

**Dancing National Identity:
A discussion of Idio Chichava's work and the history of contemporary
dance in Mozambique¹**

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Introduction

This article is a discussion of relevant aspects of contemporary dance in Mozambique through the approach of Mozambican artist-choreographer Idio Chichava, and how it invokes the broader historical and socio-political context from which this artistic genre emerged. Chichava is one of the most recognised and influential Mozambican artist-choreographers of contemporary dance in Mozambique. The ideas that drive Chichava's work influenced the structure of this article and catalysed a broader discussion of contemporary Mozambican dance. It is through this discussion, that the living echoes of the political ideals of 'national unity' become apparent. These ideals were disseminated by the Mozambican government in the early post-independence period, where the government adopted a socialist political stance. Through dance, nationalism became a deeply embedded ideal in the psyche of Mozambican artists. The state-sanctioned institutionalisation of dance adopted a "nationalist model" (Pinto,

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2015:18), making dance a “means of national unification” and a unique “political instrument of [the] idea of a single [Mozambican] nation” (Pinto, 2015: 117).

This article highlights a common language and/or understanding among artists and scholars of dance in Mozambique. But instead of attempting to strictly define the genre of contemporary Mozambican dance, it 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 contemporary dance in resisting, questioning and grappling with notions of a national and cultural identity. 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. Nevertheless, this article aims to centralise Mozambican voices in its discussion of dance in and from Mozambique, drawing on research and ideas by Mozambican artists-researchers as well as from other relevant scholarship from and about the African continent.

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). Therefore, when the discussion moves within the imaginary territory of contemporary African dance, or in the case of this article, contemporary Mozambican dance, it becomes almost inescapable that it will fall into the precipice of reductionism, essentialism and generalisation. To counter this tendency, and where relevant, I will invoke the

direct first-person by way of invoking my own identity as a Mozambican woman. My choice of words and prioritization of references will seek to ground the written discussion in the geopolitics of Southern Africa from which it was written, emphasizing the socio-political tone of the local discourse. As the guide of this written discussion of contemporary Mozambican dance, I will engage with history, dialogical analysis and mobilising recognition.

Specifically, I invoke my identity of a Mozambican woman dance-artist, by way of acknowledging the role that people with this identity have played in the emergence of contemporary dance in Mozambique. Even though the most visible bodies in the contemporary dance scene in Mozambique as well as in this article are of Mozambican men artist-choreographers such as Idio Chichava, their work is a direct product of the presence of Mozambican women (their bodies, their artistry, their social role and what they represent) within the emergence and development of contemporary dance in the country. Authors such as Mozambican artist-choreographer and researcher Maria Helena Pinto (2015) and United States anthropologist Aaron Montoya (2016) have, through their research, thoroughly demonstrated the inherent link between the emergence of contemporary dance and the role of the Mozambican 'woman' contemporary dancer. The scope of this article does not permit an in-depth engagement with this nuance. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasise that by engaging contemporary Mozambican dance, one is inevitably referencing the influential presence of Mozambican women dance-artists in the Mozambican dance scene. How it has marked a significant point of rupture with "the mode of production of choreographic shows (...) omnipresent until [the mid-90s]" (Pinto, 2015: 18) and given rise to a new wave of dance in Mozambique (Pinto, 2015: 17).

From the early 2000s, there is a strong emergence of choreographic works by Mozambican women artists, including Gigliola Zacara, Janeth Mulapha, Edna Jaime, Katia Manjate, Neidy Jorge and Maria Helena Pinto, to name just a few (Pinto, 2015: 118). Their artistic voice and presence were felt not only in the role of artist-choreographers, but also through their significant contributions to the

creative processes and performance of works by male Mozambican choreographers. Arguably, the most central to the development of contemporary Mozambican dance – according to Pinto (2015) and Montoya (2016) – is the work entitled ‘Um Solo para Cinco’ (2003) by Augusto Cuvilas. Pinto, a Mozambican woman artist-choreographer, along with Augusto Cuvilas and Mozambican artist-choreographer Panaíbra Canda, form a trio of the most influential artists that catalysed the rupture and transformation of the dance scene in Mozambique in the late 90s and early 2000s. Through their work, they have created identifiable schools of thought, lineages and/or practical principles of contemporary dance, which remain to this day, points of reference for other Mozambican contemporary dance artists, including Idio Chichava (Chichava, 2025 - personal interview; Sitole, 2016). Additionally, Pinto is to this day, the first and only doctorate-level dance scholar in the country. She is one of the pioneers and founders of performing arts programs in the higher education sector (OPais, 2023) and of the first Contemporary Dance Festival in the country (EVC, 2022a). This is just one example of the undeniable presence and influence of Mozambican women in the structuring and development of a contemporary dance scene in Mozambique.

