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Friends of Magude (February 1995)

Friends of Magude travel to that district.

—*Notícias*, headline, 4 February 1995

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It has been close to ten years since I first visited Magude district and close to eight since I left it, and Mozambique, for what may or may not be the last time. Although the date of my arrival closely coincides with that of the *Notícias* headline cited above, I was not among the "friends" featured in the national news story. That article referred to a group of still-displaced Magude residents (the "Association of the Friends of Magude," *deslocados* then living in Maputo, the capital city) who had journeyed home to take part in the resumption of *vukanyi* celebrations after the end of Mozambique's sixteen-year civil war (1976-92). Yet I remember this headline jumping out at me from the thin pages of *Notícias*, its prosaic content somehow striking—and oddly personal—to me on that steamy February afternoon. I had traveled to Magude for the first time two weeks earlier. Having



finally decided to ignore the expatriate pessimism that threatened to engulf me in Maputo, I wanted to take a look at the rumor-shrouded district for myself. After a month of dire warnings from warily sympathetic aid workers that landmines, drought, poverty, witchcraft, peasant distrust, and (above all) lack of hotels had made postwar Magude practically impenetrable to foreign researchers, it was something of a revelation to discover that I could climb into my red '86 VW Citi Golf and simply *drive* there on my own.

Of course, that inaugural visit was far from simple, and I was not on my own at all. Research companions rarely get the textual credit they deserve; and on this particular day my co-travelers—(now ex-) husband John M. Collins and intrepid fellow historian Elizabeth MacGonagle—provided not only companionship but also logistical and moral support. John and Liz were braving, in addition to the physical uncertainties of a rural road trip, *my* uncertainties (perhaps more serious) about the purpose and feasibility of my research. I was confident of nothing, really, beyond a single good idea: that, through their everyday performance of tasks considered women's work, rural women in southern Mozambique had developed oral and material strategies for remembering their pasts, strategies that might reveal surprising new truths about the region's history if only scholars learned to read them. I had been pinning my fieldwork hopes on Magude since the summer of 1992, when during a pre-dissertation research trip to Mozambique (spent mainly in Maputo, because of the war) I became fascinated with the upper Nkomati River and the sparsely documented histories of the people who had lived along its banks. I had never been to Magude, but that did not stop me from crafting a research project that required me to live in the district for a year or more. Nor did it save me from stubbornness, even after I arrived in Maputo in December 1994 and began to meet men and women who knew the area firsthand: The more I was questioned about my choice of locale, the more resolutely I fixed on Magude, refusing to consider other (more-accessible, better-known) options. For me, then, this road trip was a matter of academic life or death. On its success, I believed, hinged the outcome of my research, my doctoral dissertation, my career—indeed, the rest of my life. With such grandiose anxieties crowding our little car, my two passengers must have had a rather suffocating ride.



I can only imagine now the apprehensions that may have haunted those "Friends of Magude" who ventured to the district two weeks later, some of them returning home perhaps for the first time since the end of the war. On this particular day, I confess, I focused almost entirely on my own, often irrational fears about our journey. Would we reach Magude? How would people respond to us? Would I find a place to live? Would anyone be willing to talk to us? As it happened, the barely 150 kilometers of paved road from Maputo to Magude—north along the perilous coastal highway, then west at the unmarked turnoff to Xinavane—challenged us in ways that were rather more ordinary. From the safety of Maputo the next morning, looking back on

the day in my journal, I described the trip mainly as a string of vexatious landscapes and inconveniences: a bribe-seeking police roadblock just past Manhica; potholes that yawned wider and deeper with each passing mile; scraggly patches of withered cornstalks; the single-file march of wireless electric poles lining the roadside, tilting like drunken soldiers, their wooden uniforms bleached pale, and white ceramic insulators hanging brokenly from their shoulders; the long wait to cross the single-lane car, train, pedestrian, and livestock bridge over the Nkomati River; on the river's edge, a sign emblazoned with skull and crossbones and reading "Danger—Landmines"; the surly bridge guards; the watchful soldiers lounging on a veranda in the otherwise deserted, gunfire-pocked cement center of Magude town. ¹ Such scenes from our maiden drive to Magude were troubling in some cases because they complicated our visit, but more often because they confirmed stories I did not want to believe about postwar rural life.

