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Binding Memories (December 2003)

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Much has changed in the last eight years, for Magude and for me. On current maps of Mozambique the district looks familiar enough, the dimensions of its cartographic self no different now as I conclude the writing of this book than when I left the country in 1996. But maps have multiple visual effects, and their meanings—sometimes accidental, always somehow projections of imagination—vary with their viewers' identities, memories, and times. If I had to guess, I would say that few of the men or women I interviewed in Magude have ever set eyes on an official map of the district; what they might see if they were to look at one today—what images it would call to mind, which feelings or stories it would provoke—is impossible for me to know. My own reactions to such a map near the end of 2004



betray both the naïveté with which I embarked on this project and the anxieties crowding my field of vision as I now gaze at Magude (or its one-dimensional paper likeness) from my distant seat in the academic theater of the West. For while I cling to my hard-earned, somewhat intimate knowledge of this corner of southern Mozambique, reassuring myself with memories that bind me to a sandy patch of bushland savanna and to women whose "hearts" (as they liked to put it) I had the privilege to glimpse, I also recognize—ironically, in the fixed contours of a simple map—that Magude's history has continued to unfold in my absence, in ways that render its past ever less accessible to me.

Private memories aside, news reports from Magude that have appeared online over the past several years are at least partly responsible for the host of uneasy images I conjure up at the sight of a district map today. On the surface, some of these images seem perfectly innocuous. When I say, for instance, that Magude's shape now makes me think of a thick sock fluttering in the breeze from the clothesline of the South African border, the comparison could be harmless—except for the impression of struggle-in-captivity, of dependence versus straining for freedom, that the image suggests, and that reflects a new stage in the district's relationship with its powerful neighbor. In other comparisons I grant Magude a place of great geographic importance. With its 2,600-kilometer coastline and 4,500-kilometer land boundary abutted by six southern African states, it shoulders the weight of the sprawling mass of Mozambique. When viewed this way, nine bulky provinces bear down on Magude district in its position atop the slim pedestal of Maputo province, home of the nation's capital, Maputo city, where nearly 10 percent of Mozambique's population of roughly nineteen million reside. If I press this image further, Magude appears to buffer Maputo city both from the rest of the country and from Mozambique's pushy neighbors to the west—and, at the same time, to grip the southern boundary of Gaza province like a belt loop, holding the rest of the country by the pants to keep it from falling into the sea. Surely these images reveal my concern about the vulnerability of the Mozambican nation and, indirectly, its leaders, pressured now more than ever before to balance the needs of long-suffering citizens against the demands of often overbearing interests from the outside world. They also, however, highlight Magude's paradoxical reputation as simultaneously marginal and pivotal to the well-being of the country, no less today than in the early aftermath of the war. Here, my map-imagination feeds most anxiously of all on media stories published online in recent years. In these stories, Magude's status has acquired a worrisome new international aspect, as an ever-widening lattice of connections links the district, as both casualty and consumer, to the capitalist economies of an increasingly globalized world.



In this respect, of course, Magude mirrors some dramatic transformations in postwar Mozambique as a whole. After more than two decades of grim international press coverage, Mozambique now regularly wins praise as "an African success story" for its aggressive privatization, enthusiastic shift to a market economy, and extreme openness to foreign investment. ¹ Attributed by President Joaquim Chissano to the efficient implementation of the Rome Peace Accord (1992) between his government and Renamo, Mozambique's dizzying turn from the world's poorest country to one of the world's fastest-growing economies—in the 2003 Africa Competitiveness Report, Mozambique ranked first among African nations on the optimism index, after an impressive 9.9 percent gain in gross domestic product in 2002 ²—has brought

additional benefits at home and abroad. Western support for the consolidation of Mozambique's fledgling multiparty democracy has encouraged the formation of new opposition parties, the successful completion of municipal elections in November 2003, and Chissano's agreement to step down (after two consecutive terms in office) for the general elections planned for November 2004. At a recent meeting in Paris, international donors led by the World Bank and the European Union promised Mozambique US\$790 million in financial assistance—more than \$100 million more than Mozambique had requested—to continue its Action Plan for the Reduction of Absolute Poverty in the coming year. ³ And the once-hamstrung Frelimo government is enjoying a more prominent role in continental affairs as well: President Chissano, for instance, served as chairman of the African Union from July 2003, when he took over the position from South African president Thabo Mbeki, to July 2004. In fact, as a result of a deepening economic and diplomatic relationship with South Africa, Mozambique is now that country's largest trade and investment partner, with new details of bilateral cooperation (ranging from tourism to infrastructure development) announced practically every day. ⁴

