

**Dancing National Identity:
Idio Chichava's Work and The History of Contemporary Dance in
Mozambique¹**

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Abstract

This article examines contemporary dance in Mozambique as a critical arena for negotiating national identity, tracing how the dancing body has been shaped by, and continues to respond to, the country's socio-political history. It situates the emergence of contemporary Mozambican dance within the post-independence socialist project, when state institutions such as the Companhia Nacional de Canto e Dança mobilised dance as an instrument of national unity and ideological consolidation. The article argues that this institutionalisation produced both a powerful nationalist aesthetic and a set of tensions that later fuelled artistic rupture, experimentation, and individual agency. Through an analysis of the work of choreographer Idio Chichava, it explores how contemporary Mozambican dance engages with these legacies, interrogating colonial inheritances, collectivist ideals, and the pressures of national and international gazes. Chichava's practice foregrounds Mozambican embodied voices and positions the performing body as a site of reflection, critique, and re-imagination. Rather than treating contemporary Mozambican dance as a fixed genre, the article emphasises the socio-political conditions that shaped its formation and continue to animate its evolution. It argues that contemporary dance in Mozambique

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0161.apr0221>

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Adriana Jamisse

remains a vital cultural and political practice through which artists question, negotiate, and reconfigure the meaning of national identity.



Photo by Mariano Silva featuring Idio Chichava in *O Último Berro: corpo em estado de emergência* (2020)

Introduction

The figure of the contemporary dancer, especially in the context of how this genre has emerged and evolved in Mozambique, is a rich and layered focal point for examining notions of collective identity such as nationality and national unity. In this article, I explore the pivotal role of dance in fostering a sense of national unity in Mozambique, while also considering the contemporary dancer as a catalyst for critical reflection on notions of national identity, its colonial legacies, and the individual's role within a collectivist society. I situate contemporary Mozambican dance within the country's socio-political history and examine how dance has functioned both as a tool for nation-building and as a space for resistance, questioning, and reconfiguration of identity (Pinto, 2015; Montoya, 2016; Soromenho, 2013).

Central to this discussion is the work of Mozambican artist-choreographer Idio Chichava, one of the most recognised and influential figures in contemporary dance in Mozambique today. The ideas that drive Chichava's work influenced the structure of this article and catalysed a broader discussion about the development and recognition of contemporary Mozambican dance. Through his practice, the living echoes of the political ideals of "national unity" become apparent. These

ideals were actively disseminated by the Mozambican government in the early post-independence period of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, when it adopted a socialist political stance. As Maria Helena Pinto notes, the state-sanctioned institutionalisation of dance adopted a “nationalist model” (2015: 18), making dance a “means of national unification” and a unique “political instrument of [the] idea of a single [Mozambican] nation” (2015: 117). Attempting to write about any genre of dance, especially one such as contemporary dance, is often a trap of succumbing to imaginary borders that invent limits and thresholds between one genre and another. This endeavour is as random, or as Mozambican choreographer Augusto Cuvilas would say, “pretentious” (Douglas et al., 2006: 109), as defining the borders of African nations according to colonial views of the land. The definition and label of contemporary dance as specifically “African” is contested and problematised even among African dance-artists themselves (Douglas et al., 2006). When the discussion moves within the imaginary territory of contemporary African dance, or in the case of this article, contemporary Mozambican dance, it risks falling into the precipice of reductionism, essentialism, and generalisation. This precipice is problematic, as it homogenises a dance genre that is incredibly diverse and reduces the many different and complex ideas behind its expression to a single perspective.

Therefore, instead of attempting to strictly define the genre of contemporary Mozambican dance, this article grapples with the Mozambican socio-political context from which concert dance, broadly speaking, and contemporary dance, more specifically, have emerged. The echoes of this context still resound today and, as this article demonstrates, have become significant influences within the artistic ideas proposed by Chichava. Such ideas highlight the relevant political role of dance – specifically contemporary dance – in resisting, questioning, and grappling with notions of national and cultural identity, as well as with the role of the dance-artist in Mozambican society. Chichava’s work references a web of voices in contemporary Mozambican dance that locate the performing body in this specific geopolitical place, while negotiating the gaze imposed by national and international forces. As such, this article is an investment in centralising Mozambican embodied voices in the discussion of dance in and from Mozambique.

Due to language barriers or the limited number of Mozambican dance scholars, there is little scholarship available from and about dance in Mozambique, especially when it comes to contemporary dance as a genre, and even more so in English. As a Mozambican artist-researcher myself, I encountered many difficulties in accessing the existing scholarship on contemporary Mozambican dance. Most of what I have access to is due to personal experience and contact with Mozambican artists themselves, as well as my knowledge of some of the dance scholars in the country, due to my experience growing up and training in Mozambique. My early dance training made me aware of the big names of the field and familiar with the legacy of dance-artists such as Maria Helena Pinto,

Panaíbra Canda, Augusto Cuvilas, Virgílio Sitole, among many others, who have pioneered contemporary dance in the country. I have also had the opportunity to witness and support the development of Aaron Montoya's fieldwork, which culminated in his PhD thesis on "dance and resistance in twenty-first century Mozambique" (2016), one of the very few available research works on the subject in English. Maria Helena Pinto is the only Mozambican doctoral-level researcher who has published specifically on contemporary dance in Mozambique (Pinto, 2015), and my access to her work was facilitated by personal contact and my fluency in Portuguese.

The work of these artists and scholars informs the theoretical basis and linguistic choices of this article. They are combined with insights from a personal interview with Idio Chichava and with my own understanding and experience as a Mozambican dance-artist and researcher. My choice of words and prioritisation of references seek to ground the written discussion in the geopolitics of Southern Africa, emphasising the socio-political tone of the local discourse. As the guide of this written discussion of contemporary Mozambican dance, I deploy historical portrayal, dialogical analysis, and mobilising recognition, to paint as complex an understanding of the subject as possible within the confines of this article.

In what follows, I use several terms that require early clarification, both to situate my interpretive stance as interviewer and to establish the conceptual terrain of the discussion. I use plurality to describe the layered multiplicity that shapes contemporary dance practice, encompassing diverse training lineages, cultural origins, temporal frameworks, and choreographic visions. I draw on Sara Ahmed's notion of cultural estrangement to describe the affective and epistemic dislocations that occur when artists navigate unfamiliar cultural, institutional, or aesthetic environments. I also adopt the term *corpo global* to refer to the body shaped by transnational circulation, hybrid pedagogies, and globalised artistic economies. These concepts provide the analytical scaffolding for the interview and guide my reading of the choreographic strategies that emerge.

As interviewer, I rely on these concepts to frame the artists' reflections and to draw out the tensions between local training histories and globalised performance circuits.

By engaging with the history of dance in Mozambique, one inevitably references the role of dance-artists in challenging existing views, aesthetics, and purposes of dance in Mozambican society. When dance-artists began questioning their individual role in dance production, it marked a significant rupture with "the mode of production of choreographic shows (...) omnipresent until [the mid 90s]" (Pinto, 2015: 18). It gave rise to a new wave of dance in Mozambique (Pinto, 2015: 17), what we now recognise as contemporary Mozambican dance. As a result of such rupture, artists in the contemporary Mozambican dance scene, such as Idio Chichava, continuously grapple with and question the role of the artist-

Dancing National Identity

choreographer in Mozambique. At the forefront of Chichava's work is an active engagement of the body as a space for reflection, activation, and expression of place within its cultural and socio-political context. He questions the "cultural origins of (...) movement" (EVC, 2022) through a body that transpires the socio-political space it inhabits (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview), making his work an expression of Mozambican society through an individual lens. As he states, "we are negotiators at all times", questioning our culture and confronting our individual experiences of living in society (EVC, 2022).

