

TALKING QUEER

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Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 6 – FACING MOMOMO: a conversation with Marilú Mapengo Namoda

In this episode, I talk to my dear friend Marilú Mapengo Namoda, a post-feminist activist, artist, and curator based in Maputo. In her art, Marilú seeks to break down the boundaries between the personal and the political, and to offer us an intimate understanding of Mozambique's socio-historical context. Among other things, today we chat about her trajectory in feminist activism, and her journey through several artistic projects, including her installation *Memórias de Uma Língua de Cão*.

Marilú, welcome to the podcast.

Thank you, Caio.

Let's start by talking about your trajectory. You were involved with the feminist movement in Mozambique for many years, until you eventually moved to the arts. How did this movement happen?

I don't know if the transition was necessarily from activism to the arts, or the other way around. The arts have always been part of me, as they are part of all of us. But society has a way of limiting us. And in my surroundings, the arts had always seemed like an impossibility. I think I found activism and feminism when I started to understand the absurdity of the world in which we live. It became very urgent to me to be able to contribute to change, to contribute to transformation. So, I started to work in activism. Now, I think I actually returned to the arts, when I realized that for me it was important, crucial even, to make art, as a matter of survival. Eventually, I had to find a way of making a living out of it, too. So, my trajectory has been a tangle of various processes, which revolve around a relationship with the arts that has existed since an early age, and, later on, the encounter with activism, which had become urgent. But, at some point, it also started to become problematic, in many ways. So, I returned to the arts to find myself, to continue to exist.

When you say that activism started to become problematic, what do you mean exactly? I am interested to hear more about that moment of departure, when you decided to move away from it.

I think, over time, activism became a limiting space, where I couldn't express myself fully. It is also true that this is not only due to the activist sector itself, but also to the country's own political trajectory. In the last few years, there has been a lot more state control over political expression in Mozambique, and that has had an impact in the feminist movement. When I joined, around 2009 or 2010, our mobilization as feminists was much more dynamic. Going out to the streets was much more common. And this act of going to the streets had always been crucial to my understanding of what it means to be a feminist activist. Using my body to express indignation about the *status quo* has always been very important to me. But over time, it became much more difficult to occupy the streets, to protest, to use one's body. In addition to this, I also started seeing problems in feminism itself, in activism itself, in the ways it was structured. And then the arts became more necessary to me.

Although you have distanced yourself from activism, your art continues to carry a strong political perspective. Would you say your art is activist?

I don't necessarily see the arts as an alternative form of protest. One of the fundamental things when you are an activist is to plan actions with the expectation of impacting society, of driving change. When I embraced the arts, I established a relationship that is not activist in nature. Meaning that I don't make art with the expectation of transforming something, but to transform myself, to heal myself, to access myself. My personal process with the arts is not based on this angle of trying to transform someone else or my surroundings. If people connect with what I'm doing, and if my work changes something, that would be wonderful. But that's not my initial intention.

Still talking about your incursion into the arts, you have described yourself as "self-taught". I am interested in hearing more about your learning process.

I don't know if the word "learn" in this context is very suitable because when we talk about learning, we are automatically referring to our thought-processes, to thinking with the mind, with our brain. And, for me, it was more of a process of allowing myself to feel, and express myself, and start to believe that this form of expression can be considered art in this world. I didn't follow a structured process. It was about healing; it was about accessing other forms of expression. I think the issue of feeling was very important. Feeling, believing, and realizing the potential of the arts to heal myself.

This emphasis on feeling and healing seems to suggest that the body is central to your work, as an instrument, but also as a theme. And it also points to an interest in issues of intimacy, in breaking down barriers between the personal and the political. Where do these concerns come from?

I think this is an experience I carried from the feminist movement: this necessity to look at the personal, the micro-reality, the intimate, and connect it with what is going on around us. I think one of the reasons I fell in love with feminism was precisely because it allowed me to make those connections. And I bring this to my work, too, this desire to understand how it all connects. So, for me, it became necessary to talk about the body, talk about the intimate, to understand broader processes. To make us understand how much of what we call politics, it's

actually everything that's on our table, it's everything that's in contact with our body, it's everything that concerns us. That's where my interest in the body, in intimacy, comes from.

I would now like to talk about specific projects. First, the installation *Suicídio Colectivo*, from 2015, in which you address the issue of beauty standards and self-image, particularly in relation to black women's bodies. For instance, you mention the experience of growing up playing with a white doll. I'm interested in hearing more about this work. Was it also a healing process?

