

N'rondo¹ (N'sondo) and school: space for safeguarding the rights of mozambican young girls!?

ARTICLE

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Abstract

In the present work, we aim to reflect on the possible violence that can be committed in Mozambican schools and within the spaces in which the female unyago takes place. Thus, the intrinsic function is to analyze the rights of protection for the physical, educational, psychological and social development of young girls. However, we found studies that point to unyago as one of the causes of non-compliance with some laws regarding girls. Initiation rites are identified as the main cause of girls dropping out of school and a potential contributor to premature marriages in those communities. Therefore, from the reflection on some possible violence suffered by them, we try to point out ways for them to exercise their citizenship in these formative and emancipating spaces.

Keywords: Mozambican Girls. Unyago. School/N'rondo. Violence.

N'rondo (N'sondo) e Escola: espaços de salvaguarda de Direitos das meninas moçambicanas!?

Resumo

No presente trabalho, objetivamos refletir sobre as possíveis violências que podem ser cometidos em escolas moçambicanas e dentro dos espaços em que se realizam o *unyago*² feminino. Desse modo, tem-se como função intrínseca analisar os direitos de proteção para o desenvolvimento físico, educacional psíquico e social das jovens meninas. Não obstante, encontramos estudos que apontam o *unyago* como uma das causas do não cumprimento de algumas leis para com as meninas. Os ritos de iniciação são apontados como a causa principal da desistência escolar das meninas e potencial contribuinte para os casamentos prematuros naquelas comunidades. Assim sendo, a partir da reflexão sobre algumas possíveis violências sofridas por elas, tentamos apontar caminhos para que elas possam exercer suas cidadanias nesses espaços formativos e emancipadores.

Palavras-chave: Meninas moçambicanas. Unyago. Escola/N'rondo. Violências.

¹ Ground where initiation rites are practiced.

² Initiation rites.

We start in 2008, when the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique sets out and proposes the safeguarding of rights for this category of vulnerable citizens, setting precedents for making this issue a fundamental agenda for the nation's development. It is from this perspective of young, vulnerable and complex individuals that their incalculable value for the growth and improvement of a country's social indicators can be seen.

Our notes will give visibility to the school and the *n'rondo*³ as such specific and complex territories, seeking to understand them as the beginning, middle and end of the generation of knowledge and the construction of girls' subjectivity. *N'rondo*, in the *Yaawo* language, one of the languages of Niassa province in northern Mozambique, means: space where initiation rites take place. This is a sacred space for learning, welcoming and sharing knowledge and food that nourishes the body and soul, in communion with their ancestors. It is this place that the *Yaawo* community, as well as others who practice their rituals, consider to be their school. As *anakanga*⁴ Ambitimuenye said:

[...] before the white man came here, this was our learning space. It's our prayer space. It's our space for healing and dialog. Here we learned how to behave within our families and communities. Respect for our elders. We take our girls to learn about plants that cure illnesses [...] (Conversation, July 2017).

To this end, observing the rights/duties of girls in regional and (inter)national legal instruments, which also emphasize the responsibilities of the state, society and the family as a whole, will allow us to place them in paradigms as subjects of society, with rights and a voice, without barbarism, as Adorno (2010) says.

Considering the existence of studies on young girls, we understand that our actions as educators, although not specialists in issues of legality, employ power and interdisciplinarity. In this way, we must be attentive to other languages that enable us to question and propose solutions within educational policies and build Political Pedagogical

³ Space where initiation rites take place, or as they are popularly called *unyago*.

⁴ Master and priestess responsible for organizing the knowledge to be taught within the *n'rondo*. She is also the healer and spiritual guide of the community.

Projects that listen to them within the spaces where they are present, as subjects of rights.

We therefore hope that these reflections can lead to more tools being put in place in schools and added to those that already exist, promoting councils that function effectively, so that girls and their families can be heard without fear of reprisals. Also, to promote school sectors with teachers, specialists and tools aimed at the protection and development of young girls as "subjects" in and of the community in which they find themselves, starting from the school and the *n'rondo*.

These concerns come from the need to try to answer the questions we ask ourselves on a daily basis, as well as from reports that teachers, men from these girls' communities and/or family members are violating their basic rights, forcing them to have sexual relations based on violence, endangering their lives and existences.

In order to carry out the violations, the aggressors blame the fact that they are girls, the clothes they wear (claiming that they wear short or transparent skirts and dresses for the eyes of heteronormative men), as well as the cultural practices they carry out, such as the *unyago*⁵, which has the *n'rondo* as a space for transmitting knowledge and religiosity, worshipping ancestry.

