: Mussagy I. A. Remane, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Julho 1975” (Maniamba, August 1, 1975). It was not until the second week of March 1976 that a national flag finally arrived in Maniamba. The first time the flag was used for the standard Sunday ceremony coincided with the visit of a delegation of journalists from the magazine *Tempo*, accompanied by members of Frelimo’s Information and Propaganda Section. See: APGGN, QJ: Mussagy I. A. Remane, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Fevereiro 1976” (Maniamba, March 1, 1976); APGGN, QJ: Mussagy I. A. Remane, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Março 1976” (Maniamba, April 5, 1976); “Os infantários que o povo construiu,” *Tempo*, no. 289 (April 18, 1976): 22–28. In the meantime, the locality had begun to use the party flag as a stand-in. See: APGGN, QJ: Mussagy I. A. Remane, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Agosto 1975” (Maniamba, September 1, 1975).

7 Studies highlighting continuities include Mamdani (1996), Bonneuil (2000), Cooper (2002), and Burton and Jennings (2007).

during the war, and where the Africanization of the future administration allegedly began before independence.<sup>8</sup> That it was there, of all places, where colonial administrative routines remained almost untouched and where people waited for the nation's flag, seems rather bizarre from this perspective.

This article attempts to demonstrate how to make sense of this flag independence without flags. It tries to show that the process of decolonization in Niassa in reality deviated significantly from the dominant perception of how things went. Certainly, scholars have already done much to dissolve what João Paulo Borges Coelho (2013: 21) has called the “neighborliness relations” that existed between Frelimo and historians. Examples include the revisionist studies on the causes of the Mozambican Civil War (e.g., Geffray and Pedersen 1985; Cahen 1987), various critical works on Frelimo's agrarian policies (e.g., O’Laughlin 1996; Bowen 2000), and, more recently, investigations into Frelimo's violent purification processes (Igreja 2010; Machava 2018). Despite all these important studies, however, many aspects of recent Mozambican history remain heavily framed by Frelimo's “liberation script” (Borges Coelho 2013). This is especially true in the case of the Mozambican War of Independence and all that surrounds it. The work of Sayaka Funada-Classen (2013) has not received the attention it deserves. Crucially, we also still largely lack in-depth studies that analyze how Mozambican lives changed in the wake of independence in 1975.

This article seeks to complicate our knowledge of Mozambican decolonization. With a special focus on developments in the administration, the article will not only highlight surprising continuities, but also point to the significant changes that took place after independence. It will show, however, that these changes were hardly informed by local wartime experiences, but rather imposed from above against local practice. The article will challenge the widespread assumption that the transition of power was easier in areas where Frelimo was already present during the War of Independence.<sup>9</sup> It will underline the significant disruptions that resulted from the war, and show that we should reconsider the belief that the need for political mobilization during the anti-colonial war was conducive to greater nationalist unity.<sup>10</sup>

To make its case, the article draws primarily on sources from the *Arquivo Permanente do Gabinete do Governador do Niassa* (APGGN) in Lichinga,

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8 João Paulo Borges Coelho (2013) has provided a critical overview of this standard version of Mozambique's nationalist historiography. The study of Mokubung Nkomo (1986) is an example in which it is argued that the Africanization of the future administration had already begun during the war in Frelimo's liberated zones.

9 For examples of this assumption, see Lubkemann (2008: 117) and Newitt (2017: 153).

10 On this belief, see Chabal (2002: 20–22).

collected during a research stay in 2016. At the time of my research, the APGGN was a highly disorganized archive, with no inventories and no visible order. Some files had been eaten by termites.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, this article hopes to highlight its potential and address the existing lack of attention to post-colonial archives in Africa.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 The Depopulation of Frelimo's Liberated Zones in Niassa

To understand the developments surrounding Mozambican Independence in Niassa, it is essential to have a thorough understanding of the course of the War of Independence there. As I have argued elsewhere, the common perception of the course of the war is strongly misleading (Zeman 2023a; Zeman 2023c: 252–301). The prominent propaganda of Frelimo's liberated zones has distorted our understanding of the course of events and this is particularly true in the case of Niassa. It is generally assumed that Frelimo enjoyed massive support in northern Mozambique and was able to gradually liberate these peripheral areas of the colony over the course of the war. The reality of the war was much more complicated and dynamic. Certainly, Frelimo's internal divisions and conflicts have received considerable attention (e.g., Derluguian 2012), but they have largely been studied as a political history, concerning only the political elite, and rarely as a social history.<sup>13</sup> While Frelimo could count on broad support at the beginning of the war, this evaporated after the first few years. The reason for this was the Portuguese counterinsurgency strategy. Part of this strategy was to resettle the entire population of the war-affected areas to strategic villages, the *aldeamentos*. In order to force those who sided with Frelimo into the *aldeamentos*, the Portuguese forces also began to systematically destroy all means of living outside the *aldeamentos*. This caused widespread hunger among Frelimo supporters and considerable unrest within the guerrilla. As the war progressed, many combatants deserted, and most non-combatants fled either to the *aldeamentos* or abroad. As a result, the number of people

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11 The APGGN has also been the subject of a recent article by Benedito Machava and Euclides Gonçalves (2021). At the time of my research, the archives consisted of two parts, one located on the first floor of the provincial government building (1A) and the other in the changing and storage room of the government gardeners (QJ).

