

## A Feminist Dance of Love, Eroticism, and Life: Paulina Chiziane's Novelistic Recreation of Tradition and Language in Postcolonial Mozambique

Russell G. Hamilton

**Abstract.** This article analyses the form and content of *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* (*Niketche: A Story of Polygamy*), the most recent work by Paulina Chiziane, Mozambique's first female novelist. A brief introduction offers some considerations of Chiziane's latest work as an aesthetic object and a literary product, published in Lisbon and intended for readers from all seven of the countries, on three continents, whose official language is Portuguese. The article analyses relevant aspects of the novel's imaginative portrayal and reformulation of traditional social and cultural institutions, especially polygamy, and how these practices continue to affect gender relationships in postcolonial Mozambique. With respect to how female and male characters inter-relate in the story that unfolds, the novel can legitimately be labelled "feminist." Basically, the article seeks to reveal how this literary work, composed from a female perspective and infused with a storyteller's "orature," constitutes a linguistic and artistic achievement of international appeal in its African recreation of Portuguese expression and of traditional social and cultural themes.

With the publication, in 1990, of *Balada de Amor ao Vento* (*Love Ballad on the Wind*), Paulina Chiziane gained renown as Mozambique's first female novelist. On a number of occasions, in print and orally, Chiziane has asserted, however, that she is not a novelist. She refers to herself as a teller of stories, some short and others long. Although in much of the world, and certainly in the West, a citizen who writes a novel that gains recognition nor-

mally receives special praise in his or her home country for having reached the pinnacle of national literary grandeur. That this form of literary expression is the quintessential genre of the modern nation-state is captured in such laudatory acclamations as “the great American novel.” Chiziane, by insisting that she is a storyteller, is asserting her roots in an African and, specifically, a Mozambican tradition. She is, in effect, following, *mutatis mutandis*, the ancient tradition of the caste of hereditary storytellers, commonly known in parts of Africa as griots.<sup>1</sup>

As a storyteller who transmits her artistic orality as “literature,” the latter being a term that by definition refers to pencraft and the printed word, Paulina Chiziane is indeed a writer.<sup>2</sup> Most readers of Chiziane’s works can readily appreciate the degree to which the storytelling tradition has influenced the language, technique, and style of her, to date, four published novels. The author herself has stated the extent to which orality drives her writing.<sup>3</sup> Despite her self-characterization as a storyteller and not a writer of novels, Chiziane presumably accepts that the volumes bearing her name be marketed abroad, specifically in Portugal, as novels. Thus, on the front cover of each of her three most recent works, *Ventos do Apocalipse*, *O Sétimo Juramento*, and *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*, directly under the title is printed the word *romance*. These three works, all published in Lisbon by Editorial Caminho, are intended for a Portuguese-speaking audience that goes beyond readers from the author’s native land. *Niketche*, the novel under consideration in the present article, was published in a Caminho series called “Outras Margens: Autores Estrangeiros de Língua Portuguesa.” With respect to “marginality,” the series is an attempt to bring literary works by African authors to prospective readers from the periphery (i.e., the five Lusophone African countries) as well as to those at the center (i.e., Portugal and Brazil) of the Portuguese-speaking world.

Quite naturally, vocabulary and language usage in general have special significance with respect to works from the margins of the Portuguese-speaking world. In this regard, it may first strike some readers as curious that on the front cover of Chiziane’s recently published novel the main title, *NIKETCHE*, which appears in large capitalized letters, is not a Portuguese word. Readers unfamiliar with the indigenous languages of Mozambique may be intrigued by the exotic but unfamiliar word, which is followed, in smaller letters by the explanatory subtitle: *Uma História de Poligamia*. This clarification notwithstanding, most prospective readers will want to consult

the volume's glossary, containing a total of forty-four terms, to discover that *niketche*, a word from an indigenous language of northern Mozambique, is the designation for a "dança de amor."<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting that *Balada de Amor ao Vento*, Chiziane's first novel, published in Maputo by the Associação dos Escritores Moçambicanos, does not include a glossary. Although this relatively short novel has fewer indigenous language terms than do Chiziane's three works published in Portugal, the author does use a number of Bantu words in the narrative and dialogues. Among the words of Bantu origin found in *Balada de Amor ao Vento* are *machamba* (garden plot or small farm) and *lobolo* (bride price or dowry). These two nouns, along with other indigenous terms used in the novel, are part of the active vocabulary of most of contemporary Mozambique's citizens and other residents, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Chiziane presumably wrote her first novel, published and mainly distributed in Mozambique, for literate Mozambicans as well as for those non-Mozambican readers who are familiar with the more or less standard dialect of the Portuguese spoken in that southern African country.

