

## Remembering Ruth First at the CEA

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Ruth changed in Mozambique; she softened. I think she belonged in Mozambique in a way that she never belonged to England. It was her home, and she meant something to that society. (Gillian Slovo, interview, 1989)

This article traces the evolution of research at the Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA) from before the time of Ruth First's arrival. It divides her work there into two periods: the work on the Mozambican Miner, in which she was heavily involved personally, and the later period when she was much more involved in recruiting permanent staff and in creating conditions for successful research, including building up the Documentation Centre within the CEA. This objective included work on maintaining the administrative independence of the CEA within the university to ensure flexibility in responding to rapidly changing research conditions. Research was not simply determined by political priorities, although it engaged with them. The evolution of the key Development Course is also traced, and the work of the Oficina de Historia (History Workshop) is briefly described.

**Keywords:** Mozambique; Centro de Estudos Africanos; Ruth First; Research; Pedagogy; Documentation

[Se souvenir de Ruth First au Centro de Estudos Africanos.]

Ruth a changé au Mozambique ; elle s'est adoucie. Je pense qu'elle appartenait au Mozambique comme elle n'a jamais appartenu à l'Angleterre. C'était chez elle, et elle comptait pour la société mozambicaine. (Gillian Slovo, entretien, 1989)

Cet article trace l'évolution des recherches au Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA) en commençant avant l'arrivée de Ruth First. Il divise le travail de Ruth en deux périodes : le travail sur le mineur mozambicain, dans lequel elle était personnellement profondément impliquée, et la période ultérieure lorsqu'elle était bien plus impliquée dans le recrutement de personnel permanent du CEA, et dans l'établissement de conditions pour un travail de recherche réussi, notamment dans la construction du Centre de documentation du CEA. Pour atteindre cet objectif, il fallait tenter de maintenir l'indépendance administrative du CEA au sein de l'université, afin de garantir la flexibilité nécessaire pour répondre aux conditions du travail de recherche qui évoluent rapidement. Le travail de recherche n'était pas simplement déterminé par les priorités politiques, bien que des collaborations existaient. L'évolution du cours sur le développement, qui était primordial, est également retracée, et le travail de l'Oficina de Historia (Atelier d'histoire) est décrit brièvement.

**Mots-clés :** Mozambique ; Centro de Estudos Africanos ; Ruth First ; recherches ; pédagogie ; documentation

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I was one of a small group of academics recruited by Ruth First in 1978, when she was about to take up her position as Research Director at the Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA). An announcement had circulated from hand to hand at the University of Dar es Salaam earlier in the year, saying that the CEA was looking for a documentalist, among other specialists. I applied and got the job, partly, I believe, because I was already becoming active academically as a social scientist, as well as having library experience. Right from the beginning Ruth clearly understood that the new research centre required solid and well-organised access to all kinds of literature, and that for students learning the skills of critical reading was as important as practising fieldwork. She made sure that funding was available to buy books and journals, that space and shelving was available to store them, and that support staff were hired to help build what became over time an effective and tightly focused collection of printed and duplicated materials.

As a collective under Ruth's leadership, the CEA quickly developed a set of practices, and a critical perspective, that set it apart from most other academic research centres. There may even have been something like a 'Mozambican school' in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, characterised by an overarching view of southern Africa as a region, critical engagement with revolutionary change and a strong commitment to collective work methods.

Our first meeting in Mozambique was at the airport when I arrived from Tanzania in February 1979. Like most *cooperantes*, I had visa problems and Ruth herself came to sort them out, although her Portuguese was not especially fluent at the time. After four hours or so, much of which she spent on the telephone to the 'structures', I was finally admitted to the People's Republic of Mozambique. I was to discover that this was typical of Ruth's loyalty to and strong sense of comradeship with the people she worked alongside; she fought tenaciously and successfully to keep the CEA independent of the bureaucracy at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, so that we could respond efficiently and rapidly to the needs of our teaching and research programme.

The innovative matrix of research and teaching that Ruth directed in Mozambique is already fairly well documented in several articles published soon after her death (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982; Bragança and O'Laughlin 1984 [in English]; Bragança and O'Laughlin 1996 [in Portuguese]), as well as in such later work as the memoir by João Paulo Borges Coelho (2008) and research by the young Mozambican Carlos Fernandes (n.d., 2010 and 2011a, 2011b). These analyses vary in their focus on Ruth First as an academic leader and on the CEA as an institution.

In fact, the first research project of a CEA collective was conducted under the leadership of Aquino de Bragança at the time of the unsuccessful Geneva conference on Zimbabwe in late 1976. Mediated by the British, this meeting brought the Ian Smith government and various African nationalist parties to the table, to see if they could agree on a new constitution. The Centre was asked to produce a background paper on the country's political economy for an ad hoc 'patriotic front' of ZANU and ZAPU, and did so in short order. The original mimeographed study was later published as a book. Aquino pulled together a group of researchers based in different academic departments for several weeks of highly intensive work; they were not, however, full-time CEA cadres. The project established a broad precedent for a collective work style, and for critical engagement in urgent policy issues.