Yes, I think this is one of the works that has healed me the most. Being born into a body that is considered to be of a woman implies a toxic relationship with one's physical appearance. There is a priority placed on beauty, on how important it is for a woman to be beautiful. And I was affected by that during my childhood, during my youth. In my surroundings, there was always this demand for being beautiful. But what was never discussed was how this pursuit of beauty was unattainable and racist. The white doll comes from this racist ideal, from the white body as an ideal of beauty. We grow up thinking of the "beautiful" and the "ugly" as very objective notions, as fixed or rigid concepts. There is no space in our society to question why something is considered to be beautiful or ugly. So, I had a lot of complexes about my appearance growing up. Going back to those childhood memories, going back to all those beauty rituals, and realizing that they were constructed, that our whole history manifests itself in these beauty standards, was very important to me, so that I could face all those monsters. It was a healing process, for sure.

Still relating to the issue of the body and the feminine, in your short film *Águas de Março*, from 2019, you address the stigma surrounding menstrual flow, as a metaphor to speak about the violence that female bodies, and nature itself, face. Why did you want to focus on this relationship?

Águas de Março also afforded me a lot of healing. This work is about seeing the body as an extension of nature, or seeing the body as nature. If we realize that we have a problematic relationship with our bodies, then we can see a mirror image: what happens to our bodies is what happens to our relationship with nature, and vice versa. So, we live in a world that kills the feminine. Femicide exists. The disgust with menstrual blood, a blood that is sacred, that is natural, only makes clear that we have a problem with the origin of life, with nature itself. Our problem is with Mother-Earth, also considering the unbridled exploitation of natural resources. This stigma surrounding menstrual blood mirrors the relationship we have with our bodies, with nature. It's a cycle. It's such a deep relationship. What the environment is experiencing right now, with natural disasters, climate change, and all this attack that nature is suffering, is the same attack that women's bodies, and that the feminine itself, are also suffering.

Still in 2019, in your installation *Memórias de Uma Língua de Cão*, you set out to explore your relationship with your mother tongue, *Chuabo*. How did this topic come about?

Memórias de Uma Língua de Cão had several entry points. My contact with the body was one of them. One of my methods of working with the body is to do a "scan", so to speak, which is an attentive and millimetric examination of my own body. In one of these exercises, when I got to my mouth, to my tongue, I accessed a childhood memory, in which my grandmother forbade me to speak *chuabo*. From that point, I became interested in exploring how this interdict was built collectively, how it came about in our historical process. This culminated in

this work, through which I could realize that colonialism is still very present in our relationship with our mother tongues, with writing, with language itself. I have also realized that there are infinite forms of expression beyond speech and writing, and that I am ancestrally connected to them. They are not limited to writing, with the Roman alphabet, which I find very limiting. Accessing this childhood memory allowed me to deconstruct what language is, deconstruct what writing is. So, now I'm in a very personal, very deep, process of exploring other hybrid ways of writing, of communicating, of exploring language.

I think we can say that in your artistic practice you are keen to face and problematize this tangle between capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. Where does sexuality come into this picture? Is that an issue that interests you, too?

For sure. Something interesting about this is that I'm conceptualizing a term to speak about this tangle between capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, which is *momomo*. Because I think that it can become overly complex to think of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism separately, given that in reality they are all together, and they are just one thing. So, I am trying to make the intimate relationship between these three monsters more evident, and more translatable to our own forms of expression. And I chose the word *momomo* for that reason. Because *momomo* is the Mozambican word to refer to monsters. For instance, when we talk to children, we can say something like: "go to bed early, otherwise momomo will show up". That is exactly what I mean: these three systems together – capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism – are monsters. Like all monsters, they scare us. Going back to your question about sexuality, these three systems, this *momomo*, scare us, and confine us to boxes, to being just one thing. In this case, to heterosexuality, cis-heterosexuality. I think the LGBTIQ movement has been trying to show that we don't all fit in one box, that there are infinite ways to express and feel sexuality. But *momomo* scares us into thinking that we need to confine ourselves to a single way of expressing and feeling sexuality, of living sexuality. And that single form feeds back into the same patriarchal, colonialist and capitalist system.

Fantastic, Marilú. What a thought-provoking chat! I want to thank you for joining us in the podcast.

I thank you for the invitation. Really, from the heart.