In our consideration of the form and content of *Niketche* we shall have occasion to return to the matter of the social, cultural, and aesthetic roles of language in the story. At this juncture, we offer a brief appraisal of the book's graphic design. Although by no means a mere marketing ploy, the volume's cover illustration does catch one's attention because of its exoticism and what some might view as its eroticism. On the volume's cover appears the frontal depiction of a naked female figure and to either side of her a large bird, two snake-like creatures, and a peripheral and partial view of a clothed male figure clutching one of the reptiles. This archetypal, totemic painting, of unquestionable aesthetic appeal, is the work of Malangatana, unquestionably modern-day Mozambique's most celebrated graphic artist.

*Niketche's* intriguing hybrid title and the volume's captivating graphic design indeed prepare the reader for the main story and complimentary tales that unfold in the text. Also intriguing is the story's epigraph: *Mulher é terra. Sem semear, sem regar, nada produz.* A proverb of the northern Zambezia province, the epigraph prepares the reader for the role of women in the story about to unfold.<sup>5</sup> The proverb also sets the tone for the orature and traditionalism that permeate the story's language and its social and cultural themes.

Rami, the first-person narrator and protagonist of the forty-three untitled chapters in the volume, recounts a story of polygamy and, indeed, aspects of

the history of that traditional multi-conjugal practice in Mozambique. From her perspective as the first of the five wives of Tony, as well as the mother of five of his sixteen children, Rami tells what comes to be an uncomplicated but thematically multifaceted story line with a complex plot. Briefly stated, the story depicts events, over a period of several months, in the daily lives of women as they relate to their polygamist mate, other men, their nuclear and extended families, and to each other. The plot is made complex by a set of factors having to do with several interrelated, far-reaching, and often engagingly contradictory subjects and themes. Moreover, the language and style of the narrative and dialogues are infused with the obliqueness of a poetic prose style that frequently simulates symphonic crescendos and reaches dramatic heights of magic realism.

*Niketche's* narrator, as the voice of the story's implied author, appears to be ambivalent, if not overtly contradictory, with respect to polygamy as a social institution in postcolonial Mozambique. In the interview published, in 1994, in Chabal's *Vozes Moçambicanas*, Chiziane rather sets the stage for the attitudes of *Niketche's* implied author and narrator with regard to polygamy and other traditional social practices as they relate to the status of women. Chiziane asserts that what she calls "hidden polygamy" constitutes a major problem in a monogamous society:

Porque hoje, de facto, é o que se diz: "A poligamia mudou de vestido." Porque esses homens todos têm quatro, cinco, dez mulheres em qualquer canto por aí. Têm filhos com duas, três, quatro mulheres todas juntas. São filhos que, porque crescem numa sociedade de monogamia, não se podem reconhecer. São crianças fruto de uma situação como a que vivemos hoje, uma situação de adultério. Mas numa sociedade de poligamia já não acontece isso, as coisas são mais abertas. A situação de adultério que vivemos hoje é muito pior que a poligamia. (299)

Chiziane's interview elucidates much of what Rami, the narrator, other female characters, and, by implication, the implied author express in the fictional account of polygamy. Of fundamental significance with respect to the story are Chiziane's above-quoted assertions in reference to what polygamy was traditionally and what it has become—i.e., a "hidden practice" tantamount to adultery. In a later interview published in Laban's *Moçambique: Encontro com Escritores*, Chiziane emphatically states that "[...] é claro que não concordo com a poligamia" (976).<sup>6</sup> As she does in her earlier interview,

Chiziane makes a distinction between contemporary adulterous polygamy and the traditional practice, which she sees as having provided a firm familial context for the multiple wives and their offspring. In *Niketche* the dichotomy between the traditional and the contemporary plays itself out poetically and often dramatically. The stories that make up *Niketche* not only focus on polygamy and other traditional practices, they also feature such correlates as love, eroticism, religion, sorcery, magic, ethnicity, race, parenthood, and the social and economic status of women.