Based on the ideas Chichava shared during our interview, this article is structured around three important qualities of his artistic approach: (1) Genealogy and Ethnology, a preoccupation with the trajectories of Mozambican dance practice; (2) Plurality, the relevance of plural visions of dance as essential to the choreographic process; and (3) Corpo Global (global body), the performing body and its modes of expression, being, and communication. Each of these qualities guides the discussion and is analysed through two specific works by Chichava, namely *O Último Berro: corpo em estado de emergência* (2020) and *Vagabundus* (2021). Through a historical overview of dance in Mozambique, followed by three sections that reference Chichava's choreographic approach, the article explores the inherent links between the current dance scene and the groundwork established during Mozambique's post-independence socialist era. It highlights the history of dance in Mozambique and recognises the significant role that Chichava plays in the development of contemporary Mozambican dance today.

Historical Context of Mozambican Dance Practice



Photo from *O Pais* (2020) featuring the CNCI.

- **CNCD and the Central Role of Dance in Mozambique (1970s - 1980s)**

"In Maputo, you will find people singing and dancing on every street corner."

– Idio Chichava (2025, personal interview)

With this statement, Chichava references the cultural reality of the capital city of Mozambique. He echoes other Mozambican authors, in the recognition of the central role of dance as a thread weaved into the cultural fabric of Mozambique and as a *"leitmotiv in [its] social construction"* (Sitole, 2016: p. 60). In relation to choreography, this central role of dance is irrevocable when looking at the Mozambican dance scene through the work and legacy of the *Companhia Nacional de Canto e Dança (CNCD)*³. Choreographic works by the CNCD become a "form of historical writing" enacted through bodies (Castaldi, 2006: p. 2), that trace the history of the country and the development of an artistic identity spearheaded by the dance-artists working with the CNCD at the time. Since its inception in 1979 and for the following three decades, the CNCD and the choreographic works it produced reflect a newly independent nation and its first challenges in affirming its autonomy and identity.

Mozambique shared with Senegal and other African nations, a state-sanctioned campaign to institutionalise dance through the creation of a national company that would "construct, represent and preserve the cultural patrimony of the nation" (Castaldi, 2006: p. 2). Shortly after Mozambique's independence in 1975, the newly formed government founded the CNCD, and soon after other artistic institutions such as the National School of Dance or *Escola Nacional de Dança (END)*, the National School of Visual Arts or *Escola Nacional de Artes Visuais (ENAV)*, and the National School of Music or *Escola Nacional de Musica (ENM)*. When it comes to the overall mandate, these institutions were charged with the mission to "gather, preserve, value and disseminate through the theatricalization of popular culture (...) in the domains of dance, music and song, theatre and associated activities" (Soromenho, 2013: p. 18). This mission was accompanied by the task of civic education in thematics such as public health, environmental preservation, and "to convey the messages of nationalism, Marxist Leninist socialism and modernization" (Montoya, 2016: p. 45).

³ See their Facebook page here:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61589992721991>

Dancing National Identity

The CNCD's choreographic works and their parallel with the socio-political times have been discussed in depth by researchers and practitioners of the Mozambican dance field (see Sitole, 2016; Montoya, 2016; Pinto, 2015; Soromenho, 2013). Relevant to this paper are three main cultural influences that formed the CNCD, namely: (1) exchange between company members and population from rural villages; (2) the international choreographic principles transmitted through the training by Russian, Cuban and other international dance teachers; and (3) the military dance culture developed by the freedom fighters who moved to the capital city with their families after independence (Montoya, 2016: pp. 46-47). Military dance culture is a rarely addressed seminal component of the CNCD and the Mozambican dance culture we experience today.

FRELIMO was a nationalist movement that led the fight for Mozambique's self-determination and independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Its name stands for *Frente De Libertação De Moçambique*, or the Liberation Front of Mozambique. In post-independence, it became the democratic socialist ruling party of the country, and has remained in power until today, despite its political shift towards more neoliberal and capitalist ideals. During the fight for independence, *FRELIMO* liberated zones in the north of the country and created military encampments in Tanzania where training, leisure, and education of their freedom fighters occurred. Within these encampments, the practice of exchange and assimilation of different dance and music cultures emerged. Their integration into a mode of collective physical and cultural training was geared towards the vision of a united independent country. As a result, the military dance culture tended to be "pan ethnic, pan African, and cosmopolitan" (Montoya, 2016:48). Once the country reached its independence, the military dance culture opened a direct pathway for the creation of institutions of Arts and Culture – such as the CNCD – led by the same practitioners that led the cultural exchanges within the military encampments. This continuity between the freedom fighters and the state-funded dance institutions not only secured the transmission of dance in a manner that integrated cultural differences, but it also guaranteed the imbuing of commitments to national unity into the transmitted dance practices (Montoya, 2016: p. 45). This overarching sense of militancy, alongside cultural exchange and assimilation, is embedded in Mozambican dance practice and culture, and still resonates in today's approach to dance training (I elaborate on this in the section on plurality).

- **Unintended consequences of dancing the nationalist agenda (1990s - 2000s)**

The CNCD soon became known as the "ambassador of Mozambican culture" (Pinto, 2015: p. 51), both nationally and internationally, in response to foreign influences, as the "nation seeks to affirm its cultural [and political] identity"

(Pinto, 2015: p. 18). The imposing role that foreign and international powers have in both the training and professionalisation of dance-artists in Mozambique, is historically evident from the beginning of the theatricalization of dance in the country. It is a legacy felt to this day, which imbues and implicates from very early on, the influence of an outside gaze in the development and creation of Mozambican choreographic works. For this reason, I echo Portuguese dance scholar Sofia Soromenho, in recognising a certain irony as it is “paradoxical to its foundational mythology” that the very quest to preserve and assert a national cultural identity, is what simultaneously introduced western artistic concepts in the performance of dance in Mozambique, and the African continent (Soromenho, 2013: p. 17). This illustrates that the discrepancies in national governance and the challenges it faced post-independence, were consequentially replicated and manifested in dance spaces.

Through his engagement with Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani’s “citizens and subjects”, Montoya argues that, on the one hand, the social and spatial hierarchical segregation established in the times of the Portuguese colonial regime in Mozambique prevailed and reflected through the divides between dance training spaces, dance genres and who practiced and/or had access to which (2016). Pinto echoes this argument, by acknowledging “a differentiation between dancer-choreographers from *END* and others (...) with a less institutionalised trajectory” (Pinto, 2015: p. 88). These differences were further exacerbated from the 1990’s onwards, when other cultural community groups emerged (such as the *Milorho*, *Xindiro*, and the *Caminhos de Ferro* groups) and began to rise, as a result of the expansion of the government’s educational agenda and propaganda towards schools and neighbourhoods through the arts and culture (Sitole, 2016: pp. 44-53; Pinto, 2015: p. 78). Although these groups were a means for dissemination of the nationalist agenda and other state-sanctioned topics, they ended up instigating a political positioning of artists with a less institutionalised background in response to the hierarchical nature between state-funded dance institutions and community dance groups. The latter began to view dance and artistic expression as “a service to the people and not the elites” (Sitole, 2016: p. 135), and this in many ways marked the beginning of a turning point in the Mozambican dance scene, where dance-artists began to question and invest in their individual role and political identity.

