Just out of Reach

Imminence, Meaning, and Political Ontology in Mozambique

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The leader of Mozambique's Renamo party, Afonso Dhlakama, died on May 3, 2018. His death both necessitates an ethnographic, regionally comparative rethinking of the analytical approach to the dominant Mozambican political parties (Frelimo and Renamo) as diametrically opposed formations from independence onward and invites a more general reconsideration of anthropological approaches to politics and the trajectory of African postcolonial states. Based on long-term fieldwork in Chimoio, Maputo, and Nampula, we analyze and compare articulations of political subjectivity and launch a novel reading of Mozambique's political dynamics, arguing how the erstwhile bifurcated political order is structured by a singular, imminent political ontology. Rather than analyzing politics by privileging institutions, identities, or movements, we contribute to an anthropology that underlines politics as fundamentally shaped by the formation and manipulation of broader systems of meaning, registers, and their spatiotemporal context—aspects that elude analyses on the basis of political discourse or voting patterns. Highlighting the genealogy of this political ontology and emphasizing its generative and imminent nature in terms of forging subjectivity, we explore its enduring yet brittle nature, which includes hegemonic stasis, contestation, and the potential for openings and breakdowns.

The critical issue facing the Bolsheviks in 1917 was not merely the seizure of power but the seizure of meaning. (Bonnell 1997:1)

As liberation movement-cum-ruling party and armed guerrilla-cum-opposition party, respectively, *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Frelimo) and *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana* (Renamo) have long dominated the Mozambican political landscape. With extensive support in the south, parts of the north, and many of the nation's urban centers, Frelimo has held power since independence in 1975. Renamo, in contrast, which emerged during the civil war (1977–1992) and has been a political party since the end of open hostilities, has enjoyed high levels of voter support in the rest of the north and in the central parts of the country—especially in the rural areas. This political stalemate, which rests on simmering hostility and oddly manages to be both precarious and stagnant, underwent a massive shock when Afonso Dhlakama, leader of Renamo since 1979, died on May 3, 2018, of a diabetes-related illness in his mountain hideout in central Mozambique. His death not only led to a significant crisis of leadership for the party but also has thrown open the long-term Renamo-Frelimo dichotomy that has provided the foundation of Mozambican politics.

Such fissures in the dichotomy can be seen in the ways that Dhlakama, long denigrated as an "armed bandit" by Frelimo, was posthumously elevated to the status of a hard-working man who was true to his word by no other than President Filipe Nyusi. During the state funeral for Dhlakama, Nyusi observed that he was "depressed to be unable to help his brother [sur-vive]" (Mediafax 2018*a*).[1] The influential Christian Council of Mozambique even went so far as to compare Dhlakama, once infamous for massacres and the use of child soldiers, with Moses, lauding him as "hero of the nation" and claiming that he had "inscribed himself into the heart of many Mozambicans" (Mediafax 2018*b*). In contrast, Renamo's post-Dhlakama leadership succession seems to be following a long-standing dynamic. The man who succeeded Dhlakama as leader of Renamo is Ossufo Momade, who started his political-military career as a Frelimo soldier before being kidnapped by Renamo in 1978. Despite his Frelimista past, Momade attained the rank of general in Renamo during the civil war (Club of Mozambique 2018). In fact, since Renamo's inception, all three of its leaders began their careers as Frelimo soldiers, a tradition that implies that this hostile political duality rests on a shared foundation.

Regardless of the common origins of political leaderships, the enmity between Frelimo and Renamo should not be surprising. The demonization of opponents is a common feature of political life, and Carl Schmitt (cited in Buck-Morss 2002) went so far as to argue that the identification of an enemy is the "ultimate act of sovereignty, the ultimate political act" (9). However, what makes the Mozambican case so intriguing is the ways in

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1. All quotes in this text have been translated from Portuguese by the authors.

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which its tumultuous history demonstrates how, in politics, an enemy can be transformed into a friend *without* altering the wider polarized and mutually hostile dynamic. How are we to understand the elevation of a man who had been cast by the state as the epitome of evil and irrational violence for decades to a "brother," a national hero who warranted a state funeral? And, more importantly, how can we as anthropologists make sense of such a seeming oscillation between modalities of violent conflict and dichotomization, on the one hand, and political unity on the other?

In this article, we investigate these questions with the aim of contributing to political anthropology, as well as adding to the knowledge about postcolonial trajectories of politics in Africa and beyond. Specifically, we do so by making a case for the importance of the deep structuring of (political) thought and meaning-making as opposed to understandings that inadvertently ossify politics, as capturable in the form of identities or movements. For, as the Mozambican example will show, while any attempt at building a totalizing system of meaning—here specifically one that is reflecting a narrative of liberation and political guardianship in the hands of Frelimo—will necessarily rely on and produce politically effective dualities (like Renamo vs. Frelimo), these are, nonetheless, integral to each other and, we argue, reflective of a wider and shared political system of meaning.

A Mozambican order that fluctuates between a totalizing system of meaning and various forms of dualities thereby *transcends* regular notions of formal politics, including subjectivities, parties, voters, or allegiances. We therefore approach the Mozambican case as a form of *imminent political ontology*, which reflects both its historical origins and the alternation between totality and duality always on the verge of becoming, but never actualizing. Its imminence exists, we posit, as a long-existing horizon of expectation around which political meaning is oriented. Analytically, this means explicitly privileging *not* individual positions—such as political subjectivities and identities—but rather reversing the order: what we see and analyze as a political ontology is thereby the starting point, and individual positions, such as political subjectivities, would merely be expressions of such a world of meaning—replete with an oscillation between totalization and dualification. This approach to politics is inspired not least by Viveiros de Castro's argument (2004, 2013), building on Deleuze (1994 [1991]), about the need for an anthropology that is *not* imposing predetermined problems (say, from general anthropological theory about politics), but is rather allowing the analysis to be informed by distinct (political) worlds that form, we also claim, an imminent political ontology in Mozambique. Resonating also with Viveiros de Castro's argument for an attentiveness to distinct political worlds of meaning, Hay (2006:80) observes:

> Ontology relates to *being*, to what *is*, to what *exists*, to the constituent units of reality; *political ontology*, by extension, relates to *political being*, to what *is politically*, to what *exists politically*, and to what units that comprise political reality.

While a strand of anthropology has long recognized politics as unfolding beyond the domains to which it is generally restricted

in other disciplines, as in Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's (1987 [1940]) important treatise on African politics, there has been a substantive change in how non-Weberian, state-centric anthropological political analysis is executed. Significantly, it has moved from focusing mainly on actors, resources, formal organizations, and modes of power (see, e.g., Keesing 1981 [1975]; Lewellen 1992) to including the multisemics of political being and emergence—a reorientation generally inspired also by the much-criticized so-called ontological turn (see, e.g., Bertelsen and Bendixsen 2016; Graeber 2015; Holbraad and Pedersen 2016; Viveiros de Castro 2015).[2] In particular, Ghassan Hage (2014) sees the recent turn toward notions of ontology and difference as holding promise for an approach to politics that may transcend bifurcating tropes or dichotomous political entities:

> There is a clear radical political potential in an anthropology that is always in pursuit of ontological multiplicity and the highlighting of existing dominated and overshadowed modes of existence. . . . Minor realities offer new spaces of possibility but, nonetheless, such realities are merely arenas of political struggle rather than counter-hegemonic modes of existence in themselves.

The insights from Viveiros de Castro, Hage, and Hay are all useful for rereading politics in a situation beyond bifurcated identitarian notions like that in Mozambique. Indeed, when applied to Mozambique, a focus on political *being* as that which *is* (Hay 2006), alongside an attentiveness to the *possible* and the *potential* (Hage 2014)—that is, the force and presence of imminence—the notion of political ontology captures connectivities, commonalities, and the paradoxically shared nature of social and political fissures that are, historically and ethnographically, evident from our research sites. In sum, we argue for a historically (and continuously) produced (open-ended but comprehensive) political ontology comprising the regions and domains commonly ascribed as either Frelimo or Renamo, to the government or the opposition, but irreducible to such a dichotomy.

Threads of Imminence: Political Ontology and Meaning in Mozambique

Although very often underemphasized in, especially, studies of African political orders, as Bonnell's introductory statement demonstrates, both liberal- and socialist-inspired visions can provide the underlying meaning to be seized by a movement with totalizing pretensions. However, they do so in very different ways. Buck-Morss (2002) argues that the liberal worldview is based on ideas of *space* and that sovereignty is conceived

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2. While we agree that some contributors currently associated with the ontological turn offer problematic positions vis-à-vis the political—especially those contributions that portray sociopolitical worlds as flat and thus nonhierarchical ontologies (including Manuel DeLanda 2002; see also Peacock 2015 for a critique)—nevertheless, anthropology abounds with possibilities for rethinking the political, stemming from various ways of relating politics to ontology.

as representing a named population whose shared identity is circumscribed by the borders of the nation-state. The worldview of communism, in contrast, is based on *time* rather than space and "the temporality of the political revolution, which as the locomotive of history's progress, invested the party with the sovereign power to force mass compliance in history's name" (Buck-Morss 2002:60). Unlike the liberal conception, the communist party-state is not representative of an identity but rather a causal agent active in constructing both the people and the state (Buck-Morss 2002:20).

Many socialist and nationalist movements like Frelimo combine elements of both the liberal and the communist view in practice; it is not so much a question of absolutes, but rather which aspect is emphasized. However, while Frelimo's revolutionary project necessarily took place inside the iron borders of the nation-state, time was its prime mover, both the basis of the party's vision and its greatest challenge. Underdevelopment was to be overcome in just 10 years by an utter transformation of the people, the landscape, and nature itself. This time-based mindset was common among the more radical, nationalist regimes in Africa, such as Sékou Touré in Guinea, which exalted sacrifice now for a collective goal, a future that would bear almost no resemblance to the present (McGovern 2017:6–7), or the "Marxist modernism" of the Derg's efforts to "cut history off at the pass during the Ethiopian revolution" (Donham 1999:127). Frelimo also stressed the need for sacrifice in the immediate present, which mattered little as the nation stood on the verge of a utopian transformation. Renamo, in contrast, served as the antithesis of this vision. It supposedly embodied an atavistic, reactionary savagery bent on destroying the party's achievements and blunting the progressive march of history.[3] Elements of this dualistic vision survived the fall of socialism, if shorn of its messianic attributes. In Guinea, McGovern (2017) argued that Touré created a conception of politics that rested on "a tight cluster of self-referential terms and phrases (and) constituted a closed system of signification" (159). A similar process happened in Mozambique, and while the signifiers changed, this closed system of signification encompassed both Frelimo and what was to become Renamo. Without the burning vision of progress, the polarized duality of the civil war can never really end, even as Frelimo and Renamo increasingly become mirror images of each other, both promising to construct a utopia, while knowing that neither will ever come to be.