Yet as eagerly as Mozambique embraces its postwar identity and commitments, many hurdles, old and new, continue to slow its quest for prosperity. Sprinkled among the glowing international news reports of the country's postwar boom are occasional admissions that radical reform, now as during the heady revolutionary years after independence, does not come easily to this African nation. Still a victim of the cruel extremes of its own environment, the country has been devastated by flooding and drought in the last five years. Hunger and infectious disease (mainly cholera) have followed in the wake of these catastrophes, reaching acute levels particularly in southern Mozambique, where rates of HIV infection are also high. Despite the remarkable (and much-trumpeted) increases in GDP and foreign investment since the late 1990s, roughly 70 percent of the population still live in absolute poverty and more than one-third of Mozambicans lack access to potable water. ⁵ Indeed, the infusion of foreign capital and the reforms accompanying liberalization have had some disturbing if predictable effects: mounting economic crime (from petty theft to organized crime to high-level political corruption), ⁶ greater dependence on foreign aid (which currently pays for about 60 percent of Mozambique's budget), ⁷ inflated costs of goods and services, and ongoing concerns over land-tenure security for both small-scale farmers and corporate developers struggling to protect their interests under the provisions of Mozambique's new (1997) land law. ⁸

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In many ways, Magude embodies this maelstrom of change. By virtue of environment and history, the district is a stage where the national dramas of postwar Mozambique, particularly those involving South Africa, inexorably play themselves out. As before the war, Magude's current fortunes reflect its Janus-like position on the border between southern Mozambique and South Africa, between the largely agrarian, partially commercialized (and climatically volatile) Maputo province and the mining industries, burgeoning cities, and migrant-labor hubs of the Transvaal. Historically vulnerable to flooding and drought, Magude has often been particularly vulnerable to the secondary consequences of hunger and contagious disease (including during recent cholera epidemics) because of both the high volume of cross-border traffic and poorly regulated commercial use by South Africa of its principal water supply, the Nkomati River. Yet the nearness of South Africa also continues to furnish Magude with certain kinds of economic development—most visibly, at present, the construction of a US\$1.2-billion natural-gas pipeline connecting production fields in Inhambane province to a processing plant in Secunda, South Africa. The 865-kilometer pipeline runs through Magude (along with four other districts in Inhambane and Maputo provinces) and will eventually serve the local population; the demining and clearing (i.e., deforesting) of areas through which the pipeline passes is, according to the Mozambican media, one of the ancillary benefits of this project, as is the improvement of roads to facilitate the delivery of pipe sections to the construction route. ⁹ Reports on the pipeline's progress do not indicate what manner of access rural residents will have to this new energy source. In Magude, however, the battle over farmers' rights to affordable energy in a market economy has already begun, with sugarcane growers threatening to strike over a sudden massive increase in the cost of electricity, which they need to power their irrigation pumps. ¹⁰

A different kind of transnational development involving South Africa and Zimbabwe enmeshes postwar Magude, albeit still indirectly, in an ambitious donor-funded scheme to cultivate wildlife for the sake of ecotourism. Here too, though, journalistic optimism cannot completely hide the troubling signs that grand plans to turn Mozambique's natural assets to profit may bring more harm than good to the local population. The 35,000-square-kilometer Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park (GLTP), which joins conservation parks in the three countries, encompasses at

