

Documentary Projects For Refugee and Displaced Children in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article emphasises that the uprooting and dislocation experienced by Mozambicans has effectively separated children from their own history and cultural traditions. This is a serious problem, as the psychosocial development of children is intimately connected to a sense of their own identity and family background. In previous times a living sense of history was passed down through a rich oral tradition, which was violently interrupted as a result of the war. However, various documentary projects developed in Mozambique and elsewhere have helped to re-engage dislocated children in cultural and community activities. The author suggests development of documentary projects and activities among refugee and displaced children and young persons that could include oral history, photographic projects, autobiography and video. These would help re-establish "collective memory" for children, help them to develop basic communication and learning skills and provide a source of historical and cultural information to the community generally.

Introduction

For many Mozambicans today, remembering is a nightmare. The atrocities of life in a war-torn nation, dislocation from home and family as a result of war and drought, resettlement in urban shantytowns and refugee camps - these form the basis of many personal histories. Dreaming of the past evokes pain. Living in the present is fraught with difficulty. Imagining the future is a luxury few can afford.

But for thousands of years, memory was the glue that held Mozambican and many other African societies together. History and cultural traditions resided in the memories of tribal elders who passed their knowledge and understanding on to future generations:

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"Through the oral tradition, the African learned his history, his role in society, his crafts and duties, speaking skills, and the traditional myths and legends of his group".

(Cooper, Vol 46).

A century of colonisation, twenty years of civil war, and the economic, political, and environmentally induced dislocation of millions of people have weakened the cultural foundations of Mozambican society. For Mozambique to recover from these multiple assaults on its political and cultural integrity, its citizens will have to envision and help build a future that incorporates an understanding and appreciation of traditional ways of living with more modern ways of life.

The reconstruction of Mozambique has tentatively begun, as FRELIMO and RENAMO have agreed to end the bloody civil war. But negotiations about the country's future and the suffering caused by the drought will likely prevent any immediate large-scale repatriation of rural peoples from urban areas and refugee camps. As a result, the refugee population, both in and outside of Mozambique, are a key to the country's future.

Children under fifteen years of age constitute the majority of the refugee population. In camps outside Mozambique, governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and refugees themselves seem to be meeting children's basic requirements for food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Not so, their psychosocial needs. Children have been uprooted, not only from the land their families once farmed, but also from the heritage and community identity a family-based culture rich in oral tradition once provided. Government and relief organisations must not only provide children the means for physical survival; they must also help these future citizens and potential leaders recapture a sense of cultural identity.

One of the tragedies of dislocation is that it effectively cuts children off from much of the history and traditions that provided meaning for their ancestors. They lack contact with multiple generations, miss the ritual practices that are critical to their development into young men and women, and fail to learn the family and tribal history that helps them understand their place in the world. Confined to a refugee camp far from their homes, where many of their most basic needs are met by relief agencies, young people learn few of the traditional skills - hunting, farming, herding, cooking, building - that are critical to personal identity and family survival.

No one is born with a knowledge of cultural traditions or practical skills. Everyone must learn them. Much teaching is informal: children get clues, learn lessons, receive advice from parents, family members and others in the community.

Although informal learning continues to take place in the midst of war and dislocation, as well as in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, the disruption of the routines of daily life severely limits such cultural transmissions.

Any society benefits from connections to the past. People experiencing the dislocations associated with urban/industrial life (migration, demise of inter-generational living units, occupational change, disassociation from nature) often go to great lengths to maintain connections to the past, however formal or symbolic those links may be. In societies where, at least in the near future, most people will remain on the land producing their own subsistence, practical, organic connections to the physical and psychic ways of life are crucial. This is especially true for a country such as Mozambique. Although every part of Africa has been touched by industrial capitalism, the Mozambican economy remains based on small-scale agriculture. The survival of young people going back to rural areas will depend on their ability to understand and reproduce many of the techniques and strategies of self-sufficiency and mutual aid employed by their ancestors.

Such traditions cannot be reconstituted until people are able to resettle in stable, peaceful communities. But the refugee experience can be an important preparation for repatriation. Programmes need to be developed to foster understandings of history and cultural traditions that in turn can contribute to the psychosocial development of children who have been wrenched from the lands and villages where they would normally grow up. Such programmes can help children adjust to the refugee experience, and help smooth the transition to life in rural agricultural communities.