Simultaneous to the growing differentiation between institutions and peri-urban dance spaces, and between the roles of the dance forms these produced, was the establishment of dance as “an aesthetic and political form” (Montoya, 2016: p. 3) that created “intermediary spaces” at the boundaries between socio-political and spatial divisions (Montoya, 2016: p. 39). The continual exchange between *CNCD* members - who represented institutionalised dance practices - and the rural,

Dancing National Identity

urban, and peri-urban dance community groups - who represented the less-institutionalised dance practices - opened dialogue spaces between artists from both backgrounds. This dialogue went beyond the dissemination of political ideals of national identity, towards the creation of channels through which artists could interact, innovate, and engage with their own practice and artistic preoccupations. *CNCD*, their artistic reach, and supporting institutions, “transformed the social imaginary and embodied practices that dissolved the urban-rural and interethnic divides” (Montoya, 2016: p. 81). This artistic exchange through the “fusion of local dance techniques”, which was deeply influenced by the encounter between popular/traditional Mozambican dance forms with theatrical performing arts techniques (Pinto, 2015: p. 92), also created space for a collective (re)imagination and innovation of identity.

- **The restricting nature of the nationalist agenda for artistic expression**

As the new millennium approached and influenced by the aftermath of the civil war between *FRELIMO* and the Mozambican National Resistance party or *Resistência Nacional de Moçambique* (*RENAMO*) - which ended in 1992 - the nationalist agenda began encountering a level of resistance within dance spaces. The pressure to prioritise a sense of nationalism in the thematics and aesthetics of dance productions, restricted artistic manifestations that were, at the time, gradually outgrowing the illusion of a static collective identity to be preserved at all costs. The government’s perspective of neotraditional dance forms of this era soon became an idealist entrapment that limited their function and purpose to pure entertainment and the continuous revival of symbols of nationalism, which served, often exclusively, the political goals of *FRELIMO* as the country’s ruling party (Montoya, 2016: pp. 92-93).

Beyond the sixteen years of civil war, during which the *CNCD* remained active both locally and internationally, historically, the pathways for the professionalisation of Mozambican dance-artists have been quite limited. The development of one’s career in dance depended not only on whether the training was institutionalised, but also on which dance forms the artist or group was trained and performed in. Groups dedicated to traditional dances were often preoccupied with their preservation, which enabled them to access funding and performance opportunities. Sitole mentions that within the community cultural groups, “transforming or adapting the [Mozambican] dances was avoided” (Pinto, 2015: p. 81). Professional dance institutions and groups could be separated into two categories: heritage preservation (traditional and popular/urban dances) and nationalist representation (*bailados* or Mozambican ballets with mixed influences but a unified political message to national and international audiences). Challenging either of these categories would be discouraged and, at times, repressed, due to the government’s push towards national unity as well as due to

how funding and resources were available through governmental channels and/or local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) invested in cultural heritage preservation and international relations.

According to Mozambican artist-choreographer Panaíbra Canda, “there was not much space for creatives to think new ideas, new ways of interpreting the moment which [they lived]” (EVC, 2022a). Thus, once the *CNCD* was established nationally and internationally as a renowned Mozambican artistic and cultural institution, it inadvertently became a space of artistic autonomy and innovation, due to its access to resources and the governmental support it had harnessed throughout the years. Notably, a series of works from the early 2000s period began to manifest the artistic desire of some *CNCD* members to move “towards a new path of aesthetic and artistic expression” (Pinto, 2015: p. 137). Artists such as Maria Helena Pinto and Augusto Cuvilas, who were graduates of the National School of Dance (*END*), had access to scholarships to continue their studies abroad in Cuba and France, which was encouraged by the governmental alliances and their investment in the training of artists for their Arts and Culture institutions. These training programmes provided Pinto and Cuvilas with technical skills to continue the theatricalization of dance, while reinforcing certain hierarchies between dance institutions and dance genres. But training abroad also exposed Pinto and Cuvilas to critical and conceptual awareness outside of the framework of the national *bailados*. As they returned from their training abroad, they integrated into the *CNCD* as artist-choreographers and artistic directors. They spearheaded many *CNCD* works that deviated from its previous choreographic models and began questioning the role of the Mozambican dance-artist in Mozambican society. This new wave of artistic expression introduced the idea of the dancer as an artist of their times and laid the foundations from which emerged a new school of thought in the Mozambican dance scene.

- **New paths for professionalisation in dance in Mozambique (2000s - present)**

In 1998, outside of the *CNCD*, Panaíbra Canda founded *CulturArte* as a space for artists and companies to explore independently, new artistic languages through choreographic creation (Pinto, 2015: p. 324). *CulturArte*’s mission was to create more artistic possibilities locally, focusing on the training, creation, and dissemination of new choreographic languages. This independent institution trained many of the internationally recognised Mozambican artist-choreographers, among whom is Ídio Chichava. It pioneered the pathway for the emergence of other local independent projects such as *Projecto-Cuvilas* (2003) by Augusto Cuvilas, and *Centro de Pesquisa Coreográfica* (2004) by Maria Helena Pinto, which echoed Canda’s intention of creating alternative spaces for artistic and

Dancing National Identity

choreographic research. In this new era, “the headliners are no longer the groups or companies but the authors, the creators, the artists” (Pinto, 2015: p. 124). Therefore, paving the way for the emergence and development of what is locally recognised as contemporary Mozambican dance.

This period of experimentation began to offer a different pathway to the professionalisation of dance-artists in Mozambique, under the umbrella of contemporary dance. With the death of the country’s first president Samora Machel in the late eighties and the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in the early nineties – two crucial forces of Mozambique’s political stance and alliances as a socialist nation - the national socialist regime gradually gave way to a post-socialist neoliberal regime. The dance scene was once again becoming contemporaneous and influenced by the socio-political climate. This manifested not only through the artistic desire for change mentioned earlier, but through the increasing commercialisation of dance and the gradual withdrawal of the state as a patron of the country’s arts and culture institutions. Dance artists, groups, and institutions increasingly relied on international funding bodies and the local service economy. Locally, this led to the socio-economic devaluing of the dance profession, in which.

[I]acking institutional support, Mozambican dancers have turned to the only two avenues for patronage: dancing gigs in the service economy and international donor agencies. Both avenues have created a split between contemporary and traditional dance genres that evoke meanings about citizens and subjects in the new era. (Montoya, 2016: p. 222).

Highly dictated by donor agencies - such as local NGOs and/or diplomatic organisations such as the French Institute - these split manifested foreign priorities, where contemporary dance projects were classified as supportive of civil society, and traditional dance projects were classified as supportive of cultural heritage (Montoya, 2016: p. 100). This consequently renovated the colonial hierarchical social divides along urban-rural, settler-indigenous, modern-traditional, citizen-subject lines. In short, this meant that there was a hierarchy of dance institutions, dance genres, and professional career pathways that echoed the Portuguese colonial ideas of what is considered art, who is considered a professional, and where should renowned artistic institutions be located. But contemporary dance also became a channel through which dance-artists who were not trained in state-funded institutions could expand their professional opportunities beyond the preservation of cultural heritage. Traditional dances became a source from which contemporary dance-artists could draw from to express a sense of identity and communicate with Mozambican society. Even though there was a socio-economic hierarchy between contemporary and

traditional dance artists and groups, there was simultaneously a third space in-between created by the alternative projects, where artistic innovation, exchange, and research could happen.

