

Cultural Vulnerability of Returning Refugee Children: The Mozambican Wamakonde in Tanzania

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Introduction

Children are the most vulnerable group when communities are forced to flee for whatever reason. Their vulnerability results from the shock of being violently uprooted from their original environment. This process becomes even more traumatic when they are separated from their natural adult custodians and loved ones. In the African context these could be family, lineage, clan or other ethno-linguistic members, for in rural areas these are the people or groups that are directly or otherwise charged with the responsibility of acculturating children.

It is the disruption of the acculturation process by displacement which renders children vulnerable. They are forced to grow up within a culture different from their group of origin. The impact of such a situation can cause severe psychological stress to children while in the country of asylum and again when they repatriate. The case of the Mozambican Wamakonde refugees who took asylum in Tanzania illustrate this phenomenon and forms the focus of this paper.

The Wamakonde of Mozambique

In their own country, the Mozambican Wamakonde are culturally unique. Their most outstanding cultural elements were their initiation rites and body decoration. Body decoration included citification, teeth filing for both girls and boys; and piercing of the upper lip for lip-plug insertion. Initiation rites were associated with the production of masks and the performance of masked dances. When the Mozambican Wamakonde fled to Tanzania they lived among different host ethnic

groups, the Wamwera, Wamakua and Wayao. Refugee migration from Mozambique to Tanzania occurred in three phases: pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence. During the first phase, small bands comprised of families or lineages fled slave raids and crossed the Mozambique-Tanzania border, settling mainly in south eastern Tanzania. Here they were absorbed by the host society and never returned to their country of origin. These migrants can be described as subordinate groups that succumbed to the superordinate culture of their hosts. Children of subsequent generations appear unaffected by the process of flight and cultural absorption.

Between the two world wars, the Portuguese started consolidating themselves by establishing a forced labour plantation economy in Mozambique. Many Mozambicans including the Wamakonde, migrated to Tanzania (then Tanganyika and Zanzibar) where some became settlers and others took employment in sisal, coconut and clove plantations. These migrants fled in family or lineage groups. However, when FRELIMO (the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique), engaged the Portuguese colonial power in a war of liberation beginning in 1966 and subsequently fought the post-independence civil war against RENAMO, cases of children fleeing their country without their natural custodians were recorded for the first time.

Initiation Rites

The most significant rite for the Mozambican Wamakonde was and still is the *ingooma*. The *ingooma* is an elaborate process of passage into adulthood combining cultural indoctrination with physical initiation. In secluded camps or initiation schools, boys are circumcised and girls have

their clitoris and labia minora elongated. During their seclusion the initiates learn the history, culture, work ethics, sex education and generally all that is deemed necessary to become acceptable adult members of their society.

Similarly, body decoration and the creation of masks and masked dancing were embodied in traditional knowledge and experience that was held by a very select minority of elders. These specialized positions were not found in every family or lineage, rather each clan had its own, or by special arrangement could utilize those in neighbouring clans.

Inevitably the turmoil of flight meant that some of this cultural knowledge and experience was quite literally lost as the elders entrusted with cultural education were no longer always present within the dislocated community. Besides, on arrival in Tanzania, families did not settle in their own clusters close to each other, so it was not always possible to pull their available resources together and use them in refugee group contexts. Even during the last two phases of refugee flight, when Mozambican Wamakonde refugees were placed in organized camps, they did not live in those camps as single ethnic, clan, lineage or family groups. In fact, with the new nationalistic enthusiasm, refugee camps became, in part, grounds for inculcating the norms and values of the Tanzanian nation-state. Nonetheless, the desire to acculturate their children in the old-fashioned ways persisted. In view of the shortcomings described above, the older generation were forced to adjust, inventing new ways of bringing up their children.

Masks and Dancing

In both the male and female institutions, sculpture and figurines were

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used as teaching aids for certain phenomena or to symbolize certain beliefs. Males used the helmet masked dancer known as *lipiiko* in their language to assert and impose male superiority over women.