Documentary projects drawing upon African oral and cultural traditions can do much to help the children of Mozambique repossess their pasts and reestablish their identities, not as victims of destructive forces but as members of productive communities. Projects using oral history, photography, and the visual and dramatic arts also offer benefits to social service workers, historians, and others who need and desire a deeper understanding of the lives and traditions of Mozambican people.

The Historical Context

The children of Mozambique, before Portuguese colonisation, lived in a society structured by a family-based system of small to mid-sized scattered communities. These communities survived at what today's industrially and economically developed nations would consider subsistence levels, with each member of the community taking some part in farming, hunting, building, cooking, and child-

rearing. These were not static or totally harmonious societies. There were conflicts within and pressures from without. Everyday experiences also differed from region to region, among different ethnic groups, and among men and women. Nevertheless, in important ways life changed little from generation to generation. Strong intergenerational links established through a rich oral tradition helped maintain the institutions, customs, spiritual ceremonies, and practical functions of these communities. Children learned about their cultural heritage and were trained to assume adult roles largely through oral traditions. The older generation passed along to the younger a view of history in which the present is part of a past which continues into the future. History was crucial to the life of the living.

Portuguese colonisation, particularly during the twentieth century, disrupted and partly destroyed the community structures and practices that had existed for thousands of years. The introduction of capitalist agriculture and the use of men as workers in the mines and on the plantations greatly undermined traditional uses of land and labour.

The war for independence caused additional hardships and disruption as Portuguese army units relocated thousands of rural residents in an attempt to prevent their incorporation into the forces of rebellion led by FRELIMO. Government forces destroyed many villages and created new larger rural centres in hopes of engendering loyalty through the provision of governmentally established medical, educational, and agricultural services. In addition, many peasants voluntarily left their homelands and moved to these *aldeamentos*, or urban areas, to escape the fighting between Portuguese and FRELIMO soldiers.

In the wake of independence in 1975, the FRELIMO government established new policies without regard to the advantages and appropriateness of incorporating Mozambican traditions. Communities were eroded by the institution of a socioeconomic plan that sought to build communal villages around chosen locales and through force rather than around familial ties and through choice. The young FRELIMO government not only lacked the resources and skills to implement such changes, but also undermined their effectiveness by rejecting religious and traditional clan leaders as potential rivals to their authority. Moreover, before these changes could take root, guerrillas supported by Rhodesia and later South Africa (RENAMO) began waging war on the country, destroying much of the infrastructure built up in the post-revolutionary years. Neighbouring states' economic destabilisation policies, which were intended to prevent independence movements in other countries from gaining strength through an alliance with a newly - independent Mozambique, hampered efforts to rebuild. RENAMO activities brought devastation on all levels of society, crippling the FRELIMO government

through the systematic destruction of bridges, roads, and other elements of the infrastructure and tearing apart what remained of the fabric of small communities by looting, killing, kidnapping, and other forms of destruction. Racked by continuous political upheaval, Mozambique has been especially ill-equipped to cope with the effects of other disasters over the past decade. Neither state nor local community structures existed to deal adequately with the droughts and famine that have ravaged much of Africa through these years.

Taken together, these conditions have forced millions of people off the land and into refugee camps and cities. Hundreds of thousands of people have left the remains of their old communities for refuge in urban areas. While free of the turmoil of life in the countryside, many of these emigres find that the cities offer only a less life-threatening state of poverty. Shantytown lives often lack all but the most rudimentary familial or social structure. In effect, many of these urban transplants find themselves living as quasi-refugees in a completely foreign segment of their fragmented nation.

The majority of dislocated people have found their way to *deslocado* centres established in Mozambique, and refugee camps in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The conditions in these camps vary greatly. Some provide adequate supplies of food, clothing and shelter and even an opportunity for schooling, while others barely have the resources to keep people alive. In no case do these centres and camps have the capacity for dealing adequately with the social and psychological needs of refugees.

The impact of decades of disruption and strife has been to tear apart old structures of society and prevent any new ones from developing. Children have been uprooted, not only from the land their families once farmed and inhabited, but also from the heritage and community identity a family-based culture, rich in oral traditions, once provided. Born into a state of emergency, children, for the most part, have known only survival strategies and itinerant lifestyles designed in reaction to the siege of war.

