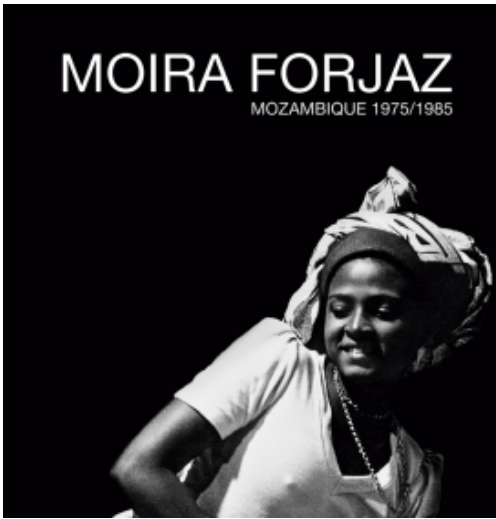


Moira Forjaz, *Mozambique, 1975-1985* (Auckland Park: Fanele, 2015) 241 pages, illustrations. ISBN 978-1-928232-16-2.



Art has been politics in Mozambique ever since the early twentieth century. As Hedges and Chilundo wrote in 1993, in the late colonial period “political channels for the expression of direct protest were closed [and] cultural life constituted one of the main fronts of opposition to colonial-fascist domination. Forms of social observation, analysis and ideology developed within this area and later contributed significantly towards the education and

motivation of participants in the liberation struggle.” Hedges and Chilundo continued:

The tales that were told in family circles, the songs of peasants in the countryside and workers in the ports, the carvings and masks, paintings, and oral and written literature, acted as channels for the transmission of social values and became forms of social criticism and protest against colonialism. Such forms of expression were even more viable since to a large extent they were incomprehensible to the colonialists who thought local languages and culture were of little value.¹

It is because of this tradition of art as a form—and sometimes *the only* form—of political and nationalist intervention that photography as a medium is taken so seriously in Mozambique, *both* aesthetically *and* politically. And it is in this tradition, I believe, that we should understand this

¹David Hedges and Arlindo Chilundo, “A Contestação Cultural” in *História de Moçambique. Vol. 3: Moçambique no Auge do Colonialismo, 1930-1961* (Maputo: Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, 1993), 222 [my translation].

book of photographs by Moira Forjaz, so carefully framed in terms of both its subjects and its chronology.

The author was born in Bulawayo and studied graphic arts in Johannesburg, moving to Mozambique at independence in 1975 to work as a photographer and film-maker. She belongs to the generation of Mozambican (and indeed, southern African) photographers whose work changed the way our region was seen by the world. In Mozambique especially, these personalities included Ricardo Rangel (1924-2009) and Kok Nam (1939-2012), as well as many others. Bruno Z'Graggen wrote of this tradition in 2002 that

Mozambican photography is photo reporting with commitment. It depicts people with respect and focuses on them with dignity. Characterised by empathy and precision, it tells of many-faceted worlds and denounces injustice. It encompasses the [... colonial period], the '50s, the war of independence and the separation from Portugal in 1975, the civil war, the peace agreement of 1992 and the departure into a new and more promising future. Its approach renders it immune against being high jacked by powerful interest groups. It has become a moral authority and helps create an identity in post-colonial Mozambique.²

Although Moira Forjaz's documentary photographs can certainly be appreciated as a series of stand-alone images, the pictures published in this book emerge from a highly specific historical context. After ten years of traumatic armed struggle against the Portuguese, in 1975 the liberation movement, Frelimo, under the leadership of its charismatic president Samora Machel, launched an ambitious post-independence project, aiming to transform society for the benefit of all its citizens. Machel died in mysterious circumstances in a plane crash at Mbuzini in 1986. These photographs, from precisely that short window of socialist transformation, may therefore in some sense be seen as representations of a "revolutionary gaze" focussed on specific aspects of the Mozambican experience. From 1986 onwards, after Mbuzini, the direction of government policy changed sharply: a structural adjustment

²Bruno Z'Graggen, *Iluminando Vidas: Ricardo Rangel e a Fotografia Moçambicana* (Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag, 2002), 7.

programme was adopted, multi-party elections were introduced, and revolutionary Marxism-Leninism was dropped as official ideology.