Ruth's work at the CEA can be divided into two periods, which are unequal in length but which are both important in understanding the development of the research and pedagogical methods that she pioneered in the most difficult of circumstances. The first period comprises her short-term stay in Maputo in 1977, on leave from the University of Durham, to lead the research project on the impact of the migrant labour system on the rural political

economy of southern Mozambique, and specifically Inhambane province, a project often referred to simply as ‘the Miner’. When Ruth directed the Miner research she had no administrative responsibilities in the CEA, so in Marc Wuyts’s words ‘she was able to run the project from start to finish . . . The miner absorbed all her energies and attention.’ (Marc Wuyts, personal communication, 3 June 2012.) This experience clearly influenced research methodologies developed after late 1978. At this time, CEA researchers, who numbered about 12 in all, still held academic posts in other faculties of the university, and were not permanent or full-time CEA employees. The Miner – and the even earlier research on Zimbabwe – differed from later projects in the way they were organised and in their detachment from any specific CEA teaching programme.

The second period began when Ruth took up a permanent position as Research Director of the CEA in late 1978, with Aquino de Bragança as Director. Aquino and Ruth had known each other for years, during the period when Aquino worked in Algiers at the *Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas* (CONCP), the coordinating body for the Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo), the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA), the *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC) and the *Movimento de Libertação de São Tomé e Príncipe* (MLSTP) in their struggles against Portuguese colonialism. Both of them were, of course, active journalists.

While heading the Centro, Aquino, who was known in Frelimo circles as ‘the submarine’, was often involved in low-profile diplomatic activity on delicate issues. To begin with there was little effective administrative support, so Ruth had to do an immense amount of running around making sure that we had enough stencils for the mimeograph machine, access to a photocopier, that we had enough office space and so on. As a result, she was significantly less directly involved in the day-to-day planning and execution of research activity from 1978 onwards. Instead, she assembled a permanent team of young Mozambicans and foreigners – *militantes de várias nacionalidades* in Aquino’s memorable internationalist phrase – as the permanent staff of the CEA.

I was not the only CEA cadre recruited from Dar es Salaam, where Ruth had been a guest lecturer earlier in the 1970s. Several other colleagues had also worked there, including Marc Wuyts, Jacques Depelchin, Gary Littlejohn and Anna Maria Gentili. Many of us, especially the Anglophones, had to learn Portuguese quickly and from scratch. I remember a debate that lasted several days about whether it was possible to translate the phrase ‘the withering-away of the state’ into comprehensible Portuguese. On another occasion, so the story goes, Ruth muddled the two words ‘pronto’ and ‘preto’, asking one of the Centre’s assistants whether he was ‘black’ rather than ‘ready’.

The CEA’s research agenda was not determined by the individual interests of its academic staff members, but rather by a concept of critically engaged social science practice. This was explicitly oriented towards making inputs into policy processes that aimed to change the Mozambican economy:

the choice of problems for research by the CEA has focused on problems of transforming production. These studies of production are important not only for the issues of transformation which they pose, but also for the ways in which they help in the building of a stronger historical understanding of the patterns of colonial exploitation from which transformation begins. The purpose of the Centre is thus to provide information on the present conditions of production in order to permit that concrete measures be devised to implement general strategy. Research problems are chosen . . . not only because they focus on particular problems in socialist development but also because the issues they raise can be drawn upon by organised structures within

government and Frelimo, who can not only respond to information, but also put it to work. (Members of the Centre of African Studies 1982, 31)

This broadly supportive approach to research provoked some hostility not just in neighbouring South Africa but also in other parts of the academic world, where it was wrongly interpreted as being simply determined by party priorities (this question is discussed elsewhere in this issue of *ROAPE*).

The Miner was a study of the supply end of a system of migrant labour, in Gaza and Inhambane provinces. It is important to remember that in the 1970s an extremely high proportion of the South African mine labour force was made up of men from Mozambique, Malawi and Lesotho. The study had a clear historical perspective, describing labour flows from 1902 onwards, as well as analysing how the system functioned in terms of the peasant economy south of the Save river. There were two versions of this work, aimed at different audiences. The 'Little Miner' was an English-language conference paper that Luís de Brito presented in Lusaka in 1978. The 'Big Miner' was the 200-page mimeographed report that the CEA published in both English and Portuguese. The Big Miner was subsequently published posthumously by Harvester under Ruth's name as *Black Gold* (First 1983). Finally, a carefully corrected Portuguese text appeared in Mozambique in the late 1990s under the editorship of Luís Covane, Colin Darch, David Hedges and Alpheus Manghezi (CEA 1998). The research found that most able-bodied men in the southern provinces went to the South African mines, given that agricultural yields were so low that a mutual interdependence had developed between peasant production and labour migration, supported by Portuguese policy. Hence the dependence of family agriculture on mine labour remittances was so strong that only a complete transformation of agricultural production would allow for a radical break.

