

A biography is not an easy genre. It forces upon the narrative and the author of the biography the urge to produce a coherent account. Biography as a genre suffers from the analytical weaknesses of any perspective that looks at history from its end and enjoys, therefore, the benefit of regarding a phenomenon that has come to its end. Depending on how an author prefers to look at a historical subject, whether as villain or hero, the facts of history and along with them the gaps in our historical knowledge may be collated or speculated upon, respectively, to render the subject accordingly. This is an important caveat that should be borne in mind when reading Sarah LeFanu's extremely imaginative biography of Samora Machel, Mozambique's first Head of State. He died in 1986 in mysterious circumstances in a plane crash in Mbuzini, South Africa, while returning home from a diplomatic mission in Zambia. The caveat is not an indictment of LeFanu's worthy effort. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the odds against the success of such an undertaking.

The odds are of three sorts. The first is the subject itself, Samora Machel, whose legacy in Mozambique has come increasingly under scrutiny, especially as the country begins hesitantly to confront its recent history and to free itself from the all too enthusiastic and epic official accounts of the country's liberation struggle foisted upon generations of Mozambican school children by the dominant Frelimo party, the liberation movement that led the armed struggle against Portuguese colonial rule from 1964 to 1974 and has ruled Mozambique up to the present. Upon independence in 1975, it sought to transform Mozambique into a socialist society drawing on 'scientific socialism'

An Imaginative Biography of Samora Machel

Elísio Macamo

S is for SAMORA – A Lexical Biography of Samora Machel and the Mozambican Dream

by Sarah LeFanu

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and under its own leadership as a 'vanguard party', transformed into a 'Marxist-Leninist' party at its Third Congress in 1977.

It is true that, from time to time, younger Mozambicans with no memory of Samora Machel's rule and the heady days immediately after independence draw from the revolutionary rhetoric of those days, which extolled the virtues of social justice, integrity and service to the people. They do this in order to ground their critique of what they perceive to be self-seeking and corrupt practices of the current political elites, Machel's former comrades. At the same time, however, there is a growing scepticism with regard to Frelimo's version of the history of Mozambican nationalism. This impacts on Samora Machel's image and his responsibility not only for the harrowing and protracted civil war that crippled Frelimo's 'Revolution', but also for bequeathing the country, through his socialist project's denial of cultural diversity and political difference, intractable problems that have come to



haunt Mozambique as it seeks to consolidate democracy.

The second type of odds refers to the author herself, a former 'cooperante' in Mozambique, i.e. a foreigner, usually from a Western country, who volunteered to go to Mozambique to help the fledgling nation through its birth pangs. There were many such people in Mozambique, mostly young, ideologically left-leaning and at odds with their own societies, who were selfless enough to commit their skills, enthusiasm and lives to whatever cause their presence in Mozambique served. Theirs is a particular perspective on the history of the country which historiography has not yet dealt adequately with. Finally, the third type of odds concerns the much bigger issue of the chances which any African country faces to chart its own path within a world which it had no part in creating. Fatalist approaches to history might assume that Frelimo's revolutionary project was doomed to failure on account of the wrong-headedness of the ideology underlying it.

With the Soviet Union no more, China and Vietnam thriving on their own version of capitalism and Cuba vegetating away, one might feel inclined to believe that Mozambique's dream was destined to be undone. And yet, this is a question that should deserve the attention of scholars, for it is crucial to any attempt at gauging Africa's potential development especially now against the background of the very upbeat rhetoric of economic boom and progress.

Sarah LeFanu's book has a rather unconventional, but refreshingly interesting, structure. It charts Samora Machel's trajectory through words drawn from Mozambique's revolutionary rhetoric, the history of the liberation struggle and also from everyday life. In the process, and as the sub-title announces, it seeks not only to render intelligible Samora Machel, but also the 'Mozambican dream' which his political work came to represent, at least to the author. The book can be recommended for the richness of the author's personal recollections and the insights which it offers into the structure of motivations that drove young people to support Mozambique. The history which the book reconstructs, however, must be taken with a pinch of salt on account of the odds referred to above. It is a history that finds its apotheosis in Machel as a hero, whose own life – from childhood through his training as a nurse in colonial Mozambique all the way up to his flight to join the liberation struggle and his triumphant return to lead the Revolution and meet his tragic and untimely death – are a singular tale of bravery, foresight and deep commitment to the people and Mozambique.

There is no doubt that Samora Machel was an extraordinary man of singular courage and charisma who left his mark on Mozambique's history and

was widely admired both inside and outside the country. However, more serious scholarship beyond the recollections of a former ‘cooperante’ is needed to read right through the cracks, contradictions and lacunae in Machel’s personality, career and decisions. The sort of scholarship which is required is one that is sufficiently sceptical of an epic account of an individual’s life to acknowledge that commitment to the people does not guarantee a respect for human dignity, especially when such a commitment is informed by an ideological stance that believes to know what is good for people. For all the rhetoric on behalf of the people, Samora Machel led a regime that undermined civil liberties, was extremely intolerant towards individuals opposed to its revolutionary course and, what is particularly worse, could be brutal in pursuit of its own political goals – as evidenced by the infamous ‘Operação Produção’ (when so-called non-productive people were chased away from cities to the northern forests

of Niassa, where some were devoured by wild animals) or the re-introduction of corporal punishment and the death penalty through a firing squad in public. The book treats these as incidents that are only marginal to the depiction of Samora Machel as a tragic African revolutionary who may have fallen victim to a conspiracy orchestrated by his internal enemies who simply wanted to live off the people.

Here is perhaps where Sarah LeFanu’s own background as a ‘cooperante’ may become relevant while at the same time standing in the way of a useful account of Machel’s life. It is amazing how little scholarship there is about the role of young people in Europe and North America who nurtured social movements in Africa and committed themselves to the cause of social justice in the world. This is all the more interesting since quite a number of them grew up to staff development agencies and research institutions that have been playing an important role in

shaping perceptions of Africa, its potential and options. The failure of the Mozambican revolution is not quite the failure of these young people, but it is in important respects a personal disappointment that not only colours their perception of Africa today, but also how they look back on history. LeFanu’s Samora Machel may represent a personal coming to terms with this disappointment, a desperate ‘why’ that makes a sanitized version of Machel stand for the purity of the ideals that drove young people to offer their solidarity to the people of Mozambique. While this is understandable, it may nonetheless be insufficient as a contribution to a better understanding of Mozambique’s recent history.

A better understanding of Mozambique’s history will require an analysis of the prospects faced by individual African countries and by the continent as a whole to define and pursue a political project in the context of the world as it is, i.e. a world which

was not made by Africans – even if they were used as slaves and colonized peoples – an economic, social and political order which has treated the African continent and its peoples in a consistently unfair manner. Le Fanu’s book, with its more modest ambition of offering the author’s personal view of Samora Machel and his political vision – which should not be confused with a ‘Mozambican dream’ – could not, of course, be the place where one would find the beginning of this engagement. To the extent that its modest ambition and its shortcomings help raise questions in this regard, the book is a welcome contribution to the broader reflection which scholars working on Africa need to pursue in earnest and as a matter of urgency. S may be for SAMORA, but also for scholarship that is long overdue not only on the individuals who made African history, but also on all the things that went wrong amidst the legitimate belief that a better future could be possible for the continent and its peoples.

