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Hostel, Home, and 'Life-Rhythm' for African Workers behind the Berlin Wall

With adventure on his mind, eighteen-year-old Nestor Matusse (a pseudonym) left Mozambique for East Germany in 1987. Never having been away from home before, he was determined to learn something of the world and of other people. Nearly thirty years later, as we sat in the garden of the German cultural center in Maputo, the Mozambican capital, Nestor described his life in Orschatz, a small German town midway between Leipzig and Dresden, where he had been sent to train and work at a fiberglass plant. Nestor recalled to me how he spent his free time: having bought a bicycle with savings from his salary, he took long weekend rides out of town. "Riding my bicycle, passing through the woods and over the hills, I could feel almost like a German," he remarked. Nestor felt most at ease while alone, away from the rhythm of the factory and the workers' hostel, a reality somewhat at odds with a cooperation agreement based on solidarity and the Eastern bloc's espousal of a "friendship of peoples" that had brought him there.

Nestor and the 20,000 or so other Mozambicans who traveled to East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, or GDR) between 1979 and 1989 were chosen chiefly for their youth. The agreement between the two states that brought young Mozambicans to Germany on four-year contracts to train as industrial workers was conceived as an investment in the future for both nations, with younger people – those selected were between seventeen and twenty-five years old – imagined to provide the greatest return. The training program provided the GDR with an infusion of much-needed low-cost labor and a chance to prove itself as a friend to states in the Global South within the socialist bloc.

For Mozambique, newly independent from Portuguese colonial rule in 1975 and aiming to put what the country's first president called "colonialism's heritage of misery" behind it, sending young people to East Germany was a step toward building a new nation.[9] The new African-led government had the population at large in mind, rather than only a white minority. Above all, the benefits of "modernity" – higher education, technical knowledge, and improved living standards – were to be brought to "the people." Young Mozambicans viewed the trainee-worker program as an opportunity to gain valuable skills and knowledge, the likes of which had long been denied to Africans during the century or so of white rule.

Leaving home and traveling for work far away was a familiar life experience for Mozambican youth. In Mozambique and elsewhere throughout southern Africa, long-distance labor migration was a well-established step taken by young men on the cusp of adulthood. Engaging in labor migration was part of a process of establishing physical and symbolic distance from their parents. The separation from home life and the workplace encounter with new forms of social and cultural interaction were vital mechanisms that helped them develop a distinct identity and shed their dependent status. Migration offered opportunities for an income and education, both less plentiful at home. Emerging out from under the shelter of the family unit and acquiring the capac-

9 See Maria-Benedita Basto, "The Writings of the National Anthem in Independent Mozambique: Fictions of the Subject-People," *Kronos* 39 (2013): 185–203; Margaret Hall and Tom Young, "'Anything Seemed Possible': The Transition to Independence," in Margaret Hall and Tom Young, *Confronting Leviathan: Mozambique since Independence* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997).

ity to provide for themselves and others, they became adults. That these young Mozambicans were on the verge of taking such a step was not something that figured in government officials' planning, extensive though it was. Nor did they imagine the ways in which these young Africans would become adults behind the Iron Curtain.

Home | Island

Recruited from throughout Mozambique, Mozambican migrants worked in enterprises all over the GDR, from fisheries on the North Sea to textile plants on the Czechoslovakian border. The majority worked in a wedge of territory extending east and southwest of East Germany's divided capital. After completing four-year contracts in German factories, living amid 'real existing socialism,' they would return home to put their skills and knowledge to work for the collective good: to build industry, advance the principles of scientific socialism, and continue the revolutionary transformation of society. Their German sojourn brought both challenges and opportunities. As well as coping with cold and dark winters, life in East Germany meant managing sometimes strange cultural norms, living in highly homogeneous communities not always welcoming to foreigners, and enduring an extended separation from family. But it gave these migrants a degree of freedom too: independence from one's elders, a chance to enjoy the adventures of a strange land and make new relationships, and the autonomy associated with a steady income.[10]

