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May Weapons Rust in Peace[1]: journey(s) with the *Tree of Life*

1. Introduction

This paper is an invitation to a *journey* through the possible reflections offered by the multiple layers of signification achieved by the *Tree of Life*, a sculpture created in Mozambique to commemorate peace and totally made of decommissioned and dismantled weapons, sponsored by Christian Aid, an international development charity, and commissioned by the British Museum for its Sainsbury African Galleries, where it stands on permanent exhibition.

The particular object of analysis, in its intrinsic paradoxical nature (a work of art made of weapons to celebrate peace) discloses the twofold *journey* awaiting us. On the one hand, and as a result of the increasing *mobility* of people, goods and commodities now working across the globe and brought about by globalisation, awareness will be raised to the actual course taken by the materials used to produce this sculpture, from several countries in Europe and the USA to Africa, and back to their original places of production, now under the form of works of art.

On the other hand, this study will take us on an inner *journey* in which the innovative project behind the production of this sculpture will be under scrutiny, in an attempt to understand this unique artwork and the relevance of the mentioned project within the context of post-war Mozambique, underlining its effectiveness in promoting a culture of peace after long years of conflict, and analysing art's capacity to *transform*, to show that guns can be *translated into* works of art created to relieve and remove tensions, to endorse and celebrate peace.

[1] From George Orwell, 1984.

2. The Project

Globalisation has triggered spatio-temporal changes promoting transformations in the nature and organisation of human affairs and activities which have led to an interconnectedness across regions and continents facilitating the flow of ideas, information, images, and people (Keohane and Nye, 2003)[2]. This, in turn, has given rise to a greater awareness of social problems throughout the world and the subsequent mobilisation of new social movements seeking to implement social justice. Among those movements are a significant number of non-governmental organisations working beyond national boundaries, which have joined forces to mediate conflicts and solve problems such as war and poverty, in *journeys* promoting unexpected and surprising *transferences*. It is within this context that I would like to describe the project that enabled the creation of the above mentioned sculpture, the *Tree of Life*.

Tree of Life with two of the scupltors. David Rose for Christian Aid, Maputo, 2004.

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2 Keohane and Nye, "Globalization: What's New? What's Not? (and so What?)", in Held, D. and McGrew, A. (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader*, 77.

In fact, the *Transforming Arms into Tools* project was founded by Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane, Chairman of the Christian Council of Mozambique, a partner of Christian Aid and an international development charity founded in 1953, operating in more than fifty countries with over 600 partner organisations and helping some of the poorest communities irrespective of religion, race and background. Its goals are both to raise awareness among more affluent countries about the needs and suffering of poorer countries around the world, and to highlight the importance of taking action and contributing to the alleviation of those problems. Such activities are very much in line with the characteristics of the new transnational actors brought onto the scene by globalisation, such as new social movements benefiting from an increasing global interconnectedness (Kaldor, 2003)[3].

After a sixteen-year-long civil war which ended in 1992 and devastated Mozambique, taking the lives of an estimated one million people, the innovative *Transforming Arms into Tools* project was devised to collect guns from former soldiers and to exchange – *transform* – them for equipment such as sewing machines, bicycles, building materials, tractors or any other tools which would enable people to make a living. In fact, an estimated seven million arms remain hidden throughout the country in spite of the action taken by this project which employs some former child soldiers, along with artists*,* and which has collected and dismantled more than 600,000 weapons over nine years. These weapons were poured into the country by Britain, several European countries and the USA through cheaper transport which made the constant *mobility* and flow of goods across the world easier and faster, and encouraged illicit trade and an increase in global crime, as mentioned in the UNDP Report 1999 (Held and McGrew, 2003)[4]. This huge amount of arms spread all across Mozambique, reaching the whole of the territory in a tentacular, insidious *journey*, and many guns are still operational: they can be used to cause even more death and suffering in a country which is one of the poorest in the world, with more than three quarters of the

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[3] Kaldor, "Global Civil Society", in Held, D. and McGrew, A. (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader*, 560.
[4] UNDP Report 1999, "Patterns of Global inequality", 423-429.

population living on less than €2 a day. Besides the war, this extreme poverty results, among other factors, from the uneven distribution of global opportunities that makes marginal countries even more marginal, thus widening the gap between rich and poor nations (Held and McGrew, 2003)[5].