Chapter 11 is an especially striking example of how throughout the work the storyteller effectively combines form and content. With colourful images, striking metaphors, and rhythmic phrasing Rami delivers a dramatic soliloquy on polygamy. Four consecutive paragraphs, in response to the rhetorical question “O que é poligamia?,” begin with the words “Poligamia é [...].” The first of these paragraphs reads: “Poligamia é uma rede de pesca lançada ao mar. Para pescar mulheres de todos os tipos. Já fui pescada. As minhas rivais, minhas irmãs, todas, já fomos pescadas. Afiar os dentes, roer a rede e fugir, ou retirar a rede e pescar o pescador? Qual a melhor solução?” (93). In what comes to be something of a transitional point in the story, Rami indulges in a kind of regional and gender power reconstruction with respect to polygamy as it exists in her country. Instead of seeing polygamy as a traditionally *matriarchal* practice of northern Mozambique, she considers it to be based on *patriarchal* power and domination that men of the northern Macua ethnic group embraced when they became Islamized. On the other hand, Rami contends that her own southern-based ethnic group has roots in the tradition of polygamy. With the arrival of Christianity, brought by the European colonizers, Rami declares, however, that her people “[...] jurou deixar os costumes bárbaros de casar com muitas mulheres para tornar-se monógamo ou celibatário” (94). This view runs contrary to the belief held by many of the women in the story that traditional polygamy was a northern, matriarchal practice predicated on the willingness to share. Rami herself originally held that belief as well as the conviction that such southern traditions as *lobolo* (“bride price”) are patriarchal in nature.

Chapter 11 thus marks a turning point at which Rami resolves to seek a solution by uniting Tony’s women in a conspiracy against non-traditional polygamy, a practice steeped in male power and tantamount to adultery and concubinage. Rami does not seek to flee from the net of polygamy but rather to exercise the authority inherent in her status as *nkosikosi*, a Bantu title for



the first of the wives to enter into the conjugal relationship. When, as an act of vengeance, Tony seeks to divorce Rami, whom he correctly recognizes as the chief conspirator, she refuses to comply. Pursuant to her decision to lead a conspiracy Rami had already engaged in some liberating activities with respect to sharing and sexual rituals. She had slept with Vito, the lover of Lu (Luísa), one of Tony's other wives. Besides sharing her man with other women, by having taken a lover Lu also is engaging in what might be termed adulterous polyandry.

With the encouragement of Lu, Ju (Julieta), Saly, and Mauá, Tony's four other wives, Rami seeks to reaffirm and enhance her femininity, physical attractiveness, and sexuality. At the beginning of the novel, the fear of losing Tony leads Rami to enrol in a course taught by a woman whom she identifies as a very famous love counsellor. During one of the first of a total of fifteen private tutorials, the love counsellor, who is part professor and part sorceress, assures Rami of her womanliness: "Tu és feitiço por excelência e não deves procurar mais magia nenhuma. Corpo de mulher é magia. Força. Fraqueza. Salvação. Perdição. O universo cabe nas curvas de uma mulher" (44).

Initiation rites and erotic enhancements redefine and regenerate traditional practices in this quintessentially postcolonialist work of fiction. Female genital circumcision is a traditional initiation rite, still practiced in a number of African countries, that has incurred considerable condemnation in today's world.<sup>7</sup> Rami, in reporting on the classes she attended, including those on matters one normally does not discuss, makes the following observation: "Enquanto noutras partes de África se faz a famosa excisão feminina, aqui os genitais se alongam. Nesses lugares o prazer é reprimindo, aqui é estimulado" (46). The foregoing may well lead some readers, who before they perused the passage were unaware that such a practice existed, to take another look at the illustration on the volume's front cover. Those readers will verify that Malangatana's totemic painting does indeed depict a female who has undergone elongation of the vaginal labia majora. Later on in the story, Mauá, Tony's youngest wife, encourages Rami to undergo the procedure as a means of enhancing her sexual attractiveness.

