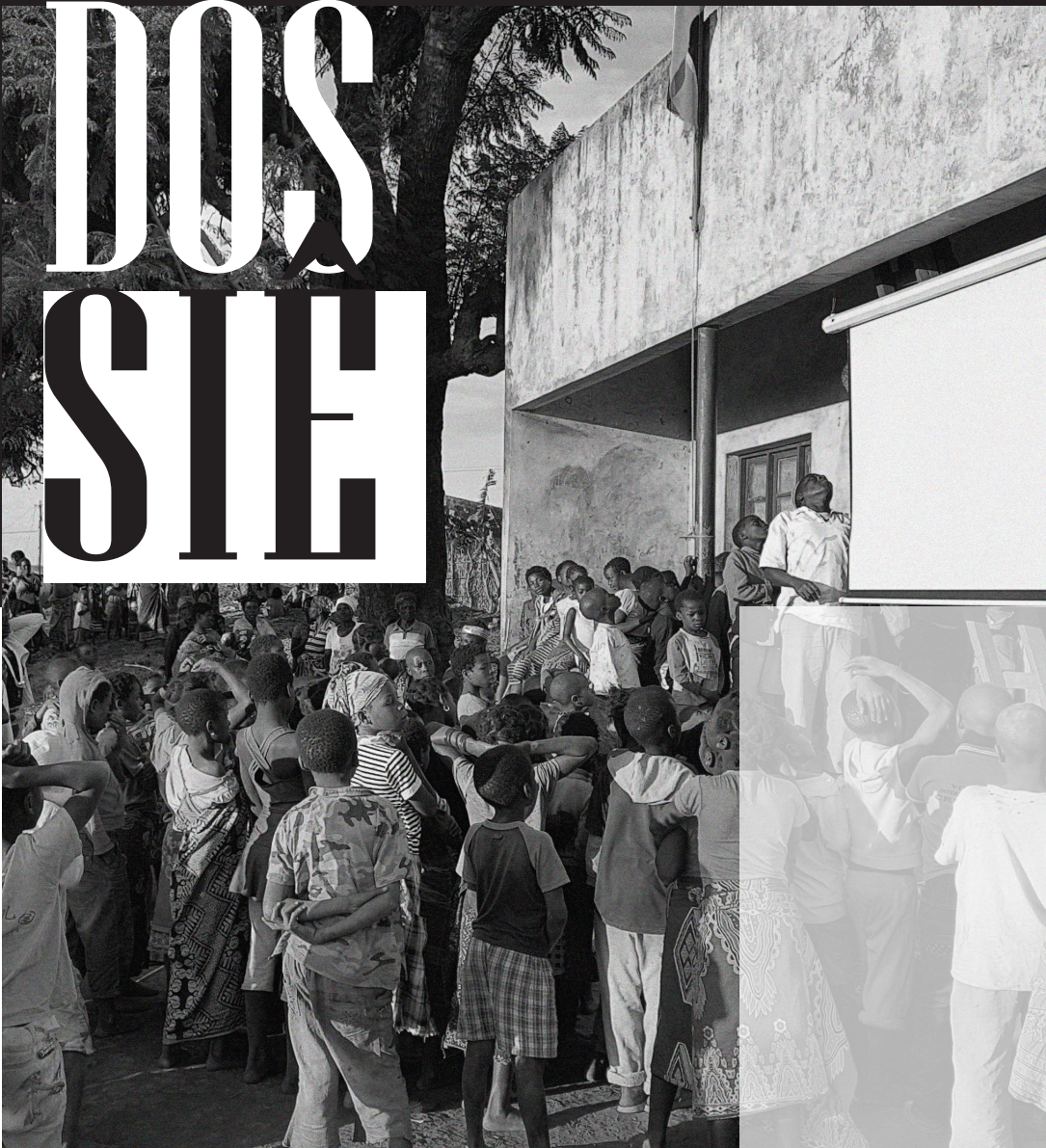


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Cinematic musicking in Mozambique: lessons from the revolutionary past and models for the decolonial future

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Abstract: Following Mozambique's independence from Portugal in 1975, both music and cinema were seen as essential tools in the revolutionary construction of a new and unified national identity. A National Film Institute was created to produce and distribute films throughout the country, and in a country with 43 different languages and high levels of non-literacy, it was found that musical films were effective at transcending the cultural and linguistic barriers of the colonially divided nation. One film that exemplifies the importance of musical films at this time, is the ethnographic and reflexive musical odyssey *Sing My Brother — Help Me to Sing* (CANTA, 1981). This multi-modal paper focuses on a scene in this film where a man and a woman play music together in northern Mozambique to reflect on how community musicking through film contributed to the passing of knowledge then, and how forty years later 30 young Mozambicans produced their multimodal, feminist, musical and equally decolonial response.

Keywords: Mozambique; Cinema; Local musicking; Decolonial; Multi-modal.

Musicares cinematográficos em Moçambique: lições do passado revolucionário e modelos para o futuro decolonial

Resumo: Após a independência de Moçambique de Portugal em 1975, tanto a música quanto o cinema foram vistos como ferramentas essenciais na construção revolucionária de uma identidade nacional nova e unificada. Um Instituto Nacional de Cinema foi criado para produzir e distribuir filmes em todo o país e, em um país com 43 idiomas diferentes e altos níveis de analfabetismo, descobriu-se que os filmes musicais eram eficazes para transcender as barreiras culturais e linguísticas da nação dividida colonialmente. Um filme que exemplifica a importância dos filmes musicais nessa época é a odisséia musical etnográfica e reflexiva *Sing My Brother - Help Me to Sing* (CANTA, 1981). Este artigo multimodal se concentra em uma cena desse filme em que um homem e uma mulher tocam música juntos no norte de Moçambique para refletir sobre como a música comunitária por meio do filme contribuiu para a transmissão de conhecimento na época e como, quarenta anos depois, 30 jovens moçambicanos produziram sua resposta multimodal, feminista, musical e igualmente decolonial.

Palavras-chave: Moçambique; Cinema; Musicar local; Decolonial; Multimodal.

Musicares cinematográficos en Mozambique: lecciones del pasado revolucionario y modelos para el futuro decolonial


Resumen: Tras la independencia de Mozambique de Portugal en 1975, tanto la música como el cine se consideraron herramientas esenciales en la construcción revolucionaria de una identidad nacional nueva y unificada. Se creó un Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía para producir y distribuir películas por todo el país, y en un país con 43 lenguas diferentes y altos niveles de analfabetismo, se descubrió que las películas musicales eran eficaces para trascender las barreras culturales y lingüísticas de la nación dividida colonialmente. Una película que ejemplifica la importancia del cine musical en esta época es la odisea musical etnográfica y reflexiva *Canta mi hermano - Ayúdame a cantar* (CANTA, 1981). Este artículo multimodal se centra en una escena de esta película en la que un hombre y una mujer tocan música juntos en el norte de Mozambique para reflexionar sobre cómo la música comunitaria a través del cine contribuyó entonces a la transmisión de conocimientos, y cómo cuarenta años después 30 jóvenes mozambiqueños produjeron su respuesta multimodal, feminista, musical e igualmente decolonial.