How petty, or how obvious, these concerns would have seemed to the *deslocados* viewing this corner of Mozambique's war-wasted countryside two weeks later. Those travelers confronted ruined homes and farms and sacred places, charred forests and parched rivers, and tattered, roofless shells of schools, health posts, and shops. Where we saw suspicious uniforms and empty spaces, they saw ghosts (sometimes bones) of friends and loved ones, seas of sand and grass where abundant corn and cattle once had been. And while I looked for signs of postwar political



order in the white, boxy, district-administration building that welcomed us as we rounded the curve from the Nkomati bridge, they would have headed straight for the towering *nkanyi* tree in the park out front—the legendary site of Chief Magudzu Khosa's nineteenth-century capitol (*Nkanyini* in Shangaan) and the place where Magude's traditional authorities and the local officials from Mozambique's governing party, Frelimo, would raise gourds or glasses of *vukanyi* together, toasting national unity and hope for a speedy recovery from the war.

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An imposing natural memorial to the force of indigenous belief and ritual practice, Magude's *nkanyi* tree embodies its own story of the past. According to local lore, Portuguese officials in the early years of colonial rule repeatedly tried to fell the tree in order to eliminate this conspicuous symbol of precolonial African authority and the great Magudzu, whose young son and successor, Xongela, signed his father's chiefdom over to the Portuguese in a "treaty of vassalage" in 1895. But Magudzu's *nkanyi* refused to die: Every Portuguese attempt to cut down the tree not only failed to kill it but somehow caused it to grow taller and wider instead. Finally, the colonizers bowed to the inevitable and decreed that, from that time forward, they too would honor the extraordinary tree, by joining their African subordinates under its shade once a year for the ceremonial opening of *vukanyi* season.



A monthlong celebration in late January and February, *nguva wa vukanyi* (the time of *vukanyi*) serves simultaneously as a ritual precaution against the dangers of the first fruits of the new agricultural year, a reminder of the proper relationship between rulers and subjects, and an interlude of freedom from social (and sometimes sexual) behavioral restraints. Onto the graves of chiefly ancestors, men and women pour libations of *vukanyi* (beer home-brewed from newly ripe *makanyi* fruit), and to their living chiefs they offer pots filled with this low-alcohol beverage. They themselves consume large quantities of *vukanyi* in communal beer drinks that go sometimes round the clock and are renowned as much for their jubilant singing and dancing as for the querulously raised voices of cuckolded husbands and jealous wives. ² In late precolonial times, rural villages across southern Mozambique would have organized their own, relatively small-scale *vukanyi* rites and revelries to pay homage to local chiefs; however, the ceremonies at Chief Magudzu's *Nkanyini* in the mid-nineteenth century would have been among the grandest in the region. The Portuguese's appropriation of Magudzu's *nkanyi*—clearly, like their appropriation of his name, a strategy for disguising colonialism as a benignly native system of rule—added a new chapter to the tree's history, but it neither erased nor transformed the layers of mnemonic meaning already contained in the chief's arboreal capitol. As the spokesperson for the Friends of Magude explained to *Notícias*, "We want to remember the old moments of Magude-Nkanhine [*Nkanyini*], always marked by traditional festivities and ceremonies." ³

Like me, in other words, these travelers went to Magude looking for history. And like me, I think, they hoped to find it through a deliberate act of remembrance, a socially orchestrated calling up of past experience into present consciousness. But which history were we looking for? Which old moments, which past? I with my interview questions, the *deslocados* with their plan to gather

around a sacred tree—what kind of remembering did we wish to invoke? The Friends of Magude were rather vague on this point. Their declared agenda was to gather as a community defined not by colonization or postcolonial war but by the tradition of *vukanyi*—but which tradition did they mean? *Vukanyi* season celebrates strong chiefly leadership and the controlling rhythms of an ancestral agrarian culture. At the same time, it encourages a temporary disregard for (if not defiance of) the very rules that these structures are intended to enforce. Which *vukanyi* experience would prove to be more memorable, more likely to be remembered, in the circumstances of postwar Magude? In setting the agenda for my research I took for granted that the men and women of Magude knew the answers to such questions and that the memories of women in particular were waiting, like uncharted lands, for me to explore. What I did not consider, when reflecting on what I saw as a propitiously timed news story, was that *Noticias'* source may have spoken with deliberate vagueness—that, while I was traveling to Magude in search of what women remembered, Magude's *deslocados* were traveling in search of memory itself.

Notes:

Note 1: Journal 2 (22 January 1995). [Back.](#)

Note 2: For an early ethnographic description of *vukanyi* rites and festivities, see Henri A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (New York: University Books, 1962), 1:397–404. [Back.](#)

Note 3: "Amigos de Magude viajam para aquele distrito," *Notícias*, 4 February 1995. [Back.](#)

[Binding Memories: Women as Makers and Tellers of History in Magude, Mozambique](#)