Teachers are the agents who, theoretically, should lead the fight to create and disseminate instruments for girls, both inside and outside school, as interlocutors in the defense of their rights. They should make it possible for girls to learn more, with the aim of fighting for and safeguarding their humanities and spaces, through the application of laws that protect them. However, we see that they are going against the grain of these struggles, as they have acted as the main violators of girls, using negationist and phallogocentric discourses.

We understand the *n'rondo*, the *unyago* and the grounds of religions of African origin - sacred spaces of various peoples - as places of learning, because they participate in the education that makes up these communities, obeying their own rules, which are

⁵ Initiation rites in the Yaawo language.

maintained from generation to generation and which should not be overlooked to the detriment of those considered hegemonic.

However, it is worth noting that several studies, such as those by Osório and Macuacua (2021), as well as social movements and NGOs, point to initiation rites and their spaces as being fundamental factors that favor vulnerability and violence towards girls; which, in turn, are indicated as the main cause of school dropouts/avoidance. These issues contribute to an increase in the number of early marriages, contributing to higher poverty rates in Mozambique.

Initiation rites, as well as other traditional Mozambican cultural practices, have been the target of persecution from the Portuguese colonial period to the present day, as they carry a tribal and obscure past (Geffray, 1991). It was considered that these rites deserved to be banned for the sake of the country's civilization in order to prevent the perpetuation of what the colonizer called "dog culture" (André, 2019). To this end, those who wished to be "assimilated" should abandon it, based on slogans such as: "down with initiation rites"; "down with tribalism" and "down with healers" (Pinho, 2012, p. 26).

Pregnant girls without their bodies being prepared for sexual activity and for carrying a child is a violation. It is a denial of various rights, such as education, health, the right to come and go, citizenship, humanity and even the right to become mothers of their own choosing. These violations are caused by groups of men, on the streets of neighborhoods, or even inside their homes, by someone close to them.

In the colonial and post-independence periods, the slogans were aimed at denying the roots of Mozambican identity. Nowadays, we find the Mozambican government itself, assisted by NGOs and social movements, with its argument based on the problem of early marriages and girls dropping out of school, as well as the violence practiced in the case of the rites.

André (2020), in an interview, says that men who have this behavior of denying the lives of girls to the detriment of their biological desires, "One of two things: either they are criminals, because they refuse to understand that that girl is a child [...] or these men

have a degenerative neurological disease that we need to investigate" (Interview - Generus newspaper, 2020).

Another form of denial of the rights of girls and their bodies, as unique territories, can be seen in the data recorded in a study carried out by the Committee on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (CDCA), in which 70% of young girls said that teachers "use sexual intercourse as a condition for getting a grade". In the same study, 50% said that they were also abused by boys from their schools and 80% were abused and harassed by men from their communities or close to them.

This study is in line with what some teachers say wins them over in their pupils, because, according to them, they "have adult bodies. Looking at a bulky 15-year-old girl, we have no choice but to attack them. They come up to us in low-cut blouses to talk to us". This clearly shows the objectification that girls suffer from their teachers, who should be looking after their education and enforcing the laws in their favor.

As the CDCA pointed out, the film *À Espera* (2016) tells the drama of early marriages in Mozambique and shows the violence suffered by these young girls, who end up taking serious risks because they contract obstetric fistulas and lose their uteruses, brutally annulling their motherhood, should that be their future wish.

During the recording of *À Espera* (2016), there was a need to gather testimonies from teachers. With the help of the Niassa Provincial Directorate of Education and Human Development, the team was introduced, among several, to a teacher whose wife was a girl under the age of 15. Instead of studying or playing, the girl was kept at home doing household chores.

In the light of the above, the aim is to present reflections that can be added to those that already exist, in order to enhance the effectiveness of national, regional and international instruments that guarantee autonomy, freedom and protection for all children, particularly those in these places.

Article 11 of the Constitution of the Republic (CR) of Mozambique states that "the fundamental objectives of the Mozambican State are: [...], c) the building of a society of social justice and the creation of the material and spiritual well-being and quality of life of

its citizens", [...]. Article 88 also states that "In the Republic of Mozambique, education is the right and duty of every citizen". It is worth noting that

[...] access to education is only the "[...] right and duty of every citizen" in Mozambique, Article 88 of the Constitution, and there is no accountability for the state's duty to guarantee it. Perhaps the violation of this basic right is also based on the gap in the state's distancing itself from responsibility, so that violators of children's rights, particularly girls, can be effectively punished (André, 2019, p. 102).

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The CoR proposes a discussion on the right to "education" for girls in Mozambique and its policies and practices. The question that worries us is: what is behind the failure to comply with the law in their favor? What makes men/teachers continue to get away with violating law 19/2019⁶?

