

## Prologue

# The Challenge of Representation

Samora Machel is remembered as Mozambique's first president and one of a number of assassinated prominent African leaders, such as Patrice Lumumba (Congo), Amílcar Cabral (Guinea-Bissau), and Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso). For Mozambicans, he was the head of FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the guerrilla army that, against great odds, brought freedom to their homeland, but on the international scene he was much more.

Throughout southern Africa, Samora was a hero to the oppressed. His military successes against a colonial regime buttressed by South Africa, Rhodesia, the United States, and its NATO allies enhanced his revolutionary reputation. His support for Zimbabwean liberation forces and the African National Congress, which came at great cost to his nation, further elevated his stature. To the settler government ruling Rhodesia and South Africa's apartheid regime, he was the embodiment of evil—a powerful black man committed to building a nonracialist socialist society on their borders.

Samora also enjoyed international prominence far beyond Mozambique's significance. In 1975, when Mozambique became independent, the world looked appreciably different than it does today. Revolutionary

movements with radical socialist agendas were on the rise. Cuba had withstood American efforts to destroy its revolution, the United States had been defeated in Vietnam, the Sandinistas had come to power in Nicaragua, and the winds of change were threatening to sweep away settler governments in southern Africa. Samora was part of a new generation of revolutionary leaders—Fidel Castro, Daniel Ortega, Michael Manley, and Yasser Arafat—with whom he shared a common vision and warm friendships.

For China and Russia, which supported FRELIMO during the armed struggle, Samora was an important ally helping to counter the West's influence in Africa. After independence, however, the Soviets never completely trusted him—he was too independent, refusing to follow the dogmatic Marxist-Leninist line or support Moscow in its battles with Beijing. By contrast, the NATO countries tracked Samora's rise to power with concern. The United States viewed Mozambique through the same Cold War prism as the Soviets, but for Washington he posed a threat to America's growing interest in Africa. Samora also played an important role in the Non-Aligned Movement, where he took a militantly anti-imperialist stance and fervently opposed both Eastern and Western attempts at global hegemony.

By the 1980s, however, Samora's standing, both domestically and internationally, had suffered. Nevertheless, he still posed such a significant threat to the apartheid regime and its allies that South African officials plotted to eliminate him. On October 19, 1986, he died in a mysterious plane crash.

His passing was a terrible loss to the country and the region, as well as for those throughout the world who shared his ideals. We were among them.

We learned of Samora's death the following night, well after midnight in Minneapolis, by a telephone call from Roberta Washington, a dear friend and fellow *cooperante* with whom we had worked closely in Mozambique. In a subdued voice, she told us that Samora Moises Machel and many of his closest advisers had died when the plane carrying them back from Zambia smashed into a mountainside in Mbuzini, South Africa.

During the two years (1978–79) that we lived in Mozambique with our two young sons, we had gotten to know Samora, whom we admired greatly, both from afar and through various personal interactions. Among those who lost their lives that night were many close Mozambican friends who were like family to us, including Aquino de Bragança and Fernando Honwana. We mourn their loss to this day.

Our relationship with Mozambique and its people had begun decades earlier. In 1968, we traveled to the then-Portuguese colony so Allen could conduct research for his doctoral dissertation. He had selected Mozambique partly because of his desire to help liberate its past from the cultural arrogance and racist assumptions that framed the colonial representation of the Mozambican people. For too long, their experiences had resided in the shadow of historical scholarship that focused almost exclusively on the Portuguese.

As activists at the University of Wisconsin in the early 1960s committed to social justice, the civil rights movement, the antiwar campaign, and the efforts to

dismantle the apartheid regime, the armed struggle being waged by FRELIMO to end centuries of Portuguese oppression intensified our interest in the colony. (In this study, “FRELIMO” refers to the liberation movement and “Frelimo” to the postindependence political party.) Happily, Portuguese authorities were unaware of our politics. We only received clearance because a high-ranking Portuguese official believed we would discover there that Lisbon was pursuing a benign multiracial social experiment known as “lusotropicalism.” Since colonial authorities were convinced that illiterate Africans had no real history and we would only be studying “myths and legends,” Allen’s research appeared to pose no threat to the status quo.