present a large portion of Massingir district, Magude's neighbor to the north in Gaza province. Formally established in December 2002, this "super park"—also referred to as a "peace park," patterned after a model of transfrontier conservation introduced in the 1930s in North America ¹¹—is not yet fully functioning, in part because of unresolved problems on the Mozambican side. Much-publicized progress so far includes the restocking of wildlife species in Mozambique, involving, for example, a US\$20-million project to "translocate" elephants from South Africa's Kruger Park to Mozambique's Limpopo National Park (formerly Coutada 16). Also, a portion of the fence between the two countries has been dismantled, to allow unrestricted movement of wildlife back and forth; a formal agreement has been reached to create a tourist-only border post so that visitors can move between Mozambican and South African sides of the park without visas; and plans have been made to construct a new toll highway cutting through Kruger so that tourists can drive directly from there to resorts on Mozambique's Indian Ocean coast. ¹²

Setbacks have received far less media attention, although the trickle of disquieting news from Mozambique is difficult to ignore. Every one of the first batch of translocated elephants, for example, quickly made its lumbering way back to home territory in South Africa (wildlife, like tourists, enjoy more freedom to migrate under the scheme than Mozambican work seekers ever have). ¹³ More seriously, Mozambican authorities' failure to involve local communities fully in plans to develop Coutada 16 has cost promoters some much-needed popular support. Residents of the area have voiced anger and fear over the prospect of large game animals living dangerously close to villages, crops, livestock, and groundwater sources. Government indecision on the complex question of fencing to protect animals and humans from one another has fostered further resentment. The fiercest local opposition, though, targets official plans to relocate families from Massingir to lands outside the park, plans that could drastically affect the lives of as many as 20,000 people now residing within park boundaries, not to mention the communities where these families will be resettled. ¹⁴ Where the government will relocate these people, in what circumstances, and with what compensation remains to be seen; most if not all of them have reoccupied this land only recently after years of displacement, and that is sure to make the process especially painful.

Again, news from Magude offers a foretaste of battles to come as local communities try to wrest personal gains from the super park in their midst, independently or in defiance of government regulations. According to a *Notícias* story from October 2003, wildlife inspectors working with the Mozambican police are tracking an elusive network of poachers in Magude district. These poachers are outfitted with AK-47 assault rifles and, until recently, better vehicles than what their pursuers had; such material advantages, combined with entrepreneurial energy and intimate knowledge of Magude's northwest frontier (which abuts GLTP territory in both Massingir district and South Africa), make illegal hunting for profit a sensible response to poverty, government neglect, and an unwanted outdoor zoo in farmers' backyards. ¹⁵ Poaching is not a new phenomenon in Magude. I remember my own excitement when, during visits to Phadjane or Mapulanguene, I would see a man dressed in the dusty colors of the forest and carrying the carcass of an *nguluve* (wild pig) slung across his shoulders. As he would approach the homestead where I was staying, I knew, with a rumble in my belly, that there would be roasted meat for dinner that night. My hosts replied vaguely when I asked where the animal had come from, though they acknowledged the probable illegality of hunters' activities and were quick to defend as vital to local survival a similarly illicit cross-border traffic in *xikukutsu* wood, an exceptionally hard wood prized as a raw material from which to make charcoal. ¹⁶ The opening



of the GLTP, however, has raised the stakes for poachers enormously, both within the park and in communities along its borders. On the one hand, the temptation to hunt for game on land that has been appropriated from its ancestral owners may intensify in proportion to the increase in new access to it by outsiders. On the other hand, the risks of such lawbreaking are already beginning to mount, as police and government and park authorities marshal new donor-funded resources to eliminate local threats to transnational ecotourism profits.