While many of our interlocutors in Mozambique have long since lost faith in both versions of the brave new world that Frelimo and Renamo unceasingly declare to be on the verge of dawning, they have nevertheless internalized the categories on which it is based. Thus, even challenges to the system tend to resemble what Humphrey (2008:9) refers to as "fettered

circularity," that is, attempts to conceptualize change through the use of preexisting categories. Here we have a political ontology, the shared meaning of which renders it hegemonic, in a seemingly endless dance between two political factions that increasingly define and redefine themselves only through their relation to the other. From these historical trajectories, political subjectivity—that is, the production of forms of political being—transcends the confines of formal identities, party programs, or public discourses and is comprised of profound, long-standing terrains of meaning.

Privileging political ontology—the origins and ongoing evolution of which we will move to shortly—entails also moving beyond lofty eulogies in the case of Mozambique. We do not regard the recent changes, be these multiparty democracy or investor-friendly legislation, as indicative of a pragmatic politics of stabilization. Instead, what is being revealed is a long-standing imbrication of the two dominant parties, reflecting an intimacy that dominates political thinking and horizons.[4] While violent contestation has been a central feature of independent Mozambique since the beginning of the civil war in 1976/1977 (see, e.g., Morier-Genoud, Cahen, and do Rosário 2018), a major finding of our combined research of 35 years points *away* from a sense of permanent crisis due to binary polarization. Mozambican political subjectivities are *not* structured by neatly distinguishable and durable political identities or memberships, such as Renamo and Frelimo; rather, they are integral to our notion of a composite political ontology that is imminent rather than fixed and waxing and waning rather than stable. Such a seemingly paradoxical system, which internalizes otherness and duality as central components of its continued existence—a political order of meaning that has significance well beyond Mozambique—is also evident from our ethnographic material from Nampula, Maputo, and Chimoio.

A few years ago, "Tatiana" told Sumich that she voted for JPC (*Juntos Pela Cidade*/Together for the City), a small "civil society" party, in Maputo's municipal elections. Sumich was surprised because Tatiana comes from a family of high-ranking Frelimo officials. Tatiana explained that as a member of "the second generation of Frelimo," she saw the world very differently from her elders and felt the need to root out corruption, arrogance, and sloth. Even though she claimed an identity as the second generation of Frelimo, she was neither a formal member of the party nor of any of its affiliates; in fact, on the rare occasions that she mentioned Frelimo, it was usually with bemused contempt. However, despite all her criticisms, she still described herself as

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3. This perspective on Renamo was evident in a range of Frelimo publications in the 1970s and 1980s, including those intended for an international audience (see, e.g., People's Power in Mozambique and Guinea Bissau 1976).

4. For a time, a third party, *Movimento Democrático de Moçambique* (MDM) looked as if it would take the mantle of major opposition party from Renamo. Its leader, Daviz Simango, is the son of a founder of Frelimo who was executed as a counterrevolutionary. Simango, who split from Renamo to form the MDM, enjoyed a brief period of success, especially among the urban middle classes. More recently, though, the support base of the MDM is collapsing and several of its members of parliament have defected back to Renamo.

part of the party, even as she voted against it. A couple of years later, Sumich was speaking to another interlocutor in Maputo, "Evaristo," who also hails from a Frelimo family. He was in the middle of a cutting and not infrequent critique of the capabilities of the ruling party. Sumich asked Evaristo if he had ever thought of going into politics and, if so, with which party—considering his obvious distaste for Frelimo. Evaristo replied, "Yes, with Frelimo. You see, with my family and background I am genetically Frelimo. I simply would not be credible as anything else." Nor is this sense of instinctive belonging limited solely to the political field. Their internalization of Frelimo's modernist orientation, similar to what McGovern (2017) previously called the "futurist disposition" in the case of Guinea, manifests itself through their social world. It can be seen in the ways they privilege the nuclear family, in attitudes toward education, in an ambivalence that borders on disdain for things like witchcraft and traditional authority, and through a complex and often contradictory set of attitudes on gender relationships that flows from Frelimo's ambitious but flawed plan for the "liberation of women."[5] Thus, despite their criticisms, both Tatiana and Evaristo see themselves as internal to a political world ordered by and originating in Frelimo and its history (see also Israel 2013), evidencing a system of meaning from which, as we will see, it is difficult to imagine an outside or alternative.

Second, working in and around Chimoio, in central Mozambique, Bertelsen has observed followers of both Renamo and Frelimo for two decades. During fieldwork in 2016, Bertelsen talked to a long-time interlocutor, "Paulo," who works for the local administration in one of Chimoio's *bairros* (slum quarters). As with almost all state employees, he is a card-carrying member of Frelimo and frequently refers to them as *donos*, or "owners of the nation." However, although Paulo allocated ownership of the nation to Frelimo, he also said there was too little space for "the other sons of the soil, Renamo"—whom he sometimes supported in the elections: he regarded Frelimo as having become "old, fat, lazy, and greedy." Using kinship terminology, Paulo adheres to a notion of Frelimo as being the genitor of Mozambique while retaining its originary position. However, he believes that it fails to care for the people in the sense, also, of political authority being conceived in redistributive terms often coaxed in the language of kinship (for instance, see Bertelsen 2016c).

In another example, while "João," who combines stints at formal employment with dabbling in the provision of black-market goods from Zimbabwe—and is by all accounts marginal to the formal political order—he nevertheless relates to Frelimo in strikingly similar terms to those of Paulo. During a conversation in 2015, João noted that "Frelimo is like the father. You have to respect him, even if he beats you. And we all know he beats! [laughs] But he is not always right." Sitting with

João in an informal bar in Chimoio, Bertelsen asked what it means for Renamo if Frelimo is like a father who errs. He grinned and said, "Well, it means that it is possible to both respect the father—and fight him as your son—at the same time!" Although Paulo and João express varying levels of support for Renamo, they reveal a similar understanding of politics as that expressed by Tatiana and Evaristo: just as them, Paulo and João also conceive of Frelimo as a total framework within which all formations find expression but, crucially, add that Frelimo, for better or worse, has assumed a hierarchical primacy in relation to the opposition.

In addition to what was revealed by the processes around Dhlakama's death—both in the snippets provided above from nominally pro-Renamo central Mozambique and, conversely, from nominally pro-Frelimo Maputo—a form of historically derived continuum is clear. While Tatiana and Evaristo did not belong to Frelimo, and often did not bother to vote for it, the concept of being "second generation," or "genetically Frelimo," nevertheless demonstrates a shared system of meaning and a form of political subjectivity that transcend the narrow confines of formal party structures. Similarly, for Paulo and João, Frelimo is cast in kinship, paternalistic, or quasicosmogenetic terms, while simultaneously tempering their expressed "respect" with the possibility of criticism of, or outright opposition (violent or electoral) to, the party in power.

For Paulo and João, in other words, Frelimo and Renamo belong to a singular continuum of meaning coexisting in the same world of political being: erstwhile political adversaries though they may be, they are nevertheless oriented by similar points of reference. Similarly, neither Tatiana nor Evaristo could be considered blind adherents to Frelimo, because both are painfully aware of what they see as the party's numerous failings. However, for them, Frelimo is intricately if at times contradictorily intertwined with what it means to be a modern, urban Mozambican. While they may repudiate Renamo as a political party, then, it remains central to their processes of identification: it is a symbol of negation—of what they define themselves against. Regarded as destructive brutes attacking the very core of postliberation Mozambican independence, a liberation that in the postwar era was necessarily guided and guarded by a paternally benevolent Frelimo, Renamo represents a primitivization of the nation-state and its citizens (see also Dinerman 2006). As such, Renamo is perceived to have a negative trajectory that must be contained, stamped out, and/or marginalized.

As political parties, Renamo and Frelimo seize and redeploy meaning, and rather than championing political projects on the basis of policies or positions, their reference points always encompass the past—the actual contours of which have long since blurred—be it socialist (Frelimo) or traditional (Renamo). In this, they promise the construction of a new future drawing on past visions (Frelimo) or inclusion of marginalized groups (Renamo), with no clear guide as to how to attain them. Both parties are thereby locked in a struggle for the creation of worlds that always remain just out of reach. In the section that follows, we delve into the dynamics of this system.

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5. We do not have the space here to elaborate on such topics; for a fuller discussion, see Manuel (2013, 2014) and Sumich (2018).

The shared if conflictual nature of political ideals has often been ignored or undercommunicated by observers and analysts eager to capture tensions within Mozambique, to portray political opposition in the form of Renamo, or to emphasize various forms of dichotomous tension (among these elite-poor, urban-rural, or central/North-south are prominent). For instance, Carbone (2005:424), in a review of the party system and politics in Mozambique, suggests that "the deep social and historical rootedness of Mozambique's new party system is apparent from the fact that the main political cleavage—and thus electoral competitions—[is] heavily shaped by past patterns of conflict." Similar analyses outlining political origins can be found in Michel Cahen's (e.g., 1997, 2002) writings, which explore the struggle between Renamo and Frelimo as a class struggle of the rural versus the urban. Also, Cabrita (2000) sees the political divisions in Mozambique as a peasant response to an alien, urban, creole Frelimo elite that has insulted and suppressed the population's traditions and destroyed their supposedly timeless way of life.

There are certainly elements of analytical truth to such characterizations, as historically, both parties have claimed to champion particular constituencies as authentic exemplars of the nation. As stated in the introduction, however, we take a different approach and in doing so build on the work of Elísio Macamo (2017), who argues that Renamo and Frelimo share a utopian orientation, political culture, and antagonism to the professed virtues of liberal democracy. As Macamo (2017:205) observed, both parties are "hostage to a political culture that is extremely hostile to individual freedom and citizenship rights. What holds them hostage is [a] millennial attitude to politics." Drawing on similar observations to those made by Macamo but conceiving of the connections between Frelimo and Renamo as more deep-seated and essential than simply being an attitude toward the practice of politics, here, we delineate the origins and trajectories of the Mozambican political ontology of state formation.

Since its foundation in 1962, Frelimo has progressed through multiple incarnations. It has been a broad-based liberation movement, a Marxist-Leninist vanguard, the dominant political party in a nominally liberal democracy, and, at its postwar peak, has operated as an elected single-party state. Since independence in 1975, Frelimo has remained in power during phases of socialist revolution, harrowing civil war, and what is popularly known as "gangster" or "savage" capitalism—while being largely indistinguishable from the state over which it (formally) presides. In fact, many Mozambicans use the term "Frelimo" interchangeably to refer to the party, the government, and the state.