Once in the interior, however, a sympathetic colonial administrator alerted us that the notorious secret police known as PIDE (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado) were following us. His warning came after we created a ruckus in the small interior town of Sena, where we were renting a room in the rear of the local bar. In violation of social conventions, we had encouraged our translator to use our bathroom, which we shared with the owner’s family, rather than relieving himself outdoors. The owner’s wife was furious, publicly berating us about the dangers of allowing uncivilized *pretos* (blacks) to use European bathrooms. The next day, PIDE agents questioned those who had witnessed this exchange. After independence, we discovered that this interrogation was not an isolated incident. In the archives was a lengthy PIDE report describing how PIDE agents had shown up to question the Africans with whom we spoke in every village we visited.

Such an incident, although largely insignificant, revealed the inherently exploitative and degrading nature of Portuguese colonialism. When colonial officials, loyalist chiefs, and known informers were not present, elders across the Zambezi Valley described in detail the abuses experienced on a regular basis.<sup>1</sup> We learned how, under Portugal's forced labor regime (*chibalo*), which the elders characterized as a modern-day form of slavery, colonial administrators compelled Africans to work for six-month periods for little or no pay on public works projects and European plantations, farms, and mines. Those trying to run away were beaten and jailed. Even compliance, however, did not protect them from the overseers' physical abuses. The tattered rags many villagers wore and the malnourished and uneducated children we encountered daily stood in sharp contrast to the luxuries enjoyed by the settler community.

For most Africans living in Lourenço Marques, the colonial capital, or Beira, the colony's second-largest city, life was only marginally better. We regularly witnessed Africans being slapped, humiliated, even arrested for behavior considered inappropriate. We walked through teeming *subúrbios* (shantytowns) crowded with reed huts (*caniços*) that lacked running water, a sewage system, proper drainage, and other basic infrastructure. The cities where Europeans lived were off-limits to almost all Africans except during working hours.<sup>2</sup> The informal but vigorously enforced color bar limited educational and job opportunities for the majority of the African population. Racial intermarriage was frowned upon, although many Europeans frequented the red-light district. All these indignities revealed the true nature of "lusotropicalism."

Of course, a small number of Africans escaped the most dehumanizing colonial practices. We encountered *assimilados* and African bureaucrats with European *padrinhos* (patrons) who had acquired cement houses on the edges of the European cities and were able to provide their children with more than a rudimentary education.<sup>3</sup> Samora's family members were *assimilados*, as was his widow, Graça Machel, who had been the only African student in her high school class.<sup>4</sup>

The modest economic and social reforms promulgated in the 1960s did not protect Africans from the whims of settlers, although not all Portuguese were abusive. In the privacy of their homes or in quiet cafes, a handful of Portuguese felt comfortable enough to openly criticize the fascist dictatorship of the late António Salazar. Some even acknowledged a certain sympathy for FRELIMO.

We could not remain silent, given the exploitative nature of what we observed during our year in Mozambique. Upon our return to the United States in 1970, Allen met with Sharfudin Khan, FRELIMO representative to the United Nations, to offer support and joined the fledgling Committee for a Free Mozambique. When the book based on his dissertation won the 1974 African Studies Association's Herskovits Prize, he donated a portion of the prize money to FRELIMO and, more importantly, pushed the ASA to condemn Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, and São Tomé. In June 1975, Allen appeared before the US Congress to condemn American support for the Lisbon government, and he subsequently testified at congressional

subcommittee hearings on the situation in postindependence Mozambique.

On June 25, 1975, Mozambique, under Frelimo's leadership, gained independence and Samora Machel became its first president. Two years later, we were invited to teach at Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM), named for FRELIMO's first president, who had been assassinated by the Portuguese. The seventeen months we lived there were heady times, despite food shortages and long lines for bread and meat. The children on our block quickly befriended our two sons—partly because they had the only soccer ball in the neighborhood—and we, as well as other cooperantes, were treated as comrades and *progressistas*. Barbara worked for the Mozambican Women's Organization (OMM), wrote a book about the legal position of women in Mozambique as part of the United Nations Decade for Women, and taught labor law at the UEM's law faculty. Allen helped train the first generation of postindependence Mozambican historians. We were energized and committed to participating in the revolution. We believed anything was possible, even if it required us at times to suspend our critical faculties.