As part of the repercussions of having foreign organisations as patrons of the arts, the local dance industry became increasingly precarious, and artist-choreographers began orienting themselves towards international circuits (Pinto, 2015: p. 251). Although this further embedded an international gaze in the fabric of contemporary Mozambican dance, it also exposed Mozambican artists to other artistic approaches from the African continent and diaspora. Festivals and exchange programmes between Mozambican artists and artists from Madagascar, Reunion Island, South Africa, Portugal, among others, began shaping a critical positioning and encouraging Mozambican dance-artists to adopt and invest in an artistic attitude. This attitude was fomented by a continuous and dynamic dialogue between the local, the African and the international perspectives and approaches to dance practice. In relation to traditional and neotraditional dance forms, Mozambican dance-artists began grappling with the ramified dilemmas that include the question of whether to “transform without amputating or [to] amputate in order to transform” (Sitole, 2016: p. 73), working with the tension and the possibilities even from within traditional and neotraditional dance spaces. The new professional path in contemporary dance pushed artists to confront themselves and to question not only the cultural identity within their work, but also the role of the artist-choreographer within Mozambican society. This questioning, alongside the challenges of professionalisation, formed the colliding forces that fuelled the development of a contemporary dance scene in Mozambique.

1. *Ethnography: Chichava's Preoccupation with the Trajectories of Dance Practice*



Photo by Mauro Vombe of *Vagabundus* 2021

It is from within this socio-political environment that Idio Chichava accesses dance training and begins to develop his artistic practice. Chichava's dance trajectory began through Mozambican traditional dance practice in the early 2000s, branching out into contemporary dance through exchange programmes and workshops offered by visiting international teachers as well as local contemporary dance practitioners. In 2005, he began a pivotal collaboration with French choreographer Frank Micheletti and the French company Kubilai Khan Investigations, "a partnership that led him to work between Africa and Europe for almost two decades (2005–2023), investigating the presence of the dancer and creation in alternative spaces" (Chichava, 2025 – artist bio from personal interview). Chichava comes from a diverse generation of Mozambican dance-artists who were directly mentored by the pioneers of contemporary dance in Mozambique. Most of these pioneers were, in turn, a product of the work by previous *CNCD* members, whether within the company or through its branches in neighbourhood groups. This generation was preoccupied with questions of cultural identity, which were significantly shaped by the nationalist mission towards self-determination and cultural preservation.

Chichava researches and questions the "cultural origins of individual movement" (EVC, 2022), and this often manifests in a citational art practice that places Mozambican traditional dances as its main resourceful foundation. This can be

seen in the way Chichava uses recognisable Mozambican cultural symbols in a lot of his works, such as traditional attire, rhythms, and songs from traditional and popular dances, as well as dance vocabulary from traditional and urban dances, some of which I will elaborate on later. But beyond nationalism, this preoccupation with “cultural origin” echoes a broader socio-political landscape of African pride, solidarity, and self-determination. It echoes the way that many African artists and activists during post-independence valued “being engaged in compiling and consolidating intergenerational wisdom and knowledge” (Phalafala, 2024: p. 83). This influence in Chichava’s approach can be tied not only to Mozambique’s socialist era, and more broadly to the growing political awareness of African artists because of the contemporary African renaissance period; but also, to the direct influence of his training with Panaibra Canda at *CulturArte*. The training at *CulturArte* was one of the most influential times of Chichava’s training in Mozambique (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). Canda has a deep interest in the history of Mozambique and Pan Africanist ideals pioneered by African visionaries such as former Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah and first Mozambican president Samora Machel, among others (EVC, 2022a). Therefore, Chichava has inherited the political influences of his colleagues and mentors, who in many ways were shaped by the ideas disseminated during Mozambique’s post-independence socialist period. The ethnological aspect of his preoccupation comes from the recognition of plurality in the training of most Mozambican dancers, as well as Chichava’s career with the French dance company which functioned based on international and intercultural collaboration (EVC, 2022). With such prevalence of exchange and collaboration, Chichava takes an activist position of prioritising the local, which includes respecting lineages and schools of thought that have developed locally in Mozambique - echoing once again a nationalist stance in the way that he asserts his artistic voice in his career in dance and choreography.

In the interview with me, Chichava clearly pinpointed two schools or lineages of contemporary Mozambican dance. On the one side, there was the lineage that has its main roots in the *CNCD*, which includes Mozambican artists Maria Helena Pinto and Augusto Cuvilas. Their lineage had an overt Western posture when it comes to choreography and the verticality of dancing bodies, emphasising the lines of the movements, and the compilation of set movement phrases in their choreographic approach. Chichava has mentioned his experience learning from Cuvilas at the beginning of his career, and a constant revisiting of some of the provocations Cuvilas proposed to him during choreographic processes. One of them being about the ways that the body transpires the space it inhabits, and that cultural identity could be entrusted to the body’s presence and expression, and not something to be imposed onto the visual aesthetic of the movement. Even with these provocations, Chichava characterised Cuvilas and Pinto’s lineage of

Dancing National Identity

contemporary dance to be highly influenced by their training abroad which manifested in the aesthetic focus on the lines of movements and choreography. On the other side, there was the contemporary dance lineage that emerged from Canda's *CulturArte*, which had a significant influence from dance groups of traditional, popular, and urban dances, as well as a diverse range of dance-artists that visited and promoted exchange programmes in the space. There, according to Chichava, the approach tends to prioritise emotion, interiority, and individual expression in the composition of choreographic works (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). It focuses on the dancing body's capacity for expression and interaction with the surrounding environment in the present moment. And relies less on the composition of set movement phrases and their visual aesthetic. This lineage has influenced Chichava's investment in an aesthetic and performativity that converges different modes of expression, incorporating fashion, visual arts, cinema, song, theatre, and live art elements as mediums to expand the capacity for expression of the dancing body. Chichava's work leans heavily into the lineage of *CulturArte* contemporary dance choreography, and acknowledges choreographic creation as a process of self-discovery, self-determination, and expression within a diverse context of cultural origins and influences.

For Chichava, choreographic creation is simultaneously a pedagogical process that trains the body and the expression of the dance-artist (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). Aligning this view of the choreographic process with the preoccupation with the ethnology of dance practice, for a choreographic work to become pedagogical, its creative process has to engage deeply and critically with citational practices. Such practices seek to acknowledge not only the lineages of training, but also the socio-political histories present in the body and in its formative context. Through them, artists can build clear intentionality in the movement and a performance quality of embodied presence that honours their plurality. They position the dance-artist in active and simultaneous conversation with their own histories and socio-political contexts, through its insistence on recognising and exploring the plural origins and influences of movement. This process becomes an educational process for artists engaged in choreographic creation in a manner that accommodates differences in training backgrounds and experiences.

The citational practice makes use of these differences and encourages community exchanges and a collective practice of cultural referencing. This process echoes similarities with how the CNCD invested in the exchange with rural communities as a crucial part of their creative processes and as essential in the development of cultural signifiers that enabled messages to be communicated effectively through performance. This integration of community, social context and cultural referencing in the choreographic process is simultaneously a pedagogical endeavour towards self-knowledge and determination. It not only trains the

dance-artists themselves but also audiences in their process of witnessing the new dance works, acknowledging the public/audience as active agents in such processes and as potential artists for future choreographic works. I combine the terms public and audience to highlight how contemporary Mozambican dance, and specifically Chichava's work are often performed outside of conventional spaces of presentation as well as within theatres, and thus the relationship with the audience is complicated by and conflated with the public sphere, where audience-performer theatrical protocols do not always apply. This is a shared approach among many Mozambican artist-choreographers, which recognises choreography as an "activist creation procedure" (Pinto, 2015:109) that contributes to growth and longevity in the professional dance field.