On arrival in East Germany, the worker-trainees had six months of intensive language instruction and technical training. Most had no experience of living away from family or managing the minutiae of domestic life on their own. A strong gender-based division of domestic labor in Mozambique meant that the young women, perhaps ten to fifteen percent of some groups, had some familiarity with household work, but the autonomy of life in Germany was something new. The German staff at the workers' residence taught them how to plan, prepare, and cook their own meals. As Nestor put it, "They taught us how to live." Yet as much as such training aimed to give them the knowledge and skills to navigate life in Germany, strict controls ensured it was a life with limits – above all in the workers' hostel, their home away from home. With a chronic and acute housing shortage in East Germany, many enterprises struggled to provide adequate conditions for the foreign workers eagerly sought by production staff. In some instances, administrators raced to renovate badly dilapidated buildings in time to receive the workers who would live there. Ministry officials enforced minimum housing standards. If a hostel might be a home, it certainly did not offer all of its comforts.

The migrants' hostels were typically two or three-story buildings (though in Berlin, higher-rise hostels were common), where worker-trainees lived two or three to a room with shared cooking, washing, and recreational facilities. Access was strictly controlled: the entrance was staffed around the clock and residents were required to sign themselves in and out. Visitors were permitted only with advance notice and were restricted to common areas. Overnight stays were prohibited, as were unauthorized stays outside the hostel for residents. The effect was to isolate the African workers, unsurprising in a state whose capital was emblematic of Cold War separation. That one group of

10 See Eric Allina, "'Neue Menschen' für Mosambik: Erwartungen an und Realität von Vertragsarbeit in der DDR der 1980er-Jahre," *Arbeit-Bewegung-Geschichte: Zeitschrift für Historische Studien* 15 (2016): 65–84; Eric Allina, "Between *Sozialismus* and *Socialismo*: African Workers and Public Authority in the German Democratic Republic," in Mahua Sarkar, ed., *Work out of Place* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017): 77–100; Marcia Schenck, "From Luanda and Maputo to Berlin: Uncovering Angolan and Mozambican Migrants' Motives to move to the German Democratic Republic (1979–90)," *African Economic History* 44 (2016): 202–34; Birgit Weyhe, *Madgermanes* (Berlin: Avant-Verlag, 2016).

sixty-seven Mozambicans working in a paper mill near Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz) lived in a hostel called "Island" struck no ironic note for the mill managers. With its communal character and unconcealed surveillance, the hostel produced a peculiar intimacy that was far from home-like. Making a home in a conventional sense was all but out of reach for most Mozambicans.

Notwithstanding these rigid protocols, however, some of the young worker-trainees found ways to circumvent these rules and, as the manager of a railyard explained, challenge what he referred to as the "discipline and good order" of the hostel. There were sometimes "disturbances of the night's rest" involving loud music, fisticuffs, or other hullabaloo little appreciated by those due at work on the early shift. Regulations "were not always respected." Some workers left the residence for the evening and returned only in the morning. "All come and go as they see fit," he lamented.

"Good contact"

The friendship and socialist solidarity that drove the cooperation between East Germany and Mozambique were, at least in principle, meant to promote close relationships. However, the regulation of worker-trainees' hostel life reflected the East German state's suspicious stance toward foreigners and general desire to keep them separate from German citizens. Authorities frowned upon close degrees of intimacy between Germans and Africans, but the extensive controls on and surveillance of workers' movements were not always effective in maintaining their separation.

If some Mozambicans, like Nestor, found the quiet of the countryside a place to be at home, others made that connection in the company of others, in closer quarters, and at least nominally outside the boundaries established by the state. The young workers eluded official efforts to control their movements around the factory and residence, engaging in unauthorized activities that were both a means and an end. Some outings made for self-evident good fun, satisfying and enjoyable in themselves: Mozambicans went out in the evenings to clubs or pubs, where they socialized with young Germans and drank and danced far past the residence curfew, returning only in time to show up for a morning shift. By spending time in bars and clubs, they found spaces that were less closely monitored by the state, where they could establish relationships, especially with other young people – African and German – of their own choosing.

