



Mozambique: Repairing the Ravages of War

Initiation Societies and Community Schooling

Indigenous healing has shown itself to be an effective treatment for the trauma suffered by children in war-torn countries of Africa (see *IK Notes No. 10*). Recent experience in Mozambique demonstrates that other dimensions of local culture may be just as important in socially “grounding” a generation of young people uprooted by armed conflict and repairing the ravages of war.

The years of civil strife in that country left rural children and their communities wounded in a number of ways. Children lost their parents. Others were separated from their families in the rush to escape the fighting and ended up living with adoptive parents or in military camps for long periods of time. Young people were also wounded or abused. And some were conscripted into the rebel army and forced to commit acts of violence.

At the same time, rural communities were largely devastated and stripped of the little infrastructure they possessed. Schools have typically been few and far between in the remoter areas of Mozambique. Under colonial rule, little was done outside urban areas. During the few short years of relative stability after the country’s hard-won independence in 1975, numbers of schools and students multiplied rapidly. Supply could not keep up with demand and, as in many areas of Africa, commu-

nity schools created locally began appearing in the countryside in the late 1970s. They were for the most part staffed by young people with a few years of education at best who reproduced what they could of the standard curriculum.

This nascent infrastructure was devastated, however, in the long civil war launched by the rebel movement in 1977. Health and education facilities in the countryside were largely wiped out because disruption of social life and particularly government services to the population was one of the movement’s prime objectives. Enrollment statistics dipped dramatically throughout the following decade and only began to recover when peace initiatives began in 1990.

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Putting the pieces back together

By the late 1980s, the hostilities had begun to abate and a variety of efforts was undertaken to reunite children separated from their families and to promote healing. The Mozambican National Directorate of Social Action (DNAS) sponsored an initial round of programs jointly with the "Children and War" Project (C&W) of the international non-governmental organization Save the Children. The program remained, however, too bureaucratic to have much success in penetrating rural areas. C&W therefore set out on its own to collaborate directly with interested communities. By 1992 it had created a network of over 14,000 volunteers and succeeded in reuniting some 12,000 children with their families.

Much of this result was due to the initiatives of the local communities themselves. By the time they were able to begin picking up the pieces, reuniting families and resuming a semblance of normal life, little in the way of social services was left, and a government burdened by debt was

unable to offer much consistent help. So the local people went to work. In order to address the needs of unaccompanied and newly reunited children, some started to rebuild community schools, developed community-based child socialization programs, and design and implement youth skills training initiatives. To ensure longer lasting support to the effort, C&W was transformed into a Mozambican NGO entitled "Children, Family and Development" (CFD).

A village takes charge

The effort bore unexpected fruit in the administrative division of Itoculo, a remote cluster of communities in the northern Nampulo province of Mozambique. The people of Itoculo belong to one of the country's principal ethnic groups, the Macua. Access to Itoculo is difficult and its contact with the outside world is infrequent. The most regular visitors to the area are illegal loggers bent on profiting from its rich forest resources, and the cotton buyers, who show up once a year during the crop-marketing season. There was only one elementary school in the central village of Itoculo, serving a fraction of the 30,000 people living close by and none of the additional 20,000 residing in the more far-flung villages of the zone, the farthest being 22 kilometers away by cart track.

By the early 1990s, many of the children of Itoculo who were orphaned or deprived of a normal childhood during the long years of conflict had themselves become parents and heads of households. They did not want their own children to be deprived in the same way, and they wanted to rebuild their communities. At that time, the government Department of Social Action approached leaders of the Itoculo communities to discuss ways of addressing the developmental and educational needs of preschool-aged children. An agreement was reached to create three *escolinhas comunitárias*, or community preschools. However, these only lasted two short years: the standardized curriculum, the rigid model of implementation, and the experience of enforced dependency on state agencies unable to fulfill their promises discouraged local participation.

The problems of unattended children remained acute and a major preoccupation of the renascent communities.