2. *Plurality: Plural Visions and Cultural Estrangement in Choreographic Processes*



Photo by Mariano Silva of *O Último Berro* (2020)

- **CNCD's approach to dance training and composition (1980s - late 1990s)**

This dimension of plurality, introduced earlier, becomes visible in the creative processes developed by the CNCD. The company approached the construction of most of its *bailados* through a cyclical method of research and exchange. The company members would do research in villages in rural areas of the country, performing some of their company repertoire, and then exchanging dance and music vocabularies with the local community members from those villages. The

Dancing National Identity

creative process then continued as the company returned to the studio, incorporating the vocabularies learnt from the rural communities into more theatrical structures and concert dance aesthetic principles. These were structures and principles that some company members had learnt either through education programs they attended in the Soviet Union (USSR), or through training offered by visiting international teachers, which reflected the government's political alliances in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The result of these creative processes was a theatricalization of traditional and popular Mozambican dances, adapted to the stage with dramaturgical elements quite similar to how classical ballets were structured. This included the use of soloists or main characters, a story or narrative divided into three or four acts, a chorus of dancers or corps de ballet, and the use of music and gesture to convey storytelling, among other elements.

The *CNCD's bailados* trained the following generations of dance-artists who then applied a similar approach in the many community arts and culture groups that emerged in the 1990s. Over the years, the *CNCD* and community groups often adopted dance training routines that were incredibly diverse and integrative of different influences. These were often created through the assimilation and convergence of movement vocabularies from: the ethnically specialised routines learnt in the military encampments that were then transmitted by senior *CNCD* members; the traditional and popular dances acquired through the company's exchanges with rural communities from across the country; and the ballet, jazz, and modern dance classes offered by visiting international dance teachers; as well as the cumulative movement repertoire from each *bailado* the company produced. The legacy of this approach to dance training and composition is still present in dance training spaces today. I was able to experience this approach during my time training at the *CNCD* junior programme in 2009, where I attended structured classes that prepared dancers for the company's diverse choreographic processes. These classes signal towards a kind of Mozambican dance technique that is comprised of all the different influences that the company members were exposed to over the years, while centring Mozambican dance rhythms and movement aesthetics. This is an approach and dance culture that acknowledges the plural lineages, schools and influences that contribute to the training of professional dance-artists in Mozambique. And it is the principal channel that allows dance-artists to access quality training to this day.

● **Temporality within Mozambican Contemporary Dance**

When tracing the emergence of contemporary dance in Mozambique, the tensions between the state-sanctioned political agendas imposed on artistic production and the artist-choreographers' desire to affirm their artistic identity, become apparent. Contemporary dance in Mozambique is characterised by action and a constant state of becoming, that is plural, diverse, and deeply entangled with temporality. As mentioned in the introduction section, the boundaries of contemporary dance as a genre are fluid, if at all existent. And when echoing the perspectives of the

artists and researchers quoted in this paper, one realises that the ‘contemporary’ in ‘contemporary dance’ refers to a temporal aspect and a shift in the positioning of the artist in relation to existing dance forms and/or how they politicise the body. It refers to these aspects, more so than it refers to a territorial demarcation of a dance genre.

Attempting to verbally articulate what their contemporary dance practice is, artist-choreographers from the African continent often centralise a “re-structuring of (...) indigenous African dance” bringing it into a different framework through researching “new body languages” (Liadi in Douglas, et al, 2006: p. 105). African artist-choreographers such as Faustin Linyekula, Augusto Cuvilas, Zab Maboungou, Adedayo Liadi, among others, resonate with the artistic “interest not in preserving traditions of the past, but in using those traditions to reflect on the present in unique ways” (Maboungou in Templeton, 2017: p. 48). Thus, contemporaneity in dance, according to these African artists, is tied to the notion of time and newness. This also echoes Mozambican dance-artists’ understandings of contemporaneity (Pinto, 2015: p. 114). Here, the priority is the ability to reflect the present moment through the embodied languages and knowledges of the dance-artist. The question of asserting a cultural identity, can be understood as a concern with manifesting an embodied presence that is honest and authentic to the “know-hows” of the dance-artist in a given cultural context (EVC, 2022); a preoccupation with cultural origins and influences; and the omnipresence of the socio-political forces that led to the emergence of contemporary dance forms in the first place.

Pinto defines three dimensions of the Mozambican contemporary dancer, as: (1) plural training influences; (2) institutional impositions; and (3) a relationship to the international (Pinto, 2015: p. 109). These three dimensions, according to Pinto, shape the attitude and artistic expression of every contemporary Mozambican dance-artist, and are constantly engaged through choreographic practice and creation. They allow the artist-choreographer to critically experiment with their own body and reflect to society their subjective perspective and artistic voice. Through choreography, the three dimensions of the contemporary dancer become an integrated artistic expression of their relationship to cultural memory and socio-political forces that inform the present moment.

- **Questions of Identity and Estrangement in Contemporary Mozambican Dance**

Contemporary dance can be generally and locally characterised by dialogical creative processes, that are open to all bodily movements and employ new technique and technologies for performance (Montoya, 2016: p. 92). What African artist-choreographers usually claim to distinguish them from their peers in other continents, is often their diverse citational practice through choreographic

creation, and their assertion of traditional African dance practices as the creative point of departure and/or return for their artistic enquiries. In their relationship with the international, it is common for African artist-choreographers to confront an ingrained and internalised Western gaze in both the local and international contexts where they share their work (EVC, 2022a). This gaze, in the context of Mozambique, is deeply rooted in the consistent presence of foreign influences in the training of Mozambican dance-artists, the inevitable dependence on international funding bodies, as well as the continuous practice of national representation for international audiences. This Western gaze has continuously raised questions of identity for artist-choreographers including Canda and Chichava. In an interview with *Estúdios Victor Cordon*, Canda shares that he created works like “Os Solos da Marrabenta” (2016) - one of his most well-known choreographic works - to engage with the identity conflict that the reception of his work raised for him as an artist. Canda expresses that “locally there was a strangeness of [his] work which was seen as Western, and internationally there was also a strangeness [that questioned] where was the Mozambique in [his] work” (EVC, 2022a). The cultural estrangement inherent to contemporary dance, leads their choreographic works to be received by the public as westernized or foreign. While internationally, the ingrained desire for distancing the West from Africa, leads their choreographic works to be received with scepticism and/or disengagement. This forces African artists to relentlessly grapple with and converge their artistic identity, their national identity, and even their African identity, as a necessary, and often inescapable, political statement within their artistic work. Thus, for African contemporary artist-choreographers, the question of cultural identity is a constant place of negotiation and grappling regardless of the subject-matter of their works.

- **The Relevance of the Present Moment for Chichava’s Contemporary Dance**

Beyond this tension between the local and the international, for Mozambican and fellow African contemporary dance-artists, contemporaneity is understood and emphasised through the temporal, historical, and sociological notion of a present moment. The temporality of the present moment is manipulable when it comes to body-based performance. It becomes something for artists to engage with, resist, stretch, bend, and/or dissolve, actively and creatively. In the case of Mozambican dance-artists, they make use of technologies from traditional dances as dramaturgical tools for choreographic creation. Their work often disrupts linear conceptions of time, simultaneously mapping Pinto’s three dimensions of the dance-artist, while making visible their experience of self within society. This manipulation of space-time highlights the potential of contemporary dance in Africa to reinterpret and transform history through choreographic creation. In contemporary Mozambican choreography, newness arises not just from a wish to innovate, but from an innovation grounded in the dancers’ embodied plurality.

This plurality is in relation to Pinto's dimensions of the contemporary dance-artist, while encompassing plurality within notions of time, culture, and identity.

