



COOLELA BATTLEFIELD MEMORIAL

Mandlakazi (Manjacaze), Mozambique

-24.61055, 33.92222

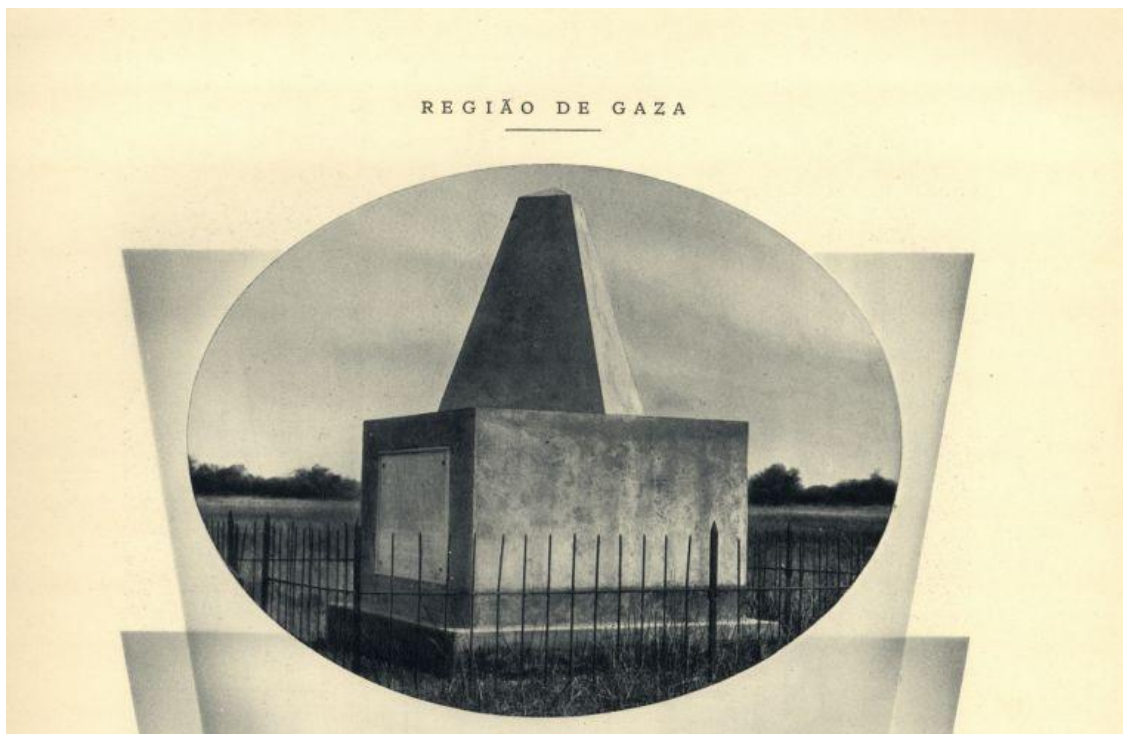


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Executive Summary

This memorial commemorates the 1895 Battle of Coolela, fought in Mozambique between the Portuguese colonial administration and their African allies, and the Gaza Empire led by Emperor Ngungunyane. The monument was originally created by the Portuguese administration in the late 1890s to celebrate their victory and conquest and to honour the Portuguese lost in combat. It was destroyed following independence from Portugal in 1975, then rebuilt in the 1980s and restored in the 1990s and 2000s by the post-colonial state of Mozambique. The monument remains contentious as its significance depends on different understandings of the historical role of

Portuguese colonials, locals and Emperor Ngungunyane, especially in connection to the creation of a Mozambican national memory.

Introduction

The Coolela Battlefield Memorial is located in the district of Mandlakazi, in the Gaza Province, Mozambique, at the site of the eponymous battle of the 7th of November 1895. It commemorates an encounter between Portuguese colonial forces and their African allies and the army of the Gaza Empire led by Emperor Ngungunyane. The battle ended with the defeat of Ngungunyane and the Portuguese conquest of his empire. Since 1895 the memorial has been altered several times, reflecting changing ideas about the significance of the battle. In present-day Mozambique, it is a contested site due to the ambiguous legacy of Ngungunyane. In 'official' narratives, he is framed as a hero of the resistance against Portuguese colonisation, but for many local people, he represents a colonial invader himself.