Beyond being entertaining as such, these evenings also were the basis on which the young women and men could establish close, lasting friendships and intimate relations. Such "good contact," as one German factory administrator blandly referred to the fact that two African workers had founded their own families, complete with Afro-German children, was the foundation on which some of the migrants could ground themselves firmly in East Germany. Notwithstanding the requirement that they live in the workers' residence, some lived largely with their German partners, with whom they had children and created family homes. These arrangements were forbidden, but were nonetheless often tolerated by factory and government officials, perhaps because these individuals tended to be content, socially stable, and perform well at work. Analogous to Nestor, though in a different manner, they found a way to feel at home away from the hostel.

So it was with Rafael Medeiros, who, having returned to Mozambique at the end of his contract in August 1985, sought to return to the small German city where he had lived for four years, where he had "felt at ease" and made many friends. He very much wanted to rejoin his German girlfriend, with whom he had a son, now two years old. "Please allow me to return to the GDR," Rafael wrote in a letter sent from Maputo to the local office of the Ministry of Wages and Labour in Erfurt. He noted that the German Postal Service had agreed to hire him. Indicating his familiarity with the political economy of the labor market, he said he was willing to take shift work, which was disliked

and avoided by those who had a choice. He also pointed out that he would not require housing, because he could live with his girlfriend, even providing her street address. This may have been the strongest factor in Rafael's favor, given the housing shortage. That he had already made a German home for himself meant that the authorities would not be burdened with securing him one.

Homeward-bound?

Numbers are elusive, but enough of the young workers remained in unified Germany to motivate Mozambican politicians to travel there in 2014 to campaign for their now-middle-aged votes. By some estimates, perhaps exaggerated, some 8,000 children of German-Mozambican relationships live in Germany. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the authoritarian 'People's State' that had built it gave way to more open expressions of racial hostility, including sometimes spectacular violence against foreign workers whose skin color marked them plainly as 'other.' The shock of such violence has clouded the post-*Wende* vision of just how hostile GDR society was, where racial hostility with its veneer of anti-racist socialist solidarity was only unevenly and episodically expressed. Mozambican youth usually shrugged it off as the alcohol-fueled indiscipline of their German counterparts or the latent discomfort of an older generation less ready to embrace a wider world. After all, for most of the twentieth century, their home country had been wedged in by white minority regimes whose notions of white supremacy had few peers. For young African worker-trainees, never meant to have a long-term place in German society, the greater obstacle was an institutional context that worked powerfully to keep them in motion and prevent settling into any space that might feel like home.

There was little appreciation for other meanings of youth – neither its potential as a launch pad for political change nor its rebellious tendencies, let alone its intractable movement into adulthood. To the extent that officials recognized that latent energy, they aimed to keep it tethered to socialist production and safely under state tutelage. Still more, there was scant attention to the social and cultural significance of an extended stay abroad at their stage of life. Reflecting on the challenges the young workers faced, one GDR labor ministry official noted the "wholly different life rhythm" they encountered in Germany. The officials who negotiated and managed the agreement that governed their lives recognized that the young Africans would need support in the totally new environment. Yet socialist planners gave little thought to how the trainees might create their own support, or to the ways in which they might seek to establish themselves as newly independent adults. Above all, planners were blind to the prospect that the hostel might be not only a site of production, but also reproduction.

For young Mozambicans who reached this point in their life rhythm, leaving home far behind for work was fundamental to engaging in reproduction – acquiring the resources necessary to establish adult independence and have children, inseparable from conventional meanings of home. In this sense, an East German hostel could never be a home, and making it into one was far from what any imagined for the young trainees from southeast Africa. German officials refused to contemplate what it would take to accommodate a family. Mozambicans' time in Germany was meant to be a moment in between an insignificant past and a portentous future, not an alternative path toward the future.

Little wonder then that soon after his return to Mozambique, Nestor left home once again, illegally entering South Africa in hope of finding work and the wealth he needed to prosper as an independent adult. His effort was unsuccessful. Caught by a border guard who, on paging through his passport, saw the German entry and exit stamps, Nestor found himself explaining how Germany had once, almost, been home.