As a result of such influences, artists in the contemporary Mozambican dance scene, such as Idio Chichava, continuously grapple with and question the role of the artist-choreographer in Mozambique. At the forefront of Chichava’s work there is an active engagement of the body as a space for reflection, activation and expression of place within its cultural and socio-political context. Chichava questions the “cultural origins of (...) movement” (EVC, 2022) through a body that transpires the socio-political space it inhabits (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). Chichava’s dancing body interacting with a given space and the people in it expresses a negotiation between the social and the individual, between the traditional and the modern, and between the local and the global. It is through dance, Chichava states, that “we are negotiators at all times”, questioning our culture and confronting our individual experiences of living in society (EVC, 2022).

Elaborating on the ideas presented in this introduction, this article is divided into four main sections. The first section lays out the Mozambican historical and political context post-independence, focusing on one of the most successful dance projects of post-colonial socialist Mozambique – the National Song and Dance Company (CNCD) (Sitole, 2016:31; Montoya, 2016). Through looking at its state-funded institutionalisation, one begins to understand the central role of dance in developing a new social and political order. This section is a sociological overview of dance in Mozambique that highlights the foundational ideals from which contemporary dance emerged as an artistic response to the times. The second section engages in a general discussion of contemporary dance as created and produced in Mozambique. The forces that led to the emergence of this genre are placed in conversation with local understandings of contemporaneity and it partially reflects the socio-political landscape of the arts in the country and the continent. In the third section, this article touches on the overarching thematics of Chichava's work as resonant with the preoccupations of contemporary Mozambican dance choreographers and critical of his socio-political environment.

The fourth section is an overview of Chichava's approach to contemporary dance choreography. It highlights five relevant elements of his approach, namely: (1) a preoccupation with genealogy and ethnology of dance in Mozambique; (2) the emergent concept of the "corpo global" or the global body; (3) the central role of the public/audience in performance; (4) the use of repetition and time to explore corporeality and affect; and (5) the relevance of plural visions of dance as essential to the choreographic process. These elements were identified through a personal interview with the artist and highlighted a link explored in the previous section between Chichava's "*O Último Berro*" (2020) – a dance film that marked his relocation back to Mozambique after a successful career in France – and "*Vagabundus*" a work created in 2022 that has since been touring the world, including performances in Brasil, Greece, Bulgaria, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Germany. Referring to Chichava's choreographic approach in both works within the discussion of the five elements outlined above, this section explores the

inherent links between the current dance scene and the groundwork established during the post-colonial socialist era of Mozambique. It highlights the history of dance in Mozambique and recognises the significant role that Chichava plays in the development of contemporary Mozambican dance. Finally, the last section concludes this article by echoing Chichava's inherited perspective on the question of artistic identity, emphasising contemporary dance as a "progressive pathway for innovating Mozambican identity and decolonising urban and rural spatiality" (Montoya, 2016: 80).

Foundations: CNCD and the Central Role of Dance in Mozambique

"In Maputo, you will find people singing and dancing in every street corner" (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: 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). Choreographic works by the CNCD become a "form of historical writing" enacted through bodies (Castaldi, 2006:2), 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: 2; Pinto, 2015: 52). Shortly after its independence in 1975, the newly formed government founded the CNCD, and soon after other artistic institutions such as the Escola Nacional de Dança (END), Escola Nacional de

Artes Visuais (ENAV), and 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: 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: 45).

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 article 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: 46-47). Military dance culture is a rarely addressed seminal component of the CNCD and the Mozambican dance culture we experience today. During the fight for independence, FRELIMO² liberated zones in the north of the country and created encampments in Tanzania where training, leisure and education of their freedom fighters occurred. Within these encampments emerged the practice of exchange and assimilation of different dance and music cultures, and their integration into a mode of collective physical and cultural training 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

² Stands for *Frente De Libertação De Moçambique*, or Liberation Front of Mozambique. FRELIMO was a nationalist movement that led the fight for Mozambique’s self-determination and independence in the 1960s and 1970s. In post-independence, it became the democratic socialist ruling party of the country to date.