Through the present moment, one finds the intentional experimentation with time through the performance of repetition based on traditional dance aesthetics and pedagogies. In our interview, Chichava mentioned that in many of the Mozambican traditional dances there are repetitive cycles that build a sense of circularity of time. In his work *Vagabundus*, Chichava uses repetition in the dramaturgical cyclical quality of day and nights, brought up by the combination of several individual journeys that constantly create the collective world. In the moments where the group of dancers perform in unison, Chichava makes use of movement and song repetition that seems to bend the notion of time and create space for the public/audience's subjectivities to infiltrate the overall affective journey of the choreography. Chichava shared that this was inspired by Mozambican traditional dances, which through repetition, provide the conditions for the body to access "different dimensions" in which the dancer is simultaneously fully present and elsewhere (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). Repetition thus evokes a circular continuity within which past, present, and future enfold into each other, bending, stretching, and disrupting linear notions of time. This conception of time, according to South African author Uhuru Phalafala is intricately connected to the cyclic movement of the land and cosmic bodies (e.g. sun and moon) and is often "informed by an animist conception of reality attributed to indigenous resource base from southern Africa" (Phalafala, 2020: p. 47). Within the context of dance practice, this understanding suggests that the present moment is an embodied exploration of time (past, present, and future) through the individual and collective movement of the dancing body within the performance encounter. It is this conception of time that highlights contemporary African dance-artists' commitment to indigenous epistemologies, in their continuous recourse to traditional African dances.

● The Relevance of Plurality in Chichava's Choreographic Processes

In our interview, Chichava spoke about respecting the schools that produce Mozambican dance-artists. These schools are incredibly diverse and hybrid. They involve a wide range of local and international artist-choreographers who through workshops, short courses, exchange programs, institutional visits, festivals, transmit their individual values and aesthetic, and consistently train the Mozambican dance-artists of today. The CNCD legacy, the urban and peri-urban community dance groups, the visiting international teachers, the international dance festivals abroad (i.e. Danse l'Afrique Danse, Dance Umbrella, etc.), and pioneering local contemporary dance projects (i.e. *CulturArte*, *Projecto-Cuvilas*, *Centro de Criação Fotográfica*, *Festival de Dança Contemporânea*, *Plataforma Kinani*,

Dancing National Identity

etc.), create a plural and diverse dance training environment that is imbedded into the bodies and artistic choices of Mozambican artists. This is what Sitole calls an embodied “eclectic pluralism of experiences” (Sitole, 2016: p. 131) that negotiates the local and the international. It produces a kind of “universal localism” (Sitole, 2016: p. 133) that allows dance-artists to engage with each other locally and experiment with movement languages that speak to local and international contexts. This ability to work with and within plurality through dance practice, can be traced down to the pre-CNCD military encampments in Tanzania, in which a pan ethnic, pan-African, and cosmopolitan attitude towards both creation and transmission of skills was cultivated and encouraged. Chichava’s concept of the *corpo global* - which I will engage with next - also seeks to embody and welcome that plurality, and to highlighting the dialogical nature of the choreographic process. The dialogue happens between dancers and public/audiences, but also when dance-artists with different visions of dance encounter one another and create an in-between space or a “no man’s land” where the choreographic creation and experimentation occur.

3. *Corpo Global: The Performing Body and an Integrative Approach to Dance Practice*



Photo by Mauro Vombe Vagabundus 2021

“Corpo Global or Global Body - a body that breathes, sings, dances and thinks in total presence”.

- Idio Chichava (artist bio from personal interview, 2025)

Having defined *corpo global* as the body shaped by transnational circulation and hybrid pedagogies, I turn now to the ways in which this concept illuminates Chichava's pedagogical and choreographic concerns. For him, *corpo global* is one of the most relevant foundations for a dance pedagogy grounded in Mozambican artistic practice. His focus lies in training and engaging the body in its plurality of expression, cultivating openness, readiness, and responsiveness in performers. The *corpo global* emerges from Chichava's analysis of how Mozambican dancers are trained: it acknowledges the long-standing practices of exchange and cultural assimilation that shaped the CNCD, and recognises that dance encompasses moving, singing, breathing, speaking, thinking, and a wide range of expressive modalities that exceed the sequencing of physical steps.

In *Vagabundus*, dance and soundscape are inseparable, generated entirely from within the dancers' bodies. This quality appears across several contemporary Mozambican choreographies and echoes traditional Mozambican dances, where dancers continually sound as they move, producing what Pinto describes as a "global melody" that evokes "a sensation that the movement never stops" (2015: 67). As Chichava asserts, "only the body that dances and sings at the same time can fully express itself and exist in synergy with others" (OneDanceWeek, 2024). Such an approach expands the borders of what qualifies as dance within Western theatre contexts and aligns with African onto-epistemologies in which dance is understood as "a form of orality in which rhythm mediates between music, speech, and dance" (Castaldi, 2006: 4).

Chichava's *corpo global* extends beyond embodied plurality, plasticity, and orality towards a relational engagement with self, space, and others characterised by an investment in "total presence" (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). This presence is not confined to the dancer's physical body; it encompasses how performers inhabit temporality and space through performance. Dancing becomes a medium through which bodies articulate and negotiate identity, role, and impact within a given socio-political environment, investing in the present moment as a fluid, responsive form of cultural citation shaped by both audience and historical context.

- **The Central Role of the Public/Audience in Performance**



Photo by Mariano Silva at *Mugangueni*

The investment in the *corpo global*, also speaks to how Chichava perceives the role of the public/audience in performance. The presence that Chichava seeks to cultivate in performance, enables dancers to remain responsive to each other and the public/audience at every given moment. In both *Vagabundus* (2022) and *O Último Berro* (2020), there are common dramaturgical threads with CNCD's *bailados*. These threads involve composing the work in a way that evokes a sense of narrative, built through sections, or acts that mimic daily life cycles, where there is a morning, an afternoon, and a night. These are cycles that retain their overall structure even if repeated and juxtaposed within the sequence of the work. When commenting on this, Chichava, highlighted that this was an intentional choice to create points of access for the public/audience. These cycles build familiarity through a sense of story "where people can identify themselves" in it before the choreography "takes them somewhere else" (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). The familiarity of the public/audience is in many ways the product of the education and training of audiences done by the CNCD. Mozambican society has become familiar with witnessing theatricalised dance that follows a narrative of a daily cycle. This can be seen in the CNCD's most well-known *bailados* such as *Em Moçambique o Sol Nasceu* (1985), *N'tsay* (1986), *Amatodos* (1998), and many others, where the audience is invited into the story through the portrayal of daily life routines familiar to Mozambican culture.

When speaking about his 2020 dance film, Chichava noted that he thought of relatable childhood games, and built them into the choreography, especially in the transitions between different city locations in order to "smoothen the subject matter a bit" so that the public/audience can remain engaged (Chichava, 2025 –

personal interview). Further into this relationship with the public/audience, both works are positioned to respond, incorporate, and adapt to the public/audience. In *Vagabundus*, “the beginning and end of the performance are open as the audience enters and leaves the hall” inviting “the viewer to find their global body again” (OneDanceWeek, 2024). And in *O Último Berro*, Chichava intersects, interacts, and engages with several people in the streets of Maputo as he dances between sites. Additionally, through the medium of film, Chichava leaves images and spoken/written words that seem to address the viewer directly and implicating their position in the work. This relationship with the public/audience, implicates them in the artistic manifestation and creation, and opens a continual dialogue between dance-artists and their public/audiences. The dramaturgical tools when combined with the affectivity of the *corpo global* also signal towards a mission of educating audiences and, in consequence, of growing a following. This is where the pedagogical aspect ingrained in the *corpo global* and the overall choreographic approach, highlights a commitment to the public/audience, as the target for their future training and creative projects (Pinto, 2015: p. 252).