Background

The Gaza Empire and the Battle of Coolela

The Gaza Empire was founded by the Nguni people who fled South Africa during a period of widespread warfare and disruption at the beginning of the 19th century.¹ They entered Mozambique around 1820 and incorporated many different language groups under their rule, creating an Empire that stretched from near the Nkomati River in the south to the Zambezi and Pungwe Rivers in the north, the Indian Ocean in the east, and the Drakensberg, Zoutbansberg and eastern Zimbabwe in the west. At the height of its power (c. 1850s-1890s), the empire incorporated what is today southern Mozambique, parts of western Zimbabwe and the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces in South Africa.² By 1893, the Gaza Empire was the only independent African-ruled monarchy left in the region.³

Ngungunyane came to power in 1885, on the eve of the notorious Berlin Conference at which European powers sought to divide African territories amongst themselves. The coup that secured him the throne was achieved with the help of the Portuguese, who had also supported his father before

¹ Gregory Houston et al., "The Liberation Struggle and Liberation Heritage Sites in South Africa. Report," *Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery (DGSD), Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)*, prepared for the National Heritage Council of South Africa, 129, November 15, 2013.

²Ibid.

³ M. Dores Cruz, "The nature of culture: sites, ancestors and trees in the archaeology of Southern Mozambique," *Rethinking Colonial Pasts through Archaeology*, eds. Neal Ferris, Rodney Harrison, and Michael V. Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 131.

him.⁴ Although there were significant relations between the Gaza Empire and the Portuguese - who had been trying to assert their sovereignty and trade links in East Africa, as well as access to the mainland, since the time of Vasco da Gama (c. 1460s-1520s) - the empire became independent.⁵ Traditional historiography and official state narratives attribute the fall of the Gaza Empire to colonial invasion by the Portuguese, positing a narrative according to which Ngungunyane fought bravely and, in spite of his defeat, is remembered as a hero of the resistance that culminated in the battle of Coolela.⁶ In the regions it ruled, however, the Gaza Empire is said to have 'dealt harshly and effectively' with local leaders who opposed their demands or tried to make themselves independent.⁷ Oral tradition attests that this approach was cause for the unpopularity that ultimately led to the downfall of the Gaza Empire. According to this perspective, after Ngungunyane tried to force local chiefs to pay exorbitant tribute, the chiefs asked the Portuguese for help, and together they defeated Ngungunyane at Coolela.⁸ In this counter-narrative, local chiefs turned to one colonial power to defeat another. The Portuguese took advantage of the position gained by involvement in this conflict to take over the lands of the former Gaza Empire. Some have argued that the local chiefs were, in effect, manipulated by the Portuguese, who would have deceivingly presented themselves as allies solely interested in limiting the power of the Gaza Empire, thereby concealing their own imperialist agenda.⁹

The Coolela Battlefield Memorial

The Coolela Battlefield Memorial was originally built by the Portuguese administration in the late 1890s to celebrate their victory and honour Portuguese soldiers and generals who had died at the occasion, some of whom were buried at the original site.¹⁰ The monument was destroyed following independence from Portugal in 1975, then rebuilt in the 1980s and restored in the 1990s and 2000s by the post-colonial state of Mozambique.¹¹ The remains of soldiers were disinterred in 1975 as part

⁴ Walter Rodney, "The Year 1895 in Southern Mozambique: African Resistance to the Imposition of European Colonial Rule," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 5, no. 4 (1971): 520; Colin Darch, *Historical Dictionary of Mozambique* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019): 290.

⁵ Walter Rodney, "The Year 1895 in Southern Mozambique: African Resistance to the Imposition of European Colonial Rule," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 5, no. 4 (1971): 519-21.

⁶ Celso Azarias Inguane, *Negotiating Social Memory in Postcolonial Mozambique: the Case of Heritage Sites in Mandhlakazi District* (MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2007), 62; Gloria Sousa, Romeu da Silva, and Gwendolin Hilse, "Ngungunyane, the king against Portuguese occupation", *Deutsche Welle*, June 8, 2018.

⁷ Walter Rodney, "The Year 1895 in Southern Mozambique: African Resistance to the Imposition of European Colonial Rule," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 5, no. 4 (1971) : 518.

⁸ Celso Azarias Inguane, *Negotiating Social Memory in Postcolonial Mozambique: the Case of Heritage Sites in Mandhlakazi District* (MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2007), 62-63.

⁹ Walter Rodney, "The Year 1895 in Southern Mozambique: African Resistance to the Imposition of European Colonial Rule," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 5, no. 4 (1971): 534-535.