12 On the neglect of post-colonial archives in Africa, see Keese and Owabira (2020), and Keese and Urbano (2023).

13 Exceptions that take a more social-historical perspective include the aforementioned study by Sayaka Funada-Classen (2013), the research by Jonna Katto (2019), and, with regard to Cabo Delgado, the work by Liazzat Bonate (2009).

living in Frelimo's so-called liberated zones in Niassa at the end of the war was tiny, probably less than 5,000 (Zeman 2023a: 122). The number of people living under the control of Portuguese forces was considerably higher, about 330,000 in 1974.<sup>14</sup> The number of refugees from Niassa in Tanzania and Malawi may have been 70,000 or more.<sup>15</sup>

The dynamics of the war not only reduced the number of people living in Frelimo's liberated zones, but also created very precarious living conditions for those who remained with Frelimo. In reality, there was virtually no space in the liberated zones for Frelimo's alleged social revolution. In fact, most people who tried to sustain in Frelimo's liberated zones were forced to be constantly on the move (Zeman 2023a: 126–127). On the other hand, it was precisely in the *aldeamentos* where an unprecedented development began during what William Gervase Clarence-Smith (1985: 192) called the “swan song of Portuguese empire.” As I point out elsewhere, previous narratives of the *aldeamentos* have largely ignored the fact that the wartime growth of educational and health facilities in Niassa was impressive, with the result that school enrollment rates of Niassa surpassed those of Mozambique's capital, Lourenço Marques (Zeman 2023c: 294–295). Moreover, the expanding presence of the Portuguese forces in the region's administrative centers led to an impressive increase in the number of jobs providing services to the military apparatus. As a result, many people began to support the military efforts of the colonial state directly or indirectly. The growing presence of the colonial state was particularly felt in the northern areas of Niassa, which were more affected by the war and where the colonial presence had been very weak in the years before the war. It is important to recognize that the colonial state reached its regional peak at the very end of the empire, as a direct result of the war (Zeman 2023c: 252–301).

By the time the war ended as a result of the revolution in Portugal, most inhabitants of Niassa had long since given up their support for Frelimo. From the perspective of Niassa, it had looked very unlikely that Frelimo would win this war. Many inhabitants of Niassa's war-torn districts had not been resettled to the *aldeamentos* by the Portuguese forces but had gone there of their own

14 Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT), PIDE, SC, CI(2), GU, Cx. 33 (NT 8966), f. 209–243; Delegação de DGS em Lourenço Marques, “Situação actual em Moçambique, Março de 1974,” Secreto (Lourenço Marques, March 4, 1974), II, 1–2.

15 According to figures provided by Niassa's provincial authorities to a UNHCR in 1977, 67,165 people had returned to Mozambique from Malawi and Tanzania after 1975. See: Archives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (AUNHCR), Box 1083, ARC-2/A48, 11/2/61-610.GEN.MOZ[b], folio 177: Sérgio Vieira de Mello, “Memorandum 460/MOZ/77: Report on Mission to the Provinces of Niassa and Cabo Delgado from 4 to 13 July 1977” (Maputo, July 14, 1977), 15.

accord to escape the life in Frelimo's liberated zones, which had been made unbearable by the Portuguese destruction policy (Zeman 2023a: 127–128). This perspective must be kept in mind in order to understand the post-colonial developments in Niassa. Here, the war had not led to growing nationalist unity, but to growing tensions between people who, as a result of the course of the war, had been forced to make difficult and divisive choices (Zeman 2023a: 132–135).

This synthesis of the events of the war already suggests that the transition of power in Niassa was not as simple as one might have expected in light of Frelimo's liberation script. More importantly, in Niassa, the post-colonial process of nation building emanated from the former centers of colonial administration, not the other way around. This will be demonstrated in the following pages, using reports from Niassa's post-colonial administration.

### 3 A Bunch of Continuities after Independence

If one studies the documents of the administration of Niassa across both the late colonial and post-colonial periods, one is struck by the unmistakable continuities. The service diaries quoted at the beginning of the article constitute a telling example of this. The fact that they were written by the same administrator beyond the moment of independence is another. By June 1977, more than seventy percent of the administrative staff of Niassa's districts had been in the civil service since colonial times. This included all district administrators, all of whom came from the colonial civil service.<sup>16</sup> A year after independence, the former colonial policemen were still on duty, and most of them seemed to adapt to the new political order surprisingly smoothly.<sup>17</sup> Such continuities could also be found among the former service personnel of the Portuguese military infrastructure, many of whom could continue their work under the new government.<sup>18</sup> Such continuities also concerned administrative paperwork.

16 APGGN, 1A: Salomão Cossa, "Mapa com os elementos respeitantes aos trabalhadores dos serviços de Administração Civil, em serviço nesta província" (Lichinga, June 2, 1977).