Mozambican Wamakonde women had their own facial masks made from baked potter's clay which depicted male characters. These items were used as teaching aids to instill among initiates, a sense of female superiority in line with the tradition of matriliney. It was also made clear to the girl initiates that real power rested with females. For, despite females apparent or perceived physical weakness, they possessed immense internal powers symbolized by their ability to sexually accommodate and subdue seemingly great and powerful males. It is females that carry both male and female children in their wombs, and it was therein that real power and authority rested.

These formerly secret and sacred elements of the symbols and paraphernalia used in initiation rites have now become objects of popular art. Male masked dancers' performances are not restricted or tied to the rites; they are now part of popular theatrical entertainment in urban areas. These instruments and institutions are providing a new message which no longer expresses the power struggle between males and females that existed in the old Mozambican Wamakonde communities. Moreover, the traditional balance of power between the sexes has been upset as men are able to assert dominance as income earners in urban areas. This new economic domination of men over women is slowly eroding the traditional ideology of matrilineal kinship and replacing it with patriliney.

Body Decorations

About three generations ago, all Mozambican Wamakonde born and initiated into adulthood in Mozambique had to have body decorations. Inasmuch as body decoration practices have gone out of fashion in many current communities and are being discouraged where they persist, they were an element of cultural identity

among the Mozambican Makonde. Their disappearance among the refugees of the younger generations has therefore robbed the latter of what was considered an important part of their heritage. As refugees in Tanzania, members of the third and subsequent generations have lost this element of their culture.

Discussion

While one can not lament of the fact that these children have undergone some change in their culture, it is clear that children of third or fourth generation Wamakonde refugees grew up in an environment in which matriliney was replaced by patriliney and the fundamental features of their cultural identity were lost. Through the additional loss of specialized cultural instructors, combined with nationalistic impositions of the Tanzanian state which disrupted initiation and acculturation practices, local pressures to assimilate, the Wamakonde either abandoned or lost much of their cultural identity and social organization. Indeed, Wamakonde children were often teased and mocked by their Tanzanian peers for the physical uniqueness of their parents and older siblings. Painstakingly, they made efforts to adjust themselves to the Tanzanian norms and values and in the process abandoned important cultural features such as the Wamakonde initiation ceremony of *ingooma* and the *lipiiko* dances.

With Mozambican independence in 1975, this new generation returned to their country of origin with expectations of fully reintegrating into Mozambican Wamakonde society. Ironically, most of them were rejected by the Wamakonde there. Without the physical markings to distinguish them as Wamakonde, and their cultural evolution towards a patrilineal society, the returnees were rejected a second time as foreigners.

Reintegration to post-independent Mozambique was a difficult process for the "decultured" Wamakonde returnees. They were discriminated against by their own people in their

own country, labelled "Wachagwa" which is a derogatory term for foreigner, or just "Waswahili" meaning "detrIALIZED."

The impact of this situation resulted in many of the Wamakonde who failed to reintegrate into Mozambican society returning to Tanzania. Reactions to their return were mixed. The official government stand was to welcome the Wamakonde a second time. However, at the local village level, interpersonal relations with individual hosts were often strained and created conflict resulting in significant psychological stress for those returning to Tanzania.

The past experience of the difficulties of reintegration for returning Wamakonde has important implications for the present repatriation process. The extended period of asylum experienced by many Mozambican refugees in neighbouring countries is bound to create serious problems upon their return. In some cases, Mozambicans have lived in exile for over a decade without contact with home. Cultural differences, as well as more fundamental changes regarding gender roles and rules of social organization may have developed during the exile as a result of the influences of the host society and, ironically, international relief efforts. These differences are likely to be greatest in those refugees who fled as children and are now returning as young adults. If the Wamakonde are an accurate example, the population who did not flee is unlikely to fully extend welcoming arms toward the returnees.

In light of the positive, albeit sluggish implementation of peace in Mozambique, these are important concerns to be considered by the ruling government and the international community. Since the peace efforts in Mozambique remain promising, these hopes should go hand in hand with concerted efforts by the Mozambican government and the international community to prepare the returnees as well as the receiving population for the long process of national reconciliation. Their homecoming should remind them less of their past experiences. ■