The Documentary Studies Tradition Among Children

While Mozambican children's needs are particular to their specific circumstances, existing methods used to address the problems facing refugee children can help us to develop a plan to aid Mozambique's next generation. In the recent repatriation of Cambodians, for instance, programmes of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) helped to educate children about the kinds of animals they would find in their homeland and the types of materials they would use to build houses.

In Mozambique's Niassa province, former Save the Children Fund (UK) staff person, Keith Warren, helped organise an effort to engage dislocated children in cultural and community activities. Children used interviews with community members to help create a child-produced newspaper, *A Voz da Crianca*. More recently, children have used cameras and video equipment to photograph and film the social problems they find important to their lives. Warren's efforts demonstrate that child-centered documentary projects can be successful with modest financial and technical support.

Similarly, projects developed in the United States to address a need for stronger intergenerational and historical ties, while deriving from different situations, can serve as useful models of what might be done in Mozambique. The best known children's oral history project, *Foxfire*, began in a high school English class in Rabun Gap, Georgia, in 1967. Rabun Gap is in the southern Appalachian mountains, an impoverished area that some have described as an "internal colony" in the United States. Ninth and tenth grade teacher Eliot Wigginton introduced interviewing and oral history into his curriculum in response to his students' disinterest in classwork that they deemed irrelevant to their lives. Wigginton explained, "students had told me that when they were treated as responsible adults, they would respond as responsible adults; that when the academic work they were asked to do was perceived by them as having real value, they would treat it accordingly" (Wigginton, 1985). The *Foxfire* project, by using the Rabun Gap community as a source of learning material, linked school work to community life in a way that increased student enthusiasm about both.

While the *Foxfire* project began primarily as an attempt to interest students in communicating more creatively and effectively with language, it developed into a much larger project with numerous rewards. By conducting and transcribing interviews, students not only improved their language skills but also learned about local culture and folklore. Producing a low-budget, student-run magazine named *Foxfire*, after an indigenous glow-in-the-dark organism that grows in the mountains, allowed the students to develop group skills and gave their readers an opportunity to learn about life in northeastern Georgia. In subsequent issues the students often chose practical topics, such as how to build a log cabin, as their themes and created *Foxfire* issues that were part documentary, part instruction manual. Young African-American teenagers in Holmes County, Mississippi, one of the poorest counties in the United States, have taken part in a similar series of oral history projects sponsored by the Rural Organising and Cultural Centre (ROCC). As part of its effort to strengthen community and foster personal empowerment through the exploration of culture and history, ROCC has held an annual school essay contest

on "The History of Holmes County from a Black Perspective". Eighth graders in a ROCC summer programme published an oral history magazine, *Bloodlines*, in 1988. Based upon interviews with elderly members of the community, the *Bloodlines* project allowed students to learn about their history, strengthen ties with their elders, and develop language and analytical skills.

The following summer some of these same students, and some new ones, began a new project focusing on the role of Holmes County residents in the local civil rights struggle. The oral history project resulted in the publication of a book, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, which tells the story of the Holmes County struggle through its participants' own words (ROCC, 1991). While recording a significant piece of history, the project has served an equally important role in building a community organisation to carry on the fight for social and economic justice.

The migrant farmworker internship programme at Duke University, originally sponsored in 1990 by the Centre for Documentary Studies and later supported by a grant from the US Department of Education, is a multifaceted project that combines community service with documentary work. For ten weeks during the summer, college students with classroom experience studying issues of particular concern to migrant farmworkers serve as volunteers with agencies in eastern North Carolina that work with migrant farmworkers and their families. In their roles as educational and social service interns, as well as through evening and weekend visits to migrant camps, these students learned first hand about farmworkers' lives.

The project was developed in part to meet a need to better inform policymakers and others of the conditions of life for the migrant farmworker population. Using documentary photography and writing, former interns have produced a magazine, an oral history report, and an art exhibit in order to share with readers and viewers their experiences and insights into the situation of migrant workers and their families. Former interns also completed a study of the needs of migrant farmworkers' children and developed proposals for the US Department of Education.

The project has included a documentary photography workshop for migrant children. Photographer Wendy Ewald, working in migrant summer school programmes, has taught elementary school-aged migrant children to use Polaroid and 35mm cameras to take pictures around themes such as family, neighbourhood, and dreams. Many children who were shy or embarrassed about trying to communicate in English (the majority of these children came from Mexican or Central American families) felt more comfortable expressing themselves through photography. The photography project was based upon many other projects Ms Ewald has undertaken with children throughout the world.