17 APGGN, QJ: Aurélio Manave, "Proposta N.º 04/976: Guardas de Polícia Administrativa" (Lichinga, July 8, 1976); APGGN, QJ: Administração do Distrito de Metangula, "Relação dos elementos de identificação completa, dos Guardas Administrativos em serviço nesta área administrativa, conforme Cir. Conf. 29/M1/75, de 13 de Dezembro de 1975," March 10, 1976; APGGN, QJ: Alfredo Filimone Lituri, "Relatório da Administração do Distrito de Metangula, Julho 1975" (Metangula, August 4, 1975), 2.

18 Arquivo Histórico da Marinha (AHMar), Coloredo, Pasta 066/MO: Alguns elementos relativos às lanchas e infraestruturas da Marinha Portuguesa no Lago Niassa (1957/1975) (Lisboa, 1988). See as well Zeman (2023c: 309).

As Benedito Machava and Euclides Gonçalves have pointed out, “the format, form and style of bureaucratic documents continued almost unaltered” (2021: 555–556). Significantly, as late as February 1978, district administrations were still using the pre-printed forms from the colonial period to report the number of taxes collected.<sup>19</sup>

Several post-colonial policies were undeniably reminiscent of their colonial precursors. This included not only the continued existence of a poll tax, but also the government’s call for people to live in communal villages, known as *aldeias comunais*, which bore a more than obvious resemblance to the Portuguese *aldeamentos*.<sup>20</sup> The post-colonial government was aware of the problematic nature of the symbolic power of such continuities. Thus, Niassa’s governor Aurélio Manave described the continued existence of the colonial police as “an inconvenience in the current socio-political context.”<sup>21</sup> And at the first meeting of Niassa’s administrators, political commissioners, and *grupos dinamizadores*<sup>22</sup> in 1976, Manave criticized the former colonial state personnel strongly and urged them to change their attitudes.<sup>23</sup> Yet in reality, Mozambique’s post-colonial government had little choice but to rely on the old structures. Or, as Governor Manave noted at the same meeting: “Many were soldiers in the colonial army, some in the police, very few who did not serve colonialism.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite these apparent continuities, it is by no means the case that nothing changed after independence. As will be discussed below, various new policies were introduced, as were new forums of political exchange. The crucial point is that these changes did not emanate from the so-called liberated zones, but from national directives coming from Maputo. The channels through which

19 APGGN, QJ: Luciano da Fonseca Henriques, “Administração do Distrito de Metangula: Mapa comparativo da cobrança do Imposto Domciliário realizada no mês de Janeiro de 1978” (Metangula, February 10, 1978); APGGN, QJ: Pedro Mário Masino, “Concelho ou Circunscrição de Majune: Mapa comparativo da cobrança do Imposto Domciliário realizada no mês de Janeiro de 1978” (Malanga, January 31, 1978).

20 For the similarities between *aldeias comunais* and *aldeamentos*, see Borges Coelho (1998).

21 APGGN, QJ: Aurélio Manave, “Proposta N.º 04/976: Guardas de Polícia Administrativa” (Lichinga, July 8, 1976).

22 The *grupos dinamizadores* (lit. ‘dynamizing group’) were created by Frelimo as a vehicle for disseminating the party’s policies.

23 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Mandimba, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 21, 1976), 3–4.

24 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Mandimba, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 21, 1976), 3–4.

these new policies were disseminated were primarily those inherited from the colonial era.

#### 4 The Futile Search for the Liberated Zones

The documents of the post-colonial administration in Niassa are full of references to the liberated zones, the alleged cradle of the Mozambican nation. Governor Manave repeatedly urged his subordinates to go to the liberated zones and learn from their experiences.<sup>25</sup> However, as the above summary of the war events has already indicated, there was little to go to or learn from. More importantly, resources, if any, flowed from the old centers of the colonial state to the liberated zones, not the other way around. Areas referred to as liberated zones were so isolated that they could hardly be reached by the new authorities. One example is the liberated zone of Micuinha in the district of Majune. In May 1976, the district authorities were recommended to “study the possibilities of creating the conditions for access to this place.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the liberated zones near Chissindo, in the district of Lago, were so remote that a brigade studying the creation of *aldeias comunais* was unable to explore them. It recommended that a helicopter be used for this purpose the next time.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the *aldeia comunal* of Chissindo was planned from above and had not grown from below is revealing. Following the same logic, in the case of Majune, the authorities manifested their “will for the officialization of the Locality of Micuinha, a liberated area, and the setting up of an administrative apparatus.”<sup>28</sup> Obviously, little was left of the embryonic structures of the new nation that had allegedly grown there during the war.

The same pattern can be observed in the case of Niassa’s most famous liberated zone, Matchedje, now officially called Segundo Congresso. It was here, just a stone’s throw from the Tanzanian border, that Frelimo had held its

25 For examples, see: APGGN, 1A: Estudo dos Documentos, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distrito da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 24, 1976), 4; APGGN, QJ: Síntese da 1a. Sessão, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comunais e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, July 11, 1977).

26 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Majune, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 22, 1976), 2–3.