Palabras clave: Mozambique; Cine; Música local; Decolonial; Multi-modal.



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1 Introduction

As we hurtle towards the 50th anniversary of Mozambique's independence, young Mozambicans draw on the power of music and moving image to insist on continuing the vision of those who came before them. They are reminding their elders that many of the core objectives of the revolution, seem as far from being achieved. One of these was for the 'liberation' of Mozambican women, which was seen as a 'fundamental necessity' for the new vision for Mozambique and a 'precondition' for its continued success' (MACHEL, 1973 *apud* URDANG, 1989, p. 22)¹. Another was for self-representation; that Mozambicans could tell their own stories. This was expressed in the motto of the newly formed National Film Institute; 'Delivering to the people an image of the people' (GRAY, 2020, p. 127). A programme of film training, production and exhibition was established for this objective. In a country with 43 different languages and high levels of non-literacy, it was found that musical films were effective at transcending the cultural and linguistic barriers of the colonially divided nation and that both music and cinema were equally essential tools in the revolutionary construction of a just, visionary, and unified new nation.

What follows is a multi-modal reflection on the role of music and cinema in the continuation of the unfinished legacy of early feminism and decolonisation in Mozambique. The analysis is not only multi-modal, but also multi-disciplinary. It draws on theoretical and practice-led research across the disciplines of ethnomusicology, anthropology, performance studies and African film studies and as such, attempts to break through

¹ Unusually for liberation movements of the time, FRELIMO prioritised women's rights as it established its hegemony in communities across Mozambique. Machel's message to the founding conference of The Organisation of Mozambican Women (OMM) in 1973 remained inscribed on walls across Mozambique long after the country achieved independence from Portugal two years later: 'The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for the revolution, a guarantee of its continuity and a precondition of its victory' (Urdang 1989, p. 22).

the silos of academic disciplinary cohorts and cadres in an act of decolonial ‘epistemic disobedience’ (MIGNOLO, 2009, p. 159-181). It argues that audiovisual local musicking (RILEY; BRUCKER, 2020) is an effective and inclusive epistemic approach to understanding the experiences and vision of those not historically valued within traditional forms of knowledge construction. It offers a sustainable and autonomous methodology that combines audio-visual musical research, production, and exhibition to draw on the revolutionary power of song, dance and cinema in social transformation. These forms of communication that are not based on the written text and often transcend the spoken word. They offer ways to learn from those not accustomed to being heard or their knowledge being valued; the non-literate and poorly educated, the women in male-dominated societies across the world. It listens to those who have found song and dance effective ways to communicate in ways that go beyond the written and spoken word. The multi-modal approach to this analysis allows for this argument to be made in ways that extend beyond the traditional linear, text-based academic argument. It combines historic and contemporary filmed sequences, photographs, and an imagined script alongside more traditional textual description and analysis.

A detailed analysis of the revolutionary film *Sing My Brother — Help Me to Sing* (CANTA, 1981)² sets the historical context and creative and epistemological precedent that forms the basis of the argument. This is followed by examples from a contemporary, collaboratively produced film series and web documentary entitled *Speak My Sister* (SPEAK, 2021) that builds on the film made and exhibited across Mozambique nearly forty years earlier. *Sing My Brother* and *Speak My Sister* share several methodological approaches. They are the audio-visual outputs of collaborative and participatory ethnomusicological research using poetic and creative approaches to put musical performance in dialogue with rarely heard verbal testimony. They also share decolonial ideas around the construction of knowledge through creating opportunities for communication through creative practice; beyond the use of the written word, and beyond speech (NGŪGĪ WA THIONG’O, 1986; CONQUERGOOD 2002; JACKSON, 2012). *Sing My Brother* and *Speak My Sister* also share the value they place on the role of music and dance as part of a wider ‘body politic’ where the dance event is corporeal: the body is ‘both a site of experience (for the dancer) and a sign (for those who watch the dancer)’ (COWAN, 1990, p. 4). Yvonne Daniel describes this physical connection with the self through dance as ‘body knowledge’ (DANIEL, 2006). Louise Meintjes describes this, often gendered construction and expression of the self as the ‘body habitus’ (MEINTJES, 2017, p. 11) expressed through a ‘body voice’ (*ibid*, p. 15).

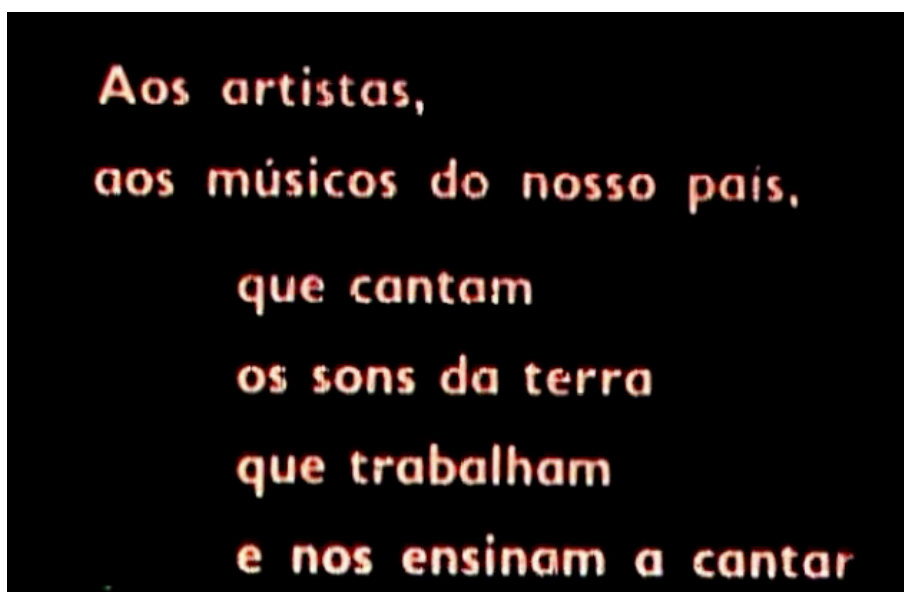
² The title of this film in Portuguese is *Canta Meu Irmão – Ajuda-Me Cantar*. All Portuguese film titles cited here will use the English translation of the original title. As the film *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing* is cited regularly, it will also be referred to by the shorter title of *Sing My Brother*, without continued reference to the sub-title and the author. Translation of the film titles, narration and any other citation from the films and their authors is also provided by the author.

Through their emphasis not only on collaborative production but also community exhibition, the two audiovisual outputs both also recognise the intrinsic connection between the production and consumption of music and the interactive relationships and contexts of the 'locality' in which this takes place (APPADURAI, 1996, p. 178).³

However, there is one notable difference between the two case studies. While *Sing My Brother* used song and dance to promote Mozambican identity largely through the male creative voice, *Speak My Sister* ensured the female voice was equally present and that the perspective of Mozambican women was not only reflected in front of the camera but also behind it.⁴

2 *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing: lessons from the revolutionary past*

Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing is an ethnographic and reflexive musical odyssey made in Mozambique five years after the country gained independence. Made as a creative response to the first Mozambican Festival of Song and Traditional Music held in the country's capital city, Maputo in 1980, Cardoso's film is dedicated 'to the artists, to the musicians of our country who sing the sounds of the land who work and teach us to sing'.