Similarly, Renamo has had multiple organizational forms and operational modes: generally comprised of Mozambicans alienated from the liberation movement encapsulated by Frelimo and widely regarded as having been formed with the financial, logistical, and organizational backing of the Southern Rhodesian intelligence service around 1976 (Vines 1991). Initially, Renamo was an anti-state guerrilla movement during the immensely vi-

olent civil war. When the war ended with the General Peace Agreement (GPA) in 1992, Renamo was transformed into a political party, contesting (and doing well) in the country's first presidential and parliamentary elections in 1994. Since 1992, Renamo has shifted between being seen as and portraying itself as a political party, a popular movement, and a guerrilla army. However, despite having had a great number of representatives in parliament throughout the post-GPA period, it has consistently failed to consolidate control over formal political institutions: some notable exceptions include the municipal elections in 2003, when the party contested 33 municipalities and Renamo mayors were appointed in Beira, Ilha de Moçambique, Marromeu, Nacala, and Angoche (Vines 2017) and when in a by-election in March 2018 Renamo won the large city of Nampula (AllAfrica 2018). Regardless of this limited electoral success and representation spanning several decades, many Mozambicans, especially in the south, still refer to Renamo as either *bandidos armados* (armed bandits) or just *bandidos*.[6]

As we argued in the introduction, in many ways, the blanket terms used in relation to the two parties are not restricted to formal political organizations, institutions, or even parties, but rather serve as shorthand ways to refer to the various divisions, forms of inequality, and social tensions that exist in Mozambican society. These must be understood through the semiotics and subjectivities that provide the foundation of this social and political order. Here, we build on Verdery's (1999) understanding of political meaning: "because human activity nearly always has affective and meaningful dimensions and takes place through complex symbolic processes, I also view politics as a realm of continual struggles over meaning, or signification" (23). She furthermore contends that in order to explore such affective and meaningful dimensions, politics must be investigated as:

> a form of concerted activity among social actors, often involving stakes or particular goals. These goals may be contradictory, sometimes only quasi-intentional; they can include policy, justifying actions taken, claiming authority and disputing the authority claims of others, and creating and manipulating the cultural categories within which all of those activities are pursued. (Verdery 1999:22)

As noted by Bonnell (1997), the goal of a revolutionary movement transcends the seizure of formal domains of power. It also aims to seize meaning and the ability, in Verdery's (1999:22) words, to shape and manipulate the cultural categories through which power is contested, accepted, and understood. This does not entail the creation of a new system of meaning from scratch,

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6. Having said this, Renamo's reputation might be changing, at least to some extent, with the death of Dhlakama: Renamo is now referred to in much less bellicose terms than it was previously, and it seems likely that the rhetoric around Renamo will more generally de-escalate and that its inclusion in a discursive national pantheon of political forebears will emerge more strongly.

but the movement endeavors to transform existing tropes and discourses, changing their underlying moral meaning, and redirecting them toward new goals.

In attempting to build a new revolutionary society in Mozambique, the Frelimo leadership drew on their social background and experiences with Portuguese colonialism, which was the historical context that shaped their understanding of the world. The Portuguese colonial state had attempted to legitimize its empire through its supposed ability to understand and interact with its subject population. During the quasi-fascist New State (1932–1974), this became a full-blown ideological justification of Portuguese colonial domination. The ideology, *lusotropicalismo*, posited that Portugal, unlike the racist rule of other colonial powers, was uniquely endowed with the ability to reign over Africans in harmony and to advance their level of civilization (Freyre 1961). As the party leadership embarked on the liberation struggle, they drew on preexisting elements, such as the cultural underpinnings of parts of Christianity and colonial forms of modernity, for their transformative project. However, combined with the trials and experiments of the liberation struggle, these elements took on new meaning.

During the liberation struggle, the rural masses were to be organized by the party and transformed into the *homem novo* (new man)—a social subject who would wipe the slate clean and enable new forms of consciousness, sociability, subjectivities, loyalties, gender relations, and economic and labor practices (Sumich 2018). According to one of Frelimo's leading theorists, Sergio Vieira (1977:25), the "new man" would be based on science, rationality, and collective labor; he would learn to forego selfish individualism and lay the foundations for a society that would ultimately end the exploitation of man by man. As described in the introduction, Frelimo held a futurist orientation similar to other radical nationalist movements in Africa, and this orientation was also intertwined with Mozambique's specific social history. Thus, while the newness of homem novo was constantly trumpeted, it shared some assumptions with colonial ideas of modernity where preexisting cultural traditions were a source of "backwardness" and needed to be abolished, although this form of it was far more ambitious (Vieira 1977:25). Other colonial elements were reabsorbed and transformed when Frelimo came to power and with the 1977 transition from a socialist front organization into a Marxist-Leninist party. It appears that the urbanizing, civilizing mission of *lusotropicalismo* fueled the party leadership's revolutionary dreams and its urban condescension toward "rural backwardness," which was regarded as a symbol of all that needed to be changed.

As described above, the dualism of Renamo and Frelimo thereby suffuses the political ontology of state formation while, of course, being articulated in various ways and holding different meanings for various actors. Many scholars, including ourselves, have focused on the ways in which Frelimo and Renamo have become intertwined with various historical experiences, social positions, and aspirations (Bertelsen 2016*b*, 2016*c*; Sumich 2016). However, as noted by Wiegink (2015:14), Frelimo and Renamo do not exist in separate worlds, but are locked in competition, although Frelimo enjoys significantly more leverage. The two parties' historically salient processes of differentiation cannot, therefore, exist without each other, because they are based on a shared set of definitions and a shared political ontology, even if disagreements rage over what should be valorized.

A caveat: our argument for a political ontology runs the risk of conveying such an analytical construction as total, unchanging, or having permanent borders—a criticism sometimes aimed at the so-called ontological turn (Vigh and Sausdal 2014). Contrary to this, and indeed to any form of primordialism or essentialism, through demonstrating the formation and transformation of Renamo and Frelimo described above, we emphasize the historically contingent and perpetually emergent character of what we regard as an imminent political ontology.

A case in point here is the groundbreaking analysis of Renamo sources of the civil war recently undertaken by historian Michel Cahen (2018). In his analysis, based on notes captured from Renamo bases in the Gorongosa mountains of central Mozambique (the so-called *Cadernos de Gorongosa*), Cahen shows that the Renamo political organization and, moreover, the slogans they used to rally the local population around their cause—that is, the overthrow of Frelimo—mimicked or were similar to those of Frelimo at the time:

> It is not by chance that almost all messages end with the phrase *A Luta Continua* ("The fight continues"), or more rarely by "Revolutionary greetings." It is not by chance either that the war is defined as the "2nd struggle for national liberation" or "the revolution until its final victory." It is not by chance that there were "political commissars." (Cahen 2018:144)

To us, these recently discovered documents underline how there was—even during a time when Renamo and Frelimo were portrayed as oil and water, as Christian democrats against militant communist revolutionaries—a shared semiotic universe that comprised the two, despite both construing widely differing political discourses of how Mozambique should be transformed.

Frelimo: Political Fatherhood, Civilizational Superiority, and Cunning

When Frelimo came to power in 1975, it faced a grim situation: the nation was on the verge of bankruptcy, the departing Portuguese settlers had engaged in widespread sabotage, and the country had a high rate of illiteracy and only a handful of educated and/or trained personnel (Newitt 1995). While the party was buoyed by popular enthusiasm, few people were well acquainted with Frelimo's platform or necessarily understood its goals (Sumich 2018). Despite these difficulties, the party rapidly began to transform the former colony along radical, future-oriented lines; it inspired supporters, trained political militants, and encouraged deep wells of opposition. Frelimo's effort to

overcome underdevelopment and usher in a new future demanded a punishing tempo, as the transformation of economic relationships—in which scattered plots must give way to communal farms and factories must rise from the bush—and the transformation of Mozambicans themselves all had to occur in a few short years (Isaacman 1978). For the new society to flourish, citizens had to be remade as the abovementioned *homem novo* as quickly as possible, and the party attempted to extend its grip in almost every conceivable direction (see Farré 2015). This was perhaps the high point of the revolutionary party-state, and the leadership indulged some of its most grandiose ambitions; however, the forward march of the social revolution was brought to a grinding halt during the civil war, leading to the collapse of Mozambican socialism in 1990.

The reforms that followed the 1992 peace declaration promised a series of revolutionary (or counterrevolutionary, as it were) transformations to refashion the nation as a liberal, capitalist polity (for details, see Obarrio 2014), although there were in fact distinct continuities with the previous era. Not least, Frelimo retained control of the state: indeed, much of the leadership had held power since the 1980s. The *practice* of power, however, now changed significantly. Much like McGovern's (2017) description of postsocialist Guinea, the state went from being omnipresent in social relations to being an occasional visitor that periodically demanded support. As one *secretário de bairro* (low-level party member) told Sumich: "I am a member of Frelimo because it is the party of my parents; I grew up in it, but Frelimo has forgotten me. It is not just me; when it is time for elections, Frelimo comes and promises solutions to all of our problems, but after winning, they do nothing." Such sentiments were found even at the highest levels of power, as a former minister ruefully observed: "What we in Frelimo once had in excess, a desire to go out and be among the people, to learn from the people, is now entirely absent." Unlike the utopian ambitions and the ideological fervor of the early years, power was now often based on what seemed to be inertia. One urbanite in Maputo stated that "for many people, it just seems like Frelimo has always been there and always will [be]." Another woman in 2013 told Sumich: "I do not think there is much danger of Frelimo imploding; too many people still need the party. Without it, they have nothing, so they will stay loyal." Crucially, such sentiments do not mean that Frelimo's rule had become completely emptied of meaning for supporters; in fact, the party´s historic role as the engineer guiding the emergence of both the nation and its people could still inspire admiration, even if its ambition was progressively scaled back. A well-off resident of Maputo in 2009 told Sumich:

> Frelimo is the best organized party, not just in Mozambique, but in Africa and the world! Just look at SNASP [the socialist era secret police]. They were very well trained and organized, they kept everything in line and even managed to assassinate some Renamo guys in Portugal during the war. Only Frelimo has the capacity to govern this country at every level. Frelimo has asked me to join a few times, but I do not really want to. I have nothing against Frelimo; I admire many things about them. When Guebuza [president of Mozambique from 2005 to 2015] came in, he purged many ministers who had been in government forever; it shows that no one is untouchable here. As for Renamo, well, Dhlakama is a clown, and Renamo's program of simply saying no to everything Frelimo proposes is not a program, and what the country needs is a serious and constructive opposition. Look, Frelimo's greatest achievement was in creating a united nation where race and ethnicity, while obviously still a problem, is nothing in comparison to other places; they really did create a kind of sense of Mozambicanness. I may not be a member, but I respect many of their achievements. Yes, they are all corrupt, but they are intelligent.

While Sumich's interlocutor praised Frelimo's construction of a universalist concept of citizenship, it was in fact built on an elitist exclusion of large segments of the population—a trait found far beyond the gilded lives of the more privileged members of the capital's population.

During his long-term fieldwork in Honde, outside Chimoio, Bertelsen became well acquainted with a rural Frelimo *secretário*, "Mateu." Mateu had joined Frelimo in the early 1980s during the heyday of socialist experimentation; during Bertelsen's fieldwork in the early to mid-2000s, Mateu eagerly pointed out various sites relating to communal farms and zones where Renamo groups had clashed with government troops. Beyond pride in having been part of *a revolução*, Mateu often communicated to his neighbors, relatives, and passersby his own trajectory from having been a peasant to having joined Frelimo: having survived the civil war, he was now the local party secretary. This point was asserted by communicating the transformation of his own political subjectivity to that of a *homem novo* through Frelimo politics—by comparison with his neighbors, whom he regularly chastised. The following is what Mateu said to a middle-aged peasant at an alcohol-fueled social event following a ceremony: "You are a dog! What is politics? What is thought? Ah, you do not know! You are still a brute; you are still a monkey from the bush."