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 integrative dance practices but it also guaranteed the imbuing of commitments to national unity into the transmitted dance practice (Montoya, 2016: 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.

Quite rapidly, the CNCD became known as the “ambassador of Mozambican culture abroad” (Pinto, 2015: 51), not only nationally but internationally, in response to foreign influences, as the nation sought “to affirm its cultural [and political] identity” (Pinto, 2015: 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 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. There is a certain irony, and it is “paradoxical to its foundational mythology”, to recognise that the very quest to preserve and assert a national cultural identity is what simultaneously introduced western artistic concepts in performance of dance in Mozambique, and the African continent (Soromenho, 2013: 17). The discrepancies in national governance and the challenges it faced post-independence, were consequentially replicated and manifested quite noticeably 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 during the Portuguese colonial regime in Mozambique prevailed and reflected through the divides between dance training

spaces, dance genres and who practices and/or has access to which (2016). Pinto echoes this argument in a passage that states that there seemed to be “a differentiation between dancer-choreographers from END and others (...) with a less institutionalised trajectory” (Pinto, 2015: 88). These differences were further exacerbated from the 1990s, when other cultural 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 political agenda towards schools and neighbourhoods through arts and culture (Sitole, 2016: 44-53; Pinto, 2015: 78). This instigated the political position of artists with a less institutionalised background that viewed dance and artistic expression as “a service to the people and not the elites” (Sitole, 2016: 135).

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: 3) that created “intermediary spaces” at the boundaries between socio-political and spatial divisions (Montoya, 2016: 39). The continual exchange between CNCD members and rural, urban, and peri-urban communities, was not only successful in disseminating political ideals of national unity and cultural identity, but it also constructed a channel 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: 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: 92), also created space for a collective (re)imagination and innovation of identity.

However, the weight of the political nationalist agenda restricted artistic manifestations that were at the time gradually outgrowing the illusion of a static identity to be preserved at all costs. The government’s perspective of neotraditional dance forms of this era soon became an idealist entrapment that

often limited their function to entertainment and symbols of nationalism that serve, often exclusively, FRELIMO as the country's ruling party to this day (Montoya, 2016: 92-93). Beyond the unimaginable 16 years of civil war in the 1980s during which the CNCD remained active both locally and internationally, historically, the pathways for professionalization of dance-artists have been quite limited. Furthermore, 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. Sitole mentions that within the community cultural groups "transforming or adapting the dances was avoided" (Pinto, 2015: 81).

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 in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, it inadvertently became a space of artistic autonomy and innovation. Noticeably, a series of works of this period began manifesting the artistic desire of some CNCD members to move "towards a new path of aesthetic and artistic expression" (Pinto, 2015:137). Artists such as Maria Helena Pinto and Augusto Cuvilas, returned from their academic dance training in Cuba and France, and 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 woman in Mozambican society. By surpassing the Mozambican woman's indoctrinated social and familiar role, this new wave of artistic expression introduced the idea of her as an artist of the times. This laid the foundations from which to build a new school of thought in the Mozambican dance scene.

In 1998, outside of the CNCD, Panaíbra Canda founded *CulturArte* as a space for artists and companies to explore independently new artistic languages through

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choreographic creation (Pinto, 2015: 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 other local independent projects such as *Projecto-Cuvilas* (2003) by August Cuvilas, and *Centro de Pesquisa Choreográfica* (2004) by Maria Helena Pinto, to emerge. In this new era, "the headliners are no longer the groups or companies but the authors, the creators, the artists" (Pinto, 2015: 124). Therefore, this way structured the foundations for the emergence and development of what is locally recognised as contemporary Mozambican dance.

This era of experimentation began to offer a different pathway to the professionalization of dance-artists in Mozambique. With the death of the country's first president Samora Machel in the late 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the national socialist regime gradually gave way to a post-socialist neoliberal regime. The dance scene was once again moving with the times, deeply impacted by that socio-political climate. This manifested not only through the artistic desire for change mentioned above, but through the increasing commercialisation of dance and the gradual withdrawal of the state as a patron of the arts and culture institutions in the country. 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. According to Montoya:

"Lacking 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 citizen and subjects in the new era." (2016: 222)