Aware of both these problems and of the need to take effective action against them, Bishop Sengulane found inspiration in the Bible and created the TAT project with the idea of exchanging arms for ploughshares, thus immediately reminding us of Isaiah when he says, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruninghooks"(Isaiah, 2:4). It was officially launched in October 1995 by the Christian Council of Mozambique (CCM) with the participation of several national and international NGOs.

According to a report on the Small Arms Action Forum, Toronto, June 15, 1999, the project's mission is to reinforce democracy and strengthen civil society by taking some specific actions aimed at "encouraging the population to participate in active peace-building activities; promoting reconciliation; and facilitating the initiation of productive activities for the population". On the other hand, the project's general objectives – clearly those of mediating conflict and transforming society – are "to help build a culture of peace; to support and maintain a peaceful post-war transition in Mozambique; and to offer an alternative lifestyle to arms holders", while its specific objectives are

> to collect and destroy all available weapons; to transform arms into 'ploughshares', e.g., offering useful tools for delivering weapons; to reduce violence and educate civil society about its results; and to transform destroyed arms into sculptures and other forms of art[6].

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5   Held and McGrew, "Divided World, Divided Nations?", Introduction to Part V, *The Global Transformations Reader*, 421-422.

6   "Small Arms Action Forum", <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.ploughshares.ca/ Working Papers/wp992

Those responsible for the project were also concerned about defining the target group and respective beneficiaries as being illegal arms holders, former combatants and other people who might have information about existing arms caches. The exchange of information on the location of small arms for productive tools, materials and training proved to be an efficient means for the TAT to attain its objectives. The next stage was to define and implement the necessary activities to achieve the outlined objectives. These included weapons collections and their exchange for useful tools; the destruction of weapons; public campaigns and civic education; and the transformation of arms into works of art.

In keeping with what Keohane proposes, an interesting feature of this project is the particular concern shown in meeting the different needs of urban and rural populations in the distribution of the incentives offered. Those willing to hand over their arms could actually express their wishes as to what tools they wanted to get, but the value of the incentive was always related to the number, type and functionality of the weapons presented for exchange. This illustrates the project's mediation role and aim to "provide incentives for the moderation of conflict, coherent decision-making to provide collective goods, and the promotion of economic growth" (Keohane, 2003)[7]. The range of tools and materials given was, therefore, wide and varied, but the articles most commonly handed over were bicycles, hoes, construction tools, sewing machines, cement bags, school equipment for children, various raw materials for building purposes and wheelchairs.

The 'Transforming of Arms into Works of Art' activity, as the title reveals, is involved in the transformation of the collected weapons into works of art, ornaments or even practical objects, such as chairs and other pieces of furniture, in order to foster a culture of peace. Monuments and sculptures were produced from fragmented weapons to be exhibited to the public or permanently installed in public squares, parks or any other public spaces. Several art exhibitions were organised locally and others in Portugal, Germany, Belgium, Sweden and Zimbabwe. The local

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[7] Keohane, "Sovereignty in International Society", in Held, D. and McGrew, A. (eds.), *The Global Transformations Reader*, 158.

Sculptures produced by the *Transforming Arms into Tools*
Project, in Mozambique, 2004.

association of artists (*Núcleo de Arte*) has been a strong supporter of TAT's objectives and activities and, maintaining a continuous contact with the project, has promoted workshops in which artists transform arms into objects of art. This collaboration has led to negotiations between the Christian Council of Mozambique, the TAT project and the *Núcleo de Arte,* aiming to ship the artworks to international exhibitions and developing an inventory system to better control the location and sales of the objects thus produced.

It was precisely within the scope of these activities that the *Tree of Life* sculpture was commissioned by the British Museum. This artwork was to undertake a *journey* of great relevance to fulfil the mission bestowed on it: that of heralding a deeply significant message about Africa to the Western countries through the powerful context offered by that Museum. The *Tree of Life* aimed to call for a better knowledge of that continent with the objective of fostering the concept of inclusiveness. In fact, nothing could be stronger than a tree of *life* made from *killing* weapons, especially if one considers the project behind it, which had allowed for the guns to be decommissioned, dismantled and exchanged for tools for people to make a living from, instead of killing. If one bears in mind that these weapons had been channelled into Mozambique to

fuel war through the networks of circulation which should have been used to promote well being for all, then one cannot help considering the **irony** of the fact that the same weapons have now returned to Europe under the form of an art object made to celebrate life and peace.