Mateu's comments—and there were others like him in the area—exemplify a pride in having had his political being and sense of self transformed by the Frelimo-led socialist revolution. Paradoxically, this led him to feel like he had risen above his fellow peasants, whom he regarded as, sadly, untransformed and animallike. Mateu's comments also underline the *temporal* dimension of the political project of Frelimo revolving around the willed and future-oriented transformation of people, nation, and society. But more than this, if Frelimo were no longer able to claim that only its party had a legitimate right to exercise power in Mozambique—to be at the vanguard of *o povo* (the people)—it nevertheless based its control on a sense of being the owner or father of the nation and on treating the opposition as a wayward child. Although Frelimo was at the height of its postwar power at the time of Mateu's comments, and was ruling as an elected single-party state, in many ways it needed Renamo, which acted as the primitive, or negative, potential from which Frelimo

protected the nation. As the party's ambitions to transform society faded, and its members became increasingly privileged segments of the population, guarding against the potentiality of Renamo was one of the few remaining reasons for Frelimo's existence.

While Frelimo only made sense, as it were, when Renamo was taken into consideration, a strict hierarchy nevertheless needed to be maintained. The numerous ways in which this embedded hierarchy was manifested were clear when Sumich was invited to attend a session at the Nampula municipality in 2008. This was at the height of then-president Guebuza's power, when Frelimo had managed to retake several northern municipalities where they had previously been weak. The differing levels of power and resources between Frelimo and Renamo was immediately evident. The Frelimo mayor had a master's degree in development studies from a well-respected British university; he was dressed in perfectly tailored slacks and a dress shirt; he was wearing an expensive watch, spoke elegant, cultivated Portuguese, and exuded an easy confidence. The head of the Renamo *bancada* (delegation) was wearing mismatched clothing—a brightly colored blazer and slacks; his clothes were several sizes too big for him, and throughout the session he seemed to have difficulty articulating his responses. There was a single representative of a small third party, PIM (*Partido Independente de Moçambique*/Independent Party of Mozambique), but he was ignored. From the beginning, the session was contentious, although most arguments were about protocol, concerning which plan would be discussed when and in what order, rather than about substantive issues. The head of the Renamo bancada claimed that the minutes from the last meeting were incorrect in showing that he had voted for a particular measure. He said, "You know me, I would not vote for that." The mayor then proposed a vote to disregard this complaint, which was passed overwhelmingly. The head of the Renamo bancada ended up voting against his own objection. Renamo then offered numerous complaints concerning security, claiming the police were agents of the Frelimo party and that the streets were unsafe; they accused Frelimo of embezzling or misplacing money needed for urban infrastructure; they also complained about the high price of urban transport. One outraged Frelimo delegate then responded that Frelimo had created this country and that if anyone was a thief, it was Dhlakama—a comment predictably causing uproar among Renamo delegates.

The mayor then took the floor and asked Renamo if they were still the party of armed resistance, further arguing that although they complained constantly, they never proposed a solution. The mayor's tone was that of an exasperated father to a recalcitrant child, repeatedly claiming that Renamo could not object if they did not understand. While there were several acrimonious exchanges between the two parties, most votes were passed overwhelmingly. The antagonism that characterized this particular session of the municipal assembly, and political relations in Mozambique more generally, did not in any way create obstacles for the actual practice of power. In fact, it could be argued that such antagonism was a vital component of the power

structure. Both Frelimo and Renamo could thus play out their various roles: the party of the modern, urban citizen, and the father of the nation still busy in its ceaseless construction, against the champion of the marginalized, acting against an arrogant and distant elite. These roles depend on never-ending antagonism, because each can only exist in relation to the other.

Renamo: The Voice of the People— Open-Ended Politics and Anti-greed

For Renamo, a similar form of conceptualization was at play: its self-definition as the voice of the people only made sense when defined against the supposed corruption and cosmopolitan arrogance of the urban, creole Frelimo elite. However, within this basic framework, people could engage with one party or the other for a variety of personal reasons and grievances, while using the ideological umbrella provided by the other party as a form of justification. For example, Bertelsen has long known a man called "Tchopa," who hails from a peri-urban community close to Chimoio. Tchopa is an entrepreneurial young man from a poor peasant background, who supplemented his income with a makeshift open-air stall in a local market on Chimoio's outskirts selling sugar smuggled from Zimbabwe. Throughout his twenties, he was unsuccessful in his business ventures and eventually returned to his rural homestead, setting up a modest house (even by local standards) and fathering two children with his girlfriend. Impoverished and gradually more disillusioned with what he called "the politics of thieves," which he saw as marginalizing people like him, he increasingly got into trouble with neighbors: there were accusations of theft, drunken fights, and debts incurred but not honored. After leaving a note for his girlfriend that he was heading to Gorongosa (Renamo's historic base and its headquarters in the recent fighting), he disappeared in 2013. Then, suddenly, in 2015 he reappeared in Chimoio, and Bertelsen met him again, by chance, and had the opportunity to hear what he had been doing in the interim:

Epah! Brother, I have been to Gorongosa. I had to get away from here, you know. Life was no good here. *There* life was good! I joined them [Renamo] after first trying farming there also. But that was the same as here; hard work and no pay. So, I joined them as soon as I could.

They say war is dangerous but, ah, I do not know. Life is cheap here in Mozambique, anyway. This you should know by now, brother. But to me . . . Renamo is just a name. But the war is good. It gives me opportunities for things. I can eat meat often. I get respect with others, with the people there [in Gorongosa].

You know that I have always hated Frelimo, yes? They are from Maputo and they are rich because we are poor. They steal. They also tell us what to do. I do not like that. So, I join those who fight Frelimo and Maputo. But Renamo? Ah, I am

not sure who they are . . . anyone can join them, and anyone can leave. You can join the war or you can take a break, as I do now. So, it is a place for opportunity, you see?

During his stay, Tchopa bragged about the wealth amassed in Gorongosa—it seems he was eager to convey the impression that the fighting was worth it and that he would emerge as a "big man." However, returning after 2 years, he presented only MZN 50 (around US$1) to his girlfriend and his two children, having spent the rest of the (little) money he had on *nipa* (a locally brewed alcohol) and eating at various family households. Staying only 3 days in Chimoio, Tchopa disappeared again, returning to the promised land of Gorongosa.

Maputo's few middle-class supporters of Renamo displayed similar grievances, although they tended to be less obviously interested in personal gain and instead emphasized their disillusionment with Frelimo and a sense of betrayal, while still being bound to its overall political ontology. "Pedro" was a former Frelimo follower who now supported Renamo. While he poured scorn on Frelimo and claimed that Dhlakama was the true voice of the Mozambican people, he still made use of many of the symbolic tropes that underlay Frelimo's role in creating both the nation and its citizenry, even though he inverted the meaning and value:

> Who is in charge here? Who controls the system? What system? You see Guebuza driving through town in his convoy. There are sirens, flashing lights, soldiers, and police. You think that is power? It's not. It's just noise and show. Actual life in this country is chaos, no one is in charge.
>
> One of our biggest problems is this massive cultural shift that has occurred in Mozambique. Many people were disconnected from their culture and background by the upheavals of the liberation struggle and the civil war. Most of the older people they could connect with, who could give people stability, died or were driven off into exile, and there was a generation that grew up in utter poverty with the war waging and little cultural or social support. They, the children of the time of hunger, they grew up in absolute poverty; often recent arrivals from the rural areas, they worship material things. They look prosperous, with a nice shirt, but they live in a shack and go hungry. This is where the country is at: we do not have development, we have economic growth; there is a difference. Frelimo sits on top of this, but they are just thieves.

For Pedro, Frelimo's claims of "creating a new man" and abolishing obscurantism and rural feudalism in an effort to bring about a brave new world had achieved precisely the opposite result. Instead of prosperity and unity, it had unleashed empty materialism and chaos, while Dhlakama's valorization of "tradition" meant he was the authentic voice of the people (see also Bertelsen 2016*c*). Although Pedro was articulating a direct challenge to Frelimo's claims of legitimacy, he was still doing so through the party's symbolic vocabulary and systems of sig-

nification, even though he was making a diametrically opposed point. Even the party's most ardent critics were often trapped in a form of fettered circularity, where polarized duality sprung from a shared reference point.

The imminent political ontology we have suggested thus goes far beyond the practices and trappings of power. Instead, it had a much deeper cosmological ambition to reform social relations, kinship structures, and understandings of the world. But despite Frelimo's efforts to tame and reform social structures such as kinship, these could also serve as a potent form of mobilizing opposition. When Sumich asked a young man, "Walter," why his father joined Renamo, he told him the following story:

> My grandfather ran a transport company in Nampula during the civil war. One night, at the height of the war when there were shortages of every possible thing, they were transporting supplies and they were hit by a rebel ambush. Almost everyone, including my grandfather, was killed, and the trucks were looted. One of my grandfather's helpers managed to hide and survive. He eventually snuck back to the local Frelimo office to report what had happened, but when he got there, he heard a lot of noise coming from inside. He peeked through and he saw that the local Frelimo boss was having a party with all of the goods that had just been looted. The soldiers did it because they knew they could blame it on Renamo. I do not know, but I always thought this is why my father joined Renamo. How could he be with the party that killed his father?

Those described above joined Renamo for a variety of reasons, spanning the personal to the ideological, and they occupy a variety of class positions in Mozambican society. What is common to all, however, is that they make use of the same points of reference as Frelimo supporters but invert the meaning. Just like Frelimo, Renamo can only "make sense" when defined against the other.

An Imminent Political Ontology: Meaning, Exclusion, and Stasis

Evident in the formation of a broad and collective form of political subjectivity described above are several elements—analytical, empirical, and theoretical—that we believe are helpful in delineating the workings of an imminent political ontology in Mozambique. We focus next on three main elements: the seizure of meaning, the ways in which the system shows signs of deep instability combined with stasis, and the dynamics of exclusion that are all central to the imminent political ontology.

First, the seizure of meaning allows this form of unstable stasis to endure through periods of dramatic transformation and to retain its hegemonic status in the present. The enemy can remain the enemy irrespective of changed formal political circumstances. An example of this can be seen with a well-off

woman from a Frelimo family who spoke to Sumich. She told him about her shock as a child when she saw pictures of the GPA being signed in 1992, because Dhlakama and other high-ranking Renamo members were ordinary humans; she had assumed they would be twisted goblin-like creatures. Renamo, in her mind, was not the opposition, or an argument that society should be structured differently, but rather existed outside the pale of humanity itself. While as an adult she no longer doubted that Renamo was staffed by human beings, she still found them unfit to rule. However, this time it was not because they were so dramatically "other," but rather because they mimicked Frelimo and appeared incapable of original thought: "Renamo is actually more Frelimo than Frelimo. I mean, it is obvious Dhlakama learned everything he knows from Frelimo. Have you ever seen him give a speech? He copies Samora[7] [Machel] completely, from the way he talks down to the way he points his finger at people. I mean, it is really kind of funny."

