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## Mementos (December 1996)

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The official revival of Magude's *vukanyi* ceremonies in the wake of Mozambique's first multiparty elections in October 1994—the latter, an affair with its own ceremonial purposes, both domestically and on the world stage—was a happily symbolic event, marking the formal reintegration of the district into the country's postwar political landscape and history. The reporter for *Notícias*, a government-published newspaper, chose not to spoil this upbeat story by mentioning the lingering presence along Magude's western border of soldiers (and captives) of the rebel army, Renamo, or the refusal of Renamo's self-styled administrators at the outposts of Mahele and Mapulanguene to lower Renamo flags even four months after Frelimo's victory in the elections.



Mozambique's flourishing independent press was not treating Magude quite as kindly in December 1996, the month I packed up my tape recorder and left the district for the last time. By then, many of Magude's "friends" had decided to return to their homes permanently instead of dashing up from Maputo for brief visits, and the renegade Renamo administrators had been replaced by young Frelimo officials. Unfortunately, the majority of the resettled rural population were still in dire economic straits, and the promise that tradition would be restored had been overshadowed (and in some cases subverted) by forces of a less local cast. According to headlines in such commercial news publications as the weekly paper *Savana* and the daily *mediaFAX* and in *Tempo*, a state-owned magazine, conflict and mistrust rather than forgiveness and harmony were the order of the day: "[Cattle for livestock development following suspicious routes](#)," "[Magude Administrator protects thieves](#)," "[Two families fight over Maguiguana](#)," "[There is an intrusion in Mapulanguene!](#)"—this last, the story of George Benjamin Van Schalkwyk, known locally as Xitaduvula ("it will shoot"), a white South African pilot with shady Renamo connections who had set up an armed, solar-powered camp along Magude's northwest border as the first step in a grandiose plan to create a private game reserve adjacent to South Africa's Kruger Park). <sup>1</sup> While such headlines increased Magude's visibility on the national newsscape, they did little to help the district's tarnished image as a dangerous backwoods still habituated to war. On the contrary, whereas the "Friends of Magude" piece attested to the power of the indigenous past to broker an independent and prosperous future, these media stories highlighted the vulnerability of ordinary Mozambicans to the ruinous pressures of the internationally funded peacetime economy. Even history itself, in the figure of famed anticolonial warrior Maguiguana Khosa, had become an object of dispute, as two of Magude's most powerful clans argued publicly over their ancestral right to offer sacrifices to Maguiguana's spirit on the ninety-ninth anniversary of his death at Portuguese hands.

This shift in the nature of media knowledge of Magude—a knowledge that was still pervasively historical, still resting on ideas of how things were or should have been—paralleled a shift that occurred in my own thinking over the course of fifteen months' residence in the district. Beautifully enacted by the men and women of Magude in the weeks leading up to my departure, this shift involved less a revision of the substance of my research than a refocusing of its central question about historical memory. As I prepared to leave Magude, many of the people I had come to know during my stay approached me to offer a *xitsundzuxo* (memento) of some kind, occasionally with great ceremony but more often in private, though with equally solemn intent. From the men who had used their authority and official connections so generously on my behalf—men in the district government, the local branch of the Frelimo party, the Swiss Mission-descended Presbyterian church at Antioka on whose grounds I lived—these mementos consisted of instructions: I was to communicate the district's most urgent problems (agricultural distress, unemployment, poor health care, lack of basic amenities) both in the book I planned to write and to my "chiefs" back home. Whoever they understood my "chiefs" to be, these men shared the belief that only such representatives of formal (presumptively masculine) power could solve Magude's postwar dilemmas and that a proper telling of Magude's history should prioritize such structural concerns.

At a farewell service at Antioka, on the other hand, I received from a singing procession of elders remembrances befitting a community long used to indulging white visitors with both decorous displays of African tradition and polite homage to Western ways. Handwoven baskets,

ornamental wooden spoons, lengths of cloth (wrapped around me, head to foot), the admonition that I must not forget to write to them with news of my parents and *bava* John—this combination of gifts and counsel pointedly expressed the full meaning of *xitsundzuxo* as memento, reminder, and advice, <sup>2</sup> a simultaneously material and oral invocation of memory. Like the directives from Magude's powerful men, these entreaties to remember also betrayed an assumption about memory itself: that remembering implies a moral obligation to *act*, not out of abstract social duty but in honor of the relational quality of past experience, the twining together of people's histories once their paths have crossed at a particular place and time. The Antioka Christians who befriended me did so, I think, for the same reason they bade me good-bye with traditional handicrafts they had learned to disdain and a reference to the fact that they, unlike most non-Christians, would be able to read the letters I wrote. Self-appointed intermediaries between a discredited *khale* (long ago) and the redemptive modernity of *sweswi* (now), these men and women embraced me as a sign that Magude would be rebuilt on a gently colonial vision of the past, under the auspices of well-meaning white folk who would dress up their modernity with pretty native things. Again, the mementos or reminders they offered laid bare the artfulness of history in Shangaan culture. What has happened, how things have been, what people know and tell of the past—all are secondary to, and defined by, how and for whom remembering is done.