¹⁰ Celso Azarias Inguane, *Negotiating Social Memory in Postcolonial Mozambique: the Case of Heritage Sites in Mandhlakazi District* (MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2007), 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

of the monument's destruction and reinterred when the monument was rebuilt.¹²

The site presently consists of a fenced-off area with the monument at the centre. It is composed of a stepped base topped with a large stone, on which the inscription reads: 'Coolela, Homage to the Warriors who died for the fatherland, in the anti-colonial struggle, on 7 November 1895 (Coolela Battle)'.¹³ The reinterred remains have been buried at a distance of around 40 meters away, their grave now marked by a smaller, plain stone with no inscription.¹⁴

History of the Contestation

Who are the 'warriors who died for the fatherland?'

The primary point of contestation in relation to the monument is who it commemorates as those who 'died for the fatherland' and who it frames as a patriot or as a coloniser. As noted above, the Mozambican state has framed Ngungunyane as a hero who fought against Portuguese colonial oppression, setting him up as a forerunner of those who would fight the war of independence against Portugal from 1964 to 1974.

The current ruling party of Mozambique, FRELIMO, has its origins in the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Mozambique Liberation Front), which was a nationalist movement founded in 1962 with the goal of achieving Mozambican independence. FRELIMO became a political party following independence in 1975, first ruling as a one-party state, and since 1994 as the elected majority party in the Mozambican parliament.¹⁵ In 1990, there was a new constitution introduced, which established a multi-party system in Mozambique, as well as separating party and state.¹⁶ In order to legitimise their own rule, FRELIMO has harnessed the heritage of Mozambique to create a national memory that places the government at the end of a long line of patriotic freedom fighters.¹⁷ The Coolela Memorial and Ngungunyane are not the only sites or figures to have been appropriated. Rather, they are part of a wider system to control and create the national narrative. Thus, Mozambican scholar Maria Paula Meneses argues that:

Throughout its short history, the Mozambican state has pursued a nation-building policy that includes the political adoption of an official history grounded in a set of public (and intensely publicised) memories about its colonial past, both recent and distant. The Mozambican state has thereby sought to

¹² Ibid., 64.

¹³ Ibid., 66.

¹⁴ Ibid., 66-67.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ M. Hall and T. Young, "Recent Constitutional Developments in Mozambique", *Journal of African Law* 35, no. 1/2 (1991):102.

¹⁷ Albino Jopela, "The Heritagization of the Liberation Struggle in Postcolonial Mozambique," *Kaleidoscopio – Research in Public Policy and Culture*, August 29, 2017; Lúcio D. P. Posse, "Heroes of the National Liberation Struggle and the Idea of Nation in the Speeches of the President of the Republic of Mozambique, Armando Guebuza," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 122 (2020).

eliminate, silence or make invisible the diversity of memories generated by the complex social interactions between the colonisers and colonised over the long period of Portuguese colonisation.¹⁸

This 'silencing' of non-official accounts of historical events in Mozambique by FRELIMO is suggestive of a pattern in the memorialisation of events in Mozambique by the state. For example, post-1975, FRELIMO sought to silence the narratives of those who had been Portuguese political prisoners during the war for independence in the 60s and 70s.¹⁹ This silencing was also part of the tactics employed by President Joaquim Chissano (1986-2004) to move FRELIMO away from its original Marxist-Leninist ideology towards a more neo-liberal ideology following the new constitution in 1990 and the end of the civil war with RENAMO (*Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*, Mozambican National Resistance) in 1992.²⁰ This institutional strategy has been called 'organised forgetting'.²¹ In the case of Coolela, and in Mozambique more widely, then, the question becomes: who has the right to tell their story and have it recognised?

Other figures appropriated by the same memorialising strategy include Eduardo Mondlane, founder of FRELIMO, and Samora Machel, the first president of independent Mozambique. In a 2020 paper, researcher Lúcio Dionísio Pitoca Posse argues that figures such as Mondlane and Machel have been instrumentalised in the speeches given by Amando Guebuza as President of the Republic of Mozambique (2005-2014). Applying speech analysis, Posse argues that Guebuza's speeches position these figures as national heroes and himself as their legitimate successor.²² Similarly, several bronze statues of Machel were erected to celebrate 2011 as the 'Year of Samora Machel' at the cost of over a million US dollars, provoking public concern. Spending large amounts of money on statues when people lived in poverty appeared in direct contrast to Machel's desire to increase transparency and integrity in public service.²³ As the government tries to mobilise the memory of prominent Mozambican figures to benefit the ruling party, contestation grows from opposition forces and those promoting alternative narratives of the past.²⁴

Local people maintain a far greater diversity of memories and narratives about Coolela, Ngungunyane, the Portuguese and how the colonial history of Mozambique ought to be remembered and commemorated. Anthropologist Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, for instance, notes that 'popular memories

¹⁸ Maria P. Meneses, "Images Outside the Mirror? Mozambique and Portugal in World History (Report)," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 10, no.1 (2012): 128.