The portrayal of erotica, while by no means pornographic, does represent a rather audacious undertaking on the part of an increasing number of the postcolonial writers of Lusophone African. That several of such writers are women is seen as especially audacious, but also as a liberating gesture on their part. To cite an example, the Angolan Ana Paula Tavares's "O Mamão" is a sen-

sual poem that uses fruit imagery to celebrate the female genitalia. In a way, this imagery recalls the sea creature vaginal allusions that appear in *Niketche*. Another relevant example occurs in the young Angolan writer Rosária's *Totonya*, a novel that depicts explicit sex scenes. Postcolonial audaciousness on the part of female African writers is, in effect, a form of "womanist" (to use the term coined by Alice Walker, the African American writer) liberation.

In Paulina Chiziane's novelistic works, particularly *Niketche*, this liberation applies, somewhat paradoxically, to certain traditional practices that might be considered at best outmoded and at worst reprehensible. What constitutes the most imaginative, if somewhat bizarre, episode in a series of unusual occurrences in this story of polygamy comes to pass when Tony is reported to have died in an automobile accident. Rami herself had passed the scene of the accident and noted that the victim was a man around fifty, which is indeed Tony's age. What is even more bizarre is that Tony's relatives identify the body. Consistent with the magic realism that permeates the story, Rami herself does not contest the family's verification of the death of their beloved Tony, who is a high-ranking police official. Rami goes along with the validity of the occurrence even though Eva, Tony's newest lover, has assured her that he was alive and well in Paris at the time of his alleged demise in Maputo.

In the following passage Rami reveals her thoughts as the funeral ends: "A multidão lança gritos de bradar aos céus. É um oceano de desespero. Quem quer que seja o morto enterrado, teve um funeral condigno, com lágrimas que não eram suas. Eu estou serena, derramo uma lágrima apenas, para não estragar a minha pose. Olho para o Levy com olhos gulosos. Ele será o meu purificador sexual, a decisão já foi tomada e ele acatou-a com prazer. Dentro de pouco tempo estarei nos seus braços, na cerimónia de kutchinga" (220). *Kutchinga* is a Bantu word that refers to levirate, the custom whereby a brother of the deceased inherits the latter's widow.<sup>8</sup> Levy, Tony's brother, accepts Rami as his wife on the eighth day after the funeral. Rami looks forward to the consummation of the union as her sexual liberation and her dance of love: "Daqui a oito dias vou-me despir. Dançar nicketche só para ele, enquanto a esposa legítima morre de ciúmes lá fora. Vou pedir a Mauá para me iniciar nos passos desta dança, ah, que o tempo demora a passar! Deus queira que o Tony só regresse a casa depois deste acto consumado" (220). Recognizing what some may think of her, Rami then exclaims: "Chamem-me desavergonhada. Dêem-me todos os nomes feios que quiserem. Sou mulher e basta. Estou a cumprir à risca a tradição ditada pela família do meu marido"

(220). Within the context of this magical realist story of reinvented customs and practices, the episodes are natural.

Within the dictates of the tradition, Rami's in-laws seize many of her worldly possessions, including furniture, and give her thirty days to vacate the house. Tony's four other consorts are spared this pillage and expulsion on the grounds that they are not really wives and are thus not true widows. Moreover, according to the in-laws, who are from southern Mozambique, these women are northerners and thus have another culture. Northerners do not use the southern tradition whereby the groom pays a bride price (*lobolo*) to his future wife's parents. Moreover, the pillaging in-laws allege that these *xingondos*, a name by which southerners refer to northerners, "[...] são unidos e provocar um é provocar todos" (221).