Photograph 1 – Screenshot from the opening of the film.
Sing My Brother- Help Me to Sing. (CANTA, 1981)

³ For Appadurai, locality is a structure of feeling that forms relations between the sense of immediacy, the technologies of interactivity and the relativity of contexts (see APPADURAI, 1996). For more on Musicking, see Small (1998).

⁴ This paper is multi-modal in nature and although some clips are embedded in the text, the full films, behind the scenes portraits of the filmmakers and extracts from musical performances can be found on the *Speak My Sister* web documentary. www.speakmysister.org / www.falaminhairma.org.

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The film opens with a quiet scene of an old man sawing a thick branch from a tree. We watch him calmly hollow out the trunk, stretch a skin over it and start to play. The rhythms of his drum are picked up by the drums played at the opening the first National Festival of Song and Traditional Music. A poetic narration introduces the film in the name of 'we, the men of cinema' setting the film up as an ode to Mozambique's artists and musicians based on curiosity, travel, and audiovisual enquiry.

A country is born.

5 years later, your music,

As old as the people who play, dance, sing,

Powerful music with precise functions and significance

Your music

5 years later, your festival

and you brought your instruments with you

Your art.

Behind your gesture,

We, the men of cinema,

we can guess your true rhythm,

made from a quiet inquiry,

under sun and rain,

in open spaces with the stars and the trees as your calendar.

We, the men of cinema, have decided to visit you, with our cameras our curiosity and our will to learn.

(Opening narration, *Canta...* (1981))



Photograph 2 – Rajabo Ibrahim on Stage at the Screenshot National Festival of Song and Traditional Music 1980 from the film *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing*. (CANTA, 1981)

CLICK TO WATCH: The National Festival of Song and Traditional Music 1980 from the film *Sing My Brother- Help Me to Sing*. (CANTA, 1981)

This short fast-paced montage is followed by a slower, sensitive, and celebratory insight into ten of the very different musical traditions seen on the festival stages of the capitol. Inspired by the filmmakers' 'curiosity', it takes the viewer to the homes of those musicians and shows collective musicking in their own localities. Through this it makes poetic call for national unity in the still colonially divided nation. After the viewer has travelled from the south to the north of the country with the filmmakers, the narration concludes:

It felt as if we had been around the world
And it was a country. A country that fights and fights
For a life that it can call its own. And of a different quality
Your gesture will be here in the future, brother
As a symbol of a people is born.
In truth, what we see in your gesture
will lose the mystic significance it has now

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In the meantime, you sing

In the meantime, you teach

And you help us to sing.

(Closing narration, *Canta...* (1981))

At the time of the release of *Sing My Brother – Help-Me to Sing* in 1981, the young republic of Mozambique had only been independent of Portuguese colonial rule for five years. The legacy of nearly five hundred years of cultural division and exclusion required creative approaches if it was to bring about the new government's dream of a thriving, fair and prosperous socialist country, free of colonial interference and exploitation. The first task was to generate a new national self-confidence and pride in the task ahead. *Sing My Brother* was produced with this objective in mind. It was screened across the country in cities, towns and villages in an inclusive distribution plan that formed part of the new president Samora Machel's revolutionary belief in the unifying and transformative power of music and moving image (PIÇARRA, 2018, p. 132-145). Cardoso and his team of proudly independent Mozambican filmmakers and distributors researched, produced, and exhibited *Sing My Brother* as part of their own ongoing research into the most effective cinematic language for their revolutionary purpose of social transformation.⁵ Considering the number of different language-groups they were hoping to reach, they did not depend on the spoken word to communicate the values of national unity with their audience. Sometimes, songs or interviews are translated into perfect Portuguese delivered in a woman's spoken voice. Sometimes a male narrator speaks directly to the audience in the name of 'We the men of cinema'. Mostly, however, the audience are treated to full renditions of virtuoso musical performances of some of the country's most celebrated traditional genres of music and dance, from *Timbila* Orchestras in the south, to masked *Mapiko* dancers in the north.⁶

⁵ At the time José Cardoso and his team from the National Film Institute were filming at the National Festival of Song and Traditional Music, a second international team made up of filmmakers from Portugal, Angola and Mozambique were also filming the concert film *Música Moçambique* (MÚSICA, 1981). See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wof8IWjvtcE> (accessed 24th February 2024). Inspired by the pan-African concert film *The Pan-African Festival of Algiers* (PAN-AFRICAN, 1969) this film focused on combining concert footage with comments from the international guests present at the festival such as the South African musical icon Miriam Makeba.

⁶ To watch the entire film in Portuguese, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCz_Z5AqomM (accessed 24th February 2024).



Photographs 3,4,5,6 (top row) – Screenshots from the musical portrait of Mestre Mahamba and his Timbila Orchestra in Zavala, Inhambane.

Photographs 7-10 (bottom row, left-right) – 7, Pankwe and shakers of Macololo, Tete. 8, Nyanga Pipes of the communal village Bairo Sansão Mutembe, Tete 9, Nyao puppets, Tete and 10, Cow horns of Cesar, Tete. Photographer Jacinto Bai Bai, from the film *Sing My Brother- Help Me to Sing* (CANTA, 1981).

2.1 The Passing of knowledge through the *Kanyembe*

In one musical portrait filmed in the province of Cabo Delgado in the north of Mozambique, Rajabo Ibrahim and his wife play the *Kanyembe*, a bowed instrument described by the narrator as an instrument through which knowledge is transmitted traditionally and played only by men. The scene raises questions around the role of the artist in the passing of knowledge, the inclusion (and exclusion) of women in this respected social position, and the central role of music and dance in the knowledge transmission of the Makonde people.⁷

In this area, the passing of knowledge is generally done through the *Kanyembe*. This brings dignity. Only men, and only the old men, used to play it. You, an artist, you taught your wife to play it with you. How much prejudice you must have overcome by doing this? (Narration. *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing*, Canta..., 1981)

⁷ The Makonde people (also known as Simakonde, Kimakonde and Chinimakonde) are an ethnic group from the Mueda Plateau in northern Mozambique, also found in southeast Tanzania and Kenya. In Mozambique they are known for their strong magic and related Mapiko dance, costumes and masks, and their resistance to colonial power which culminated in a massacre of unarmed Mozambicans by the Portuguese in 1961, marking the beginning of armed resistance to the four-hundred-year colonial presence in Mozambique (see MUEDA, 1979). At the time of the filming of *Sing My Brother* they were also recognised by the use of facial and full body tattoos, in part historically to deter slavers, and the lip plugs worn by women which stop them speaking.



Photograph 11 – Rajabo Ibrahim's wife playing the Kanyembe. Screenshot from *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing*. (CANTA, 1981)

The scene begins in the home of a man the audience will later recognise as a musician and dancer they have already seen dancing in a feather headdress on the festival stage in Maputo. Soon, they will see him in the same headdress and grass skirt, dancing now in the dust under the tree in the northern village of *Mandimba*, this time playing a duet with his wife. The couple are surrounded by their community members who also provide the rhythmic accompaniment on logs played with sticks.