For me, now settled in my comfortable apartment in Boston and chasing news of Magude through the safe channels of the Internet, such stories raise both a flicker of hope and a sigh of despair. Do poachers represent the first stirring of a groundswell of popular resistance to nondemocratic decisions about land use, or are they the last gasp of an agrarian ethic whose outlaw defenders will seize what they can before the forces of global capitalism finally drive them away? From here, at this moment, answers are hard to obtain. While my overseas access

to news of Magude has improved substantially in the last few years, particularly since the Agencia de Informação de Moçambique (Mozambique New Agency, or AIM) launched its [official Web page](#) in 1998, I am no closer to the plain fabric of local experience in Magude, to the homespun meanings of newsworthy events—not to mention the lives or opinions of rural women—than I was before Mozambique established its presence on the World Wide Web. If anything, ironically, I feel farther away: Media knowledge of Magude currently published online is neither as local nor as historical as I remember print news in Mozambique used to be, although AIM draws much of its online content from Mozambican papers. With stories focused either on the transformations wrought in the countryside by foreign capital or on the struggles of rural folk to adjust to a liberalized economy, the more transnationally connected Magude of today seems bound more to visions of an elsewhere-oriented—and clearly capitalist—future than to traditions or memories (even disputed ones) of a native past. Of course, this latest shift may be deceptive. AIM rarely disseminates material from Mozambique's privately owned media, and so its state-centered and often openly partisan viewpoint may not reflect either the broader spectrum of print news available in the country or trends in popular thinking in Magude itself. ¹⁷ And yet I am troubled by these parallel and certainly related developments: the opening of Mozambique's rural districts, such as Magude, to the exploitative opportunities of global capital investment and the closing off of public discourse to local knowledge (or, more properly, knowledges) of Mozambique's agrarian past.

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The passage of time has also affected my understanding of Magude's history and of the histories of Magude's women, as my life has become less rather than more globally connected in recent years. The women of Magude seem increasingly distant, although I surround myself with their *switsundzuxo* and try to apply lessons I learned from them—about the power in a name, the need for life-storytelling, the mnemonic richness of household things, the precious support of fellow women, the rewards of cultivating kinship—to my own daily life. I am aware of our attenuating connection, of the possibility of loss built into a set of relationships whose existence derived from struggling to survive in the same place at the same time. Now that our histories have diverged, now that the conditions of our respective lives—and of our remembering—have changed so dramatically, what place can we have in each other's memories anymore?

Without a doubt, after seven years' absence I am bleary-eyed with nostalgia, a feeling I know that in my professional capacity I am not supposed to admit towards my work. But I would argue, am now able to argue, that nostalgia is precisely what the self-described "old women" of Magude wanted me to remember about their histories most of all. I have begun to suspect that these women were more prescient about Magude's future than I was at the time, that the shattering impact of the civil war, the painful adjustments of reconstruction, and the eagerness of old national foes—Portugal, South Africa, the capitalist West—to finance Mozambique's recovery had already convinced them that their knowledge of "long ago" would not be useful in the world much longer. Perhaps I was a conduit for them; perhaps they were also farsighted in understanding this book of mine, which none of us imagined would take electronic form, as a kind of *xitsundzuxo* too, an archive of our relationship binding them, through me, to the global community to which they and their *tiko* (land, country) would inevitably belong. If so, I can almost hear the incredulous hoots and hollers of their laughter at the idea that their histories—their memories—their lives, their talk—are accessible via something called the Internet to a global audience. I wish the readers of this book could hear their laughter, the laughter of my fellow women. It is a delightful and yet wistfully echoing sound.

Notes:

Note 1: Craig Urquhart, "Mozambique Shows New Face to the World," *Panafrican News Agency (PANA) Daily Newswire*, 6 July 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>. [Back](#).

Note 2: Commonwealth News and Information Service, "Commonwealth Mozambique Investment Conference Will Drive Forward Investment Agenda," *allAfrica.com*, 21 October 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>; Johann Barnard, "The Land of Milk and Honey," *Sunday Times*, 26 October 2003, <http://www.suntimes.co.za/2003/10/26/business/surveys/survey11.asp> (accessed 5 November 2003). [Back](#).

Note 3: Xinhua News Agency, "Donors offer Mozambique 790 Million US Dollars," *allAfrica.com*, 3 October 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>. [Back](#).

