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Sónia FRIAS, “Mulheres na esteira, homens na cadeira”? Mulheres, economia informal e mudança cultural: estudo realizado na cidade de Maputo

Lisbon, Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas, 2006, 456 p.

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- 1 Sónia Frias has written an interesting but uneven study of women in the informal markets of Maputo, Mozambique. She begins her book with lengthy chapters of background material on the anthropology of urbanization and underdevelopment, and on women in developing economies. She also spends many pages discussing the definition of the informal sector and providing a brief overview of recent Mozambican history, both sections markedly ungended in their presentation.
- 2 The second section, “A Cidade da Acácias,” opens with her personal observations of Maputo, colored by the expectations she brought from her childhood in Mozambique, from which she was absent from 1974 until 1998. She describes the city, the street children, and the restaurants, but with little or no reference to the many studies which might quantify the presence of boys on the street guarding cars and selling cigarettes.
- 3 Section 3, “Mulheres e Negócios,” finally introduces the central topic of her book, market women in Maputo, but it does not begin until page 189, about half way through the text. She does a creditable job of organizing that information. There are interesting descriptions of the various modes of vending – from carts (tchovas), stalls on the

sidewalk (bancas), and temporary spots marked by capulanas or mats (dumbanengues), as well as from front yards. Women, she claims, prefer to remain in their yard or close to home, while the mobile *tchovas* are more often staffed by male vendors.

- 4 I was confused by some of her assertions. She states that "In most African countries, women traditionally go door to door to sell the surplus products of their family garden" (p. 219). This claim ignores the vast literature on women's roles in markets, especially in West Africa where there is a long history of women's market organizations. She discusses the organization of vendors in Maputo, including the election of leaders, and the organization of rotating savings accounts but again without reference to the well-documented parallel histories of market women in other African countries. The study is most useful when presenting new information, for instance concerning the development of the organization of market vendors, Assotsi (*Associação dos Operadores e Trabalhadores do Sector Informal*).
- 5 The problem with Frias's unsystematic and anecdotal approach can be seen by looking at two brief sections. In the first she discusses the increasing numbers of male vendors (pp. 204-207). She begins by noting that the women she interviewed referred to the "students of the west" – men who had studied abroad and returned to Mozambique, only to find themselves without work and turning to street vending. She then reports on the numbers of men among demobilized soldiers and people returning from the exile and dispersion of the war with Renamo. But she never indicates with precision how many of these men are now found among the vendors, and there is no suggestion that she herself collected statistical material or did any kind of a count to see the ratio of male to female traders in the markets or on the streets. The section is tantalizing but frustrating, as it raises issues but does not provide the data to sustain her speculations about the demographics of the vendors.
- 6 In the second selection that illustrates the limitations of this book, Frias focuses on the lives of urban girls (pp. 326-327). She again provides some interesting but limited observations, for instance claiming that "today in Mozambique, no boys will court a girl who goes about shoeless and wearing a capulana", they are only interested in girls who have western clothing and wear shoes. This situation puts pressure on girls to spend money their families do not have in order to attract a potential husband. The need for an income is the reason for the increasing numbers of young girls who are found selling in the streets and markets. As Frias concludes, again with no data to support her comments, "From what we could observe, these women appear to marry later than most other women." While I believe that some of her conclusions are valid, they are not scholarly and persuasive.
- 7 The book is based on the oral testimony she collected, especially twenty-one life histories of women traders. Interspersed throughout the text are lengthy excerpts from the interviews and life stories she collected. At the back of the book are several pages of color photographs of the markets and vendors, which along with further illustrations in black and white throughout the book provide a useful visual context for understanding urban markets in Mozambique. These primary materials are valuable and give a real flavor of the lives of market women in Maputo.
- 8 While she relies in part for her analysis on publications by anthropologists and others concerning urban Africa, there are some very curious lacunae. She never mentions previous studies of urban women vendors in Maputo by Natalina Monteiro, Silvina Rodrigues de Abreu, Palmira Velasco, and Peter Little and Irae Baptista Lundin. She

does not seem to be aware of the important work done by fellow anthropologist Ana Loforte on women and community in Maputo. There is no reference to Jeanne Penvenne's work on the history of women and work in Maputo nor to my own publications on urban women in Mozambique, which also include information about women vendors. And her analysis would have greatly benefited if she had turned to some of the rich material on market women in other regions of Africa, including research on Ghana by Gracia Clark, Ghana and Kenya by Claire Robertson, Zimbabwe by Nancy Horn, and many other scholars.

- 9 The book is presented as a labor of love, written by a scholar who was happy to return to her childhood home and pursue research on an interesting group of women who live there. But the result is unfortunately limited by the gaps in her research. Because she does not incorporate the findings of earlier studies that might have provided a stronger context for understanding Mozambican market women, she misses some important points and in the end the book is disappointing.

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