Similar processes can be found among Renamo supporters. During the civil war, Renamo often claimed that it was the true inheritor of Eduardo Mondlane's[8] nationalist mission before it was corrupted by Samora's communism. More recently, Renamo has adopted the mantle of its one-time archenemy Samora and claims to uphold his vision against the corrupt and degraded version of the party that Frelimo has become. When Dhlakama died, many high-ranking members of Frelimo—who had publicly advocated the murder of Dhlakama to deal with Renamo's open act of armed rebellion—now called him a "brother," a "partner for peace," and a "great son of Mozambique." Such examples illustrate both instability, in that the messages have changed dramatically, and also stasis, because the underlying meaning remains basically the same. However, the frictions that produce this stasis are also what undermine it. Although Frelimo's power was underwritten by an economic boom driven by an imagined future of mineral-based plenty, the country had by 2014 plunged into political and economic crises.[9] In many ways, Mozambique is beginning to resemble the paradox Yurchak (2008) described for the former Soviet Union: it was a regime that was eternal, immutable, and all-powerful, and when it collapsed, no one was surprised.

Second, what is striking about the cases, which comprise urbanites and rural dwellers, wealthy citizens, and marginal figures, is that there is an exclusiveness to the world of orientation, meaning, and subjectivity that is provided by the Renamo-Frelimo duality. It has become virtually impossible to consciously narrate in interviews (as can be seen in the statements of members of Maputo's privileged classes), express in political

action (such as municipal council meetings in Nampula), or enact in social settings (e.g., a party member reminding his neighbors that they are little better than dogs) a world of only *one* of the seemingly exclusive narratives. Therefore, as political meaning-bearing entities of the real, in Hay's sense, Frelimo and Renamo produce each other as mutual gatekeepers. This suggests that this dual exclusionary force entails an elimination or marginalization of other movements or parties that may seek to establish themselves—such as the range of other political parties over the last 25 years that have never managed to break the Renamo/Frelimo hold on political meaning, being, and worlds. Effectively, there has been a continual, generative political ontology predicated on bifurcated ideas that encompass and thereby redefine political orientations that challenge the dichotomy or relegate such alternatives to the margins. Thus, for many interlocutors of both authors, this fluidity and comprehensiveness is often summed up by stating that if Renamo ever came to power at a national formal level, Frelimo cadres would simply join Renamo. Additionally, Bertelsen has worked with many in Chimoio who are card-carrying members of Frelimo—to access the perks and positions of the party-state—yet vote for Renamo.

Finally, we return to Verdery's point that politics is ultimately about the manipulation and creation of cultural categories: we have shown here that such categories throughout the post-independence period in Mozambique have structured social life and form the basis for processes of exclusion and inclusion. However, these categories are increasingly functioning outside the domains and controls of their genitors and erstwhile guardians, who can increasingly be undermined by their own logic and claims to legitimacy. A concrete manifestation of this has been the recurring popular uprisings in major Mozambican urban areas in 2008, 2010, and 2012 (Bertelsen 2016a; Brito 2017). These protests have been compounded by recent cases of kidnappings, high-level corruption, the siphoning off of public funds to the tune of billions of dollars, political assassinations of journalists and critics, and low-intensity conflict between Frelimo and Renamo from 2012 to 2016: all of these have heightened political volatility (see also Muchemwa and Harris 2019). Arguably, such events have created fissures in the political ontology of Mozambique. Hage (2014) observes that while political ontologies are comprehensive, generative, and enduring—and undergirded by a seizure of meaning and the production of exclusion—they also have volatile content. This suggests that there is always the possibility of radical new departures or modes of transformation. In the Mozambican context, this would necessarily involve the emergence of political subjectivities that are not based on the comprehensive Renamo-Frelimo duality that is integral to the country's current political ontology.

7. Mozambique's charismatic first president, 1975–1986, and a socialist icon.

8. Mondlane was Frelimo's first leader; he was assassinated in Tanzania in 1969.

9. For examples of a wider discussion on mineral-driven dreams of development in Lusophone Africa and their consequences, see Kirshner and Power (2015) and Schubert (2018).

Conclusion

As glimpsed in the aftermath of Dhlakama's death in 2018, and as demonstrated by the ethnographic and comparative

examples in this article, the seemingly diametrically opposed political organizations of Frelimo and Renamo may instead be regarded as primary actors in a shared effort to seize, form, and redeploy systems of meaning. While Frelimo's early goals had much in common with James Scott's (1998) description of state modernization, in contrast to Renamo's "neotraditional" peasant-based project, both, we have argued, are encompassed by a shared political ontology. However, there is a double dynamic to this ontology, meaning that it is both reified and reifying as alternatives are co-opted or redefined by the dominant dichotomy and it undermines efforts to bring to fruition the visions that supposedly animate their respective political projects. Moreover, what we approach here as political ontology has, throughout the decades that Renamo and Frelimo have coexisted, transformed into a regime—albeit one with ossified components that are continuously challenged, as our material also reveals.

Buck-Morss, as described in the introduction, has argued that communism and liberalism base themselves on a fundamentally different principle, with liberalism conceiving of the world through space and communism through time (2002). Frelimo and Renamo made use of both tropes in practice, blending them within the particular social and historical context. However, what McGovern (2017) has termed a futurist orientation has long animated the worldview championed by Frelimo, while Renamo tended to focus more on the liberal conception of space. Instead of being polar opposites, however, these separate projects of also meaning-making have become increasingly intertwined, especially as the utopian drive that once animated them has collapsed. Frelimo still claims the mantel of social engineering, ceaselessly engaged in constructing the Mozambican citizen, in deference to Renamo, one firmly circumscribed by national boundaries as the previous ambition of ending "exploitation of man by man" has long since been abandoned. Without this utopian goal, though, it is never actually clear what this citizen would be, and the task remains a ceaseless act of construction with no possible end point. Renamo, in contrast, draws its legitimacy through its claim to represent certain established identities, in the liberal fashion, while also fully recognizing Frelimo's constructivist role and accepting Frelimo as the *donos* (owners) of the nation. In such a situation where duality and otherness are internalized, the enemy is eternal; it can never be destroyed because if it were, the victor not only would have no further reason to exist but also would be unable to define its own existence.

Mozambique, through its tumultuous and polarized history, allows us to see the formation of a political ontology that trumps formal party politics, simple identitarian notions, or dichotomies between urban/rural and so forth. Such an ontology has shaped the way that its adherents conceive of kinship, historical forms of authority, conceptions of the supernatural, and gender. At the same time, it is widely recognized that its political initiators are totally incapable of ever actually achieving its claims; it is always *imminent* but will never actually be. Nielsen (2014:214) describes the widespread concept

of *kuzuma utomi*, which refers to statements about or plans for the future that the speaker acknowledges will probably never happen. This concept has many parallels with the political ontology described here, where the basic premise can never be achieved but continues to reside on a plane of imminence. Thus, Mozambique remains trapped in a form of hegemonic stagnation—or "fettered circularity" (Humphrey 2008)—as change is both conceived of and neutered by a dominant, shared system of signification.[10] This perspective necessarily shapes the totality of the political domain—in which there are also possibilities for other political forces to contest the hegemonic dynamic—in addition to structuring power relationships more generally, outside strictly defined party politics. Such explorations offer a possible way forward, toward the fulfilment of what Hage (2014) identifies as anthropology's radical political potential by way of providing alternative analytical pathways into how the political operates on many registers beyond the formal and identitarian. In this article, we have both outlined a historical genealogy of Mozambican postcolonial history and shown some examples of the powerful ethnographic expressions of such a political ontology, believing that similar analyses may have purchase in other postcolonial contexts. Furthermore, in a time of massive transformation of what we used to think of as stable ideologies and political parties (a case in point being global populist movements), we also believe an attentiveness to the force and duration of political meaning as ontology may reenergize the critical vision of an anthropological analysis of politics—and what that analysis might be.

Acknowledgments

10. The condition of fettered circularity seems set to continue. In the elections of 2019, Frelimo secured a landslide victory of 73% compared with 22% for Renamo. However, numerous cases of blatant fraud were recorded by local civil society organizations and international observers. Renamo has called on the nation to reject the results and demand a fresh election. Frelimo has thus far refused such demands, seemingly drawing the battle lines for future confrontations between the two parties (France 24 2019).

Comments

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Just out of Respect for the Dead: Kinship and Spiritual Immanence in Mozambique

The death of long-serving Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama offers an excellent opportunity to rethink the workings of Mozambican politics. Written by two anthropologists with an intimate knowledge of the country, this article challenges readings of Mozambique's bifurcated political landscape as intrinsically determined by the opposition between Frelimo and Renamo, by focusing instead on what the two parties share. The result is a compelling analysis of a relational ontology in which Frelimo and Renamo only exist through their relationship to each other. As the authors point out, Renamo leadership does, after all, have its origins in Frelimo, and recent evidence also reveals how Renamo has often quite explicitly modeled itself on Frelimo. More importantly, the authors argue that despite their very different political programs, the two parties hold a similar orientation toward the future. What is shared is not so much the shape and texture of this utopic future as its temporality or, as it were, its purported imminence.

While it might be difficult to imagine an alternative vision of the near future to the one that maintains that things will get better soon, I would like to push further the reflection on the temporality of the relational ontology that existentially binds the two parties together, and that the authors so nicely describe, by picking up on a single and very specific element introduced in the text, namely, the interpretation of Felipe Nyusi's posthumous praise of Dhlakama. Extending the authors' insights on the prevalence of kinship as an idiom of political relations, and answering their call to approach politics as shaped by the manipulation of systems of meaning, I would argue that another important thing the two parties have in common is a particular understanding of personhood, and, more specifically, a shared understanding of the "immanence of the dead" (Wirtz 2016), who stubbornly "remain within" the realm of the living.

When the president of Mozambique posthumously declared Afonso Dhlkama "a hero of the nation"—the same Dhlakama who led the protracted civil war against Frelimo (1977–1992) and, more recently, the renewed fighting in the center of the country—many were taken by surprise. For the authors, the posthumous praise can be read as a fissure in the dichotomy between Frelimo and Renamo. Perhaps, but some of my interlocutors in the south of the country saw things differently. Consider the critique voiced by Anita, an astute political observer from Inhambane who was born shortly after the country

gained independence from Portugal in 1975. According to her, Nyusi's proclamation of Dhlakama as "hero of the nation" was little more than lip service. She told me: "You only need to compare Dhlakama's funeral to the funeral Marcelino dos Santos[12] received to see." In her view, "those who don't read much, might have been fooled into thinking that Dhlakama was treated like a national hero, but for us who read a lot [on social media], we know that it was just talk [*papo furado*]." Politics as usual.