Dictated by donor agencies, this split manifested their 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: 100). This consequently renovated the colonial hierarchical social divides along urban-rural, settler-indigenous, modern-traditional, citizen-subject lines. The local dance “industry” became increasingly precarious, and artist-choreographers became oriented towards international circuits (Pinto, 2015: 251). Although this further embedded an international gaze in the fabric of contemporary Mozambican dance, it also exposed Mozambican artists to fellow artists from the African continent and diaspora, encouraging an artistic attitude fomented by dynamic dialogue between the local, the African and the international. In relation to traditional and neotraditional dance forms, they began grappling with the ramified dilemmas that included the question of whether to “transform without amputating or [to] amputate to transform” (Sitole, 2016: 73). This new professional path pushed artists to confront themselves and to question not only their cultural identity within their work, but also the role of the contemporary artist-choreographer in Mozambique. This questioning alongside the challenges of professionalisation formed the colliding forces that fuelled the development of a contemporary dance scene in Mozambique.

Contemporaneity: plurality and estrangement in 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, which is plural, diverse, and deeply entangled with temporality. As mentioned in the introduction, the boundaries of contemporary dance as a genre are fluid if at all existent. When echoing the perspectives of the artists and researchers quoted in this article, 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 existent 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: 105). They echo an 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: 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: 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, namely: (1) plural training influences; (2) institutional impositions; and (3) a relationship to the international (Pinto, 2015:109). These dimensions 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. Contemporary dance can be generally and locally characterised by dialogical creative processes, which are open to all bodily movements and employ new techniques and technologies for performance

(Montoya, 2016: 92). What African artist-choreographers usually claim to distinguish them from their colleagues is often their diverse citational practice through choreographic creation and their assertion of traditional African dance cultures 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). Locally the cultural estrangement inherent in 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. African artists are forced 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.

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 actively and creatively, resist, stretch, bend and/or dissolve. In the case of Mozambican dance artists and many others, they make use of technologies from their traditional dance cultures as dramaturgical and practical tools for choreographic creation. Therefore, their work often disrupts linear conceptions of time, while simultaneously mapping the different 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 processes and creation. The newness, in

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contemporary Mozambican choreographic work emerges not only through the desire to innovate but from the emphasis on innovation that is foundationally constituted by embodied plurality. This plurality is in relation to Pinto's dimensions of the contemporary dance-artist, while encompassing plurality within notions of time, culture, identity, and so on.

The emergence of the contemporary dance wave in Mozambique signals a rupture with dominating choreographic models that were founded in the combination of western classical theatrical principles and the nationalist representation of traditional Mozambican dances. Consequentially, it becomes an aesthetics of making visible and making strange the normalised discrepancies within one's relationship to one's social context.

"Contemporary creation, not only on this continent, but everywhere in the world – is always a strange thing. It's like some weird animal coming into your back yard – you don't know what to do with it." – Faustin Linyekula (Douglas et al, 2006: 112)

Contemporary dance capitalises on a sense of cultural estrangement, echoed in Linyekula's "weird animal" analogy. Through choreographic process, the individual stands out from their collective social context, which makes both the individual and the collective estranged to each other. This estrangement emerges from dissonances in perspective between them and shifts the focus from a group that is made up of individual elements to an individual that transpires the group, the space, the memory, a culture of a particular society. By standing out and sharing how their individual body transpires the collective's culture, this generated estrangement not only invites a process of reflection, but it becomes "an act of resistance" to the status quo (Pinto, 2015: 250). This cultural estrangement is expressed by many contemporary dance-artists from Africa, in their attempts to define in words what contemporary dance is for them. Artists have referred to the genre as "a bastard style" (Pinto, 2015: 18); a "strange thing" or "weird animal" (Linyekula in Douglas et al, 2006: 112); and/or a "vagabond" (Noel in Douglas et

all, 2006: 106). The use of these figures as analogies for contemporary dance reflects an out-of-place-ness and sense of uncomfortable confrontation with one's own strangeness within a given space. They signal an emphasis on a reflective and critical practice that engages the individual's sense of self, their relation to others, and experience of place. Politically, this imbues contemporary dance-artists with a "critical attitude towards their time, and their reality" (Pinto, 2015: 115), affirming contemporary dance as a site for political questioning and positioning.