Girls as young as 11, 12 or 14 are kept as "house wives", without going to school, even though their husband is a teacher. This "teacher" is the ratifier of the violation of the basic rights of these girls, exemplifying the reign of his sexism, as well as that of many, in delimiting the female figure to the role of maintaining the human species. What rights do these young girls have and have they had? What space does the school offer for safeguarding their rights?

In this observation, the violation of the basic rights of these girls enshrined in the Constitution and in various regional and international instruments to which Mozambique is a ratifier, such as the Convention on the Rights of Children and Adolescents and the Dakar Convention, which state that "everyone has the right to life, health, education, well-being" and the right to come and go, was visible.

If an under-18 doesn't have the right to vote and be voted for, how will she have the right to choose whether she gets obstetric fistulas and loses her uterus? How can she choose whether to acquire sexually transmitted diseases or other venereal diseases? How will you choose whether or not to put your future and humanity in check?

⁶ Mozambique's Law Against Forced Unions, including early marriages, punishes anyone who marries a girl under 18 and her family members, as well as legal guardians who condone such unions.

In a relationship between an adult and a minor, as well as physical and psychological aggression, the adult also has the responsibility of holding another child in his arms - À Espera (2016). So, will this young girl have the ability to choose, if not for the adults who should be looking after her overall development so that she can make free and conscious choices?

Schools play an essential role in society, as they contribute to socialization, the formation of emancipated individuals, the democratization of knowledge and the creation of a "*transformative space*" for building awareness and citizenship. Likewise, the *n'rondo* also plays a fundamental role for the communities that participate in it, as it is concerned with educating its initiates in good habits and ethics. The *n'rondo* are spaces of multiple knowledges, belonging and the transmission of fundamental knowledge for the initiate's insertion into the spaces of their ancestors. They are also places where individuals socialize and share knowledge and learning, which takes place on the basis of the codes that govern the communities and their ancestry, through the cult of the ancestors.

Initiation rites are centuries-old practices, if not millennia-old, which consist of the transfer of knowledge that will allow the subject to move from childhood to adulthood. It is worth pointing out that being a child or an adult, for these communities, is not determined by chronological age, but by whether or not they experience the ritualistic process, through codes impregnated in their bodies that allow them to dialog with other bodies. In this way, Cossa (2014) mentions that:

Initiation is closely linked to the introduction of men and women to complex rituals that work with the body, sexuality, memory, community knowledge and ethnic identity, while the school almost always brings a civic consciousness that seeks to distance the individual from their ethnic group and bring them closer to the state (Cossa, 2014, p. 15).

One fact to be emphasized is the particularity that each society possesses, allowing it to develop based on its own dynamics and history. However, we have a great challenge ahead of us, since there are issues that permeate societies with a strong colonial heritage and thinking, and are not relevant to resolving conflicts and problems.

We are often driven by automatic forces that determine how we plan our day, our week and our lives.

We wake up, open our eyes, brush our teeth, shower, "put on our clothes" and go about our business, without ever questioning the origin of these supposed universal standards and customs. We just introduce them into our life dynamics and follow them as we go.

In other words, we are reproducing rituals and often we don't even question why they are important or whether they cause inequalities within a group. We touched on this subject to point out the strong opposition to the rights to otherness and to the new situations that the modern rule of law allows and safeguards. Based on this principle, we see a huge deficit in the attendance and participation of Mozambican girls in schools.

It is clear that if there is no effort to ensure that other devices are in place for them to stay in school, what conditions are found that do not allow them to do so? How can their citizenship be guaranteed globally? We have an exact answer when we come across the failure of this protection: the existence of harassed girls, such as the case of the teacher mentioned above, whose wife is under 18. She, in turn, is prevented from starting or continuing her studies, and denied the right to education guaranteed by the Constitution.

When we mention education, we are looking at formal schooling, because we understand that people carry with them their forms of education acquired throughout their processes and experiences within the community in which they live - which are just as valid and worthy of respect.

Assuming that the girl who arrives at school with legitimate speech is not an empty individual or a repository ready to be molded. Therefore, this space should protect her overall integrity, enabling her to recognize her citizenship and exercise sociability in a community full of "different" people. To this end, the school must be the personalization of the parity of rights between women and men, as well as the rehearsal space for this coexistence in a fairer, more humane society, with equity and social justice.