The text-based description of the portrait that follows is presented in the form of a film script with further descriptive observations that highlight some of the possible non-verbal audio-visual messaging at play in the portrait.

Sc 13. EXT. DAY. RAJABO IBRAHIM'S HOME, ALDEIA MANDIMBA. CABO DELGADO

Two men sit on a traditional bed outside an earth-baked house, one in shoes, jeans and a button-down shirt with a notebook on his knee. The other barefoot with light cotton clothes stained brown by the dust and an embroidered

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kofió (islamic skull cap) of the same colour on his head. A woman sits on the floor next to the bed. She looks curiously in the direction of the camera as she quietly nurses her child. The men speak to one another informally in the regional language of *Maconde*. A translation into Portuguese is provided by a female narrator.

VOICE OVER (FEMALE VOICE)

My name is Rajabo Ibrahim

I'm a peasant

Being an artist makes me respected

here in the village

The camera zooms into the men deep in conversation as the interviewer continues to speak to Rajabo Ibrahim. There is no translation this time. After some time, the sound of the conversation is replaced by the voice of a male narrator who provides information to the viewer in Portuguese.

VOICE OVER (MALE VOICE)

In this area

The passing of knowledge

is done through the *Kanyembe*

This brings dignity.

Only the men,

and most of them old men,

played it

Sc 14. EXT. DAY. ALDEIA MANDIMBA, PALMA DISTRICT. CABO DELGADO

Three women stride through the village, one in front of the other, each with a large tin container filled with 20 litres of water on their head. A man carrying nothing walks towards them

VOICE OVER (MALE VOICE)

You, an artist,

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you taught your wife
to play it with you.
How much prejudice
you overcame by doing this.

A crowd is gathered under the shade of a tree. The frenetic sounds of their call and response chanting and the high-pitched, fast rhythms of the wooden drums are carried to the corners of the village. Under the tree, young men are seated on the ground at the front of the crowd, beating out the rhythm onto the long straight branches in front of them. Rajabo Ibrahim is now dressed in a grass skirt and a headdress. As he dances, he reveals behind him a woman standing still, also playing the same bowed instrument. The singing stops, the drums drop in intensity and the woman continues to play. A green cloth covers her head, another is wrapped round her shoulder, holding a baby balanced on her back. The baby watches the proceedings quietly. They are both still but for the mother's right arm drawing the bow back and forth over the strings and her fingers moving with confidence as they bring out the melody of the haunting sound of her *Kanyembe*. Her husband spins and spins and spins and spins, he too plays from time to time responding to her call, caught in the frenzy of her music.

Having offered the text-based description and argument above, the filmed portrait itself is presented below by way of a non-verbal argument for the case of audiovisual knowledge construction and transmission.



Photograph 12 – Rajabo Ibrahim being interviewed in his home. (L-R) Journalist, Rajabo, Rajabo's wife and child. Screenshot from *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing*. (CANTA, 1981)

CLICK TO WATCH: Portrait of Rajabo Ibrahim and his wife in *Sing My Brother - Help Me to Sing*. (CANTA, 1981)

Although the themes of knowledge transmission through music and women's role in this are not developed or explored in the audiovisual portrait of this couple, the image, the music and the dance seem to have one core message driving the director's choices in this scene: if knowledge is transmitted in this village through this instrument, and Rajabo Ibrahim's wife is playing this instrument, then in this new post-colonial Mozambique, can women also now transmit knowledge to us all through music and dance?

It seems possible that after watching this scene, many Mozambican men and women may have been left questioning their existing beliefs about what women can and can't do and what instruments they can and can't play. They will have heard the call of the villagers, singing their encouragement from behind the percussionists, seated community members playing the wooden poles placed around the couple. They will have felt their own energy levels raise as the clackety-clack of the high, fast polyrhythms raise in intensity. They will have watched the man and wife sing and dance in the middle of the circle and some may have found themselves answering the questions posed indirectly through

sound and image: Yes, even the sacred *Kanyembe* can be a vehicle for women to share their knowledge, or at least their embodied experience and emotion, which in itself is a form of knowledge.

2.2 Speech, silence, body voice and power

This scene offers an example of the female ‘body voice’ (MEINTJES, 2017, p 15), of subaltern speech and the language of silence. We do not know the name of the woman in this portrait. We know through the narration that she is Ibrahim’s wife. Although this film has been conceived to give a voice to the voiceless rural poor of Mozambique, we do not hear this woman’s spoken voice. She is one of the many ‘voiceless’ women presented in the film; the subaltern women, denied their agency through speech. While the two men sit on the bed and talk, some of their words translated into narration, the woman sits on the floor in silence. Cardoso does however show her playing the *Kanyembe*, singing and dancing, and through this offers her an opportunity to ‘speak’ through her body and through her instrument.

Cecile Jackson argues that there are ‘many different ways and places in which women communicate’ including through silence and non-verbal ‘bodily praxis’, all of which should be ‘listened to’ alongside speech (JACKSON 2012, p. 1002-1004)⁸. Using this kind of ‘listening’ through observation, it is possible to see Ibrahim’s wife slowly gain the confidence to express herself through the *Kanyembe*. This is all the more poignant as the *Kanyembe* is an instrument known as a transmitter of knowledge – and one normally only played by men. Sitting at her husband’s feet, his wife expresses very little emotion as she assesses the crew and their equipment, apparently in her own world, with no expectation of being asked to speak. Later, accompanying her husband under the tree, alongside the percussionists and chorus from her community, her hunched body tucked in the shadows seems to come to life. As the lead percussionist increases the rhythmic intensity, and Ibrahim’s body seems to take on the energy, she too starts to ‘speak’, her cries soon joining those of her instrument and those of her husband. She expresses a new, non-verbal confidence, a ‘dancing wisdom’ (DANIEL, 2006), stemming from an embodied knowledge that reflects an ‘entrainment’ of ‘bodily habitus’ (MEINTJES, 2017, p. 11) that communicates beyond speech.

⁸ For more on speech, silence, gender and power, see also Parpart (2010a, 2010b, 2020).

2.3 Scriptocentrism, music, speech and body knowledge

The two men sitting on the bed are both from the same part of northern Mozambique. They speak the same mother tongue. From their body language between them they seem to also share other cultural codes, but one holds a notebook and a pen⁹. The visitor seems comfortable in Ibrahim's home environment and speaks the same language. His paper and pencil, however, have given him the power to take the knowledge from Rajabo Ibrahim and share it with the men from Maputo and, through their cameras, with the rest of the country and the world.

Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood describes literacy as part of 'a complex political economy of knowledge, power and the exclusion upon which privilege is based' (CONQUERGOOD, 2002, p. 148). He distinguishes between two different domains of knowledge, one official, objective and abstract, the other practical, embodied and popular. He conducted research in Belize with an African-descended minority group called the *Garifuna* and takes examples from their language to illustrate his point. Here, the urban middle classes are referred to as *gapencillitin* (people with pencil), and the rural and urban working class *mapencillitin*; (people without pencil), with the pencil 'drawing the line between the haves and the have-nots' (*ibid*, 145). The example of the *Garifuna* is most likely replicated across the non-literate rural poor across the globe. In outtakes from one of the films in the *Speak My Sister* series *Xingomana: A Dance of Generations* (XINGOMANA, 2018), for example, the pen and paper also symbolise this same line of exclusion. The *Xingomana* dancer Maria Mondlane, describes the competitions of song and dance common during colonial times and speaks with awe of the literary skills of the community chief's advisors and of the power those men had through being able to record and recall information using their pieces of paper.

When the colonials were here and wanted to open a shop, they had to invite this group to come and dance at the shop to bless it.... Then women danced *Xingomana* and men danced other types of dance like *Ngalanga*, *Ndlhama* or *Xigubu* and they would write down on their paper all the different dances we did. They wrote it there on their paper! They wrote 'This group has this dance, this group has that dance, this group from here has this dance, this group from there has that dance' and the leaders of the community; our chiefs and their advisors well, it was their advisors as they knew how to read, they would take the paper and tell us 'Now group x will dance, now group y' because they could see it on their paper! 'this group is from Musengue, and now it will be *Ngalanga* from Madzumani. Then, we didn't have timings, but they could read it all on their paper! (Interview with Maria Mondlane recorded in Nwajahane, Gaza, 2018)¹⁰

⁹ It is also of note that the researcher wears jeans and shoes. In colonial times, one of the factors that separated a *nativo* (native) or *indigeno* (indigenous) resident of Mozambique from an *assimilado* (assimilated person) - all terms common in the Portuguese colonial lexicon of what was then a part of Portugal - was the ability to speak and write Portuguese. Another was the footwear.

¹⁰ See the films "*Xingomana – Dance of generations*", "*Behind Xingomana*" and "*Screening Xingomana*" in the

Conquergood talks not only of the inaccessibility of text for subaltern groups, something he describes as the 'hallmark of Western Imperialism', but also of the threat they represent as 'instruments of control and displacement ...(to) oppressed people everywhere', citing Michel de Certeau's aphorism:

'Posted above the gates of modernity, this sign: "Here only what is written is understood". Such is the internal law of that which has constituted itself as 'Western' [and 'white']'. (CERTEAU 1984, p. 161 *apud* CONQUERGOOD 2002, p. 147)

In Mozambique, and many colonised nations across Africa, it is hard to tell which imposition has been most effective as a colonial tool of power and exclusion, however, that of the domination of the written word or of the colonial language that came with it? A prerequisite of literacy across Mozambique has been the ability to speak Portuguese. In a country with 43 registered languages, reading and writing are still taught in Portuguese to this day. In rural contexts where Portuguese is not required for day-to-day communication, often the first time a Mozambican is expected to engage with the world through the colonial language is when they learn to read and write. Yet, as the Kenyan decolonial thinker Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o is keen to point out, language is 'the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history' (NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O, 1986, p. 15). A prolific writer who first published in English and later only in his own language of Gikuyu, he describes how he personally gained his view of the world through the suggestive, magical power of the images, symbols, and music of his language. The riddles, proverbs, transposition of syllables and the nonsensical musically arranged words and the songs, made language, he explains, not only a means of communication but also 'a carrier of culture' (*ibid*, 13). This is also how the musical instruments played by the husband-and-wife duo can transmit not only feeling, and command dignity and respect from those listening, they can also transmit knowledge.

The film places the artist as a person of importance and dignity, reminding the viewer that the role of the artist in a community is not only the prerogative of urban intellectuals such as the urban filmmakers, but of all Mozambicans. Rajabo Ibrahim presents himself as a peasant, respected in the village because he is an artist. Very little of the conversation conducted in Makonde between Ibrahim and the researcher is translated into Portuguese. Instead, the viewer is offered an explanation from the male narrator: "The passing of knowledge is generally done through the *Kanyembe*, which brings dignity". This invites the audience to question the role of language in this large, linguistically, and culturally diverse post-colonial society and enter the non-verbal language of song and dance. Those who don't speak *Makonde* are left on the outside, listening to the

web documentary <https://kboswall.wixsite.com/speakmysister>.

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sounds of the language, experiencing the conversation between the two men as many Mozambicans do when engaging with those in power who only speak Portuguese. This technique is repeated in four of the *Sing My Brother* portraits where the music and rhythm of the speech of other important Mozambican languages of the south, centre and north of the country are presented sonically and indeed musically by those sharing their knowledge, yet untranslated. This may have been simply due to the lack of sub-titling equipment available at the National Film Institute, but this creative decision may also have been informed by an understanding of the context this film would be viewed in and the importance of sound and image to the local audiences. In the rural screenings where Portuguese was and continues to be perceived sonically by a large part of the audience, the non-verbal language of song, dance and moving image does the heavy lifting in communicating the knowledge being shared. Those watching the scene who don't speak the languages of those on the screen share this experience and sense of relief when the speech they do not understand is replaced with song and dance. When offered the uninterrupted performance of a whole song in which the husband and wife sing and dance among their community, they are immersed into the musical and corporeal language and offered an experiential understanding of the importance and dignity of the artists in these non-literate and multi-lingual contexts.

Sing My Brother - Help Me to Sing was seen by men and women in rural and urban screenings across the country throughout the early 1980's. Most audience members would have been unlikely to go to the far north of Mozambique, to the village of *Mandimba*, where the portrait was of Rajabo Ibrahim and his wife was filmed. Yet, when the film was projected on screens across the country, they would have seen this quiet woman there in the centre of the crowd with her baby on her back and the instrument in her arms and would have heard what she had to communicate through her body and her instrument. They may even have provided their own non-verbal and embodied answer to the questions asked in the scene about women as transmitters of knowledge and carried a new understanding home with them after the film ended.

Less than a decade after the production of *Sing My Brother - Help Me to Sing*, shifting political priorities and a crippling civil war brought film production in Mozambique to a relative stand-still. Only now, as peace and economic growth have brought relative stability to the country, are the next generation of Mozambican filmmakers exploring how they can continue their country's cinematic legacy. The questions, raised in this scene only five years after independence, and the answers they began to provoke, continue to be pertinent and still little explored in Mozambique now, as the nation heads towards its fiftieth birthday. The *Speak My Sister* audiovisual research project was designed to address this.

3 *Speak My Sister* film series and web documentary: models for the decolonial future

The film series and web documentary *Speak my Sister* (SPEAK, 2021) was released 40 years after *Sing My Brother – Help Me to Sing* was completed in 1981 and conceived as a contemporary, feminist response to it¹¹. In the absence of the levels of governmental support and international collaboration of the heyday of autonomous national audiovisual representation, initiatives in film training and production had been sporadic and not widely accessible, limiting the diversity of Mozambican voices heard. After decades of lobbying from those still working towards the decolonial vision for the creative arts in Mozambique, a state university of art and culture known as ISArC (*Instituto Superior de Arte e Cultura*) was established in Maputo in 2008. The first state subsidised degree course in cinema and audio-visual studies began in 2014. It offers bursaries to Mozambicans from across the country and has a proactive recruitment policy to attract both male and female students. The filmmakers behind *Speak My Sister* film series were from the course's first three years of intake and came from eight of the nation's ten provinces. Ten of the thirty filmmakers who took part were women. The research project was inter-disciplinary and was conducted in collaboration with staff and students from the four departments of the university: Cultural Studied and Management, Dance, Visual Art, and Cinema and Audio-visual studies. The partnership was developed over 2017 and the training, research, production, and exhibition of the *Speak My Sister* film series took place in 2018¹².