The White Mapiko: subverting 'national unity' through choreography

One of Chichava's latest works is entitled *Vagabundus*. Often translated as "wanderers" (Aefestival, 2025), *Vagabundus* was first conceptualised and performed in Maputo in 2022 and has been touring several countries since then. The work is conceived as a "Made in Moz" production, comprised of a team of exclusively Mozambican performers, dramaturgs, costume designers and producers, which makes it unique. *Vagabundus* features thirteen Black dancers, five women and eight men of diverse body types, wearing loose, silky and colourful shorts, with the women wearing additional black sports bras. In a section of the choreography, some of them carry props such as a shopping trolley, a shopping bag, a car tyre, a bundle of clothes wrapped in a *capulana*, baskets, cloths, etc. But apart from that the stage is completely bare. This contemporary choreographic work is inspired by a dance ritual of the Makonde people from the north of Mozambique and "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).

The title of this work is, in my view, a statement about the performing body about the contemporary Mozambican dancer and clearly reflects the genre's socio-cultural estrangement. Through the vagabonds, or "rebellious *molwenes*" – as

former CNCD 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” (ibid). 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. In my understanding, 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 dancer-artists, artists 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, 1999:343). 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 the cast, which is rooted in Mozambican traditional, urban, and popular song and dance cultures, and helps establish the cultural cohesion of the group. He inverts 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. 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.

The reference to the Makonde people carries specific geopolitical baggage when addressing migration. Since 2017 populations of rural areas of the northern Cabo Delgado province have been forcibly dislocated en masse fleeing from an armed insurgency (Ntaka, 2023: 23). This mass migration has triggered a growing humanitarian crisis, with dozens of deaths and almost a million displaced (Koen, 2022: 190). Yet, in most of my time in Maputo in the south, this outrageous reality rarely crosses our minds, our media, and daily lives. From my personal experience of growing up in Maputo, there is a degree of detachment from the north of the country that in several instances also manifested in 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 exposure to their dance cultures within dance groups, institutions, and performances, many *Maputenses* 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, which honoured them for their role in the fight for independence, with Cabo Delgado forming part of the first liberated zones (Montoya, 2016: 8). Upon independence, and ingrained in the nationalist

narrative, the Makonde 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 disseminated the military dance culture that influenced CNCD's success (Montoya, 2016). But with the civil war, the collapse of the Soviet nation, the death of Machel and the shift towards a neoliberal regime, this crucial role of the Makonde has faded from society's consciousness and images of Cabo Delgado as rural, poor, and desolate tend to dominate. Thus, I could 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 echo civilised-primitive, national-ethnic, modern-traditional, citizen-subject divides inherited from the country's colonial, socialist and post-socialist eras (Montoya, 2016).

In 2020, Chichava collaborated with Mozambican filmmaker Ivan Barros, and other Mozambican artists³ to create a Dance film entitled "*O Último Berro: corpo em estado de emergência*" that premiered at the Mozambican *Festival Gala Gala*⁴. The initial idea for this work was to create a photograph series that would place a *Mapiko*⁵ 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: 62), so the term *Mapiko* is often used to refer to 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

³ 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

⁴ "[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.)

⁵ A dance ritual of the Makonde people associated with male initiation ceremonies.

original cultural purposes and was often used as a means of social commentary and political sensibilisation (Bussotti & Nhauleque, 2022: 161).

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: 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 meets. The iconic *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, and plastic buckets, among others. The movement language performed by Chichava, is a manifestation of his three dimensions as a contemporary dancer, incorporating his technical influences in a gestural language of quotidian life and frequently returning to an ordinary physical posture. This offers a unique and personal performance that expresses individual sentiment while transpiring the society that he is a part of. The colour choice for the *Mapiko* mask is also unique, as it traditionally is rarely if ever made in white. In making this culturally recognisable symbol white, Chichava subverts the nationalist connotations of its image and alludes to the colonial legacy of the country. It makes visible the segregative culture of Mozambican society, which replicates colonial hierarchies that privileged some (citizens) and oppressed 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 and question its accepted meanings.

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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, and question individual relation to the collective. Though this approach can allude to a sense of fusion reminiscent of the 'national unity' ideal, Chichava presents this narrative 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 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 and 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.

Choreographic Action: insights from Idio Chichava's artistic approach

Through engaging with Chichava's work analytically and experientially, and by way of amplifying his ideas, this section of the article outlines crucial elements of Chichava's approach to choreography that in my view are shaping the new generation of dance-artists and carving out a bigger space for contemporary Mozambican dance in the international arena. This section is heavily based on my personal interview with the artist in June 2025 and uses each element as a point of access for a wider dialogue grounded in a Mozambican worldsense. I have

identified five (5) elements of his approach that I found relevant to the discussion of contemporary Mozambican dance, but it is important to state that these are by far static or necessarily established. They express a kind of thought process, characteristic of an inquisitive and reflective artistic practice that overflows from the choreographic product and becomes a form of research that is ongoing, process-based, and oriented towards legacy.