On the eighth day after the funeral, Levy and Tony's pseudo-widow consummate the *kutchinga* and symbolically Rami dances the *niketche*. Later that very day Tony returns home to his widow's nearly empty house. Rami tells her resurrected husband why the house is empty of furniture, and she reports that "(a)té o kutchinga, cerimônia de purificação sexual aconteceu" (226). In effect, the events surrounding Tony's supposed death, his funeral, the *kutchinga*, his return home, and Rami's sexual fulfilment, as well as the latter's sense of having avenged herself, are climatic. The denouement, albeit replete with dramatic episodes and stories, essentially plays out Rami's, Ju's, Lu's, Saly's, and Mauá's vengeful reinvention of their polygamous relationship with Tony. As a final result of their having come to terms with a disarranged tradition, Ju, Lu, Saly, and Mauá enter into monogamous marriages (on the other hand, Rami's union with Levy is, in effect, annulled). All five women, including Rami, feel vindicated, however, in having gained emotional peace and economic independence along with a sense of having engaged in a conspiratorial, shared experience that has revindicated the traditional practice of polygamy.

The novel ends with Tony's discovery that Rami is pregnant. As Rami and Tony embrace, she reveals, however, that the father of the child is Levy, and then narrates the story's descriptive closing and her polygamous husband's dramatic if uncertain fate: "Os seus braços caem como um fardo. As três trovoadas que um dia tentou encomendar contra o noivo da Lu hoje atacam-lhe o cérebro, o coração e o sexo e fazem dele um super-homem calcificado no éden da praça. Ele só vê o escuro e a chuva. Fica uns minutos intermináveis a contemplar o vazio. Era uma ilha de fogo no meio da água. Solto-o. Não cai, mas voa no abismo, em direcção do coração do deserto, ao inferno sem



fim” (332). Words flow poetically, and as poetry often does, they convey an obliqueness that may appeal more to readers’ aesthetic appreciation than contribute to an understanding of the story’s outcome, which might be termed open-ended. The open-ended story, in a postcolonial sense, can be defined as providing no fixed answers or offering any definitive conclusions. *Niketche’s* open-ended conclusion invites the sort of speculation about Mozambique’s future and, indeed, the futures of all of the relatively new Lusophone African nations so intricately tied to the colonial past. In other words, an author’s postcolonial perspective inevitably means that the characters, story line, and themes of his or her works deal with much of the legacy of the political social, economic, and cultural past of a given nation-state. As it does in *Niketche*, this perspective may also reflect the pre-colonial past of indigenous beliefs, customs, practices, and native languages.

One legacy of colonialism in Paulina Chiziane’s story of polygamy is the matter of race, skin color, and ethnicity in post-independence Mozambique. When Tony’s wives learn that he has taken a bi-racial, light-skinned lover, named Eva, the narrator is moved to exclaim: “Uma mulata é uma rival a sério. Os homens negros são obcecados pelas peles claras, como os brancos são obcecados pelas cabeças loiras. Mas na verdade as escuras têm mais calor, eles sabem disso” (133). In an attempt to determine the degree to which Eva poses a threat to their relationship with Tony, the black wives discuss such matters as the *mulata’s* physical attractiveness and her social status. Lu remarks that Eva is a “third-class *mulata*,” whose father is most likely a Portuguese of low socio-economic standing in the settler community. Rami admonishes the black wives not to be racist, because, after all, “—Mulata não é mulher?” (133). The question at the end of Rami’s admonishment elicits a quick response from Mauá: “—Mulatas são mulheres e mais: são especialistas em magias de amor. Elas são a tentação no paraíso” (133). Mauá’s mention of witchcraft and magic brings to mind the Luso-tropicalist cult of the *mulata* enchantress. Moreover, Mauá’s allusion to “paradise” is in keeping with the mulatto woman’s name—Eve in the Garden of Eden. As a young traditionalist from the north, Mauá further defends her racialism, if not racism, by asserting that polygamy is for black women, not *mulatas*. Lu then contributes to the discussion by assuring her “sisters” that “—[a]s mulatas de terceira são pretas e não se importam com a poligamia [...]” (133). She argues that what women like Eva want “...é um poiso, para que o mundo diga: ela tem marido” (133). When Tony’s wives confront him about his

choice of a mixed-race lover, he reacts with an explanation that supports a prior contention that he is the quintessential national husband: “—Vontade de variar, meninas. Desejo de tocar numa pele mais clara. Vocês são todas escuras, uma cambada de pretas” (140). Tony’s apparent need for variation leads him, while in Paris, to become involved with a French woman named Gaby. He thus becomes an internationalist lover in the eyes of the indigenous traditionalists back home in Mozambique. After Tony’s pseudo demise, the matter of Eva’s identity gets an ethnic/regionalist twist when at a meeting of members of his family and his wives and lovers someone asks the *mulata* where she is from. Without hesitation Eva replies: “—Sou de Palma, lá do canto norte desta terra, a beira do mar, de onde ninguém fala. Sou maconde” (215). A collective gasp of surprise is issued when the group learns that Eva is a member of a Mozambican ethnic group that is well known for having retained its traditional ethnic purity and cultural identity. Eva also contends that she and Tony are just friends, with no amorous involvement.