Note 4: UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, "Strategic Partnership with Mozambique to Be Consolidated at Summit," *allAfrica.com*, 21 August 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 5: Africa Review World of Information, "Mozambique Country Profile," 23 September 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>; UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, "Mozambique: Cholera Kills 87 People," *allAfrica.com*, 17 June 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>; UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, "Elections Another Step Forward after Violent Past," *allAfrica.com*, 30 October 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 6: *Business Day* (Johannesburg), "Organised Crime Thrives in Paradise," *allAfrica.com*, 11 July 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>; *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, "Mozambique Murder Trial Exposes High-Level Corruption to the Nation," 24 January 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Agence France Presse, "Mozambique Marks 11 Years of Peace, Economic Growth," 4 October 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Malaysia General News, "Mozambique: USAID Suggests Partial Land Privatisation," 16 February 2002, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>; UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, "Women Still Struggle for Land Rights Despite New Law," *allAfrica.com*, 4 July 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Agencia de Informação de Moçambique, "Gas Pipeline Advances," *allAfrica.com*, 14 August 2002, <http://www.allafrica.com/>; Xinhua News Agency, "Large Gas Project in Mozambique to Be Completed Ahead of Schedule," 29 July 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Agencia de Informação de Moçambique, "Farmers Association Complains of High Electricity Costs," *allAfrica.com*, 15 April 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 11: African Wildlife Foundation, "Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park Will Double Land for Wildlife—including Kruger's 10,000 Elephants," 12 August 2002, <http://www.awf.org/news/8734> (accessed 11 November 2003); African Wildlife Foundation, "Africa Launches the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park," 13 January 2003, <http://www.awf.org/news/10792> (accessed 11 November 2003). Transfrontier conservation areas were intended to improve management of shared natural resources and to enhance peace and cooperation among the countries involved. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Agence France Presse, "Mozambique, S. Africa to Set up Another Border Post for Tourists," 27 May 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>; BuNews, "Greater Limpopo Park Takes Shape," *SouthAfrica.info*, 29 July 2003, http://www.safica.info/what_happening/news/limpopopark-290703.htm (accessed 11 November 2003). [Back.](#)

Note 13: James Hall, "Mozambique Conservationists Raise Red Warning Flags," IPS-Inter Press Service, 14 February 2003, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/>. [Back.](#)

Note 14: "The Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park: A Model for Africa?" *allAfrica.com*, 10 February 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>; Agencia de Informação de Moçambique, "Wildlife Restocking in Limpopo National Park," *allAfrica.com*, 7 July 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/>; University of the Witwatersrand Refugee Research Programme, "A Park for the People? Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park—Community Consultation in Coutada 16, Mozambique," March 2002, <http://www.queensu.ca/samp/miqdocs/Documents/2002/park.pdf> (accessed 13 April 2004). [Back.](#)

Note 15: Agencia de Informação de Moçambique, "Police Seize Weapons and Game from Poachers," *allAfrica.com* 9, October 2003, <http://www.allafrica.com/> target="new">. [Back.](#)

Note 16: At this time (1995-96), the weekly border trade in wood of the *xikukutsu* tree (Rooibos [Combretum apiculatum Sond.]) netted 3 rands (the South African currency) per bundle of four small pieces of wood and enabled Mozambican wood sellers to buy such consumer goods as flour, sugar, bread, and soap, items not available in Phadjane or Mapulanguene. This activity was the main source of income for the local population, supplementing farmers' scanty harvests and assistance from the World Food Program. The trade began during the period of Renamo occupation, when South Africans were entering the area to

hunt and to reach Renamo bases at Ngungwe and Matongomane. In late 1996, Renamo was still central to this commerce, renting out its tractor to haul the wood to border exchange points—such as the crudely fashioned gate in the fence shown in the photograph—for 30 rands per return trip. See Heidi Gengenbach, *Women, Land, and Resettlement in Magude District: A Field Study* (Maputo: Norwegian Refugee Council, 1997). According to the *Notícias* story (October 2003) on poaching in Magude, provincial authorities are now cracking down also on unlicensed logging and firewood sales in the district. [Back.](#)

Note 17: For commercial Mozambique news publications available online, see the Web sites of the daily *mediaFAX* and the weekly *Savana*, both produced by the independent media company [Mediacoop](#), and of the weekly [Fim de Semana](#). Online access to these commercial media is restricted. [Back.](#)

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