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The most eloquent *switsundzuxo* of all, though, came from the women with whom I had spent the bulk of my time in Magude. As I conducted my final round of visits and interviews, clumsily expressing my thanks to them for everything they had given and taught, I gathered a homier assortment of mementos of my stay: seeds, recipes, clay pots, a medicine to cure the ailment women believed was keeping me childless, hearty greetings to "our husband" and my mother, and a chorus of complaint about daughters' loss of "respect" (*xichavo*) and about the demise of the "ways of long ago" (*mahanyelo ya khale*). These concerns were not making headlines in Mozambique, nor did they appear to be troubling representatives of official power in the district. But for the women I interviewed—women whose memories encompassed most of the twentieth century, women whose mothers or grandmothers could recall the precolonial kingdom of Ngungunyana, women whose lives bore the indelible stains of colonialism, migrant labor, revolutionary nationalism, and civil war—Magude's past, as they chose to convey it to me, resided most permanently in these simple reminders of farming, cooking, healing, and female-centered kin ties. Perhaps, in a way, the women intended their *switsundzuxo* to capture a shared memory (theirs and mine) of the interviews themselves, after my groping questions about "long ago" gave way to their thickly storied recollections of the earthy dramas of life on the land. Tales of work and play, sickness and suffering, friendship and courtship, of partnership and strife in women's struggle to coax survival from the soil—here were the narrative grounds on which we met, renderings of long ago whose value we each, for our own reasons, wanted to believe in and understand.

Yet women's *switsundzuxo* represented more than innocent mementos of their pasts, more than casual tokens or stories offered simply to entertain a curious visitor. Despite their silence on economic and political matters, these women were just as troubled by poverty as their more influential menfolk, just as keenly aware as Antioka church elders of how the tension between tradition and modernity—between old and new, *xilandin* (black) and *xilungu* (white)—complicated debates about national reconstruction. Like both groups, moreover, these women believed in the therapeutic power of the past, in the necessity of history for curing the ills of postwar Magude. Their history, though, had little to do with chiefs or Western ways. For them, there was no history beyond the pale of their remembering, no past beyond the web of shared stories and practices that bound women together as they worked to keep the bodies and spirits of their families and communities alive and well. For them, history dwelt in the archives of these relationships: the oral and material reminders of a past experienced with *vansati kulorhi* (fellow women), reminders that intentionally recorded and explained that past at the same time. When they took advantage of our interviews to share with me some of those reminders—names, life stories, pottery, tattoos—the women of Magude were doing more than reminiscing. As I understand it, they were deliberately binding our memories together, teaching me by example the history that had sustained them so that I would carry that history forward and bind other memories in turn. The most striking thing about that history was its apparently *unhistorical* character, its indifference to the information that academic historians seek as evidence of a significant or meaningful past. For what mattered to these women at the moment of my departure was less *what* I remembered about their lives than how I remembered them, and for whom. What mattered above all was that I share their *switsundzuxo* with my own "fellow women"—whoever they might be—back at home.

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**Notes:**

**Note 1:** Paulo Machava, "Gado de fomento pecuário em rotas duvidosas," *Savana*, 3 August 1996, pp. 16-17; Constâncio Nhancale, "Governo e associação atacam-se mutuamente," *Savana*, 22 November 1996, pp. 4-5 (the accusation that the "Magude Administrator protects thieves" appears as a front-page teaser for this article); Rui de Carvalho, "Duas famílias disputam Maguiguana," *mediaFAX*, 13 August 1996; Arnaldo Langa, "Há um intruso em Mapulanguene!," *Tempo*, 12 August 1996, pp. 11-15. In the *Tempo* article, Van Schalkwyk's name appears as "Van Schalkwyw," an unlikely Afrikaans spelling and probably a misprint. Van Schalkwyk is a common surname in South Africa (Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, conversation with author, 30 January 2004) [Back](#).

**Note 2:** *Tsonga-English Dictionary*, comp. R. Cuenod (Braamfontein: Sasavona, 1991), s.v. "xitsundzuxo." [Back](#).

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