Documentary Projects for Displaced Communities and Refugee Populations in Southern Africa

The goal of documentary projects among displaced and refugee populations would be to help prepare Mozambicans, young and old, for repatriation and for the eventual development of self-defined, independent rural communities. Drawing on the past to help build the future, these activities would target the immediate needs of children for connection to a greater past than their memories encompass. They would also serve the community's requirement for training young people in the practical methods of subsistence living. Many of these skills can be learned from discussions with adults when combined with other forms of teaching and instruction.

A wide variety of projects can be designed to benefit displaced children, their families, and communities as well as the field staff working to assist them. The following suggestions are flexible and adaptable and are meant to be modified to meet the particular needs and resources of any particular group. The specific format of a project will be determined by the availability of local resources.

Oral History Projects

Oral history would serve as the primary methodology for these documentary projects. Oral history is a form of documentation based on the recollections and reminiscences of living people about the past. Although Western scholars have only recently turned to oral history as a documentary technique, the spoken word has been an important source of historical knowledge since the beginnings of human society. For thousands of years oral traditions served as the medium by which each generation transferred information about the past. In the West, as literacy spread and historians became professionalised, written records replaced the spoken word as the primary source of historical documentation. With the rise of social history in the 1970s, with its emphasis on history from the bottom-up, historians once more turned to the spoken word as a means of documenting the lives of non-elites who leave behind few written records. Tape recorders and computers have put the creation of historical documents at the fingertips of most of the world's people.

Oral history projects among refugee and displaced children would encourage young people, with the assistance of teachers or NGO field-level staff, to talk with elders in their camp or neighbourhood. Ideally, children would be equipped with:

- (1) a general sense of the purpose of the interview
- (2) available background on the person to be interviewed
- (3) an understanding of the techniques of tape recording if machines were available, and
- (4) an outline of proposed topics and a list of possible interview questions.

Projects might begin with life histories of older people in the community. These interviewees would be asked to narrate the story of their lives, beginning with early childhood memories and continuing to the present. Children could ask for specific information on place and date of birth and occupations of parents and grandparents, names of siblings and other relatives, education and work history, marriage and children, but they should emphasise open-ended questions that allow interviewees to tell their stories in their own ways. The interview should proceed in a roughly chronological manner, with the interviewees emphasising the events and experiences that seem most meaningful to them.

In the course of a life history interview, much unanticipated information will emerge. Stories about places, events, and family members may not seem to have much historical significance, but these are the ways in which people communicate their understandings of life. Such stories contain valuable moral lessons for children. The breakdown of traditional values, for instance, has been one consequence of war and dislocation. Killing, lying, and stealing often become behavioural norms for young people who were subjected to life and death situations in RENAMO base camps and controlled zones. Life history interviews would inevitably impart a sense of the moral and cultural values considered important by elders and would serve as a corrective to the attitudes and habits children were forced to develop to survive in these violent and dangerous environments.

Building on these individual interviews, children could begin compiling a history of a particular ethnic or tribal group, or region of the country. The different interpretations of the past provided by interviewees would instruct students in the complexities of historical knowledge. Such projects would be especially applicable for children further along in school who could do background reading in preparation for the interview.

Projects could also focus on specific events in the recent past. Understanding the history of the struggle against Portuguese colonialism could help build national pride. Children could read existing histories and then identify and interview people who had fought to end Portuguese domination. The discussions might include information on the pre-colonial period, the impact of colonialism, the organisation of resistance, the reasons for the successful revolt, and the problems associated with nation-building. It is also crucial that children come to terms with the recent civil war. Interviewing adults and other children about the experiences of war will help the process of reconciliation.

Displaced children also need instruction in practical, life-sustaining tasks, so interviews focused on traditional crafts and skills would be of great importance. Many children cannot identify animals that are integral to family survival. They have no experience with the chores their parents and grandparents performed as children. Young people could seek information from adults about hunting, farming,

child-bearing, basket-making or home-building. Where feasible, these interviews could be combined with practical instruction, since some traditional crafts are practised in refugee camps. In the process, children will learn many lessons about the ways in which their people have built and supported their own communities, skills that they will need to apply if they are to repatriate into a war-ravaged country.