- **Rebellious *molwenes* and the figure of the contemporary dancer**



Photo by Mauro Vombe of *Vagabundus* 2021

Chichava’s choreographic work *Vagabundus*, - often translated as “wanderers” (Aefestival, 2025) - was first conceptualised and performed in Maputo, Mozambique in 2021, as part of the Kinani Contemporary dance Festival. The work has been touring several countries since then and is conceived as a “Made in Moz” production, comprised of a team of exclusively Mozambican members from performers to dramaturgs, and from costume design to producers. *Vagabundus* features thirteen Black dancers, of which five are women and eight are men, who perform on a stage that is mostly bare. This contemporary choreographic work is also inspired by a dance ritual of the *Makonde* people from the north of Mozambique. The dance *Mapiko*, as I was taught at *END*, is a dance ritual of the *Makonde* people that is associated with male initiation ceremonies. *Mapiko* is commonly known to feature an unrecognisable masked dancer (*Mapiko* dancer)

Dancing National Identity

that through his movements leads an ensemble of drums and the witnessing community members through an expression of storytelling, social critique, or spiritual insight. The dance is part of a ritual known to have a degree of secrecy that allows the masked dancer to navigate different plains of existence, to critique powerful leaders, and to transmit an otherworldly quality in his movements. *Vagabundus* engages with this ability to navigate and move between different plains of existence, as well as with the quality of social critique in its exploration of migrant bodies as it “shows migration through the prism of the body” (OneDanceWeek, 2025). The bodies performing *Vagabundus*, are in constant motion – dancing, singing, and breathing audibly and rhythmically – taking themselves and the audience, through a “growing progression of dances imbued with origin, heritage and identity” (ibid). Chichava explores migration as the physical navigation of geopolitical places, invoking images and experiences of both the history of migration of Mozambicans to work in the mines in the neighbouring country of South Africa; and the current military insurgency and humanitarian crisis that has forcibly displaced thousands of people of Cabo Delgado in the north of Mozambique. But in *Vagabundus*, Chichava also engages an embodied sense of migration, in its exploration of the different stages that the body goes through and expresses in life, as well as how it changes through training and movement (Drouère, 2024).

The title of this work suggests a statement about the performing body of the contemporary Mozambican dancer and clearly reflects the genre’s socio-cultural estrangement. Through the vagabonds, or “rebellious *molwenes*” – as former CNCND artistic director David Abílio called them – dancing bodies wander through a “no man’s land” of pluralities and incite the “heart’s demands for freedom” (Abílio, 2024). These bodies reflect the space and the space activates them, in a dance of involution, memory, presence, and resilience through the affectivity of dance. “In the harsh space that denied them,” the bodies and movements of the wanderers “were transformed by their ability to take in the different suns and moons, smells and tastes of each ground they walked on” (Abílio, 2024). Abílio’s reflection of the journey of the *vagabundus*, highlights the active and activating power of space, which can be read more politically as an embodied exploration of place, be it a certain neighbourhood, region, culture or even a nation. It also expresses their wandering as a practice of resistance or responsiveness, by framing them as rebellious.

The term *molwenes* is used especially in Maputo, capital city of Mozambique, and is associated with homelessness, dirtiness, and a marginalised existence. The term is also often used to denote people with bad and disruptive behaviour. Going a little deeper, *molwenes* also carries colonial notions of the “uncivilised” and those without manners. Interestingly, in the early 2000s with the devaluing of the profession of the dance-artists, they were often viewed by society, specifically the

urban middle class, as marginal to societal norms. Those who are marginal to society, are often perceived as uncivilised, disruptive, and rebellious for simply existing and wandering through communal spaces. The figure of the contemporary artist and of the *molwene* become intertwined in *Vagabundus*, portraying a politicised body that expresses a cultural estrangement of being simultaneously from a space and “denied” by it. The sense of cultural estrangement evoked by Chichava’s *Vagabundus*, more than a quality it is a process “of becoming estranged from that which was inhabited as home” (Ahmed, 1999: p. 343). It expresses a continuous process of becoming through the movement of bodies from one place to another, from one register to another, much like a wandering migration that is simultaneously spatial, affective, and introspective.

In *Vagabundus*, Chichava clarifies and makes use of the technical training and movement language shared among cast, and that is rooted in Mozambican traditional, urban, and popular song and dance cultures. These help establish the cultural cohesion of the group. He inverses the ingrained collectivist mentality of these dance modes, transforming it with a critical and individual confrontation with each dancer’s own cultural identity (EVC, 2022). The group moves from cohesion to individuation creating periods of relatability followed by estrangement. The use of day and night cycles is present in each dancer’s individual sequence. Each dancer has a starting point and characteristics of their identity such as a song, a gestural, spoken text in a particular language, and in the 2022 version of the work, each dancer had specific props. These elements offered an access point for relatability of the public/audience, but as the performance proceeded the individual characteristics would often merge into the group which engaged in coordinated song, dance, and breath combinations. These would then be broken as one of the dancers would separate from the group resurfacing a sense of individual identity. This process happens throughout the work creating the sense of constant movement and relentless process of merging and individuating. One other strong feature of this work that cultivated its specific affective quality, is the long repetitive singing sections in which the bodies would go through multiple changes in movement posture and quality while repeating the same melody or song again. As an audience member witnessing these sections, there was a sensation of temporal vacuum in which one is pulled into the cyclical nature of the performance, while the space and time seems to expand and allow for one’s own awareness to become somehow distorted. Through bodies that move physically, aurally, and energetically, the journeys of the *Vagabundus* divide, gather, and intersect, which offers a point of access for the bodies of the audience to affectively join in the emotional and kinesthetic oscillations between estrangement and relatability.

Dancing National Identity

The reference to the Makonde people of Mozambique, carries a specific geopolitical baggage, when addressing migration. Since 2017, populations of rural areas of the northern Cabo Delgado province, have been forcibly dislocated and displaced en masse fleeing from an armed insurgency (Ntaka, 2023: p. 23). This mass migration has triggered a growing humanitarian crisis, with dozens of deaths and almost a million displaced (Koen, 2022: p. 190). Yet, in most of my time in the capital city of Maputo in the south, this reality rarely crosses minds, or appears in media and daily lives. As someone who grew up in Maputo, there is a degree of detachment from the north of the country, that in several instances also manifested in an outright prejudice against and/or problematic stereotypical views of the people from the north. Apart from the often-romanticised cultural image of the Makonde people, and the learning/exposure to their dance cultures within dance groups, institutions, and performances, many *Maputenses*⁴ who have no familial connection to the north, are rarely exposed to the reality of the people there.

This romanticised image of the *Makonde* people is a product of Mozambique's early post-independence period that honoured them for their role in the fight for independence, with Cabo Delgado forming part of the first liberated zones (Montoya, 2016: p. 8). Upon independence, and ingrained in the nationalist narrative, the Makonde people were one of the few ethnic groups glorified by *FRELIMO*, some of whom relocated to Maputo and formed part of important cultural groups and neighbourhoods that transmitted and disseminated the military dance culture that influenced *CNCD*'s success (Montoya, 2016). But with the civil war, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the death of Machel and the shift towards a neoliberal regime, this crucial role of the *Makonde* has, to a certain degree, faded from society's consciousness, and images of Cabo Delgado as a rural, poor, and desolate place tend to now dominate. Thus, I argue that there is a degree of estrangement and distancing between the north and south peoples, that not only reference urban-rural divides but simultaneously, as elaborated by Montoya, echo civilised-primitive, national-ethnic, modern-traditional, citizen-subject divides as the inheritance of the country's colonial, socialist and post-socialist eras (Montoya, 2016).

⁴ People from Maputo.