¹⁹ Harry G. West, "Voices twice silenced: Betrayal and mourning at colonialism's end in Mozambique", *Anthropological Theory* 3, no.3 (2003).

²⁰ Albino Jopela, "The Heritagization of the Liberation Struggle in Postcolonial Mozambique," *Kaleidoscopio – Research in Public Policy and Culture*, August 29, 2017, 9.

²¹ Pitcher in *Ibid.*

²² Lúcio D. P. Posse, "Heroes of the National Liberation Struggle and the Idea of Nation in the Speeches of the President of the Republic of Mozambique, Armando Guebuza," *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 122 (2020): 99-113.

²³ Albino Jopela, "The Heritagization of the Liberation Struggle in Postcolonial Mozambique," *Kaleidoscopio – Research in Public Policy and Culture*, August 29, 2017, 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

of his rule, emphasising violent domination, are equally vivid and remain infused with oppositional political force'.²⁵ The 'official' narrative, which creates a binary between the colonial Portuguese and the patriotic Gaza Empire, wipes Ngungunyane's problematic memory clean and erases the narratives of local groups by obscuring the legacy of the people who sided against Ngungunyane and viewed him as a colonial force himself.²⁶ Locals who sided with the Portuguese may well be considered by some also as 'warriors who died for the fatherland', but are marginalised in the context of the current monument. The legacy of the Portuguese is also contested: according to some oral sources, the Portuguese forced people to celebrate the battle on its anniversary, making the day a district holiday and fining those who did not comply. Others disagree, however, stating that no such compulsion took place.²⁷ As argued by the scholar Celso Azarias Inguane, this probably represents a diversity of opinion as to whether the battle was justified in the first place: those local people unhappy with Ngungunyane's rule may have been willing to celebrate his defeat, while those who were not, may have considered themselves forced to do so.²⁸ Some consider that the reburial of the Portuguese in a manner that is excluded from the main memorial also excludes them unnecessarily from a historical narrative in which they played a major role.²⁹

Other local discourses highlight Coolela's pre-colonial religious significance as a shrine where people would come to perform 'rainmaking' ceremonies.³⁰ By emphasising religious and ecological concerns, some people may be choosing to question the primacy of political and military events in building historical narratives. In this context, the pre-colonial history of the site is revived, and the legacy of all colonisers minimised.³¹ Another aspect to the contestation stems from groups in South Africa, who claim to be part of the lineage of Ngungunyane and are keen to promote his legacy.³² This has the potential to open future social conflict, as the legitimization of Ngungunyane by the state lends weight to the claims of these groups, who assert their right to Coolela and other sites in the area.³³ This transnational aspect highlights the broad scale of the contestation, taking in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Mozambique, as well as areas beyond the present-day nation that are connected to Ngungunyane and his empire.³⁴

Memory and Popular Culture

²⁵ Bjørn E. Bertelesen, "Ngungunyane (1850-1906)," *Oxford African American Studies Center*, December 8, 2011.

²⁶ Celso Azarias Inguane, *Negotiating Social Memory in Postcolonial Mozambique: the Case of Heritage Sites in Mandhlakazi District* (MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2007), 67-68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71-76.

³² *Ibid.*, 68-69.

³³ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

The Gaza Empire and the wars of the 1890s continue to hold sway in Mozambican popular culture, both questioning and supporting the national narrative. Prominent Mozambican authors Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa and Mia Couto have written works of fiction dealing with the period, both challenging the positive image of Ngungunyane.³⁵ Khosa's 1987 novel called *Ualalapi* paints Ngungunyane as a bloody tyrant, his violence partly the cause of his own downfall.³⁶ Similarly, Couto's recent trilogy of historical novels concerns a young girl called Imani, living in a village stuck between the Portuguese and Ngungunyane.³⁷ In an interview in 2016, Couto declared it was his intention in the series to centre individuals like Imani and contest elite narratives that distort or simplify the past.³⁸