How many institutions that look after children can we find in the country to turn to in the event of sexual abuse? How many specialized public services or police stations for crimes against children? Or even how many and which laws are effective in penalizing those who commit such abuse? How many schools have these tools? If they do, do they work effectively in guaranteeing legality for those abused in schools - which are supposed to be safe spaces? Are initiation rites also responsible for these rights violations? Do they contribute to teachers demanding sex as a bargaining chip to get girls to move up a grade? Or is it the failure of the more severe application of Law 19/2019, which does not punish a member of parliament who rapes a minor and, days later, takes up his parliamentary mandate, even though social movements and civil society are fighting for his conviction?

There is a huge gap that favors the continuation of the problem, pointing to traditions as responsible for the violation of the rights of school-age girls, while allowing those truly responsible for such dangers to circulate and take possession of the country's public and private institutions.

It doesn't add up. Whose interest is it to annul an ancient culture of female strength and the strengthening of community ties? The fact is that there is no dialogue between the parties that should be working for the schooling/education of these girls. There is a need for struggle and unity in order to create a school space that does not deny or invalidate the knowledge that these girls carry from learning spaces, as is the case with the knowledge learned within the *n'rondo*.

This knowledge confers belonging, identity and religiosity, among other forms of relationship with its members, and needs to be recognized and validated. In other words, the space of the rites should be seen as "a place where fundamental knowledge is transmitted to the individuals who make up those communities" (André, 2021), as it is part of a

[...] a place of bio-narratives, where we are taught not only to be with others who are different, but also to take care of what surrounds us, of nature, because nature is us, [...]. Fraternity, union, feeling, a compassionate gaze, a place that allows for universal symphonies, in which the other is accepted with their corporeality, spirituality, rationality, historicity and makes us review our seams

and edges. It teaches us to look at the other with affection that communicates, dialogues and cares. The spirit of sharing, of caring about the other, of looking after each other, are part of an ethic called ubuntu [...] typical of African communities in their ways of being and being [...] (André, 2021, p. 13).

There is no dialogue between the school and the communities that practice the *u'nyago*, since there is a *quid pro quo* for them to continue to be practiced. The government, through the Basic Education Curriculum Plan (PCEB), "understands" that the demonstrations should continue, stating that "the rites come from Traditional Education Systems with the aim of transmitting the norms and values of a society", which should be practiced during school vacations so that there is no school dropout (PCEB, 2003).

By proposing that the *unyago* be held during the school vacations, in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Human Development, as a way of reducing dropouts, isn't this disrespecting what the community has been doing since their ancestors? Isn't it disrespecting the fact that the practice is being carried out in a period that they believe to be appropriate, whose link is closely connected to the sowing and harvesting period in the fields, whose abundance is celebrated as a form of gratitude to their ancestors? Why doesn't the Mozambican education system adapt to this reality, allowing for an education that has a communicative relationship, appreciation and respect for the community? [...] (André, 2019, p. 25).

There is a logic of its own to which the school should be attentive, in order to respect and adapt the curriculum to those communities, being willing to accept other biographies and realities, even if they are different from the colonized systems and benefit unilaterally.

The book *À Espera* (2016) points to a new direction within this set of conflicts between "traditional" and "erudite" knowledge, articulating them as a vehicle for information and dialog at points of tension. Undoubtedly, working with diversity is a major challenge.

Stifling and criminalizing traditional practices without questioning their importance in the subjectivity of these subjects is also a violent practice of denying their existence as a people. Constantly problematizing discrimination and inequalities in the classroom and

in dialogue environments, in order to develop more effective forms of teaching, is exercising the right of speech and protagonism of these subjects, taking into account their entire understanding of the world and how to acquire their knowledge.

In this way, by taking into account the elements of community belonging, it is possible to achieve satisfactory results in the understanding of society, since laws are mechanisms of respect for a country that understands the particularities of all subjects as citizens. Hence the need to create policies and comply with laws, including by those who practice or worship their ancestry - since no culture is above the law - but without denying other "selves", but rather (re)signifying them.

To this end, it is a multidisciplinary action that requires the mobilization of society and the Mozambican state and government on several fronts, in order to achieve the goal of creating a school that is a real safeguard for these young girls, guaranteeing their humanities and other rights, allowing them to choose what they want to be, without being approached as a mere body to satisfy the biological desires of their teachers and other men in their communities.

In this scenario, the observance of an education that respects cultural plurality, in this case, with evidence of gender, allows everyone to guarantee and use the various modes of health care, human rights (even before literacy and writing education), society, the environment, identity, nation and territory, the use of local languages and the practice of initiation rites - so significant for various societies.

The *u'nyago* or other rituals in northern Mozambique are condemned as a backward step in the civilization process, but there is no in-depth study of their philosophy and their importance in strengthening community ties.