27 APGGN, 1A: Estudo e projecto de quatro aldeias comunais no Niassa: Msauíze, Mataka, M’kalapa e Chissindo, 1976, 82.

28 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Majune, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 22, 1976), 2.

second congress in the midst of the war, demonstrating to the world that it could operate successfully inside Mozambique. When Niassa's governor visited the place in 1977, he told the local population, “[w]e think that this circle has a major responsibility, because it is a historical place, known worldwide, so you should live organized in a collective way.”<sup>29</sup>

Earlier that year, at a meeting in Niassa's capital Lichinga, there had already been calls for Matchedje to be made an *aldeia comunal* because of its historical significance.<sup>30</sup> How little of the alleged social revolution had already taken place there became clear during Manave's visit, when the representative of the inhabitants of Matchedje greeted the governor with the words that they had spent three years looking for a place where they could live “in an organized way,” and had only found one this year. It became even clearer when this representative began to express the demands of the population. He complained about the lack of health infrastructure, telling the governor that they always had to take their sick to a hospital in Tanzania. He also complained about the lack of a school and various agricultural tools.<sup>31</sup> In complete contradiction to the propaganda of the experiences of the liberated zones, Manave had to teach the people of Matchedje that the solution to “the problem of the school and medical post must be born in your midst, through your initiative.”<sup>32</sup> Another revealing moment was when the representative of the people of Matchedje made a demand regarding the issue of collectivization: “[o]ne [of the problems we are very concerned about] is the small population that exists, so we wanted to ask for an increase to make it easier for us to organize collectively.”<sup>33</sup>

The government of post-colonial Mozambique had set fixed minimum sizes for *aldeias comunais* and cooperatives. Given the demand, it appears that there were not enough people in Matchedje to meet this quota. At the closing session of a provincial seminar on *aldeias comunais* and cooperatives, Governor

29 APGGN, QJ: Relatório de Visita de Trabalho, do Camarada Governador Aurélio Benete Manave ao Distrito de Sanga, de 21 a 24 de Setembro de 1977 (Lichinga, September 30, 1977), 7.

30 APGGN, QJ: Síntese da 3a. Sessão, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comunais e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, July 11, 1977), 2.

31 APGGN, QJ: Relatório de Visita de Trabalho, do Camarada Governador Aurélio Benete Manave ao Distrito de Sanga, de 21 a 24 de Setembro de 1977 (Lichinga, September 30, 1977), 7.

32 APGGN, QJ: Relatório de Visita de Trabalho, do Camarada Governador Aurélio Benete Manave ao Distrito de Sanga, de 21 a 24 de Setembro de 1977 (Lichinga, September 30, 1977), 8.

33 APGGN, QJ: Relatório de Visita de Trabalho, do Camarada Governador Aurélio Benete Manave ao Distrito de Sanga, de 21 a 24 de Setembro de 1977 (Lichinga, September 30, 1977), 8.

Manave complained about the lack of consideration given to the experiences of the liberated zones.<sup>34</sup> However, as the governor should have known from his own experience, there was in reality little potential for the liberated zones of Niassa to serve as an example for the new government's collectivization projects.

This divergence between propaganda and reality is also evident in an interview conducted in 1980 by the economist José Negrão with the representative of the commission of the communal villages in Mavago as part of an oral history project by the *Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique*. Seduced by Frelimo's propaganda, Negrão was obviously looking for the oral documentation of something that in reality had never existed. In the interview, Negrão expressed his disappointment that collective production was not functioning properly in post-colonial Mavago. He had to realize that collective production in the liberated zones of Niassa had never worked as he had thought:

Negrão: In this case, the point that names were registered was never reached?

Answer: This point was never reached.

N: Hmmm! This was only in Cabo Delgado?

A: This was only in Cabo Delgado. Here, in Niassa, this phase was never reached.

N: Mm! And there were no other forms of collective production, such as the production of sculptures like [in the case of] the Macondes?

A: There were none. There were none.

N: Nothing? This did not exist?

A: It did not exist.

N: Hmmm! Hmmm!<sup>35</sup>

34 APGGN, QJ: Sessão do Encerramento, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comunais e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, n.d.).

35 Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique (AHM), Secção Oral, Transcrito NI 10: Germano Ntaula and Aly Saidy, N.º 162–163, Entrevista com o responsável da comissão de aldeias comunais (Mavago, Niassa), interview by José Negrão, 1980, 17. A purified version of this interview was published in the journal *Não Vamos Esquecer* in 1987: "Resenha histórica sobre as Zonas Libertadas – A experiência da Província do Niassa," *Não Vamos Esquecer!*, no. 4 (1987): 13–18. Interestingly, the same informant later gave a more positive assessment of collective production during the war. See: Depósito Museológico de Lichinga (DML), 1a Gaveta/N.º 8: Samuel Raisse, "Pequeno episódio sobre a história da L.A.L. Nacional" (Mavago: Serviço Distrital de Cultura – Mavago, n.d.), 4.