Photographic projects

Using simple, Polaroid cameras, children could be taught to photograph each other, their elders, life in their camps, or anything else they choose. Photography provides a creative language for children who might have difficulty expressing themselves in other ways. Once taught to use the camera, children are able to determine for themselves what they photograph and how they present their images. This gives them a sense of power and control often lacking in other aspects of their lives.

The camera also could be a useful tool for learning about cultural customs and traditions. In any refugee camp, there are people from different ethnic groups and geographic regions. They express their culture in the clothes and ornamentation they wear and the way they decorate their living spaces. Children could photograph these aspects of camp life as a way of helping them understand the diversity of Mozambican people.

Photographic projects might have practical uses as part of family tracing efforts. A photographic essay on a particular family or village could be displayed in camp or inexpensively printed for distribution to other camps. In this way children could provide an important service to the larger community.

Autobiography

Children who have suffered the traumas of war have unusual needs for communicating those experiences as a means of understanding and catharsis. Autobiography is a form of documentary expression that seems particularly relevant for refugee children. Although individual or group counselling might be preferable, there is little likelihood that such services could be made available to more than a few children. Through autobiography, whether written or spoken, children would tell about their own lives as a means of self-understanding and healing.

Video

The rapidly decreasing cost of video equipment presents possibilities for video documentary projects with dislocated and refugee children. In addition to taping interviews, children might document cultural events as a way of helping preserve rituals and oral traditions that were difficult to sustain under war conditions. Older children might even be able to produce short documentary films.

Documentary Presentation

Participation and learning are the most important goals of child-centered documentary projects. But children can also develop ways of presenting their findings to a larger public. Oral histories, for instance, might serve as a source of material for small theatrical productions, or as part of a dramatic musical presentation. Role-playing could help children to identify with their elders and their cultural history. Individually or as groups, children might depict the stories they hear from elders. Through singing, dancing, drawing, painting, carving, sculpting or modelling with whatever materials are available, children could produce visual representations of the life stories or historical events they have learned about through oral history projects. Working as a group, they could produce epic murals from which others could learn these histories.

Children may choose to present their photographs in a simple public forum, and could get assistance from fieldworkers to mount their work and to produce an accompanying essay or descriptions of the photographs. Children's photographs would also have a diagnostic value for fieldworkers trying to understand the viewpoints, thoughts, troubles and concerns of these children.

Children could create simple publications, such as a short mimeographed newspaper or magazine that would serve as an educational project and tool. Producing the publication would be a learning experience in itself, an opportunity to practice writing and reading as well as a chance to collaborate with peers. Through stories and pictures the completed publication would serve as a source of information ranging from historical accounts of life in a community to instructions from an experience farmer on the best ways to cultivate crops.

Summary of Goals

Child-focused documentary projects would contribute to the reconstruction of Mozambican society in four ways. First, they would help children (and other members of the refugee community) better understand both the cultural traditions of their families, villages, tribes, and ethnic groups and the factors that have changed that traditional world. These projects would help reestablish collective memory as a source of positive identity-building rather than as the fodder of nightmares and psychosocial difficulties.

Second, projects could be used to develop children's interest in learning and education. School attendance is low in most refugee camps, in part because children and parents see education as irrelevant to their immediate survival needs.

But documentary programmes focused on traditional skills can easily be shown to be relevant. Once in school, children could use documentary projects to develop basic communication and learning skills. These interviews would contribute to the children's education, as well as to the training and knowledge of staff people. Where schools are in place, tape-recorded interviews could be used as material for history lessons and literacy work, with children presenting reports on what they have learned from the interviews and practising writing by transcribing parts of the interviews.

If these documentary materials can be preserved and archived, they would become of great value to the nation. They would give voice to the life experiences of men and women who, because of limited education, economic resources, political power, and the disruptions of recent years would otherwise leave little trace of their lives. There is little recorded history of the people of Mozambique, and with the deaths of so many people, particularly men, in the fight for liberation and the civil war, the preservation of this history and culture is made more difficult. Also as African societies adopt more modern ways, they will need to preserve the past in more modern forms.

At the same time, the outside world needs a better understanding of the millions of people who have been driven from their homes by war and starvation. People who work with and support refugee populations, from field level staff to donors in other countries, need a better understanding of the lives and expectations of refugee populations in southern Africa.

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