Feminist Masquerades and Soccer in the Makonde Plateau

Rui Assubuji

**Aviso**
São avisar todos genê em geral que no domingo avery jogo éile: Moçambique/Nigéria pelas 14h. Por isso o clube Gibôla emissor éile 3,00€. Vem dineria nômulco Gibôla.
In early 1975, in the lead up to Independence in Mozambique, a group of women guerrillas stationed at the northerly Beira base took advantage of the idleness of the moment and came up with a provocation in the domain of culture. They prepared a mask all but identical to the legendary *mapiko*—a secretive masquerade traditionally reserved to adult initiated men—dressing a woman in the same way in which a man would be, with only one difference: instead of using a wooden mask they rolled a cloth around the dancer’s face. They rehearsed the dance in the depth of the bush and then presented it to a bewildered audience of soldiers on the anniversary of Eduardo Mondlane’s death. It was called *lingundumbwe*. This bold invention drew from the women’s experiences in the *Destacamento Feminino*, the women’s corps created in 1966 to further the cause of gender transformation in the people’s war, as well as from older cosmopolitan dances from the colonial era.

In the wake of Independence, the socialist government in Mozambique promoted the construction of communal villages, “cities in the bush” which should facilitate rural development as well as the rooting of the revolutionary mentality and the institutions of people’s power. In the Makonde plateau, heartland of the liberation struggle, dozens of communal villages mushroomed in the space of a few years. The villages were built following a precise plan, with all the houses arranged in lines, each with a spacious yard, and a broad central plaza devoted to communal activities: politics, dance, and sports. On Sundays and national holidays, the people gathered there to celebrate and mingle: listening to political speeches below the podium facing the party house, then bringing out the drums to boom under the mango trees, both boys and girls competing in soccer tournaments in the sports field.
In the vibrant milieu of the communal villages, dances and cultural practices proliferated and circulated. The feminist dance of the faceless mask spread amongst the women who had fought the liberation struggle and who wanted to rememorate their deeds and channel their hopes for a new future. But the dance soon awoke the men’s wrath. The men considered it offensive and encroaching and fought it with all means: in the domestic space, by using marital authority and sometimes even violence to forbid the women to dance; and in public, by demanding that the government ban the dance and threatening to drop their own mapiko masks if such ban would not be not enforced. Some women gave in, moving on to a new kind of dance called utamaduni, which maintained only a vague resemblance to the original. Others resisted and fought back, knowing that when a lingundumbwe dances it will draw crowds away from its masculine rival.

In the new millennium only a few lingundumbwe groups have survived the end of socialism and the onslaught of masculine chauvinism. One of these is the group based in the town of Mueda, captured in Rui Assubuji’s vibrant photographs. Feeling not sufficiently protected by the State, the group mostly dances for tourists or private patrons. Their dancing choreographies depict both the heroic history of the liberation struggle and everyday snapshots of village and town life. In 2009, with the first African FIFA world cup forthcoming, a special choreography was devoted to penalty-shooting—also a way of cheekily referencing the intrusion of women in a domain traditionally reserved to men.

If lingundumbwe dance styles are cheeky and playful, its songs have a more melancholic quality. They evoke the demise of the dream of gendered revolution in Mozambique, iconically condensed in the tragic figure of the lost heroine, Josina Machel:

Be still so I can tell you
Josina’s farewell
In the year when she died
Josina’s farewell:
“Don't forsake culture
But envious speech and sorcery, drop them
Take care of yourselves, you orphans”
And truly we are orphans
We no longer have a leader
We don't even have quarters
Take care of yourselves, you orphans