The novel also delves into the matter of sexual encounters, both intra- and inter-racial, during and after colonial rule. While holding forth about the fate of women with respect to sexual exploitation, Rami offers a compellingly ironic example to make her point:

Há dias conheci uma mulher do interior da Zambézia. Tem cinco filhos, já crescidos. O primeiro, um mulato esbelto, é dos portugueses que a violaram durante a guerra colonial. O segundo, um preto, elegante e forte como um guerreiro, é fruto de outra violação dos guerrilheiros de libertação da mesma guerra colonial. O terceiro, outro mulato, mimoso como um gato, é dos comandos rodesianos brancos, que arrasaram esta terra para aniquilar as bases dos guerrilheiros do Zimbabwe. O quarto é dos rebeldes que fizeram a guerra civil no interior do país. A primeira e a segunda vez foi violada, mas à terceira e à quarta entregou-se de livre vontade, porque se sentia especializada em violação sexual. O quinto é de um homem com quem se deitou por amor pela primeira vez. (277)

Rami declares that this particular woman has carried in her womb the history of all of Mozambique’s wars, but that she laughs, sings, and tells her story to anyone who will listen because she is happy to have only given birth to males who will not know the pain of being sexually violated.

As noted above, Rami’s four “rivals” in the polygamous relationship with Tony all embrace monogamy. In a kind of postcolonial defiance of the exploita-

tive sexual encounters between the dominant colonizing male and the subjugated native female, Ju holds forth about her newly acquired husband. The usually silent Ju speaks out during the special session of the polygamous spouses' conjugal parliament: "Tony, os teus filhos pretos têm um padrasto branco, subiram de categoria. O teu filho de dezanove anos cavalga um mercedes que o padrasto ofereceu no dia dos anos. O meu novo marido é um português. Nós nos amamos, muito, muito, muito. É muito meiguinho, aquele meu velhinho. É viúvo, esse meu homem. E tem dinheiro. Muito dinheiro" (325).

Rami regales Tony with a summary of the breakup of his polygamous family. She gives a rundown of her fellow wives' new relationships, at least two, and possibly three, of which are interracial: "A Lu, a desejada, partiu para os braços de outro com véu e grinalda. A Ju, a enganada, está loucamente apaixonada por um velho português cheio de dinheiro. A Saly, a apetecida, enfeitou o padre italiano até que deixou a batina só por amor a ela. A Mauá, a amada, ama outro alguém" (331). A combination of vengeance, self-serving economic interests and motherly concerns, but also a "womanish" self-esteem, feelings of amorous passion, and, in the case of Rami, the *niketche* dance of life and love, underlie the dismantling of a polygamous configuration based on adultery, concubinage, and patriarchal exploitation. Judging by the implied author's perspective, the tradition of polygamy appears to be vindicated, however, as a social and emotional source of sisterhood, family, and a means of sharing in Mozambique's evolving postcolonial condition in Africa and among the family of nations in the world beyond.

Internationalism and cultural globalization in the former colony are reflected in the language and style of Paulina Chiziane's story of polygamy and other reinvented traditional patterns. The derivation and symbolism of a number of the characters' names reflect aspects of cultural hybridity. Rami, which derives from an apocopated combination of Rosa Maria, two common European names, has an African ring to it, and thus captures a kind of redefined measure of the traditional. On the other hand, Tony, the sobriquet of António Tomás, is a recognizable Euro-American appellation that labels the womaniser whose promiscuity extends from trans-regional, national multi-ethnicity and mixed-race fixation to an international, inter-racial affair. Levy also stands out in the story as not being a traditional Mozambican or otherwise African name. Readers of the novel might assume that the name is of Biblical, specifically Old Testament or Hebrew Bible origin. In view of the fact that Levy is the brother who "inherits" Rami, his name is most likely

based on *levirato* (levirate), the equivalent of *kutchinga*, which, of course, refers to the practice of inheriting a wife.