Negrão had to come to a fairly disillusioned conclusion: “[t]here is better production in Gaza [in southern Mozambique] than here ... So what is it when we talk about the experience of the liberated zones? It is nothing!”<sup>36</sup>

## 5 The Threat of the Returnees

Most of what the government referred to as liberated zones were not only sparsely populated, but many of those who lived there were returnees from abroad. The inhabitants of the planned *aldeia comunal* in the allegedly liberated zone of Chissindo were almost exclusively returnees.<sup>37</sup> The district administrator of Sanga explained at a meeting in Lichinga that the “difficulty that exists in the liberated and semi-liberated zones is that at the time of the struggle, others departed, leaving behind their homes and things.”<sup>38</sup> In truth, those the administrator called “others” were the majority. Comparing UNHCR statistics on returnees with official post-war population estimates, about sixty percent of Niassa’s four northernmost districts were returnees.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, according to internal Portuguese statistics, the number of people living in *aldeamentos* in these four districts towards the end of the war already accounted for almost fifty percent of the official post-war population.<sup>40</sup> Obviously, the

36 AHM, Secção Oral, Transcrito NI 10: Germano Ntaula and Aly Saidy, N.º 162–163, “Entrevista com o responsável da comissão de aldeias comunais (Mavago, Niassa),” interview by José Negrão, 1980, 27.

37 In the brigade’s report, Chissindo was described as consisting of three circles. The 1,700 inhabitants of the circles of Maumbiça and Xilotose were described as returnees. The background of the 900 inhabitants of the circle of M’cuela was not specified in the report. But, according to a UNHCR report, they were also all returnees. See: APGGN, 1A: *Estudo e projecto de quatro aldeias comunais no Niassa: Msauíze, Mataca, M’kalapa e Chissindo*, 1976, 82; AUNHCR, Box 1083, ARC-2/A48, 11/2/61-610.GEN.MOZ[b], folio 177: Sérgio Vieira de Mello, “Memorandum 460/MOZ/77: Report on Mission to the Provinces of Niassa and Cabo Delgado from 4 to 13 July 1977” (Maputo, July 14, 1977), 7.

38 APGGN, QJ: Acta da 3a. Sessão, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comunais e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, July 11, 1977), 1.

39 For the figures of the UNHCR, see the annex on returnee statistics in: AUNHCR, Box 1083, ARC-2/A48, 11/2/61-610.GEN.MOZ[b], folio 177: Sérgio Vieira de Mello, “Memorandum 460/MOZ/77: Report on Mission to the Provinces of Niassa and Cabo Delgado from 4 to 13 July 1977” (Maputo, July 14, 1977). For the post-war population statistics, see the annex of: APGGN, QJ: Documento CNCS/1-77/8A: Província do Niassa, Conselho Nacional Coordenador de Saúde, Maputo, 21 a 26 de Fevereiro de 1977, n.d.

40 ANTT, SCCIM N.º 24 (folhas 247–253): Mapa comparativo da população do distrito distribuída por regedorias e relacionada aos anos de antes da eclosão da subversão (1964/1965), e depois da subversão, para controle dos elementos refugiados (Vila Cabral, June 1972).

numbers do not add up, most likely due to inaccuracies in the statistics on returnees and/or in the estimates of the post-war population. In any case, they demonstrate once again how small the percentage of those who had lived in the liberated zones must have been, even in the areas most affected by the war.

The fact that those propagandistically so important liberated zones were largely inhabited by returnees is ironic in that it was precisely the returnees whom the post-colonial government viewed with the greatest suspicion. If the post-colonial government had its reservations about the former inhabitants of the *aldeamentos* and the former members of the colonial structure, it was above all the returnees who were considered a threat to the new order. In a speech in Chissindo, the Mozambican Interior Minister Armando Guebuza accused returnees from Tanzania of not having endured the war and of having only danced and drank in Tanzania.<sup>41</sup> In an interview with the *Tempo* magazine, Governor Manave openly suspected returnees from Malawi of being “enemies.”<sup>42</sup> Refugees had apparently anticipated these problems. When a UNHCR official visited a refugee camp in Tanzania less than a month before Mozambique’s independence, he found that most were hesitant to return to Mozambique, in part because many feared “that they may be treated harshly or as second-class citizens.”<sup>43</sup>

Accordingly, the post-colonial government placed great emphasis on controlling the returnees. They were all to live in *aldeias comunais*, or “at the same site, to allow for their assistance, control and effective political awareness raising,”<sup>44</sup> as a government document of the time put it. The abstruse nature of this obsession with returnees can be seen in the recommendation made by some zealous officials after a meeting in the presence of the governor to deal with the insignificant number of returnees in the district of Marrupa: “[t]here are thirty-four returnees in the district, so it is recommended that these

41 AUNHCR, Box 1124, ARC-2/A48, 11/2/61-610.TAN.MOZ[b]: H. Idoyaga, “Memorandum HCR/MOZ/313/75: Excerpts Concerning Returned Mozambican Refugees from Speeches by Mozambican Minister of Interior, Mr. A. Guebuza” (Geneva, November 20, 1975). For more details on this speech, see Zeman (2023a: 133–134).

42 “Entrevista com o governador do Niassa: Aurélio Manave analisa problemas políticos da província,” *Tempo*, no. 319 (November 14, 1976): 22–27.

43 AUNHCR, Box 1124, ARC-2/A48, 11/2/61-610.TAN.MOZ[a]: Robert Chambers, “Note on the Return of Refugees to Mozambique” (Dar-es-Salaam, June 9, 1975), 1.