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The first break-through came when Itoculo area residents who had worked with C&W during the war thought of borrowing the model of traditional initiation societies and grafting it onto the *escolinhas* idea in order to devise a solution. In Macua culture, as in most others across the African continent, youth go through traditional initiation rites on their way to adulthood. For these rites, children are informally grouped into small cohorts of friends and relatives as they grow toward adolescence. When a certain number — averaging ten to fifteen young boys or girls — is achieved, the children are taken away from the community to an isolated area by an elder. There they are taught the “lore” of adulthood: male and female roles, the meaning of puberty, community traditions and relevant skills. Boys receive instruction in hunting and fishing, house construction, and related matters. Girls learn about their bodies and the responsibilities of being a mother and housewife; and they are instructed to protect themselves and break contact with boys.

Adapting the traditional model

The initial idea was simply to revive the failed *escolinhas comunitárias* in another form, under local control. Some of the few schooled young people in the village would take charge of cohorts of older children in a thatched hut “classroom” away from town and share with them the rudiments of literacy. Three *escolinhas* of this type were created. Although the initiative worked, community members did not think it went far enough. The younger children needed care as well, and things other than the three Rs belonged in the “curriculum.” So the community requested help from CFD to expand and develop the idea. CFD staff agreed to train *animadores* for the community school and provide some assistance with management and organization if Itoculo residents lent material support and took charge. A committee was formed, and the collaboration was launched.

CFD backing triggered an extended process of blending or “cross-breeding” between the community school and the traditional initiation model, carried out under local direction. Though they remained supportive of the idea of

children becoming literate in Portuguese to facilitate communications with the outside world, Itoculo committee members questioned whether this learning would be enough for the children to become full members of the community itself. And so they began, step by step, to elaborate the curriculum and revamp the organization of the *escolinhas*, selecting among the methods of initiation societies ideas and models that made sense and inventing new ones as they moved forward.

Deliberations about the curriculum and *escolinha* organization typically involved a cross-section of committee members, parents, *animadores* and children. Among the innovations adopted over time by Itoculo were the following:

- Elders were invited in to tell stories of the traditions of the community and their own life experience.
- The committee encouraged all community members to contribute games, toys, songs and poetry that could be shared with the children. Traditional chants used to teach numeracy were “unearthed,” adapted and added to the curriculum. And the schools began sponsoring or joining events to exchange these cultural resources with other *escolinhas* of the region.
- Local artisans were contacted to provide instruction in their crafts. Women who made clay pots for cooking and gardening shared their skills with the children, as did weavers and dancers.
- The schedule of classes was reviewed and modified to fit better with the seasons of farming and social activity in Itoculo.
- After first using the standard government preschool curriculum as the point of reference for the “academic” portions of the *escolinha* program, the committee decided to adopt — and adapt — major portions of the national adult literacy curriculum as more appropriate to their objectives.

Spreading the word

The first few years of experience of the *escolinhas comunitárias* — from 1995 through 2000 — have been successful ones. The number of these schools in Itoculo has grown to eight, and the initiative has begun to attract

much attention throughout the region. Starting in 1998, other communities in Nampulo began to ask the Itoculo committee for assistance in starting similar projects, and committee members have grown increasingly proficient as “consultants” and “trainers” in their own right. Six other such schools now function in neighboring areas.

In addition, the experience in managing a locally directed initiative like the *escolinhas* has given committee and community members some valuable and very “transferable” skills in collective entrepreneurship — and ones that they have begun to apply to a series of other local development challenges, including water supply and health services. In fact, the group has now created two formal public schools to begin filling out local educational infrastructure and provide a means of further training for at least some of the children who have gone through the

community learning experience. In each case, the formula used for the *escolinhas* — outside support with substantial matching resources from the community, clear accountability and direct local control — has proved functional. In the year 2000, the village formally created the *Associação dos Amigos da Criança de Itoculo* (AMICI) or the Association of Friends of the Children of Itoculo, to coordinate all such initiatives, the first such legally chartered entity in the community’s history.

AMICI offers a unique opportunity to couple past and future in the Nampula region and to harness the best of traditional practice in youth initiation to opportunities for viable rural futures in Mozambique. An infusion and selection of indigenous models has proved to be a vital element in the solution to the problems of a war-torn society.

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