In Mozambique, as in many parts of the continent, political authority is often couched in the language of kinship. The authors highlight, for instance, how Frelimo has embraced the role of "political fatherhood" in contrast to Renamo, which has been relegated to the status of "a wayward child." Extending this important observation to the analysis of Dhlakama's death, I would argue that Nyusi's posthumous response also deserves be understood as embedded in a particular cultural context in which the living and the dead remain bound by complex ties of reciprocity. The dead are always treated with respect, at least that is the ideal, regardless of their past deeds. Even a deceased wayward child would not be spoken ill of. In fact, death generally generates important moments of reflection, as revelations are made and legacies are assessed and rewritten. As Anita pointed out, "now that Dhlakama is dead, it is easier to see that he helped bring democracy to Mozambique, even despite the fact that our democracy remains deficient." Death congeals. But it also opens new channels of communication, as the dead continue to make demands on those they left behind. The immanence of the dead had, indeed, proven particularly contentious during the war, which some even described as "a war of spirits" (Wilson 1992), as many of its battles were waged in the spirit realm and Renamo's powers as a guerrilla movement at the time have often been attributed to the fact that its leader was a Ndau, an ethnolinguistic group from central Mozambique whose members were particularly feared for their occult powers. Across the country, the spirits of those who died during the war have often returned to haunt the living, and in a country where the government's amnesty law encouraged silence rather than accountability (Igreja 2018), many war survivors have relied on spiritual means in their struggles for postwar accountability and reconciliation (Honwana 2003; Igreja 2018:172; Obarrio 2017).

In a country still scarred by war, I see Nyusi's posthumous praise of Dhlakama as the acknowledgment of a shared ontology that transcends the political; one that recognizes the spiritual immanence of the dead.

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12. Marcelino dos Santos, who passed away in February 2020, was one of the founders of Frelimo and remained a left-leaning member of the party even after the adoption of neoliberal reforms. Unlike Dhlakama, dos Santos was buried in Maputo's Heroes Square, alongside all the other "heroes of the nation."

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The Political Afterlives of Death, from Mozambique to Angola

Scholars interested in Angola and Mozambique have surely come across the trope of symmetry recurrently established between both countries in terms of their postcolonial political history. The trope begins here: Angola and Mozambique were former Portuguese colonies that gained independence at the same time (1975) after decades of liberation wars staged by militarized movements. These movements later became political contenders in the postcolonial period, marked by the extension of military means into civil war and the triumph of one socialist party (MPLA in Angola and Frelimo in Mozambique) over an "other" (UNITA and Renamo, respectively), prolonged throughout years and years of de facto single-party rule in a more or less fictive democratic multiparty system.

In reaction to Sumich and Bertelsen's article, I want to focus on what they refer to as the death of the devil, that is, on how the passing of the main oppositionist leader (Afonso Dhlakama), historically framed as the origin of all evil and man responsible for the country's shortcomings in its postcolonial history, plays into this binary political ontology. This is, at the same time, a classic anthropological trope: a theory of enmity based on the adversarial binary of, for example, integrity versus alterity (e.g., Castro 1992) or of domination and resistance (Scott 1990). To what extent is this binary ontology inescapable within an anthropology of the political?

Sumich and Bertelsen describe how Afonso Dhlakama, leader of Renamo since 1979, was recurrently depicted as a war criminal, or the "armed bandit" of Mozambique. But on his passing in 2018, Dhlakama was publicly acknowledged by his Frelimo rival Filipe Nyusi as a "brother" and "hero." What happened that such a radical change took place? A mere observation of etiquette and diplomacy, or perhaps of Turnerian ritual process? In any case, such a radical change challenges the fixity of certain ontological configurations of the political—and, by extension, of the human.

Concurring with the authors in that this points to something other than the traditional identification of enmity as part of the political ontology of authoritarian postcolonial regimes, I will navigate the comparative trope and explore how this ontology plays out within a more fluid landscape that incorporates a plurality of political agents, across the living and the posthumous (Weinstein and Colebrook 2017). In Angola, Dhlakama was none other than Jonas Savimbi, the man "on the wrong side of history" (Fernando 2012). Emerging from the Angolan liberationist youth movements exiled in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in 1966 Savimbi founded the UNITA movement in counterpoint to other guerrilla movements (MPLA, UPA/FNLA) and became one of the three main protagonists of Angolan independence in 1975. In the civil war that ensued, and

at the height of the Cold War, he fought the Marxist-Leninist MPLA with the support of North American foreign policy articulations. But even with the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, the MPLA's position remained unchallenged, and Savimbi and his partisan following were progressively enclosed within a logic of marginal, clandestine ethnic-based (Ovimbundo) bush war in the interior eastern regions of the country.

Thus, while Dhlakama was able to pursue a long political career with a certain degree of legitimation in terms of partisan leadership and participation in three presidential elections, Savimbi's postcolonial political trajectory was one of perpetuated guerrilla life, punctuated with a brief stint as a presidential candidate in the 1992 elections during a short-lived armistice. His death in 2002, at the hands of governmental forces after more than a dozen assassination attempts, was subsequently marketed as the inauguration of peace construction in Angola, after almost consecutive 26 years of civil war. This might explain why his bloody, bullet-ridden body appeared on Angolan state television as a trophy, the stepping-stone for a reconstructed New Angola that was to emerge in the new era of Angolan history (Péclard 2008).

That was in 2002. But Savimbi's death did not imply his retirement from Angolan politics; in fact, he continued to be an active emblem of any expression of negation of the victorious history of MPLA rule (Blanes 2016), subject to recurrent demonization. In 2008, his unsuspected tomb, located in the distant city of Luena (Moxico), was vandalized by MPLA youths (Cawaia 2008). In a strange moment in 2016, the famous online video game *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* depicted Savimbi as a character who was none other than a barbarian war machine. His family later sued the game's publisher, Activision Blizzard, but the image of Savimbi as the devil was perpetuated in global popular culture.

In the Angolan political landscape, this translated into a subjugation of UNITA and his former leader within the MPLA political system (Schubert 2017), which domesticated and depoliticized both partisan opposition and civic society in its authoritarian rule (Péclard 2013; Schubert 2015). However, after 2011, with the emergence of a wave of contestation against the MPLA regime inspired by the Arab Spring (Blanes 2016, 2019), the political landscape somewhat changed. In what became known in Angola as the "Revú" or Revolutionary Movement, several activists began to contest the hegemonic narrative of the "New Angola" of postwar prosperity, questioning, among other things, the historical imposition of the MPLA-centered national narrative and its historical manufacturers. During my research with these activists, I progressively acknowledged how many of them, without necessarily adhering to UNITA, reclaimed Savimbi as yet another victim of the bloody, ruthless rule of the MPLA, alongside other oppositionists such as Nito Alves, Holden Roberto, or M'fulumpinga Lando. In their first demonstrations against then-president José Eduardo dos Santos, they also sang famous Savimbi slogans (Ball and Gastrow 2020; Morais 2019).

At the same time, other processes were taking place as described above. In 2019, in a similar move as with Dhlakama's posthumous regeneration in Mozambique, the Angolan government's new cabinet enabled a public reburial of Savimbi's remains, this time in accordance with his own wishes. As one of Savimbi's 30 children expressed, "he had always said he wanted to go home," where his own father was buried (AfricaNews 2019).

While this move can be analyzed within politics of reconciliation, this shifting posthumous presence of Savimbi in Angolan politics exposes the complexity of the political ontology addressed by Bertelsen and Sumich, highlighting how the oppositional, bifurcational logics of political faring in the postcolony is not as stalemate as it seems, but instead in a state of constant transition. In this respect, while adversarial, polarizing politics are a theme, their form and directionality are in fact unstable and shifting. And if there is an Angola/Mozambique trope I openly embrace, it is that of their tumultuous politics.

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In *The Fire of the Jaguar*, Terence Turner's (2017) seminal exegesis of one Kayapo myth, the schematic tautology of classical Lévi-Straussian structuralism is challenged by the internal self-regulation of dynamic structuralism. Whereas the former privileges the structural (synchronic) coordinates of seemingly disparate cultural arrangements, the latter suggests that *everything*—even imputed structural coordinates—arises from and can only be read as (diachronic) actions. "At the basic level as well as at the higher (transformational) levels," he writes, "the structure of the myth is homologous with the model of Kayapo social structure as a dynamic, hierarchically structured, self-regenerating system" (Turner 2017:135–136).

The core argument of this article is built on a similar kind of qualitative arithmetic that allows for oppositions and dichotomies but without being irrevocably affixed to classical structuralist binarism. Departing from most conventional readings of Mozambique's recent political history, Sumich and Bertelsen suggest that what appears as a bifurcated political system is actually one "composite political ontology that is imminent rather than fixed and waxing and waning rather than stable." As such, the authors present us with an ethnographic account of a sociopolitical arrangement that is structured around otherness, dualities, and detachment as interior forces and whose dynamic shifts and turns also recalibrate the structuring capacities of the system itself.

As someone who has worked in Mozambique for the last 15 years, this is a very compelling and much-needed analytical approach. Especially since the 2008 global financial crisis, there has been a growing need to expand the analytical vocabulary with which allegedly postsocialist-gone-neoliberal nation-states, such as Mozambique, are being examined. Even today, it is not uncommon for political anthropological analyses of such volatile environments to put the emphasis on their postsocialist (read: transition-fetishized) histories; the implication being that even when we are offered crucial insights about the sociopolitical repercussions of collapsing ideological systems, we are still short on ethnographic information about what actually *is* (an important exception is West and Raman 2009).

In this regard, Sumich and Bertelsen offer a unique perspective on contemporary oppositional political strife, which might perhaps best be described as monadic ontological dynamism: there is, the authors tell us, an "exclusiveness to the world of orientation" imprinted in and emerging from the Frelimo-Renamo political duality. While this world of orientation does seem to be defined by a monadic "internal finality" (Leibniz 1991:58–59), it is nevertheless a product of its own open-ended and dynamic historicity. This takes us back to Turner's dynamic structuralism, which is reflected in his insistence on seeing myths not as passive reflections of a rigid socioeconomic organization, but rather as the "perspective of a 'subject' or actor . . . engaged in creating, through their own actions, the order of relations that the structure of the myth reflects" (Turner 2017:136). If we consider Sumich and Bertelsen's analysis in this light, it seems to me that the political ontology that they have identified (I deliberately phrase it like this rather than the "Mozambican political ontology," although I suspect that it is in fact this latter definition that the authors implicitly endorse) is one that, while it might chart "what *exists politically*" (pace Hay 2006), is never more stable than the actions through which it dynamically comes to have structural implications. In my view, one of the major theoretical strengths of the article is precisely that it operationalizes ontological difference as an analytical heuristic both for plotting the "unmarked" topography of local sociopolitical universes (Viveiros de Castro 1998) as well as the dynamism of its transformation (Barber 1981; Scott 2005). It is, in other words, a twinned-out scaling of political processes, which makes it possible to measure the complexity of different phenomena by focusing on their specificity (and vice versa; Strathern 1991).

Sumich and Bertelsen go to great lengths to emphasize the "double conditioning" (Foucault 1978) of Frelimo and Renamo, where "each can only exist in relation to the other." And while I do agree that both parties seem to be "locked in a struggle for the creation of worlds that always remain just out of reach," I am less convinced that Frelimo and Renamo increasingly "become mirror images of each other." What comes across from the authors' many conversations with local Frelimo and Renamo supporters is the sense of a once-shared ideological project that has gradually morphed into a narrative vehicle for mnemonic revisionism that serves the interests of a small and extremely wealthy power-holding elite (Cahen 1993; Dinerman 2006). Whereas it seems to be the ambition of many Frelimo cadres to maintain consistency in a gradually disintegrating nationalist "liberation script" (Coelho 2013), which confers legitimacy to the ruling party on the basis of an all-encompassing narrative of

its victorious and revolutionary liberation of the country in 1975, Renamo supporters appear to be acting on a deeply felt sense of deception with this project. In other words, while Frelimo resuscitates a singular narrative of nationalist victory, which many party cadres also cynically distance themselves from, Renamo claims lost ownership of this very narrative. I would therefore suggest to consider the relationship less of a dichotomous opposition between mutually dependent parties than a situation where pairs of values are sought to be (almost cannibalistically) encompassed by their contrary (Dumont 1980). Roy Wagner's (1981:20) apt description of his relationship with his Daribi interlocutors as one where "their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them" also applies in this situation. Frelimo and Renamo are basically misunderstanding each other in fundamentally different ways.