Danish sociologist Signe Arnfred, in her studies *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique: Rethinking Gender in Africa and Female Sexuality as Capacity and Power? Reconceptualizing Sexualities in Africa*, points out that the developmentalist regimes in Mozambique have weakened female power, taking into account what she would have experienced within the initiation rites and in her research on Mozambican women.

We can think that they suffocated the great wisdom and millenary knowledge of these women in the name of the culture of the other. This "other" is a being enclosed within the colonial, colonizing and Eurocentric standards of the Other from the northern world. Hence the need to reinforce the use of themes and tools that share the right of these young girls to make choices about their lives, in a permanent dialog about their experiences. The theft or denial of their identity and people values is also a form of violation of human rights from their bodies and places of existence and belonging.

Returning to safeguarding, there are no policies that are committed to and effective in ensuring the lives of these young girls, their right to school and perhaps their right to life. The ritual itself could be an ally, a reaffirmation of their place, people and values. Along with it, good research in various areas that highlight their belonging, the origins of their beauty and their strength. The dialogue between knowledges is already underway. Here we have a concrete example. Now it's up to us to develop appropriate and specific policies, respecting the different forms and needs of learning and existence.

It is worth mentioning one of the episodes that exemplifies the denial of young Mozambican girls, particularly in rural areas. The crew of the film *À Espera* (2016) went to the Niassa provincial hospital, in the capital Lichinga, and came across a nine-year-old girl giving birth - in other words, she had become pregnant at the age of eight. In the same place, they identified another girl who had just lost her child, her uterus and her ovaries, because she had arrived at the hospital with a ruptured uterus and needed to undergo a removal procedure to save her life, because when the "uterus ruptures, there are many arteries that cause bleeding and the patient can die" (*À Espera*, 2016). These are examples of young girls whose right to life, health and education, as well as humanity, have been denied to them.

Where are the violators of the rights of these girls who, overnight, become the responsible adults, prevented from continuing their studies? Where is the effectiveness of the law in their favor? What makes legal guardians and girls who go through *u'nyago* not see and feel that school is a safe and trustworthy place? What can be done about teachers who violate the law and the girls? How can we allow the school to be a safe

place for them, contrary to what studies and reality indicate? Or will the institutions just continue to transfer these accused teachers to other places, as one head teacher said when asked about the case of a teacher who had impregnated a girl: "the teacher was transferred to another school". In other words, a problem and a rapist has been transferred to another place, so that he can continue with these violent processes with other young girls.

Final considerations for other journeys

From the experiences and reflections narrated in the text, it is clear that schools, spaces that should provide girls with safety, confidence and the development of objectivity and subjectivity, are the places where they are most aggressed against. This aggression is perhaps present and frequent in this space because of the lack of compliance with laws, or because of their gender status, placing them as mere objects and recipients of other people's pleasures, whose bodies must obey the opposite sex.

This is not to say that there are no instruments, measures and actions developed on their behalf. We just want to raise questions based on what we have found throughout our research, positioning ourselves as the educators we are, proposing to ensure that the rights of all are respected, regardless of the genitals they bear. We are fighting to allow inspections and punishments for anyone who violates the rights of girls, in any and all spaces that should represent and safeguard them. Law 19/2019 should be unailable and carry the maximum penalty, since violators deny nothing less than the humanity and integrity of girls, putting their lives at risk.

There is a need for in-depth studies on the part of those who point to traditional practices, such as *u'nyago*, as backward and/or detrimental to the country's development, advocating that they be banned. We need to find better ways of understanding and interacting with the different types of knowledge that exist, without hierarchies or the dominance of one over the other. This would make it possible to integrate the spaces and knowledge of the school and the *n'rondo*.

Every society, in addition to the spaces considered formal (schools, universities), has other spaces for the production and dissemination of knowledge, which should be validated just as much. Just as we understand the importance of school for and in the formation of subjects, we also understand the importance of the *n'rondo* and *U'nyago* space as a place for other forms and means of education. This is a space for women's congregations and

[...] a place of women where femininity flows, typical of the nature that emanates in us, where the education of bodies, of being and of existence and resistance materializes! This space is a place of education and emancipation for women, based on the re-signification of their bodies and beings. [...] this sacred space is and can be a place of dialogue where yesterday and today can join hands towards a fairer, more humane and equitable society, because a woman's place is much more than rolling out a mat and her body available to the opposite sex as a mere object for receiving other people's pleasures (André, 2021, p. 14).

There must be spaces (schools, police stations, ombudsmen's offices and psychological assistance) to which young girls and their legal guardians can turn when they feel threatened, seeking to validate their rights within the rule of law.

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