11 The *Speak My Sister* research project formed the basis of my practice-led doctoral research. For the full thesis see Boswall (2022). In using the term 'feminist' in this research, I draw on a large body of work, most notably on the writing of early black American feminist theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who identified and named the intersection between race and sex, bell hooks (1982), who subsequently took these ideas into the global and decolonial discourse, and also to their contemporary poets and thinkers such as Audre Lorde (1984), and activists such as Angela Davis (2001). Over the decades, it has also been recognized that there is no one 'feminist' ideology to suit the contexts of women throughout the world, and that it would be more accurate to refer to feminisms in the plural. In relation to African feminisms, I draw on the work of Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (2000, 2004) and a collection of papers on African Gender Scholarship published by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), which place papers by African Feminist thinkers such as Oyewumi, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, and Signe Arnfred in dialogue with one another (ARNFRED, 2004, 2011). The work of the Nigerian academic Obioma Nnaemeka (2005) and especially her exploration of a concept she calls 'nego-feminism' is also particularly useful in the theoretical framing of my research.

12 The *Speak My Sister* doctoral research project was funded by the Consortium of the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE), a Doctoral Training Partnership of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. Research funding included travel costs for the doctoral researcher and basic participant training expenses. For the full doctoral thesis, see Boswall (2022).

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Photographs 13-16 – Top L-R: Lourdes Rubaine in camera training in Maputo at the international music festival AZGO. Lutegardo Lampião, Alexandre Pita and Gabriel Pita filming the portrait Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life in Maputo. Bottom L-R: André Bahule recording the sound of the *Xingomana* dance group, Nwajahane, Gaza. Alzirsu Guetsa filming during the opening of the 10th National Festival of Culture in Niassa. Photos by the author (2018).

While the first National Festival of Song and Traditional Music in 1980 served as the inspiration for *Sing My Brother*, the tenth National Festival of Culture in 2018 became the inspiration for *Speak My Sister*. The films were to be launched at the festival and each film in the series was based on the chosen motto for the festival ‘Women, promoting culture, identity and sustainable development’.



Photograph 17 - Women wearing T-shirts with the festival motto “Women, promoting culture, identity and sustainable development” at the opening of the 10th National Festival of Culture.

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CLICK TO WATCH: Illustrated round table radio discussion among women artists from Mozambique, including the author. Broadcast on Radio Mozambique where the festival motto is discussed (FALA, 2021)

Just as the ‘men of cinema’ before them, the next generation of Mozambican filmmakers were also drawn to the language of music and dance to inspire, inform and provoke questions around culture and identity, this time drawing on different female cultural traditions in a series of collaboratively researched, produced and authored musical portraits. The presence of young female students in key roles in the research, production, direction and distribution of the film series was another notable difference between the contemporary film series and its original revolutionary inspiration.



Photograph 18 – Young Mozambican filmmakers on stage at the Gala Performance of *Speak My Sister* Teatro Gilberto Mendes, Maputo, August 2018.

Mirroring the process behind *Sing My Brother*, all the musicians featured in the musical portraits appeared on stage together at the end of the creative process. The song performed by the Hip-Hop group *Revolução Feminina* in this final gala event captures the essence of the ideas behind the series.

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Original lyrics in Portuguese

Desde a tenra idade que mereço liberdade
Poder opinar e exprimir a mentalidade
Porém ainda criança
[...] da escola
Ferem minhas memórias
Me põem por fora
Desse sistema que só acolhe o sexo masculino
Sou condenada por nascer com o sexo feminino?

English translation

I deserved freedom from the start
To have opinions and express myself
Although just a child
I'm not allowed to go to school
They hurt my memories
They keep me out
of this system that welcomes the male sex
Am I condemned when born with the fe-
male sex?

(Lyrics from the song 'I Am Free' by Ênia Lipanga and performed by *Revolução Feminina*, at the closing Gala of *Speak My Sister* [REVOLUÇÃO, 2021] and featured in the film *Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life* [RITMO, 2018])

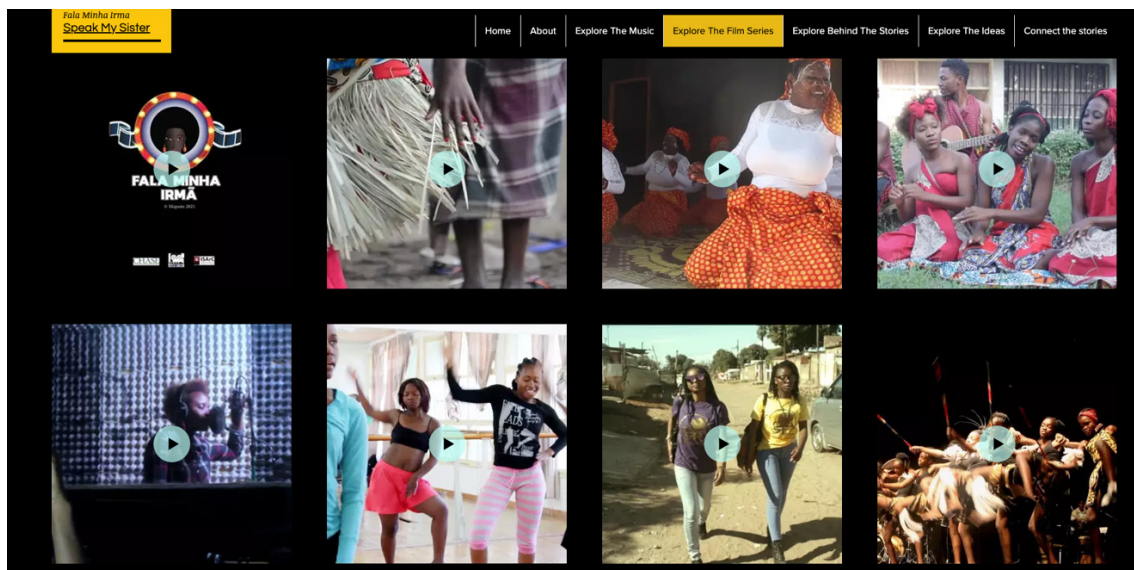


Photograph 19 – Guiggaz N'Black on stage at the closing Gala of *Speak My Sister*. Teatro Gilberto Mendes, Maputo, August 2018.