44 APGGN, 1A: Comissão do Relatório de Mecanhelas, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 1976), 2.

elements be constantly assisted and that the structures intensify the politicization of these elements and keep an eye on them."<sup>45</sup>

The distrust of returnees stemmed from the fact that most of them were considered to have supported Frelimo at the beginning of the war but had then given up the struggle. It seems that Frelimo deserters were at least initially treated more harshly than former enemies, i.e., those who had collaborated with the Portuguese forces. Accordingly, most of the early “political prisoners” in Frelimo’s notorious reeducation camps were not colonial collaborators, but Frelimo dissidents and wartime deserters.<sup>46</sup>

## 6 Meetings, Seminars, and Assemblies: Democratic in Appearance, Authoritative in Content

The flag episode told at the beginning of this article might give the impression that little changed after Mozambican Independence. Indeed, several people I interviewed in the district of Lago suggested to me that government largely remained government (Zeman 2023c: 315). But while this sense of continuity may have been true in some respects, there were in fact significant changes in many areas. We can, for example, observe a clear attempt by the government to distinguish the new *aldeias comunais* from the old *aldeamentos*, even if this was not always successful in practice, as in the case of an *aldeia comunal* in the district of Majune, where the children were still attending the school of the old *aldeamento* “a few kilometers away” because there was still no building on the new site.<sup>47</sup> There were also significant changes in the new government’s

45 Obviously, the absurdity of this recommendation was even recognized by the governor or some other higher authority, as it was later crossed out by hand. See: APGGN, 1A: Comissão do Relatório de Marrupa, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 1976), 2.

46 In 1976, there were five reeducation camps in Niassa. Two of them were for alleged prostitutes and held 1,101 women (plus an additional seventy-six children who had been taken there with their mothers). Two were mainly for Frelimo dissidents and deserters, with a total of 446 inmates. And one was primarily for what Frelimo called “drug addicts,” holding 395 people. See: APGGN, 1A: Relatório Político-Militar da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, March 24, 1976), 4; APGGN, 1A: Efectivos dos Campos de Reeducação, n.d.; APGGN, 1A: Relação das crianças que se encontram nos campos com suas mães, n.d.

47 APGGN, QJ: Acta da 5a. Sessão, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comunais e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, July 12, 1977), 1. See as well: APGGN, QJ: Acta da 3a. Sessão, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comunais e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, July 11, 1977), 4.

approach to religion and tradition, as well as various new economic policies aimed at collectivizing production and trade. In the area of trade, in particular, the impact of the new policies had far-reaching consequences for people's daily lives, as they led to a deterioration in the terms of trade for most people and to a significant shortages of essential consumer goods such as salt, clothes, and sugar.

I discuss the effects of these changes in detail elsewhere (Zeman 2023c: 302–337). The focus here is on how the new policies were communicated and how knowledge about them was disseminated in Niassa. As we have already seen, the dissemination went from the former centers of colonial administration to the rural areas, rather than in the opposite direction. And as we will now see, the dissemination followed a distinctly authoritarian path, in direct continuity with its colonial precursors. In practice, the grassroots rhetoric of *poder popular* (“people’s power”) turned out to be quite meaningless.

Early reports and documents from the post-colonial administration bear witness to the pronounced top-down approach of Mozambican post-colonial politics. The people had to be constantly “mobilized,”<sup>48</sup> “enlightened,”<sup>49</sup> “controlled,”<sup>50</sup> and their “awareness” had to be raised (“consciencialização da população”<sup>51</sup>). Above all, they had to be taught the “correct line” of Frelimo.<sup>52</sup> Decisions of the central state and party organs were “diffused”<sup>53</sup> and directives “transmitted.”<sup>54</sup> The only real room for maneuver for local officials was in the manner of transmission, as this principle to be followed by the administration of the district of Maúá shows: “[w]hen any task is received, first gather all the

48 APGGN, 1A: Comissão do Relatório de Mataca, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 23, 1976).

49 APGGN, QJ: Alfredo Filimone Lituri, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Maio 1976” (Metangula, June 29, 1976), 1.

50 APGGN, 1A: Palavras proferidas pelo governador da Província do Niassa, Aurélio Benete Manave, no passado dia 16/11/1976, na sessão de encerramento do 1.º estágio de elementos do C.P.M. em Lichinga.

51 APGGN, 1A: Comissão do Relatório de Mecula, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 26, 1976).

52 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Amaramba, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 20, 1976), 1.

53 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Maúá, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 19, 1976).