The matter of characters' names leads to a consideration of the language question in Mozambique and language usage in Chiziane's literary expression. First, it should be noted that in interviews and other published statements, Paulina Chiziane makes some relevant observations on the language question in general as well as her literary expression (see Chabal and Laban). The author reveals that she grew up speaking Chope, a Bantu language of southern Mozambique, where she was born. When her Chope parents moved the family from their hometown of Manjacaze, in Gaza province, to the suburbs of Lourenço Marques (today, Maputo), Paulina Chiziane also learned to speak Ronga, a local language, and in grade school she began to acquire a spoken and written knowledge of Portuguese. In an interview, Chiziane insists, however, that despite her formal schooling she neither knows nor wants to know standard Portuguese (Laban 981). She also notes that she studied linguistics at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. After then telling the interviewer that she would like to be able to write in her first language, Chiziane admits that even if she could compose literary works in Chope and Ronga, it would not be practical to do so because of a relatively small number of prospective readers of works composed in any of Mozambique's indigenous languages.

To a certain extent, Chiziane displays the same ambivalence about language usage that she seems to feel with respect to traditional social practices such as polygamy. The following rather lengthy passage is worth quoting because it puts into context the stylistic hybridity, rhetorical devices, and simulated orality that dominate the language and style of her imaginative writing:

Para mim, a utilização da língua portuguesa na escrita é um grande dilema. Na própria *Balada* há uma série de termos que eu uso, que eu não sei se deviam ficar de uma maneira ou de outra. Por exemplo, quando se fala de amor: bem, em português, porque eu ouvi—os meus namorados, pelo menos—, diziam: “Eu amo-te”, enfim, com uma voz mais bonita ou menos bonita, mas é nesses termos. Na minha aldeia, a declaração de amor é diferente, é: “*Na kurandza, na kurandza, na kurandza,*” mil vezes [...]. Então, há uma frase que eu ponho ali: “Eu amo-te, amo-te, amo-te mil vezes amo-te.” Quer dizer, isso é, mais ou menos, uma tradução daquilo que o povo sente, daquilo que o povo diz. E, ao fim e ao cabo, está escrito em português mas não é português, não é nada, é uma coisa qualquer. (Laban 981-982)

The above-quoted passage also illustrates what Chiziane may be getting at in an earlier published interview in which she makes what might be construed as a somewhat surprising declaration of intent when at the end of her statement she poses an intriguing question:

Eu não quero escrever em português, não estou interessada em ser uma escritora de língua portuguesa. Estou interessada em ser uma escritora africana de expressão portuguesa. Ao querer ser uma escritora africana de expressão portuguesa eu tenho esses problemas, porque eu não consigo traduzir directamente as coisas como elas são para uma outra língua sem ser a minha. Tenho que recriar a língua, e neste processo de recriação muitos valores se perdem. Mas o que é que eu posso fazer?" (Chabal 300)

Some might argue that Chiziane and her fellow Mozambican authors are indeed Portuguese-language *African* writers. In fact, some Lusophone African writers and critics now reject the once commonly used label of African literature of Portuguese expression. Those who instead prefer African literature in Portuguese agree that the older label might convey a sense of "expressing" a Portuguese rather than an, Angolan, Cape Verdean, Guinean, Mozambican, or São Tomean perspective or ethos. In the context of Chiziane's afore-quoted statement, however, and in keeping with the ambivalence and poetic obliqueness that characterizes much of her prose fiction, her declaration of a recreated Portuguese expression, rather than the use of the Portuguese language, is indeed convincing. As to the question she poses about lost values, Chiziane's literary works, and particularly *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*, are perhaps themselves the answer to the question posed in the above-cited passage. Just as the reinvented traditional practices express refurbished values, so does the author's recreated Portuguese expression impart new aesthetic worth, with Mozambican, African, and universal meanings, to the novel.