In contrast, there are still celebrations of another battle fought around the same time as Coolela, the Battle of Marracuene (2nd February 1895), also fought between Portuguese forces and the Gaza Empire, continues to be widely celebrated. The battle was also a defeat for Ngungunyane and has been described as 'the beginning of the end' for him and his empire.³⁹ Like Coolela, it was originally celebrated as a Portuguese colonial festival.⁴⁰ It is now a musical and cultural festival with a nationalistic character, having been revived in 1994.⁴¹ This celebration of what can be seen to have originally been a colonial festival marking a humiliating defeat has also been criticised.⁴² Despite this, it continues to feature as a recommendation by Lonely Planet for tourists in the region.⁴³

Decision-Making Processes

The primary decision-maker is the ruling FRELIMO party (1977 to present). Prior to 1990, Mozambique was a one-party state, but the new constitution in 1990 established a multi-party system as well as separating party and state. However, FRELIMO has won every election to date. FRELIMO's interest in heritage sites grew under Guebuza's premiership (2005-2014). During that period, the Mozambican state marked their involvement through the organisation and promotion of commemorations, the construction and restoration of memorials and other structures or objects, financial assistance to foundations connected to sites and through the acceleration of legal procedures that ensure their protection.⁴⁴ A key player in this programme was the Ministry of Education and Culture of Mozambique (MEC) and, within that, the National Directorate for Cultural

³⁵ Patrick Chabal, "Mozambique," *The Post-colonial Literature of Lusophone Africa*, ed. Patrick Chabal et al. (London: Hurst & Co., 1996), 29-102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁷ Ayesha H. Attah, "Woman of the Ashes by Mia Couto review – Mozambique in the 19th century," *Guardian*, March 8, 2019.

³⁸ João Céu e Silva, "Não há tentativa de branquear a história ou de menorizar o que foi criminoso," *Diário de Notícias*, October 11, 2016.

³⁹ Dave Durbach, "The king's jam," *Mahala*, February 20, 2012.

⁴⁰ Darch, *Historical Dictionary of Mozambique*, 183; Club of Mozambique, "More than 5,000 expected today at Gwaza Muthini celebrations in Marracuene," *Club of Mozambique*, February 2, 2018.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Gwaza Muthini, Mozambique, *Lonely Planet*.

⁴⁴ Celso Azarias Inguane, *Negotiating Social Memory in Postcolonial Mozambique: the Case of Heritage Sites in Mandhlakazi District* (MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand, 2007), 75.

Heritage (*Direcção Nacional do Património Cultural*, DNPC). The state's interest in heritage sites appears to have continued since 2014, with four Mozambican sites submitted by FRELIMO currently on UNESCO's 'tentative list' for world heritage classification,⁴⁵ but there have been concerns about a lack of funding to support the preservation of Mozambique's cultural heritage and a lack of coordination between the various provincial and municipal institutions responsible for preserving the sites.⁴⁶

As we have seen, however, there are a myriad of other 'unofficial' voices which are increasingly making their mark on Mozambican narratives. These range from literature and the study of oral histories by historians and anthropologists to the use of vandalism to express discontent. For example, in 1995, a bust of Ngungunyane set up by the then president Joaquim Chissano was vandalised within days of being erected.⁴⁷

Dynamics to consider in decision-making include how a variety of voices can be incorporated into the building of narratives, especially those not aligned with 'official' discourse. How can a nation with fresh memories of its colonial past grapple successfully with multiple colonialisms of both European and African origin?

Summary and Conclusions

The Coolela Battlefield Memorial forms part of a web of narratives connected to the problematic legacies of colonial pasts in Mozambique. In its drive to create national historical narratives that are beneficial to their present goals, FRELIMO has been criticised for over-simplifying events and marginalising the experiences and memories of Mozambicans which may diverge from the state's 'liberation' and 'resistance' narratives. The Coolela Memorial makes clear how monuments have the potential to marginalise and erase groups based on the positioning of makers and the wording of inscriptions. It also reveals the complicated nature of colonial memory, in a situation where there are multiple colonisers and multiple struggles for liberation.

Research contributed by Grace Stafford, Celine Ng, Luisa Karman and Katharine Burnett

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⁴⁵ UNESCO, "Mozambique", *UNESCO*.

⁴⁶ Romeu da Silva, "Falta de coordenação prejudica preservação de património cultural moçambicano", *Deutsche Welle*, March 25, 2015.

⁴⁷ Gloria Sousa, Romeu da Silva, and Gwendolin Hilse, "Ngungunyane, the king against Portuguese occupation", *Deutsche Welle*, June 8, 2018.

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Figures

H. Graumann and I. Piedade Pó. "File:AFDCM-05-057.jpg." Wikimedia Commons, February 15, 2018. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AFDCM-05-057.jpg>. (Cover Image)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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