One important and interesting aspect of this project is that, through the agency of some of the organisations involved, it has inspired and generated similar art-oriented activities with a message of social justice in other countries faced with post-conflict difficulties or internal violence.

3. The Production

The process involved in the production of these sculptures, namely the *Tree of Life,* deserves particular attention, especially in view of the kind of materials used – dismantled weapons. From the point of view of Visual Culture Studies, and drawing on Stuart Hall's concepts of encoding/decoding, an analysis must be made of the several stages of decoding involved in the exchange and dismantling of the arms, their subsequent recoding into other objects, and the ensuing different layers of signification assigned both to the process itself and to the art object. This will take us on another *journey*, an inner one, through the meanders of the metamorphosis/*transference* undergone by these objects.

The actual name of the project behind the creation of the *Tree of Life* sculpture, 'Transforming Arms into Tools', points to a process of production of meaning within which the operation of codes plays an important mediation role. Actually, the moment of production implies the formation of meaning – resulting from sets of social relations – which will enable the product to reach its different audiences through a discursive form. The discourse thus formed must be *exchanged* so as to complete its circuit. As Stuart Hall puts it, the event – in this case, the art object – "must become a 'story' before becoming a *communicative event"* (the author's emphasis) (Hall, 2001)[8]. In fact, the *production* of the *Tree of Life constructs* the message that the whole project seeks to

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[8] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", in Durham, M.G. and Kellner, D.M. (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies*, 166-177.

convey. This production process is, therefore, the starting point for the realisation of the message that Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane wanted to pass on to the people of Mozambique: that of the importance of *exchanging* (decoding/encoding) arms made to kill *for* tools to make a living from. Hence, for this message to be meaningful for Mozambicans (the immediate receivers), it had to be encoded into a discourse that would make sense to them so that they could subsequently meaningfully decode it and make it effective in terms of their response/behaviour/ social practice, that of handing over the arms they still held. In other words, that discourse had been encoded in a way that made the message plausible to the populations who, as a result, decoded it efficiently and complied with the challenge that had been made to them to dispose of the weapons. This was the moment of "gratification" to which Hall alludes(Hall, 2001)[9], and it came within the scope of the structures of understanding which enabled receivers to *transform* meaning into practice and, therefore, to assign social use value to the weapons by exchanging them for useful tools. In this case, this exchange was also endowed with political effectivity since it meant a move towards a peace process. According to the Christian Aid Report on the TAT project, the population's adherence enabled its implementation, which illustrates that the efficiency of the discourse adopted enhanced both the peace process and the well being of the populations involved, who then had a way to make a living.

Let us now concentrate on the practical aspects of this production process and analyse the different stages in its dual perspective, thus embarking on yet another *journey* of multiple transferences. On the one hand, there is the actual handing over of arms and their exchange for useful tools. On the other hand, there is the subsequent dismantling of those weapons and the creation of art works. This implies two different discourse formations having the same starting point – the arms – and the same end product – the art works, and namely the *Tree of Life* – albeit following different paths. In the first instance, the project *changed* (decoded) arms handed over by the population *into* (encoded) equipment and/or instruments, allowing them to work and make a living. The tools

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[9]   *Ibid*, 168.

thus obtained symbolised, for those who received them, not only the past time of war and violence the arms had promoted, but also the hope for a peaceful and productive life in the future. For Mozambicans, those objects had a double meaning which was completely plausible for them, since it embodied the story of their own lives, past and future, as well as the history of their country.

The second course of circulation (or *journey*) undertaken by these weapons was that of the dismantling process. Despite also being discursive, in this case, owing to the physical nature of the materials, serious decisions had to be made and very practical actions had to be undertaken to proceed with the project. In fact, handling such dangerous materials proved to be a difficult and treacherous feat. Most arms were destroyed immediately after their collection using TAT equipment to avoid unnecessary risks, although for safety reasons some had to be destroyed elsewhere. Noteworthy from the point of view of the credibility assigned to this process was the situation of public destruction sessions, at which technicians cut the weapons into pieces. This also played a relevant pedagogical role in bringing an end to the practice of war and violence which had been a way of life in Mozambique for the previous sixteen years. As one of the artists, Adelino Serafim Maté, puts it in the short film shown next to the *Tree of Life* at the British Museum, the weapons had to be destroyed, rendered unusable – decoded – so as to become tame and be *transformed* – encoded – into art objects. Fiel dos Santos, another artist involved in this project, describes it as a discursive process, when in an interview given to Matt Cunningham and published on 9th February 2005, he states that

> the material I have worked with here *speaks* for itself – I try to make it *say* something *different*. So I have *turned* them *into* birds, flowers and animals. Step by step, I try to introduce *themes* that make people *think* about peace and not about war" (my emphasis)[10].