   Sumich and Bertelsen make a brief point about new "modes of transformation" having to involve "the emergence of political subjectivities that are not based on the . . . Renamo-Frelimo duality." I am not so convinced. In a context where it is "difficult to imagine an outside or an alternative," transformation might have to come from within. Lévi-Strauss (1974) once suggested that myths reach a point of exhaustion when they cease to engender transformations. Myths die, we are told, when their internal system of variations is no longer capable of producing differences in other structures. Beyond this threshold, myths turn into legends, which are historical and political narratives rather than cosmological ones. Could it not be that what we are seeing in Mozambique right now is the mutation of the "liberation script" into a deformed legend of static wealth and political arrogance? In that sense, new "modes of transformation" can be read from the internal dynamics of the "political ontology" rather than from the emergence of new subjectivities from beyond the Renamo-Frelimo duality.

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Sumich and Bertelsen's article makes a timely intervention into debates about the nature of the state and the foundations of political legitimacy in southern Africa, as a (long-overdue) generational shift among postliberation, dominant-party regimes in the subregion is replacing the historic heroes of the liberation struggle. The hegemonic strategies of such developmental regimes are reaching their limits; the hitherto successful combination of financial largesse and the repression of dissent is, especially in a moment of dwindling state revenues, often no longer sufficient to mitigate growing popular discontent over the broken promises of economic improvement for all. And the generational transition challenges the ideological and discursive foundations on which their claims to legitimacy for a long time rested, with a younger generation coming of age for which the liberation

struggle is but a hazy memory, vicariously passed down in their parents' stories.

   The challenges of this transition become especially visible in liminal moments, such as the death of Renamo leader Afonso Dhlakama, as cleavages that seemed until then absolute and immutable suddenly collapse and allow, as the article details, for "the elevation of a man who had been cast by the state as the epitome of evil and irrational violence for decades to a 'brother,' a national hero who warranted a state funeral."

   To make sense of this puzzle, the authors postulate that Mozambique's long-term ruling party, Frelimo, and its wartime-opponent-turned-major-opposition-party, Renamo, are part of the same "imminent political ontology." The imminence they describe here is typical for postliberation revolutionary developmental regimes: such regimes, in places as varied as Angola, Cuba, Mozambique, or Venezuela, propagate a millennial soteriology—the promise but constant deferral of the promises of a better future that serves not only as a precondition for regime survival but also as justification for the sacrifices demanded from "the people." The people (*o povo*), this mythical and often-invoked foundation of the regime's claims to legitimacy, is a universalizing category that includes all people—as long as they subscribe to the dominant status quo. In such an optic, more particularistic claims to citizenship easily become associated with enemies of the nation.

   Sumich and Bertelsen's original contribution, in this context, is diagnosing a shared political ontology between the dominant party, Frelimo, and its long-time opponent, Renamo. Rather than analyzing them as fundamentally opposed entities, this perspective sees them as creating the conditions for each other's continued existence and political relevance. They illustrate this argument in detail, based on extensive fieldwork in the capital Maputo and the central Manica province, demonstrating how a novel analytical angle can be fruitfully applied to existing empirical material and revisiting it in the light of new events such as the death of Dhlakama.

   The vignettes about party loyalty and political kinship aptly illustrate their analytical take. If we take hegemony as a lived, constantly remade, shared "political ontology," in the authors' words, it is by looking at the production of the political not in institutions, but rather in its "multiple metamorphoses" (Navaro-Yashin 2002:3) that we can begin to understand how people's actions and discourses can at the same time be subversive and participate in and perpetuate existing power structures. The discussions of colonial-era civilizedness that are reproduced in the Frelimo-Renamo antagonism, in addition to the debate about the capacity to actually run a state, are important points well worth repeating, and that can be seen, in variation, in other postcolonial African dominant-party systems.

   This raises two questions that warrant further discussion. One is whether such an approach is in any way translatable to other postliberation regimes marked by one dominant party and one major antagonistic opposition party, beyond the Mozambican context. The dimension of imminence, as described above, is characteristic of not only Mozambique—but how useful is it to

speak of a shared political ontology in other similarly bifurcated contexts?

I think there is some value in trying to develop this argument. In Angola, the case I am most familiar with, the political landscape is comparable, dominated by a ruling party, the MPLA, and its former civil war opponent, UNITA. In contrast to Mozambique, UNITA's founding leader Jonas Savimbi was killed in battle in 2002, paving the way for a military rather than a negotiated peace, which allowed the government for many years to uphold Savimbi as the embodiment of conflict and bloodthirst, an enemy of all Angolans. It is only in recent years that Angolans have rediscovered Savimbi as a defender of the interests of "ordinary Angolans" and even, in an interesting reversal of signifiers, as a tireless worker for peace. This resignifying, coupled with a change in leadership within the MPLA—the new Angolan president, João Lourenço—finally paved the way for the restitution of Savimbi's mortal remains to his family and his grand reburial in his native village of Lopitanga in 2019. This was not a state funeral, however, and the government delayed handing over the coffin at the last minute, most likely having been spooked by the turnout of an estimated 150,000 UNITA supporters camped out in Lopitanga for the reburial.

Might this indicate that, while the frame of reference invoked by the two political antagonists is a shared one, under the conditions of postcolonial statehood and sovereignty—the nation and national development—we are in this case rather facing two radically different designs for the nation? The second question ensues from this and is both analytical and political. What hope for change is there in a system that, from the analytical vantage point of a shared political ontology, appears hermetic and self-reinforcing? Could precisely moments like the secret debt crisis that Mozambique has been embroiled in since it broke in 2016 open up inroads for *citizens* to hold their *rulers* to account, beyond the seeming inescapability of the immanent but ever-deferred fulfilment of the promises of independence, revolution, and national development for "the people?"

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Sumich and Bertelsen emphasize the dynamism of political life. Rather than considering politics by focusing on elections, political parties, and political discourses and positions, they demonstrate how politics are essentially shaped by ways of being, connections and relations between people, historical continuities, and shared meanings. This approach to politics complements recent studies on how political realities and related governmental structures are shaped by everyday practices (for Mozambique, see, e.g., Obarrio 2014). The authors take the lived dynamics of politics one step further by examining political ontologies that are fundamental to state formation. They argue that political realities, such as the duality of the Mozambican political parties Renamo

and Frelimo, are based on a shared semiotic universe, despite disagreements between them over what should be valorized. This means that opposition and otherness are part of and continue to shape a shared political ontology that makes the existing duality necessary and eternal, even if the related positions, actions, and visions change over time. Furthermore, it makes social change difficult to achieve because the political actors are not able to realize future plans, since they cannot overcome the existing polarized duality that defines their political being.

The authors' contribution clearly helps to explain the ways in which "Mozambique remains trapped in a form of hegemonic stagnation." Moreover, what is particularly intriguing, is their description of how political ontology is shaped by kinship, conceptions of the supernatural, and gender. Although they may not be at the heart of their argument, the authors' material is quite explicit on these matters. Their interlocutors speak of the political parties using kinship terminology: Frelimo is described as "the genitor" and "father" of Mozambique, and Renamo is considered "the child" or "the son." In addition, the polarized Renamo-Frelimo duality has also significantly been shaped by claims about gender roles and either a disregard or acceptance of "traditional authorities" and the power of ancestral spirits (Arnfred 2011). In my view, further analysis of how kinship and gender shape and are shaped by political ontologies could shed additional light on the importance of political subjectivities and would further strengthen the argument of the authors.

The article instantly reminded me of the important study on alliances in Chopi society in southern Mozambique by anthropologist David J. Webster (2009). Similar to other societies in southern Africa, the Chopi's ways of being were affected by a deep commitment to kinship values and to the solidarity of local groups. Yet Webster's detailed ethnographic examination of people's relationships reveals that their production of solidarity was dependent on enmity toward rival leaders and groups. Thus, oppositions were necessary to create solidarity and successful leadership, and vice versa. One example is the logic of incorporating foreigners and enemies, such as the Ndau people, into the local society by allowing them to marry Chopi women. According to different scholars, this logic of integrating and pacifying foreigners has characterized the long history of conflicts, wars, and alliances in southern Africa (Ferguson 2013). In addition, the logic of integrating enemies and shaping political relationships involves the incorporation of foreign ancestral spirits (Honwana 2002). Spirits of vengeance who belong to murdered soldiers—during the Frelimo-Renamo war, for example—seek appeasement by marrying a virgin girl, which would, in turn, allow them to reintegrate in society (Igreja, Dias-Lambranca, and Richters 2008)). An important detail in this respect is that many avenging spirits are considered to belong to the Ndau and are connected to Renamo. These avenging Ndau spirits seek to integrate into Tsonga families, most of whom are connected to Frelimo (see also Honwana 2002:145–166).

This particular example of avenging spirits demonstrates how political ontologies are deeply embodied. The sexual and gendered experiences of Mozambican men and women are

codefined by political allegiances and oppositions, evidencing that political, socioeconomic, and cultural-spiritual relations are indeed all bound up in one sphere. This raised a fundamental question among my own interlocutors during fieldwork in Mozambique between 2005 and 2011. Women and families afflicted by avenging spirits asked questions like: "Where is our society heading?" Kinship, as well as spirits and gender roles, have been and continue to be an essential social institution and meaning-making system in regulating economic, sociocultural, and, importantly, political life. But the women I met chose to break with historical kin alliances and to align with what they considered to be more forceful foreign powers, such as the Holy Spirit, even if the consequences could be violent (van de Kamp 2011). One of my questions to the authors, therefore, is to what extent the "imminent political ontology" could offer space for new "foreign" alliances that potentially and slowly can break the Frelimo-Renamo duality.

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In this article, Jason Sumich and Bjørn Bertelsen take up a pertinent question in the context of Mozambican politics, which is to understand the modalities of conflict and dichotomization between the *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (Frelimo) and the *Resistencia Nacional Moçambicana* (Renamo), as well as the shared political system of meaning in which both movements exist. Frelimo and Renamo only make sense when they are defined against each other, the authors state, which allows them to make a more general argument for a political ontology that is not reduced to political bifurcated identifications, party politics, and dichotomies between the urban and the rural. Indeed, paradoxical political manifestations, such as the posthumous elevation of Renamo's leader Dhlakama, a long-standing Frelimo enemy, to the status of hero of the nation and a "brother," while at the same time maintaining hostile positions, should be seen in terms of duality as well as unity.