The book consists of carefully printed, uncropped black-and-white photographs with narrow black framing, organised into seven broad categories, and introduced in some but not all cases with a page or two of commentary by people who were living in Mozambique in the decade after independence. The themes—the Ilha de Moçambique; people; mine workers; the wives; cotton; coal miners; and music—partially echo, and probably not by coincidence, the primary interests of the research programmes carried out by members of the Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA), which was directed until her assassination in August 1982 by Forjaz’s close friend Ruth First. Two of the introductory texts to the sections are written by former CEA staff members: Alpheus Manghezi (mine workers) and Bridget O’Laughlin (cotton). I would guess that the two translated songs by miners’ wives printed on page 139 were also contributed by Manghezi.³

The decade when the photographs in this book were taken—the ten years framed by the attainment of national independence and the abandonment of the socialist project—as well as the book’s dominant organising themes, present the reader without excessive emphasis or explanation with a particular perspective. This perspective is informed by an understanding of the political economy *and the culture* of the country as it was inherited from Portuguese colonialism, as well as of Frelimo’s struggles for social and economic transformation. For example, Forjaz includes a section of photographs of miners, and another of “the wives.” The mine workers from the southern provinces, half-peasant and half-proletarian, were ensnared for decades in the system of migrant labour to the Rand; their wives, probably married with *lobola* earned on those very mines, were left to farm and raise children at home, so that South African capital could avoid the cost of what Marxists would call “the reproduction of the working class” and thus protect their profits. As mentioned, there is also a section of images entitled “Cotton.” The forced cultivation of cotton, a crop known to Mozambican peasants as “the mother of poverty,” fuelled great resentment in the colonial period, and Frelimo tried unsuccessfully to use cotton cultivation after 1975 as the

³In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I lived in Mozambique between 1979 and 1987, and worked as a staff member of the Centro de Estudos Africanos, where Ruth First was research director until her assassination in 1982.

motor for the industrialisation of the textile industry. Forjaz's images are redolent of this history of exploitation and liberation.

Nevertheless, as an artist Forjaz understands clearly that political economy is not the whole story, and there are collections of photographs on music and on the extraordinary heritage of the Ilha de Moçambique, where lessons in Mozambican history are compressed into the architecture, cuisine and traditions of a space of a little over one square kilometre. But Forjaz's photography, despite its political character, is far from being propagandistic. She has a sharp eye for the humanity of her subjects, and indeed it is abundantly clear from both text and image that the photographer empathises deeply with her subjects, both individually, and collectively as the "povo." The pictures are virtually all of people, and even the landscapes are populated, sometimes with just a single isolated figure.

There is, for example, a photograph of Samora Machel, apparently listening to his interpreter during a conversation with then President Canaan Banana of Zimbabwe. Machel's expression is a mixture of amusement and uncertainty. On the following page, Forjaz prints a photograph of Machel between Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe, holding their arms aloft in a gesture of triumph for an audience behind the photographer. Mugabe, glancing sideways, his free hand in his pocket, exudes embarrassment and discomfort. The pictures of mine-workers returning home with portable radios and guitars and broad-brimmed hats capture both their exhaustion and their relief.

There is a moving and iconic portrait of the hugely influential Mozambican photographer Ricardo Rangel. He was the first black photographer to work for a Mozambican newspaper in the early 1950s, and during a long career became the doyen of Mozambican photographers. His best known works are probably his powerful studies of prostitutes and bar-girls in the Rua de Araújo—extraordinary examples of the kind of social criticism and protest against colonialism mentioned above. They were published in book form as *Pão Nosso de Cada Noite* (an inversion of the phrase from the Lord's Prayer—"Give us this day our nightly bread").⁴

⁴Ricardo Rangel, *Pão Nosso de Cada Noite* (Maputo: Marimbique, 2004).

But the book is not only about the famous. Forjaz also includes many images of anonymous, ordinary Mozambicans going about their daily lives. There is a photograph of perhaps a dozen women carrying large cans of water back to the village on their heads, some coming, some going, along a path that stretches into the distance down the middle of the frame. There is another of a male worker carrying a large sack of cotton up a kind of staircase of cotton sacks to the top of a huge pile, the only light coming from a narrow opening between the top of the warehouse wall and the roof. There are other images of a village child dancing, a smiling woman with her baby, an old Portuguese man with a wrinkled face reading the newspaper, and one of a musical evening at Forjaz's own house. And, of course, a well-known photograph of Ruth First on a field trip to Nampula, sitting with a small group of researchers, frowning slightly as she concentrates on the conversation.

When Kok Nam died in 2012, the novelist Armando Artur described him wandering the ordinary places of Mozambique with a fine disregard for protocol, and “capturing extraordinary moments in the daily lives of Mozambicans through the lens of his camera.”⁵ This is what Moira Forjaz has also achieved of this book.

—*Colin Darch*

⁵Notícias, Maputo (18 August 2012).