Ruth had the ability to stretch her colleagues within the collective mode, to push them into new areas of work. When the edition of *Black Gold* was being prepared, she called me into her office one day and asked me to draft a couple of sections, including a literature survey with an emphasis on working conditions and health and safety. 'But I don't know anything about health and safety in the South African mines,' I protested. Ruth was having none of that: 'Now's your chance to learn,' she replied. I wrote the draft.

In many ways, the jewel in the CEA crown in this second phase of Ruth's work in the Centre was the Development Course for state and party cadres. The fundamental idea was not to impart a body of knowledge as such, but rather to teach young cadres how to analyse problems in such a way that they could later help to develop policies for revolutionary transformation. Students were not selected according to traditional academic criteria alone, but also for their positions within state and party structures; some were therefore formally 'unqualified' for postgraduate studies. In the end this was one of the reasons, despite Ruth's best efforts, that graduates were not awarded diplomas, but only certificates of completion.

The methods included group teaching where all the staff were present in the classroom for lectures. There were also small tutorial groups on such topics as Marxist theory – and lots of fieldwork for the collection of data. Well into the early 1980s, and even after Ruth's murder this was still possible, before the *bandidos armados*, as Renamo was known, made it too dangerous. Another important principle was to allow students to make their own mistakes. The first iteration of the course, without a diploma, ran for two years in 1979–1980, but in 1981 it was reduced to one year. By the third time around, in the year that Ruth was murdered, the course had been partially broken up into special modules for e.g. the banking sector, although the big topics such as 'Empirical Methods' and 'Political Economy of

Southern Africa' continued as before. Part of the reason for this was the difficulty of identifying suitably placed students with either sufficient experience or education (a question discussed elsewhere in this issue).

Although the Centre did undertake relatively small-scale research on such subjects as unemployment, the presence of the students enabled us to carry out much bigger and more ambitious projects. One of these was the investigation on cotton, undertaken jointly with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. The study integrated agricultural as well as industrial aspects. It consisted of two rural investigations in Nampula and Zambezia, two factory studies in the Texmoque and Texlom companies, and systematic analyses of documentary and statistical sources. The reports or *relatórios* were published in 1979, 1980 and 1981, with the last contribution from Norway appearing in 1982. One of the reports caused significant irritation at high levels within the Party because it identified the use of child labour in cotton plantations and a small number of copies included a photograph of children queuing up to be paid – these were withdrawn (see the discussion in the article by O'Laughlin, this issue). Ruth, of course, never hesitated to write what she found, and her practice in Mozambique in support of the revolution was no different from her practice in South Africa as an implacable foe of apartheid. She combined academic and theoretical rigour with the urgency and sense of immediacy of the working journalist.

It is important to mention the CEA's historical work in the Oficina – the first time the Portuguese word for a workshop had been used in an academic sense. Ruth was not a historian but she understood that socialist transformation could only start from historical understanding. The work of the Oficina de Historia (History Workshop) – which included participants from outside the Center and even the university – focused initially on the history of the armed struggle but quickly expanded to cover such areas as cultural history and gender as well. It began with a series of weekly seminars; most of the presentations have now unfortunately been lost. These included, for instance, unpublished joint research by Paulo Soares and Malangatana on art and politics in the struggle, and an anthology of articles from the early nationalist newspaper *O Africano* (Soares and Zamparoni 1992). The Oficina published the short-lived periodical *Não Vamos Esquecer* (Let Us Not Forget), and conducted field research in the former liberated zones of Cabo Delgado. The research brigades included Anna Maria Gentili, Jacques Depelchin, Yussuf Adamo and myself as well as many students.

The CEA's research at its best was critically engaged investigation, emancipatory in Habermas's sense, not a mere exercise in positivism. The purpose was, precisely, to help to change things. This approach was not always well received by Africanists in the global north. To cite an example, in an article published in the late 1980s, Tom Young of SOAS bemoaned how little was known about Angolan and Mozambican reality. The problem for Young was that the best-informed literature at the time was being produced by 'red-feet' (a derogatory term for progressive academics in institutions such as the Centre). This material, he wrote, 'though often useful, has to be assessed cautiously and critically' (Young 1988, 165). Presumably other work could simply be taken on trust.

Ruth's work and her methods of analysis are not forgotten. Publications have continued to appear well into the 1990s and 2000s that owe much to her style of work (Davies, O'Meara, and Dhlamini 1984, 1988; Darch 1987; Wuyts 1989; Manghezi 2003a, 2003b to name a few). There may or may not have been a Mozambican 'school', but the view of the southern African region as a system, with its own regional dynamic, was an essential characteristic of the CEA's approach.

### Note on contributor

Colin Darch worked at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1975 to 1978 and at the Centro de Estudos Africanos, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane from 1979 to 1987. He has a PhD from the now defunct School of Social and Economic Studies at the University of Bradford and is a qualified librarian. He retired from the University of Cape Town in August 2013 and is now working on issues around the political economy of intellectual property, transparency and access to information. His book *Freedom of Information and the Developing World*, co-authored with Peter G. Underwood, appeared in 2010.

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