

Bandits and witchdoctors

by Paul Fauvet

The man who styles himself "supreme commander" of the "Mozambique National Resistance" (MNR), Afonso Dhlakama, made his first trip to Europe in late 1980. On arrival at Lisbon airport on 19 November a curious little ceremony took place. Dhlakama stepped off the plane, onto the airport tarmac, and immediately took one of his shoes off. He stood for a moment with one bare foot planted on the ground, then brushed the dust from the sole of his foot into an envelope which he put into his pocket. What the other passengers thought of this procedure is not recorded.

There was nothing whimsical about this behaviour - it had all been planned in advance, before Dhlakama left his main base in the South African province of the Transvaal. Among the documents found when the Mozambican army (FPLM) seized the MNR base of Garagua in Manica province in December 1981 was a scrap of paper in Dhlakama's handwriting that dates just before his 1980 European tour. In an idle moment the bandit chief had been doodling - he was experimenting with different spellings and signatures of his name. Four these are preserved for us, and at the bottom Dhlakama had scribbled: "N.B. Medicine, Portugal. I must remove one of my shoes, stand on the g and take this dust, mix it with the medicine, which gives very good qual: and chew".

To decipher this, one must first understand that Dhlakama is a chror superstitious individual. His speeches are punctuated with references to "the spirits", the twists and turns in the war are attributed to supernatural rather than military factors, and Dhlakama's enemies are accused of trying to bewitah him. Swallowing the first dust of Portugal that he stepped on was meant as a sure-fire way of placating any evil spirits that might inhabit Lisbon.

It is not a coincidence that the district of Gorongosa in the central province of Sofala. where the MNR built its internal headquarters, is also

noted for its "feiticeiros" or "macungeiros" - words that can roughly be translated as "witchdoctors". These men wield enormous power - sometimes the power of life or death. If someone is killed by a wild animal in unusual circumstances, the "explanation" of the macungeiro is that one of that person's enemies has transformed himself into a leopard or hyena. The belief that at night certain people have the power to change into animals is widely held (a parallel would be European myths of werewolves). If the macungeiro accuses a peasant of this, then the rest of the community is quite likely to kill him.

Frelimo has waged an uncompromising battle against this obscurantism, and has tried to break the power of the macungeiros, replacing religion with science. The response of the macungeiros has been to forge an alliance with the MNR.

This alliance has not been without its problems. In 1979 the Gorongosa macungeiros objected to the arrogant behaviour of the MNR (then still controlled by the Central Intelligence Organisation of Ian Smith's Rhodesia), and decided to teach them a lesson. They fed false information to the then MNR commander, André Matsangaiza, telling him that Gorongosa town was undefended and the time was ripe for an attack on it. In fact, the Mozambican army had just moved tanks into the town, and the assault was suicidal. Among those killed was Matsangaiza himself.

Matsangaiza died on 17 October 1979, and the following day a Rhodesian helicopter flew Dhlakama into Gorongosa to take over. Dhlakama sought out the most powerful of the macungeiros, a man named Samatanje. According to Dhlakama's own history of the MNR (a long rambling speech which was also found at Garagua), he paid Samatanje well for this meeting, giving him "8,000 escudos in money, as well as cloth, brandy, cigarettes etc".

"In this meeting, Samatanje began by criticising the leadership of the late commander André", recalled Dhlakama. "After they reached the conclusion that the MNR had a bad leadership, the men of the Gorongosa spirits met together and decided to liquidate the MNR through the spirits".

Dhlakama told Samatanje that the MNR now had a new leadership (namely himself). He "made a promise to Samatanje and to the spirits that he would

direct the MNR in a new way, and give new guidelines to the struggle".

A series of "miracles" allegedly followed this "historic promise". However, they were no sufficient to prevent the FPLM from pushing the MNR out of most of Gorongosa by February 1980. But with massive South African support, the MNR swept back in force into Gorongosa in late 1981, and dominated the district until August 1985, when Mozambican and Zimbabwean forces overran its headquarters.

During these four years, Dhlakama and his lieutenants worked in close liaison with Samatanje and the other "men of the spirits". The macungeiros were restored to a privileged position which bears comparison to that of the Catholic clergy in medieval Europe. They commanded the same fear, and held the same anti-scientific view of the world.

Those accused of casting spells, or of being "leopard-men", were identified in ceremonies conducted by macungeiros, who would dance frenetically, claim to hear spirit voices and to see visions - and would finally finger the alleged culprit. The victim was then subjected to a form of trial by ordeal. He was forced to swallow a potion (which seems to have contained a hallucinogenic drug). If the liquid provoked convulsions, the case was taken as proved - the accused was indeed guilty. If, on the other hand, he was fortunate enough to vomit the liquid up again, then he was innocent. Thus was justice administered in Gorongosa under the MNR.

Samatanje certainly had an extraordinary influence among the MNR. A captured member of the MNR's "women's detachment", Maria Njocoma, told the daily paper Diario de Moçambique that Samatanje had "a huge area" under his control. "No bandit chief dared enter this zone to rape women or steal food from the population", she said. "They knew they wouldn't come out of it well. Samatanje could send lions or swarms of bees to attack them, or he could cause enormous thunderstorms which would fill them all with panic".

Samatanje had powerful visions too. According to Maria Njocoma, "he was respected because in dreams he saw what was going to happen".

Now soothsayers are welcome as long as what they predict is music to the ears of their military allies. Thus as long as the MNR felt itself

secure in its Gorongosa strongholds, Samatanje and Dhlakama worked in perfect harmony.

But in August things began to look bleak for the MNR. One did not need any magical powers to see that the military initiative had passed to the Mozambican army and its Zimbabwean allies. Dhlakama wanted some spiritual reassurance that everything would turn out all right in the end, and so he asked Samatanje who would win the coming battle.

Samatanje's answer has passed into local folk lore. According to both Maria Njocoma, and to Gorongosa peasants whom AIM reporters have interviewed, Samatanje took two bottles of equal size and filled them with water. One was to represent President Samora Machel, and the other Afonso Dhlakama. The bottles were to be guarded overnight - whichever had turned the colour of blood in the morning would represent the defeated side in the approaching battle.

Much to Dhlakama's distress, it was his bottle that turned red during the night. "There was no chance. The war would be won by Frelimo", said Maria Njocoma. "Two days later we began to see the warplanes".

Dhlakama did not accept the prophecy, and suspected that Samatanje had interfered with the bottles (he perhaps recalled the earlier abandonment of the MNR by the Gorongosa macungeiros). Maria Njocoma thought that Dhlakama, in a rage, ordered Samatanje to be killed. The peasants who spoke to AIM, however, did not believe that Dhlakama would dare take such a step. Instead he beat Samatanje up, and killed one of his brothers.

On 28 August Samatanje's prediction was fulfilled, and Zimbabwean paratroopers occupied the MNR's headquarters.