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[10] "Pressure Works", <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.pressureworks.org/ frontline/ features/Fiel.html.

The artist's intended *transference* or shift of meaning operated through the production of the artworks, and the respective processes of decoding/encoding seem to be clear. He has decoded the material, deprived it of its original function and meaning, in order to encode it into something different, to give it a new discursive message. As Hall states, "production, here, constructs the message"(Hall, 2001)[11], and the artists were well aware of this, just as they were also aware of the importance of the social relations which made their work significant.

Hence*,* art works produced under the scope of the TAT project hold three different layers of signification and stand for three different journeys with deep meaning for Mozambicans: firstly, they are made of weapons which were used to make war and cause death; secondly, through having been exchanged for tools, they have acquired a new meaning, that of allowing them to earn a living; and, thirdly, they have become art objects celebrating peace. This is probably an instance of the situation to which Matzke refers in an article on post-conflict art production in Eritrea when she states, "on the whole, there was a deep-seated need for both civilians and fighters to imagine 'a cultural ideal of harmony' and thus to set something positive against the brutal realities of war" (Matzake, 2002)[12].

Furthermore, the very materials out of which the sculptures are made – the killing weapons – are deeply interwoven into the lives of all those looking at them in Maputo, since, in one way or another, they have all been passively or actively engaged in this dark episode of the history of Mozambique. Some actually fought in the war, others lost friends and family members to it, and those who are too young to have lived through it have been brought up listening to stories about it. Therefore, since a feeling of belonging can be triggered by the recognition of familiar shapes, textures and colours (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000)[13], viewers in Maputo could identify with those artworks, as they are connected to the history of their country and their lives.

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[11] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", 167.

[12] Matzake, "Comrades in Arts and in Arms: Eritrea", in Döring, T. (ed.), *African Cultures, Visual Arts and the Museum: Sights/sites of Creativity and Conflict*, 33.

[13] Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 110.

Tree of Life, Peace Park, Maputo. David Rose for Christian Aid, 2004.

The discourse produced by the *Tree of Life* sculpture and all the other art objects made of decommissioned weapons was particularly effective, as it triggered a change in attitude among the population of Mozambique, since it embodies the narrative of a country whose history their citizens wish neither to erase nor forget. The decoding/encoding process materialised through the production of the sculptures has successfully translated the message that Bishop Dom Dinis Sengulane meant to spread, and it has done so in a broader sense, since it has reached beyond the borders of Mozambique. As the Bishop himself stated, "this is a story about Mozambique, not about conflict and misery, but about creativity to bring an extraordinary message (…), a message that is universal"[14].

The discursive aspect of the production of the *Tree of Life* and other sculptures is further illustrated by the Bishop's statement that "we are transforming the guns into something positive. We are using a passage of scripture to transform the gun – and the mind of the person handing it over – into a peacemaker"[15]. Curiously, this brings to mind a statement that Albie Sachs, one of the judges of the Constitutional

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[14] Sengulane, "Surefish", <accessed until June 2006>, http://www.surefish.co.uk/ culture/features/090205_ africa05_bishop.html.
[15] *Ibid*.

Court in Johannesburg and an advocate of human rights, made in an African National Council in-house seminar held in Cape Town in 1990,

> In the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun […]. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions […] (Sachs,1990)[16].

The discourse of these sculptures, however, seems to me to be innovative in that it exposes art's capacity to *transform*, to show that guns can be *translated into* a work of art created to relieve and remove tensions, to promote and celebrate life and peace through a process of conflict mediation.

These weapons do now actually **rust** (and ***rest***) in peace, scattered throughout the streets and squares of Maputo, as well as in museum rooms throughout the world, heralding their mute, yet eloquent, message of *a journey* made possible by the good will of men: that from conflict to peace, from arms into art.

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[16] Sachs, "Preparing ourselves to Freedom", in de Kok, I. and Press, K. (eds.), *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom by Albie Sachs and Respondents*, 20.

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