(1) A Preoccupation with the Genealogy and Ethnology of Dance in Mozambique

This element is the most overt when it comes to the influence that nationalism and the post-socialist era had on the mentality of dance-artists. Chichava comes from a diverse generation of dance-artists that were directly mentored by the pioneers of contemporary dance in Mozambique. This generation was preoccupied with questions of cultural identity, which were significantly shaped by the nationalist mission towards self-determination and cultural preservation. Chichava is preoccupied with the “cultural origins of individual movement” (EVC, 2022), and this often manifests in a citational art practice that places Mozambican dances as its main resourceful foundation. But beyond nationalism, this preoccupation echoes a broader socio-political landscape of African pride, solidarity, and self-determination. It echoes how many African artists and activists post-independence values “being engaged in compiling and consolidating intergenerational wisdom and knowledge” (Phalafala, 2024: 83). This influence in Chichava’s approach can be tied to the socialist era more broadly, to the growing political-awareness of African artists at the time, but also more specifically to the artist-choreographers that pioneered the contemporary dance wave in Mozambique. One of the most influential times of his career in Mozambique, was his training at *CulturArte*, the contemporary dance project spearheaded by Panaíbra Canda. Canda has a deep interest in the history of Mozambique and the schools of thought pioneered by African visionaries (EVC, 2022a). Therefore, Chichava has inherited the political influences of his colleagues and precursors.

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The ethnological aspect of this preoccupation comes from the recognition of plurality in the training of most Mozambican dancers, as well as Chichava's career with a French dance company that functioned on the basis of 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 the interview with me, Chichava pinpointed two schools of contemporary Mozambican dance. On the one side, there was the school that has its roots in the CNCD, which included Mozambican artists Maria Helena Pinto and Augusto Cuvillas. Their lineage has an overt western posture when it comes to choreography and the dancing bodies, emphasising the lines of the movements, and the compilation of movement phrases in their choreographic approach. On the other side, there was the school that emerged from Canda's *CulturArte*, which had a significant influence of dance groups of traditional/popular/urban dances. There the approach tends to prioritise emotion, interiority, individuality and relies less on institutionalised dance conventions. This school has influenced Chichava's investment in an aesthetic and performativity that converges different modes of expression. For Chichava, choreographic creation is simultaneously a pedagogical process, which trains the body and expressivity of the dance-artist (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). Thus, for a choreographic work to become pedagogical, its creative process engages deeply and critically with citational practices, building intentionality in the movement and a performance quality of authentic embodied presence. This is a shared value among Mozambican artist-choreographers, who recognise choreography as an "activist creation procedure" (Pinto, 2015: 109) that contributes to growth and longevity in the field.

(2) The Emergent concept of the *Corpo Global* (Global Body)

This is one of the most relevant concepts for a dance pedagogy that is grounded in the Mozambican dance-artist. Chichava focuses on training and engaging the body in its plurality of expression. This on a surface level means investing in creating an openness, readiness and responsiveness in the bodies of the

performers. The *Corpo Global* is the result of Chichava's analysis of how Mozambican dancers are trained. It references a practice of exchange and cultural assimilation that gave birth to the CNCD and acknowledges that dance encapsulates moving, singing, breathing, speaking, and a range of diverse expressions that go beyond the stringing together of physical movements in a sequence. In *Vagabundus*, the dance and the soundscape are one, entirely grounded within the dancers' bodies. This is a characteristic present in several contemporary dance choreographies by Mozambican artists, as well as in some traditional Mozambican dances, where the dancers are constantly sounding as they move through the space, creating a "global melody" that evokes "a sensation that the movement never stops" (Pinto, 2015: 67). Chichava asserts that "only the body that dances and sings at the same time can fully express itself and exist in synergy with others" (OneDanceWeek, 2024). This expands the borders of what qualifies dance, especially within its western theatre contexts, and presents dance as experienced in African epistemologies, where it is understood as "a form of orality in which rhythm mediates between music, speech, and dance" (Castaldi, 2006: 4). Chichava's *corpo global* expands even further than embodied plurality, plasticity and orality towards a relationship with self, space, and others characterised by an investment in and cultivation of "total presence" (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview).