- Chichava's White *Mapiko* and the subversion of 'national unity'



Photo by Maria Silva of *O Último Berro* (2020)

In 2020, Chichava collaborated with Mozambican filmmaker Ivan Barros, and other Mozambican artists⁵ to create a Dance film entitled “O Último Berro: corpo em estado de emergência” that premiered at the Mozambican *Festival Gala Gala*⁶. The initial idea for this work was to create a photography series that would place a *Mapiko* dancer within iconic and identifiable urban and peri-urban sites of Maputo city (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). *Mapiko* is “a set of beliefs celebrated through a ceremonial dance” (Sitole, 2016: p. 62), so the term *Mapiko* is often used to refer either the dance, its soloist dancer, and/or the elaborate mask worn by him. It forms part of the dance repertoire performed and disseminated by the *CNCD* and is integrated in the curriculum of traditional Mozambican dances at the National Dance School (*END*). As a result, the dance expanded its

⁵ Among them Lenna Bahule (Musician), Filimone Meigos (writer). To watch the work and credits, access: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oW-UOzNxgxw&list=RDoW-UOzNxgxw&start_radio=1&t=1010s

⁶ “[A] multidisciplinary festival that brings together the colours, rhythms and movements of the arts of Mozambique to the world and contributes to positioning Maputo as a creative city” (16neto, n.d.).

original cultural purposes and was often used as a means of social commentary and political sensibilisation (Bussotti and Nhauleque, 2022:1 p. 61).

According to Chichava, behind this dance film was the idea of visually bringing the souls of Palma – a town in Cabo Delgado that came under siege in 2017 (Koen, 2022: p. 190) – into the spatial and architectural day-to-day reality of Maputo city (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). In the film, Chichava is wearing a white *Mapiko* mask, while navigating many recognizable areas of Maputo and interacting with people and objects that he comes in contact. The *Mapiko* mask is presented in white, and without the clothing attire that traditionally accompanies it. Instead, the mask is worn with common daily attire and, through the choreography, is placed in direct conversation with other objects and symbols such as a boxing glove, a respirator mask, plastic buckets, among other things. The movement language performed by Chichava, is a manifestation of Pinto's three dimensions as a contemporary dancer, while incorporating in his technical influences a gestural language of quotidian life and frequently returning to an ordinary physical posture. This offers a unique and personal performance that expresses an individual sentiment while transpiring the society that he is a part of. The colour choice for the *Mapiko* mask is also unique, as it is rarely (if ever) made in white, traditionally. In making this culturally recognisable symbol white, Chichava subverts the nationalist connotations of its image and alludes to the Portuguese colonial legacy of the country. It makes visible the segregative culture of Mozambican society that replicates colonial hierarchies that privileged some (citizens) and oppresses others (subjects) (Montoya, 2016).

The white *Mapiko* denounces the post-independence government as complicit in the perpetuation of colonial oppression, but more importantly, it evokes a questioning of the position of Mozambicans – *Maputenses* in particular – in relation to it. The symbol of *Mapiko* becomes estranged both by being inserted into a space that denies it, and by being presented with new elements (in movement, colour, and attire) that evoke a reflection of the current times and questions its accepted meanings. By capitalising on the dance cultures from the *Makonde* people of the north, while converging them with cultures and symbols from the urban and peri-urban south, Chichava forces the memory, reality, and history of Cabo Delgado back into society's consciousness. He uses choreography and dance languages to make apparent the discrepancies in romanticised narratives of nationalism, and to question the individual relation to the collective. Though this approach can allude to a sense of fusion reminiscent of the 'national unity' ideal, the manner in which Chichava presents this narrative subverts it through critical, technical, aesthetical, and political engagement.

Chichava works with traditional Mozambican dances as the foundation for his explorations of migrant bodies, locating them aesthetically and conceptually

within the local geopolitics. The journey becomes simultaneously personal and collective, in the quest to “reflect dance today” (EVC, 2022). In this way, Chichava’s choreographic reliance on traditional Mozambican dances to reflect on current social events/reality, expresses and highlights a contemporaneity in dance artistry that is grounded in the Mozambican context while resonating global politics. This approach references the theatricalised dance practice of the *CNCD*, but instrumentalises it to demand reflection and critical engagement. Chichava’s work is a manifesto of a contemporary dance, articulated through the ways that Mozambican contemporary dance-artists explore a sense of cultural estrangement and the plurality of their training, their performing body, and their subjective experience. Such estrangement becomes their mechanism to find their own artistic identity and resist the status quo.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory traced in this article shows that contemporary Mozambican dance emerges from a dense web of political, cultural, and institutional forces. From the early post-independence period, when the *CNCD* and other state-funded institutions were charged with “gather[ing], preserv[ing], valu[ing] and disseminat[ing]” popular culture (Soromenho, 2013: 18), dance was mobilised as a “means of national unification” and a “political instrument of [the] idea of a single [Mozambican] nation” (Pinto, 2015: 18, 117). The military dance culture developed within FRELIMO’s liberation encampments, the exchanges between rural communities and urban institutions, and the influence of international teachers all contributed to a choreographic language that was at once pan-ethnic, pan-African, and cosmopolitan (Montoya, 2016: 46–48). Yet, as Montoya and Pinto have shown, these same structures reproduced hierarchies and exclusions that echoed colonial spatial and social divisions (Montoya, 2016; Pinto, 2015).

As the socialist project gave way to a post-socialist neoliberal regime, and as the state gradually withdrew from its role as patron of the arts, dance-artists increasingly turned to international donor agencies and the service economy for support (Montoya, 2016: 222). This shift created new tensions between traditional and contemporary dance genres, between institutionalised and community-based practices, and between heritage preservation and artistic innovation. Artists such as Maria Helena Pinto, Augusto Cuvilas, and Panaíbra Canda responded by carving out independent spaces—CulturArte, Projecto-Cuvilas, Centro de Pesquisa Choreográfica—in which new choreographic languages could be explored. In this new era, “the headliners are no longer the groups or companies but the authors, the creators, the artists” (Pinto, 2015: 124), and it is within this landscape that contemporary Mozambican dance, as discussed here, takes shape.

Dancing National Identity

Within this broader field, Idio Chichava's work stands out as a significant force. His choreographic practice engages critically with the genealogies of Mozambican dance, interrogating the "cultural origins of (...) movement" (EVC, 2022) and the socio-political space the body inhabits (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). Through his emphasis on plurality, he foregrounds the multiplicity of influences—local, regional, and global—that constitute contemporary Mozambican identity. His concept of the *corpo global* articulates a body that carries the traces of its socio-political environment while navigating transnational artistic circuits. In works such as *O Último Berro* and *Vagabundus*, Chichava's dancing body "expresses a negotiation between the social and the individual, between the traditional and the modern, and between the local and the global", embodying the tensions and possibilities of Mozambican society today.

This article has argued that contemporary dance in Mozambique is not merely an artistic genre but a critical cultural practice that continues to interrogate the meaning of national identity. It offers a space in which dancers and choreographers can confront the legacies of the socialist project, negotiate the demands of global visibility, and articulate new forms of belonging and self-understanding. By centralising Mozambican embodied voices and situating Chichava's work within the historical and socio-political context of the country, the article has sought to show how contemporary dance functions as a "progressive pathway for innovating Mozambican identity" through an engagement with the country's dancing bodies (Montoya, 2016: 80).

Rather than presenting contemporary Mozambican dance as a homogeneous or bounded genre, the discussion has emphasised its plurality, its genealogical depth, and its critical engagement with both national and international gazes. This suggests that contemporary dance in Mozambique remains a vital political and cultural practice, one that questions and reconfigures national identity and opens up spaces for collective reflection and individual expression.



Photo by Mariano Silva of *Vagabundus*

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Dancing National Identity

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