Under the auspices of the Office of the President we undertook several projects, including surveying the living and working conditions of Western cooperantes and serving as liaisons with Business International, a Western-based organization promoting investments across the world. Allen and his colleague Iain Christie conducted a five-hour interview with Samora that appeared in several Western newspapers and journals. We also met periodically with President Machel and came

away impressed with his energy, intellect, and deep commitment to ending social injustice.

Samora had a wry sense of humor, a big ego, and loved to hold court. On one occasion, the American cooperantes living in Maputo made a donation to help rebuild a village attacked by US mercenaries working for the white settler regime in neighboring Rhodesia. We stood in a receiving line and, as Samora walked by with his entourage, he introduced Barbara as “Allen Isaacman’s wife,” to which Barbara replied, “No, he is my husband.” Samora laughed and nodded approvingly to the entourage accompanying him.

Upon our return home in 1979, we continued to support Mozambique and its socialist project. We organized the Mozambican Education Fund—which to our surprise was granted tax-exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service—through which we sent several thousand badly need books to rural schools established after independence. We also worked closely with Valeriano Ferrão, Mozambique’s ambassador to the United States, to mobilize opposition to the increasing aggression of South Africa and its surrogates inside Mozambique.<sup>5</sup>

Barbara returned to Mozambique periodically and was a guest at the 1982 OMM conference. At the Frelimo-organized reception, President Machel greeted her and asked where Allen was. When she told him that her husband was, of course, at home caring for their children, he laughed and responded, “You see, we have something to learn from you Americans.” Around the same time, Barbara’s book *Women, the Law and Agrarian Change*, co-written with June Stephens, was translated into Portuguese and read widely throughout the country.

For the next several years Allen spent most summers in Mozambique collecting oral histories. At the end of every visit he met with President Machel and other government officials to discuss conditions in the countryside and politics in the United States. While his critique of Frelimo's disregard for rural culture and history sometimes fell on deaf ears—on one occasion a party ideologue dismissed his criticisms as the idealistic views of an "*Africanista*"—Samora always gave his full attention to Allen's accounts of the abuses of power, incompetence, and corruption he had witnessed. Samora made many errors and was quick to anger, but he also demonstrated the capacity to listen, challenge inherited orthodoxies, and engage in self-criticism.

We have sketched our connection with Mozambique and FRELIMO to underscore that we were both students of and witnesses to an important period in Mozambican history. We also hope to show how our interpretation of this history is informed by our personal experiences, politics, and somewhat different temperaments (Barbara was always somewhat more skeptical about FRELIMO's policies than Allen). In some ways, we are telling a life story where the relationship between authors and subjects is inseparable from the story told.<sup>6</sup>

Although we were partisans, we are also scholars who prize intellectual rigor and careful analysis. As engaged scholars, we are committed to challenging social hierarchies and oppressive institutions and the racist assumptions supporting them. Not content to critique the status quo, in our own small way we have sought to change it. We are driven by a mutually reinforcing intellectual and political commitment, and we reject the

notion that there is a singular authentic history. Our allegiance to scholarship and activism, however, poses a serious challenge. We recognize the problematic relationships between biographer and subject. Passionate commitments to worldly causes must not undermine the capacity to question or the willingness to criticize the causes and movements we support and the men and women we admire. Edward Said put it bluntly when he cautioned, “never solidarity before criticism.”<sup>7</sup>

In this social biography of Samora Machel we have tried to maintain that critical stance and avoid the tendency to romanticize a man we held in high regard. It has not been easy; some may conclude that we have not been successful. While we do not apologize for our stance, readers must recognize that our interpretations of this critical period in Mozambique’s history necessarily differ from those of people who criticized FRELIMO’s revolutionary agenda or actively opposed it.

In writing this biography, we have consulted both academic publications and a substantial body of unpublished primary material. The Centro de Documentação Samora Machel in Maputo houses a rich collection of Samora’s papers and other documents related to his family. The secret police (PIDE) files in the Arquivo Nacional de Torre de Tombo, while generally depicting Samora as a Marxist pawn of China or the Soviet Union, contain voluminous material on the FRELIMO leadership and its strategy. We were not able to review thousands of FRELIMO wartime documents that fell overboard into the Indian Ocean when FRELIMO transferred its office from Dar es Salaam to Maputo, nor the very substantial collection of documents from the armed struggle housed

in the FRELIMO archives, which are still not open to the public and would have supported a more comprehensive analysis of Samora's role.<sup>8</sup>