(3) The Central Role of the Public/Audience in Performance

There are many aspects that speak to how Chichava perceives the role of the public/audience⁶ in the performance of his choreographic works, and these aspects go beyond the scope of this article. The investment in the *corpo global* (an

⁶ I combine the terms public and audience to highlight how contemporary Mozambican dance, and specifically Chichava's work is 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.

equally ramified and expansive concept) is one such aspect, as 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. I focus on the dramaturgical aspects that point to the implication and centralisation of the audience. *Vagabundus* (2022) and *O Último Berro* (2020), follow dramaturgical threads common with CNCD's *bailados* and many of the choreographic works produced by Mozambican artists. These threads involve composing the work in a way that evokes a sense of narrative built through sections 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. 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). 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 city location to "smoothen the subject matter a bit" so that the public/audience can remain engaged. 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 implicate their position in the work and opens a continual dialogue between artists and public/audience in a shared society. The dramaturgical tools when combined with the affectivity of the *corpo global* also signal to a mission of educating audiences and growing a following. 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 project (Pinto, 2015: 252).

(4) The Use of Repetition and Time to explore Corporeality and Affect

Interconnected with the sense of “total presence” that the *corpo global* cultivates, is the intentional experimentation with time through the performance of repetition. In our interview, Chichava emphasised how the training of any dancer is often built through repetition. He also mentioned that in many of the traditional dance cultures there are repetitive cycles that build a sense of circularity of time. In *Vagabundus*, Chichava uses repetition in the cyclical quality of day and nights, brought up by the combination of several individual journeys that constantly create the collective. 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 in the repetition of traditional dance cultures that 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 tied to the cyclic movement of the land and is often “informed by an animist conception of reality attributed to the indigenous resource base from southern Africa” (Phalafala, 2020: 47). It is often this conception that highlights contemporary African dance’s commitment to indigenous epistemologies through their recourse to traditional African dance cultures.

(5) The Relevance of Plural Visions of Dance as essential to the Choreographic Process

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In our interview, Chichava spoke about respecting the schools that produce Mozambican artist-choreographers. These schools are incredibly diverse and hybrid, they involve a wide range of local and international artist-choreographers, that through workshops, short courses, exchange programs, institutional visits, festivals, etc, transmit their individual values and aesthetic and train the Mozambican artist-choreographers of today. The CNCD, the urban and peri-urban dance groups, the international dance festivals abroad (i.e. Danse l’Afrique Danse, etc), and pioneering local contemporary dance projects – i.e. *CulturArte*, *Projecto-Cuvilas*, *Centro de Criação Fotográfica*, *Festival de Dança Contemporânea*, *Plataforma Kinani*, etc – create a plural and diverse dance training environment that is embedded into the bodies and artistic choices of Mozambican artists. Sitole calls this an embodied “eclectic pluralism of experiences” (Sitole, 2016: 131), that negotiates the local and the international, producing a kind of “universal localism” (Sitole, 2016: 133) that allows dance-artists to engage with each other locally and experiment with movement languages that speak to local and international contexts. Chichava’s concept of the *corpo global* seeks to embody and welcome that plurality, while highlighting the dialogical nature of his choreographic approach. The dialogue happens between dancers and public/audiences, but also when individual dancers with different understandings of dance encounter one another and create an in-between space, a “no man’s land” where the choreographic creation and experimentation occur.

Conclusion

Through engaging with the work of Mozambican artist-choreographer Idio Chichava while discussing the socio-political history of contemporary dance in Mozambique, one begins to grasp an identifiable thread in the development of this dance genre. This article highlights the central role of dance in Mozambican society in transmitting values and ideologies at micro and macro levels. Contemporary Mozambican dance emerges as a response to the nationalist institutionalisation of that frequently limited artistic expression and neglected political and critical awareness. Through contemporary dance, Mozambican artist-

choreographers like Chichava create spaces and encounters for collective reflection that lead to individual artistic expression and social engagement. Choreographic processes then become laboratories and conversations that reinterpret, renovate, reformulate and reimagine a national identity that honours individual perspectives of a shared society. For Chichava, identity is about “accepting where you are from (...) and to make sure that the place you come from is always present” (Chichava, 2025 – personal interview). This moves the discussion beyond the restriction of nationalism while honouring a kind of “universal localism” that still retains a sense of *Mozambicanity*.

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