CLICK TO WATCH: *Revolução Feminina* on Stage performing 'I Am Free' by Ênia Lipanga at the closing Gala of *Speak My Sister*, introduced by Alzira Guetsa. From the Web Documentary *Sing My Sister* (REVOLUÇÃO, 2021)

Since the National Film Institute developed their decolonial production methods in the 1970's, more affordable and user-friendly audiovisual technologies have become available. This has opened possibilities for more diverse and inclusive audiovisual representa-

tion and self-representation. Yet, as the corporal, musical and spoken languages require a level of aptitude and skill that can only be developed through practice, so too with the audiovisual language. If those less represented are to reach audiences who expect the professional standards of mainstream audiovisual production, technical, conceptual, critical, and creative training and practice must accompany the now accessible technology. One of the research objectives of *Speak My Sister* was therefore to look for alternatives to existing donor-dependent training and production models and test affordable, practical training methods that could be continued and repeated beyond the project end. The filmmakers shared two low-cost filming kits and one university desktop computer between them and produced their finished films on an expenses budget of \$75-\$100 USD per portrait.¹³ As such restrictive budgets didn't allow for the travel and 'road-movie' narrative of *Sing My Brother*, a collective decision was made to produce a series of films taking advantage of the capital's large culturally diverse population. This offered an opportunity for individual and collective authorship of seven separate musical portraits. These were to be shared in dialogue with one another in community screenings and a variety of online exhibition initiatives not available in the 1970's, including a YouTube channel and a website¹⁴.



Photograph 20 - Screenshot from the *Speak My Sister* Film Series page of the *Speak My Sister* web documentary (SPEAK, 2021). **GO TO LINK.**

13 Costs were kept low through creative production choices such as selecting locations that could be reached on public transport and catering collectively, often with the participants. The lack of computers and filming equipment was a limitation of this project however and three of the films were eventually edited on personal laptops and two used additional cameras. One of the research findings was a recognition of what was and what was not possible with such limited equipment and low production expenses budgets. For more on the methodology of the *Speak My Sister* research, see Boswall (2020).

14 See also: <https://www.youtube.com/@falaminhairma> (access: 24 February 2024).

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Both *Sing My Brother* and *Speak My Sister* applied a participatory and collaborative audiovisual research methodology that engaged with the musical process in the locality it was rooted in. Here, the filmmakers and their subjects came together to find common understanding, often across cultural and generational divides.

As in *Sing My Brother*, the portraits in the *Speak My Sister* film series are not films 'about' the musical genres portrayed. They are films motivated by a question about music and locality: how has *Xigomana* informed the sense of self of the women of Gaza? What can an imported women's song and dance tradition from the north contribute to a poor migrant *bairro* (neighbourhood) of Maputo? Can a young couple from the periphery break through class and gender stereotyping through composing hip hop rhymes together?

The filmmakers' decision to co-create their films with their subjects was born from their mutual love of music, song and dance and a shared recognition of the value of using the language of moving image to communicate the ideas the musicians usually shared through their bodies and their instruments. The male filmmakers also found that looking at the feminist themes of the films through a musical lens was an inspiring way to represent their female subjects, while also representing themselves.

Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life, for example, took the mutual passion for hip-hop as an entry-point to the co-creation of a film promoting women's empowerment in the workplace.



Photograph 21 – Guiggaz N'Black and Ênia Lipanga, members of the hip-hop group *Revolução Feminina*. Screenshot from the film *Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life*. (RITMO, 2018)

CLICK TO WATCH: *Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life*. (RITMO, 2018)

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Made by three young men, the film offers a surprisingly provocative female perspective through its co-creative filming methods. The director, Lutegardo Lampião, is an established hip-hop artist and has experienced the excitement and challenges of the shared urban creative world his subjects occupy. As an artist, he had also overcome his own obstacles through hip-hop, finding a way to eliminate the severe stammer that he still struggles with in conversational speech, through rapping. The producer Alexandre Pita came from a rural background and moved to the capital city to study. He found a creative, inclusive space in the Maputo hip-hop scene, where he was free of the stigma associated with his poor, rural religious background. Hip-hop had given both the female musicians and the male filmmakers a platform through which they were able to assert their voices in ways everyday speech hadn't.



Photograph 22 – Alexandre Pita and Gabriel Pita Producer and sound/lighting technician from the film *Behind Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life*. (BEHIND, 2021)

CLICK TO WATCH: *Behind Rhythm, Art, Poetry and Life*. (BEHIND, 2021)

In contrast, the filmmakers working with women from traditional musical genres grew up with the music and dance they were exploring and had lost their connection with it through moving to the capital. Each had their own story of growing up in rural Mozambique where genres such as *Tufo* and *Xingomana*¹⁵ were part of their environment and formed their sense of local identity. Their yearning for these musical gatherings with their community when away from them motivated their choice of music to feature in

¹⁵ For more on the female music genres covered in the research, namely Mozambican Hip Hop, *Tufo*, *Xigubu* and *Xingomana* see Boswall (2019a, 2019b, 2022, 2024), Siteo (2013) and Hebden (2020).

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their portraits. For example, the filmmakers behind *Tambourines of Mafalala* (PANDEIROS, 2018) grew up to the found of women's *Tufo* groups in the north of Mozambique. Despite not knowing their specific film subjects before filming, the music was familiar and the women they chose as their protagonists were women from the north and reminded them of many of the women they had grown up with. Likewise, they felt a familiarity with the young filmmakers as they invited them into their homes. Their shared love of the music and dance of home brought them to a closer understanding of one another's lives.



Photograph 23 – Screenshot from *Tambourines of Mafalala*, taken at 0m 30s.

CLICK TO WATCH – *Tambourines of Mafalala*. (PANDEIROS, 2018)



Photograph 24 – Members of Tufo Da Mafalala with the crew of *Tambourines of Mafalala*.

CLICK TO WATCH – Behind *Tambourines of Mafalala*. (PANDEIROS, 2018)

3.1 Exhibition and Reception of the *Speak My Sister* film series



Photograph 25 – The *Speak My Sister* filmmakers take *Tamborines of Mafalala* to the community of Bairro Mafalala, Maputo, where it was filmed. From right to left: Angélica Novela (Director of ISArC Film Department), Alice Cunha (Sound Recordist) César Vitorino (Director). Photographer: Isard Pindula.

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In a continuation of the decolonial values of Mozambican revolutionary cinema, it was important that the films were not only produced by Mozambicans, but that the exhibition plan was directed towards Mozambicans. The films in the *Speak My Sister* series were therefore screened across the country as *Sing My Brother* had been. The screening localities ranged from rural villages and small urban and peri-urban neighbourhoods where the films were projected onto the side of crumbling walls, to an urban gala performance in an 800-seat popular downtown theatre in Maputo. The audiences ranging from the rural and non-literate who spoke little Portuguese, to urban young students and professionals who only spoke Portuguese.



Photographs 26-27 (Top) – *Speak My Sister* road show, Lake Niassa. Screening in Lipende, Niassa. **Photographs 28-29** (Bottom) – Backstage Teatro Gilberto Mendes, Maputo, August 2018. Photos by author.

Another objective of the *Speak My Sister* research was to offer the filmmakers an opportunity to gauge the impact their films had on the different audience groups they shared the films with through structured reception analysis. The filmmakers joined their audiences watching their films and followed the screenings by group feedback sessions and smaller intimate conversations, both on the day of the screening and on the days that followed. In the excitement after a screening, it was not easy for audience members to describe their response to films in any detail, and comments were often expressions of gratitude, or requests to see more films like this, or to repeat the same films again the next day so they can bring family and friends to see what they had missed.