This study also relies on over twenty interviews with figures who had close relationships with Samora, collected by FRELIMO-sanctioned researchers in the wake of Samora's death and now deposited in the archives of the Centro de Documentação. We have also drawn on our interviews of members of his immediate family and several close advisers. To try to avoid the "bias of proximity," we spoke to former guerrilla fighters, peasants, Portuguese settlers, a rap singer, and a Portuguese priest; referenced material we collected in Mozambique over the past half-century; and consulted John Marcum's recently published *Conceiving Mozambique*, which contains detailed oral accounts from disenchanted former members of FRELIMO who studied in the United States. We intended to supplement this information with interviews of prominent Beira residents who were outspoken opponents of Samora, but two days before our scheduled flight to Beira in March 2019, Typhoon Ida devastated the city and surrounding areas, making that impossible.

The oral and written documents we consulted are all social texts that often contain multiple or contradictory meanings. Nostalgia, limits of memory, and the politics of forgetting complicate their construction. We are reminded of the often-cited admonition of the French anthropologist Marc Augé: "tell me what you forget and I will tell you who you are."<sup>9</sup> Understanding these complexities informs how we analyzed the texts themselves, the different perspectives of the authors, and their interpretations of events.

Two examples illustrate memory dissonance. When Samora and the platoon he led began training in Algeria, there were intense disagreements among the recruits on whether whites and South Asians born in Mozambique should be allowed to participate. On occasion, the debate precipitated conflict between Samora and another guerrilla who vehemently disagreed with Samora's insistence that one did not have to be either black or Mozambican to fight with FRELIMO. Raimundo Pachinuapa, Samora's political ally, described Samora physically subduing his rival. Jacob Jeremias Nyambir, who was also there, insisted that an older guerrilla, Lindoklindolo, intervened to prevent the fight. They not only told different stories, but disagreed about when and where the altercation occurred. Nyambir claimed this was in Algiers, shortly after the FRELIMO recruits arrived from Dar es Salaam. Pachinuapa recalled it taking place somewhat later at Marniah, a remote region near the Algerian-Moroccan border. Pachinuapa's account, collected after the president's death, emphasized Samora's masculinity and physical prowess—an image both Samora and FRELIMO promoted—and thus might have been affected by nostalgia. Nyambir shared his account with us in 2019. While respectful of Samora, he had no reason to embellish the story—but his memory, so many years later, might have been faulty.

The second example is common in contemporary Mozambique. After years of pervasive corruption and rapidly increasing inequality, many citizens longingly look back to the time of Samora's presidency, when social and economic justice were the stated goals of the revolution and corruption was severely punished. In

doing so, they often romanticize Samora's leadership, forgetting the difficulties of daily life.

While most writing about Samora focuses on him as a political actor and his public persona, we have expanded our perspective, whenever possible, to include neglected aspects of his personal life. We do so not only to humanize Samora, with all his foibles, flaws, and passions, but also to challenge constructions of his life that separate public from private and political from personal. Too often biographers pay little attention to the personal lives of prominent male political leaders.<sup>10</sup> Historical agents cannot be fully understood, however, without reference to the personal.

Throughout his life Samora struggled to balance his personal and political commitments. His correspondence with his first wife, Josina, whom he lovingly referred to as Jozy, is filled with anguish and a sense of remorse that military responsibilities kept him away from her and their baby Samito for long periods of time. He was particularly concerned about her frail health—with good reason. On August 7, 1971, less than two years after they married, Josina died. Although Samora was devastated, he returned to the battlefield almost immediately after the funeral, leaving his son in the care of his surrogate FRELIMO “family.”

Similarly, he was reluctant to remove from their high-ranking positions “old comrades” who had become ineffective or corrupt, because of deep personal bonds or his appreciation of their previous sacrifices. This tendency complicated and contradicted his public persona as a leader who did not tolerate incompetence or corruption.

As researchers, we have the responsibility to reflect, analyze, and access contemporary representations of the past and to raise new questions about Samora's legacy. Hopefully, we will continue to join other scholars in delving into the issues raised here. Samora Machel, and the many other less visible women and men who died in struggles for freedom, left an indelible mark on the continent. Their stories, told from various perspectives, must not be lost to posterity.