*Niketche* abounds with imaginative examples of the use of indigenous words and phrases along with orality, trans-cultural hybridity, and rhetorical devices as evidence of the success of the author's attempts to recreate Portuguese expression. The novel is richly complex in theme and form and, simultaneously, its orality flows with an accessible comprehension for all readers of Portuguese expression. In conclusion, Paulina Chiziane, by virtue of *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia* and her three earlier novels, assumes a well-deserved place among such innovative storytellers of postcolonial Mozambique as Mia Couto, Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, and Lília Momplé.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Germano Almeida, the prolific and highly regarded contemporary Cape Verdean author of long works of prose fiction, also identifies himself as a storyteller and not a novelist. Likewise of interest with regard to writers of the Portuguese-speaking world, João Ubaldo Ribeiro, one of contemporary Brazil's foremost novelists, also prefers to think of himself as a storyteller. All three writers no doubt consider themselves griots, or the relevant equivalent, who seek to weave tales that are culturally uplifting and aesthetically appealing.

<sup>2</sup> Although the term "oral literature" is still widely used by humanists and social scientists, many scholars, including Africanists, consider it to be something of an oxymoron. Increasingly, "orature" is the preferred label for literature that simulates or is influenced by orality.

<sup>3</sup> See the interviews of Paulina Chiziane published in Patrick Chabal's *Vozes Moçambicanas* and Michel Laban's *Moçambique: Encontros com Escritores*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ventos do Apocalipse*, Chiziane's second novel, also published in Lisbon by Caminho, includes a glossary consisting of fifty-one indigenous language terms. Originally, it was published in Maputo at the author's own expense and with no glossary. Not surprisingly, the Caminho edition, primarily directed at non-Mozambican readers, does include a glossary of indigenous words with Portuguese equivalents and/or definitions.

<sup>5</sup> On a number of occasions Paulina Chiziane, a southerner, has stated that Zambesia, where she has lived and worked, inspired her to write *Niketche*.

<sup>6</sup> While not widespread and although the country's ruling party disapproves of it, polygamy persists in Mozambique. Historically, polygamy has been more common among Muslims, who comprise about 10 percent of the population and are mainly in the country's northern regions. In the recent past, a group of women from the Muslim community in the capital city of Maputo, located in southern Mozambique, expressed their opposition to polygamy, which a number of Muslim men have claimed should be sanctioned by law.

<sup>7</sup> In March of 2003, several US newspapers carried a review of *The Day I Will Never Forget*, a film documentary produced and directed by Kim Longinotto. Shot in Kenya, the film is about female circumcision, also known as genital excision, widely practiced in that southeast African country as well as elsewhere on the continent. As "An Unblinking Eye on a Searing Topic," the title of Elvis Mitchell's review states, the practice, commonly referred to as female genital mutilation, has come under increasing condemnation around the world, including by many women and men in the African countries where it persists as a rite of initiation.

<sup>8</sup> "Rights Group Calls for an End to Inheriting African Wives," an item written by Marc Lacey and published in a recent edition of the *New York Times*, reports that Human Rights Watch has condemned the traditional practice in some African societies of wife inheritance. This condemnation is based on the fact that the practice permits that the brother or other in-laws take possession or control of the deceased man's property and finances. The widow is thus often left destitute. Some would argue, however, that traditionally the sibling who "inherits" his brother's widow is obligated to provide for her as a wife and to raise her children as if they were his own. This traditionalist, familial perspective, along with the stated "sexual purification," clearly drives Rami's acceptance of Levi as her "inheritor," even though, ironically, she is aware that her husband is not dead.

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**Russell G. Hamilton** is Professor Emeritus of Lusophone African, Brazilian, and Portuguese Literatures at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. In 1978-79 he spent a sabbatical year in Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique. Over the ensuing decades he has had the opportunity to make frequent research trips in to all five Lusophone African countries, as well as Portugal and Brazil. The author of two books, *Voices from an Empire: A History of Afro-Portuguese Literature* and the two-volume *Literatura Africana, Literatura Necessária*, he also has published numerous chapters, articles, essays, and encyclopedia entries. One of several of his most recent articles is "Chronicling from the Center of the Periphery: *Estórias Contadas* by Germano Almeida," published in the recent issue of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* devoted to "Cape Verde: Language, Literature & Music."