These women are something else! I have to thank you from the bottom of my heart for bringing these films to us. We've never seen anything like this. You must come back! (Comment in Nyanja from audience member Metangula, Niassa, Mozambique)

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Sometimes, after audience members had had time to reflect, they would comment on the themes of the films, but again, in general terms.

You showed us that nowadays a girl is worth something, a woman too. Now women have a voice. In our time, women weren't respected. I'm so happy thinking about the film about how far we have come... I thank you so much. (Comment in changana from audience member Nwajohane, Gaza, Mozambique)

In the light of the limitations of the verbal feedback, observing the non-verbal audience response during the screening, offered an effective alternative. There were moments in the films that would regularly render audiences silent and attentive while others left them talking animatedly amongst themselves. Some moments regularly provoked laughter, others repeatedly left audience members in tears. Together the verbal and somatic reception analysis applied by the filmmakers confirmed the anecdotal conclusions of the earlier generation of Mozambican filmmakers:

When I showed my film in Niassa, there I really felt I was a filmmaker with a role to play in social intervention, because I was able to create and see a connection between the music of different regions. Mozambique has various cultures and I saw a lot of interest in what was being communicated in the films through the music. For me, they (the audience of Niassa) were the best kind of spectators because they weren't there to judge me or my work, they were there to reflect on what was in the film. They were simply curious to understand "What is this dance called *xingomana*?" "What is the music of these people like?". I was immersed in a very rich context in which I could see that I was with people who communicate the same way when it is done through music and differently when it is done through spoken language. I was able to understand the power of music in this context. So the *Speak My Sister* project opened up this space for reflection on what music can bring (to filmmaking in Mozambique) and how music can be a vehicle to tell our stories and a vehicle for change. (*André Bahule, Director of Xingomana – Dance of Generations*. Filmed interview, São Paulo, November 2019)

The films in the series have now been seen by thousands of Mozambicans at different community screening initiatives across the country. Although a detailed audience reception analysis was not within the scope of the *Speak My Sister* research project and there is no written record of the audience reception of *Sing My Brother*, the empirical reception research conducted during and after the *Speak My Sister* screenings served as an indication that the musical encounter of the film screenings cut through many of the communication barriers of language, ethnicity, gender, and levels of education. The regular requests by local audiences for repeat performances and the increasing numbers at each repeat performance also indicate that even those unable to offer verbal feedback to the filmmakers during those early screenings in Mozambique, did so through their personal recommendations of the screenings to others in their community.

A series urban, peri-urban and rural screenings in Brazil the following year also confirmed the findings around the power of the cinematic musical encounter to cross national and cultural boundaries when the portraits found a new resonance with their Brazilian audiences.

4 Final considerations

Speak My Sister was continuing the revolutionary search for sustainable, decolonial approaches to audiovisual production in Mozambique that began with *Sing My Brother* 40 years earlier. It reassesses the viability of cinematic local musicking at a time when more inclusive methodologies and perspectives are now possible. Today, there are less technological obstacles to the dream that José Cardoso and his colleagues as the National Film Institute aspired to. Mozambican self-representation and social intervention through music and film is not only more possible now, but now women can also play a part in this dream. Mozambican women are learning the techniques to work alongside the men and through training courses sensitive to the gendered experience of both, young male and female filmmakers can continue ensuring that Mozambican men and women are being represented equally.

In the discipline of performance studies, the ethnographer Dwight Conquergood makes a powerful case for practice-led research as a form of radical research and intervention, describing this need not of 'knowing that' and 'knowing about', but 'knowing how' and 'knowing who', as a way of 'braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing' (CONQUERGOOD 2002, p. 152). He shares the decolonial values of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o and wants to cut to the root of how knowledge is organized in the academy, making a case for the creation of knowledge that is not 'anchored in paradigm and secured in print' but one that is 'grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection' (*ibid*, p.146). Also, recognising the notion explored by Appadurai of location as an itinerary and not a fixed point, Conquergood uses a phrase by the French scholar Michel de Certeau as his theoretical springboard: 'What the map cuts up, the story cuts across' (CERTEAU 1984, p. 129). He paints a picture of a postcolonial world 'crisscrossed by transnational narratives, diaspora affiliations, and the movement and multiple migrations of people' (CONQUERGOOD 2002, p. 145). This argument for practice-led research and the picture he paints of a world criss-crossed with the stories of those who live in it, is also at the heart of the *Speak My Sister* musical portraits. The filmmakers were researchers into women's musical genres, and through this onto women's lives and often they entered this new world of knowing through the stories their subjects told them. They were drawing on the power of dance, music, and story to explore the kind of embodied and shared knowledge Conquergood describes. Together, the researchers, film-

makers, their subjects, and their audiences share and construct knowledge across social boundaries, through the practice of music, dance, and film.

The idea of audiovisual local musicking for social transformation was not a new idea when the *Speak My Sister* methodology was developed in 2018, but through using the technology now available and embracing the growing recognition of the need for more female perspectives to be heard, the *Speak My Sister* film production and exhibition process was able to be more inclusive. It combined the analytic and empirical emphasis on the language of music and dance of *Sing My Brother* and introduced to this new collaborative and feminist methodologies alongside fresh musical and visual ideas of the younger generation of filmmakers developing their craft in Maputo today.

In the light of the revolutionary legacy of the first independent Mozambican filmmakers and distributors, it seems no surprise that the next generation have found the same solutions to the same challenges. In continuing the huge task of what the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o famously described as 'decolonising the mind' (NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O, 1986), instead of the pen, they chose the somatic language of dance and sonic language of rhythm and song and the visual language of moving image as the most affective and universal for their purposes.

The films in the *Speak My Sister* film series were made by young Mozambicans born long after the baby on the nameless woman's back playing the *Kanyembe* in Aldeia Mandimba, yet their musical portraits from Maputo and Gaza and taken to Northern Mozambique in 2018 continue to ask questions about the place of rural and urban Mozambican musicians as knowledge transmitters, as artists and as active members of society, and the role of song and dance in the formation of knowledge and the self. They also offer some of the same answers as the scene in which Rajabo Ibrahim and his wife play their *Kanyembe*'s surrounded by their community in their village in Cabo Delgado forty years ago. 'Women can transmit knowledge', they call in unison. They can do this through their music and their dance, their stories and their ideas, and now they can do this through their films'.

Every story told through moving image has an impact. It can make people cry. It can make people angry. It can make people sad. It can motivate people to action. Every story has power, ... but when a woman sits down and looks at the screen and sees another woman talking .., or telling the story of any other woman, we, the women, will identify with it. ... and cinema has this power, the power to transform minds. We might not think it's possible, but every time we hear a story, at the end we think: that woman in the film, that's how I'm going to live from now on. (Alzira Guetsa, Director of *Victorious Dancer* (BAILARINA, 2018), *Speak My Sister Film Series*)



Photograph 30 – *Speak My Sister* logo designed by ISArC design student Iassine José (2018).

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