54 APGGN, QJ: Alfredo Filimone Lituri, “Relatório da Administração do Distrito de Metangula, Julho 1975” (Metangula, August 4, 1975), 2.

structures in order to discuss how to find a method of transmitting it to the populations.”<sup>55</sup>

The only option for the population was to follow the directives and to understand them “correctly.” While this authoritarian style of Frelimo’s post-independence government has been repeatedly highlighted by scholars (e.g., Alexander 1997: 3; Igreja 2010), there still seems to exist a belief in a “democratic content of Frelimo’s reforms at the local level” (O’Laughlin 2000: 30). In fact, the post-independence period in Niassa witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of new political platforms in the form of assemblies at various levels, as well as of political-educational meetings, at which the government’s policies were to be discussed and “interpreted” in depth. These included so-called seminars, but also new platforms of political and administrative exchange, with titles such as “First National Seminar of Reeducation” (1976), “First Meeting of the Administrators, Commissioners and *grupos dinamizadores*” (1976), “First Provincial Seminar of *Aldeias Comunaes* and Cooperatives” (1977), and “First Provincial Conference of Niassa” (1977).<sup>56</sup>

These meetings and assemblies definitely constituted a new forum for political exchange and also produced a type of documentation that does not exist in this form and quantity for the colonial period, providing a rare and intimate insight into the ways Frelimo’s new order was discussed at the lower levels of the state hierarchy. But while they left some room for discussion, their spirit was equally authoritarian. Criticism coming from below was silenced rather harshly. Examples of this can be found in the documentation of the aforementioned first meeting of Niassa’s district’s administrators, political commissioners, and *grupos dinamizadores* in May 1976. In their report to the meeting, the delegation from Metangula had called for the placement of a doctor and the urgent assignment of teachers and nurses to the district.<sup>57</sup> During the reading

55 APGGN, 1A: Comissão do Relatório de Maúá, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 21, 1976), 1.

56 While the APGGN holds a great deal of documentation on first meetings and seminars, the available material suggests that many of them were not carried forward. As late as 1981, the new government was still experimenting with new formats, organizing the “First Regional Seminar of the Districts of the Northern Zone of the Province of Niassa.” These developments in Niassa mirrored those in other parts of Mozambique. According to complaints found by Jocelyn Alexander in government reports from Manica Province, meetings there “were so numerous that ... they prevented people from engaging in ‘productive work’” (1997: 3).

57 APGGN, 1A: Júlio Reis and Alfredo Filimone Lituri, “Relatório do Distrito de Metangula,” Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Metangula, May 16, 1976), 9.

of their report, they were then made to look foolish by other participants who asked: “Why do you ask for the urgent placement of a doctor and of teachers? Don’t you know the difficult moment that our country is passing through?”<sup>58</sup>

The opposition was obviously so strong that the delegation from Metangula had to apologize for its request, saying that it had been a mistake to use the word “urgent.”<sup>59</sup> What can be understood as a call for self-censorship was even more explicitly expressed by Governor Manave at this meeting in relation to the issue of the political mobilization of the people. Several reports had pointed out the problems of mobilizing people for certain political ends. The governor commented as follows: “You all don’t analyze your reports when you make them for the Minister of the Interior ... If the population does not show up for [political] rallies, is that supposed to be the fault of the comrade minister? Why do you mention this [lack of mobilization] in your reports? That the comrade minister comes here to mobilize?”<sup>60</sup>

Reflecting on this period, the Mozambican author Pedro Chissano (2007: 9) referred to post-colonial Niassa Province as a “police state” that was “relentlessly commanded by Colonel Manave.” Similarly, Benedito Marime (2007: 30), who worked for the state in Niassa at the time, described Manave’s rule as “autocratic, tending to be dictatorial and even despotic.” Despite their authoritarian behavior, Frelimo’s leadership initially still seem to have had the drive to demonstrate the existence of flat hierarchies on a symbolic level, for in the first years after independence, they were still often addressed as “comrades.” This changed around 1978/1979 when suddenly all documents and speeches began to address them as “excellencies” and *senhores* as in colonial times.<sup>61</sup>

58 APGGN, 1A: Acta sobre o relatório do Distrito de Metangula, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 23, 1976), 1.

59 APGGN, 1A: Acta sobre o relatório do Distrito de Metangula, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 23, 1976), 3.

60 APGGN, 1A: Síntese do Relatório do Distrito de Maúá, Primeira Reunião de Administradores, Comissários Políticos e Grupos Dinamizadores dos Distritos da Província do Niassa (Lichinga, May 19, 1976), 2.

61 For examples, see: APGGN, 1A: Visita do Camarada Governador da Província do Niassa aos Distritos: Mensagem de Recepção ao CDA Governador (Metangula, April 15, 1976); APGGN, QJ: Relatório de Visita de Trabalho, do Camarada Governador Aurélio Benete Manave ao Distrito de Sanga, de 21 a 24 de Setembro de 1977 (Lichinga, September 30, 1977); APGGN, QJ: Acta da 1a. Sessão, Primeiro Seminário Provincial das Aldeias Comuns e Cooperativas, 1977 (Lichinga, 1977); APGGN, 1A: Síntese da Visita de Trabalho Realizada por Sua Excelência o Governador da Província do Niassa, Coronel Aurélio Benete Manave, à Base Naval de Metangula no Distrito do Lago, nos Dias 28 a 29 de Janeiro de 1982, n.d.; APGGN, 1A: Gabinete do Governador, “Relatório da Visita à Empresa Agrícola

Frelimo's top-down approach to governance certainly contributed to the fact that many of its (progressive) political messages reached the lower levels of the state only as empty phrases. This is perhaps best illustrated by the closing remarks of the provincial representative at the end of the first session of Metangula's newly established district assembly in 1979:

We congratulate the participants for the decisions that they have made, and that must now be materialized. Our people know that this district meeting is taking place, and they are waiting for the fruits of it. Because they were the ones who sent us. The *senhor deputados* have to keep this in mind. We here knew that we had to focus on all the problems, and we have focused on them because we want to overcome these very same [problems]. Overcoming them requires the efforts of each one of us in the service of the people. That is why it is necessary for us to live in communal villages.<sup>62</sup>

When one considers how unpopular the idea of collectivization had become in the region and that all the decisions taken at this meeting were unanimous, it becomes even clearer how little democratic content these empty words had in reality. The representation of the people of Niassa was also not helped by the fact that the administration continued to be dominated by personnel from outside the province. Of the forty-six employees of the administration of Niassa's districts in 1977, only six had been born in Niassa. Five of them had been in the civil service since colonial times. Of the twelve new hires since independence, only one was from Niassa, a final testament to how little remained of the alleged social revolution in Niassa's liberated zones.<sup>63</sup>

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de Unango, efectuado por Sua Excelência o Governador da Província do Niassa Aurélio Benete Manave," February 3, 1982. According to Benedito Marime (Marime 2007:23, note 26), it was Machel's statements at a meeting with the workers of the Central Hospital of Maputo in December 1979 that brought about this change. However, documents from the APGGN suggest that this change had already begun somewhat earlier. For Machel's statements at this meeting, see: "Nos hospitais: 'Liquidar influências pequeno-burguesas'. Presidente Samora Machel em reunião com trabalhadores da saúde," Tempo, no. 478 (December 9, 1979): 37–39. For sources indicating that the change may have begun earlier, see: APGGN, 1A: Assembleia Provincial VI Sessão: Síntese da Sessão (Lichinga, December 3, 1979); APGGN, 1A: Seminário de Estudo da Nova Política Fiscal: Documento Final (Lichinga, March 19, 1978).

62 APGGN, 1A: Paulino Hamela and Luís João Pedro, "Relatório da Brigada de Apoio à 1 Sessão da Assembleia Distrital do Lago" (Lichinga, February 22, 1979), 7.

63 APGGN, 1A: Salomão Cossa, "Mapa com os elementos respeitantes aos trabalhadores dos serviços de Administração Civil, em serviço nesta província" (Lichinga, June 2, 1977).

## 7 Conclusion

In Metangula, the capital of Lago District, the celebration of Mozambican Independence spanned five days. The festivities concluded with the final match of a football tournament. The trophy for this competition, titled “Independence of Mozambique,” was won by the team “Benfica de Metangula,” a name obviously inspired by the famous Lisbon club.<sup>64</sup> This is another illustrative example of the kind of political, social, economic and, in this case, cultural legacies that the new nation had to deal with. It is, of course, naive to believe that a complete break with the past would have been possible. But in the absence of thorough analyses of the decolonization processes in most places, our expectations and assumptions often remain inaccurate.

This article has hopefully contributed to complicating some of these assumptions and stimulating reflection on others. It has shown that there were indeed many surprising continuities in Niassa after independence, especially when it came to the administration and its staff, but also regarding taxation and villagization. Indeed, as I argue elsewhere, many people perceived the process of decolonization as a kind of “flag independence” in the sense that this expressed their disappointment at unfulfilled expectations (Zeman 2023c: 315, 337). But the new post-colonial order was definitely different from the old one in other ways, as exemplified in this article by the proliferation of new platforms for political debate and education. However, the missing flag on the Mozambican periphery is emblematic of the fact that this was not an order that came directly from the areas allegedly liberated in the course of the war. This article hopes to have made clear that, at least in the case of Niassa, Frelimo’s liberated zones were in reality only a very thin shadow of the extensive propaganda. In Niassa, the new order emanated from the former (urban) centers of the colonial state. Furthermore, it was disseminated in a very authoritarian manner and mainly through the channels of the old colonial structure.

The course of the War of Independence did not facilitate the transition of power in Niassa. On the contrary, there is much to suggest that it made it more difficult, given the divisions and mutual suspicions it had created among the population. However, much more research is still needed to follow these processes closely in Niassa and elsewhere. It would be particularly interesting to learn more about developments in the war zones of Cabo Delgado and Tete, where, according to Portuguese military and intelligence reports, Frelimo

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64 APGGN, QJ: Alfredo Filimone Lituri, “Cópia do Diário de Serviço, mês de Junho 1975” (Metangula, July 10, 1975).

was much more successful in repelling Portuguese counterinsurgency efforts (Zeman 2023a: 119; Zeman 2023b: 220–225). We can also assume that the reality of the liberated zones of Cabo Delgado was indeed somewhat closer to the propaganda, and that the “revolutionary” practices developed there during the war may indeed have had a more direct influence on the policies of the new post-independence government, and thus also indirectly found their way to Niassa. However, to convincingly affirm these continuities beyond the prevailing propaganda narratives, in-depth research would undoubtedly be required in the areas concerned. As this article hopes to have demonstrated, such future research should also try to make use of post-colonial archives.

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