The relevance of the intervention is reflected in recent events, which can also be seen as structured by the political ontology proposed by Sumich and Bertelsen. The signing of the Definitive Peace Agreements between Renamo and Frelimo in August 2019 can be regarded as another act of a dance in which both parties could their play familiar parts: Frelimo as the father of the nation and Renamo as the champion of the marginalized. The elections in October 2019 also seem to be a continuation of this duality and unity, as the Frelimo party won with fraudulent means. And although the magnitude of the electoral victory raised eyebrows (including a condemnation by the EU saying the results were "highly unlikely"), this did not result in any outcries or protest. Renamo did not accept the electoral results, yet the party's members of parliament did eventually take up office

when the government was installed, to no one's real surprise either. Mozambican politics can indeed be read as a recurring dance of an apparent inevitable duality in a shared political context.

A major argument of the article is about imminence as a defining feature of the political ontology that involves "the alternation between totality and duality always on the verge of becoming, but never actualizing." I find myself in need for some clarification of what the authors exactly mean by this. On the one hand, this imminence seems to refer to the looseness of political subjectivities in Mozambique. On the other hand, imminence seems to refer to the political projects of Renamo and Frelimo of some kind of future that will never be. I recognize this emphasis on "the creation of worlds that always remain just out of reach." Interestingly, Frelimo's emphasis on the sacrifice that the authors note in relation to the postindependence transformation seems to recur in the context of the extractive future of Mozambique, as government discourses around project-induced resettlement ask people to consider the sacrifice of the involuntary dislocation from their residences and land in the light of national development. Nevertheless, I wonder whether such emphasis on possibilities and futures is very distinctive for politics in Mozambique and whether the ways in which political worlds come into being are predominantly through these utopian visions of "true democracy," *o homem novo*, or prosperous extractive futures.

As the words of "Tchopa" illustrate, identification with Renamo is also about everyday considerations and ways that resources could be accessed. Similarly, as the party and state are hardly indistinguishable, Frelimo is tied to one of the main sectors of formal employment in the country and generally allows for the distribution of resources, including aid, projects, and odd-jobs, that are central to people's lives, especially in rural districts. This is not further addressed in the article, but these systems of relations and resource distribution form a context in which ambivalent political subjectivities and blurry identifications and navigations, such as for maintaining a Frelimo party card but perhaps voting something else, can be understood. To me it seems that this is not only about imminence but also about the very tangible outcomes of navigating political identifications.

It also follows that if this is a dance—to continue the metaphor—Renamo and Frelimo are not equal dancing partners. The session at the municipality of Nampula described in the article is a beautiful illustration of this, as the discourse, aesthetics, context, and outcomes show the imbalances between Frelimo and Renamo, as well as the various roles that, in this case representatives of both parties, play out. This imbalance took a more disturbing turn, however, during the recent armed conflict, as the presence of death squads targeting Renamo members and attempts on the life of Dhlakama instilled terror in those associated with Renamo. I wonder whether these war dynamics had the potential of a radical new departure of the ontology proposed by Sumich and Bertelsen. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Renamo, one can argue indeed that things only make sense in relation to Frelimo: Renamo's leadership has been made up out of former Frelimo cadres, its politics and administration mimic the structures of the Frelimo state and party, and those who

associated themselves with Renamo would generally express their political position in opposition to Frelimo.

However, one can wonder to what extent this also holds true for Frelimo. Sumich and Bertelsen argue that the antagonism between Renamo and Frelimo is a vital aspect of power structures and that Frelimo's reasons for existence are tied to keeping Renamo from taking things over. But whereas the political subjectivities presented in the article demonstrate ambivalence to Frelimo (and a certain inevitability), the emphasis on a never-ending antagonism with a "Renamo other" is less convincing. In the light of developments such as Frelimo's recent landslide victory in the elections, the Frelimo elite's hold on the extractive economy, the hidden debts, and the seemingly increasing irrelevance of Renamo after the death of Dhlakama, could it be that we see the prominent duality waning and perhaps becoming obsolete? This raises again the question of how radical new departures from a political ontology as described by Sumich and Bertelsen would look like in Mozambique.

Reply

First of all, we would like to thank all of our commentators for their insightful engagement with our intervention into both the nature of politics in Mozambique (and beyond). We appreciate their patience with our attempts to think anthropologically about political divisions, formal organizations, and tensions *beyond* a focus on the formal, organizational, and electoral. The driving force behind our argument for analyzing Mozambican politics in an ontological framework was therefore twofold. First, we believe that we have reached a point in readings of Mozambican politics where explanations that revolve around a reifying dichotomy of two parties holds limited explanatory value and should be challenged. As we try to make clear, such analyses tend to reflect long-standing hegemonic readings of both the so-called civil war (1976/77–1992) and the nearly three decades of so-called peace from 1992 onward—two eras in which antagonists-cum-political parties dominated discourses in and on Mozambique.

Second, through having undergone highly varied and distinct historical phases—from colony to postcolony, from revolutionary socialist republic to (nominally) liberal democracy—Mozambique represents a very apt case for rethinking anthropological approaches to politics more generally. In our article, we try to outline some possibilities to avoid replicating institutional and formalistic approaches to parties or macro-models of political systems. Instead, we argue for a revalorization of meaning-making at an ontological level as an anthropologically rewarding entry point into grappling with politics.

In reading and reflecting on the incisive comments made above, we feel that if nothing else we have succeeded in our aim to open a wider conversation on these issues. Undoubtedly, our commentators' critical probing of our claims also makes it possible for us to discern these in a new light, and we are grateful for this (limited) space to at least acknowledge the importance of the points made and to attempt to reflect on or answer some of the concerns they have raised. Due to constraints of space, we are unable to reply to each author, in turn, but instead will try to focus on some of the major themes that have emerged through the commentary.

Our analysis of the Mozambican material—and as some of the commentators (Nielsen and Blanes) also make clear—demonstrates the problems that anthropologists might run into when adopting ready-made and formal understandings of the political (i.e., as reducible to political parties, movements, or identities) as fundamentally opposed or binary: for there is a lot to learn from looking at the extreme case of Mozambique, a country seemingly divided along a central fault line between two former armed forces and now political parties. In transgressing this bifurcation—and thereby deepening anthropological understandings of the nature of political ontologies—we suggest that many of these issues are best illuminated through the themes that follow.

Theme 1: Utopic Impulses, Ontology, and Renamo-Frelimo Hierarchies

Several of the commentators probe the connections, sometimes implicit and sometimes more explicit, that we make between ontology and the notion of utopia—for instance, in our emphasis on the lasting importance and reverberation of New Man. While we do invoke the notion of utopia in the text, we have not explored it in depth. However, in line with Blanes and Bertelsen (2021 [see also Bertelsen 2021]), at its most basic we do see utopia as "a generative form that, regardless of political spectrum, emerges from the translation of a transformative will into an instance of mobilization" (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021:6). Thus, in our analysis of Mozambican politics, we have precisely emphasized the utopic impulse within the domain of meaning—what Jon Schubert very aptly calls a "millennial soteriology"—that defines a field of politics that is dynamic and which reverberates across sectors, territories, and practices. When in this way privileging utopia as a form of mobilization—as opposed to the oft-peddled notion of an idea of a stable, stale, and conservative always-already perfect model society or world—we are left with a situation, we argue, where a utopic impulse is fundamental and transformative: it spans temporalities and positionalities and thereby becomes central also to the political horizon and its fluctuating and unstable universe of semiotics.

Furthermore, many of our commentators were as taken, as we were, with President Nyusi's posthumous description of Dhlakama as a "brother" and "hero of the nation." Some, however, have also pushed us on our interpretation; Archambault, for instance, questions how much of this was simply a cynical act of political theatre combined with a "particular cultural context in which the living and the dead remain bound by complex ties of reciprocity." Some of these issues are partly echoed by Wiegink, who helpfully points out that despite some seeming symbolic concessions, Frelimo is by no means an equal partner, but instead overwhelmingly dominant both politically and economically, while

adherents of Renamo, by and large, face continued exclusion. Rightly, therefore, Wiegink asks whether such an approach to politics does not run the risk of rendering Frelimo and Renamo as belonging on the same plane—as effacing the many hierarchies in power and wealth, as well as the highly differentiated institutional histories that separate these. To such a critique we would respond that our analysis does not erase such differences and, instead, we even cite the many attempts at killing former Renamo leader Dhlakama (a point also raised by Blanes). Instead, we underline the many ways in which there is a shared and (seemingly) perennial universe of imminent meaning that suffuses the Mozambican political dynamics and utopic impulse—albeit one that is unwieldy and with all the rifts and openings that are made possible.

These are excellent points that we agree with and take on-board: Frelimo is overwhelmingly dominant, Dhlakama's funeral was an opportunity for shamelessly cynical theatre, and Mozambique does have a long cultural history of "spiritual immanence" also revolving around death, as Archambault and van de Kamp both underline. The central role of death and immanence and its relation to political authority is, we would argue, integral to what we analyze as ontology is indeed strong in Mozambique—as all the work on the power of the (dead) former president Samora Machel (1975–1986) also testifies to. Furthermore, the fact that dead leaders affect present-day political thought, action, and horizons is also well-known from other anthropological works—from Ssorin-Chaikov (2017) to Michael Taussig (1997). Thus, much like in Bertelsen's work (2016*c*), when transferred to the spirit realm (imagined or real) antagonists become nondifferentiated ancestors, the spirit of Dhlakama will be present and impinge on the political ontology. This is, however, not to say that spirits may not assert political authority or be politically significant. Thus, one may ask: Why, when Frelimo is the author of a system in which it inordinately benefits, did the party leadership feel the need for this theatre? And why was Dhlakama incorporated into the national pantheon in a way the equally symbolically potent and equally dead founder of Renamo, André Matsangaissa (d. 1979), never was? We think this points to forms of politics that cannot be explained by pointing out simple hierarchies of power between two political parties.

Wiegink is therefore completely correct when pointing out that imminence is not strictly tied to the material conditions but also to the domains of the symbolic. Thus, the existence of Renamo is necessary, since there needs to be an enemy, a spoiler, but one that does not actually put anything in danger. Renamo's symbolic threat justifies Frelimo's very real material power.

Theme 2: Comparison of Bifurcational Logics

We are very grateful to scholars, such as Blanes, who have highlighted both the comparative perils and possibilities of our article—underlining the very different fates of Angolan UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi and Dhlakama in Mozambique. Schubert also very helpfully probes whether comparisons can and should be made between Angola and Mozambique or, more generally, between Lusophone-speaking former colonies countries that owe much due to their (purported) similar colonial history.

We acknowledge that the balance between comparison and particularization has, generally, been difficult to strike as our goal was making a twofold argument. On the one hand, we wanted to highlight how a totalizing system can never actually be total in an absolute sense. This is not simply the case for vanguard or neo-authoritarian regimes such as Frelimo but equally true for contemporary liberalism. As Chantal Mouffe (2005:39) famously observed, even the most sweeping rhetoric on the universality of the liberal conception of human rights only makes sense if you can conceive of a scenario where they are not honored. From this broader background we wanted to ethnographically explore how this continual failure to achieve totality, the ways in which one engages with the other that they cannot accept, takes place in the particular sociopolitico-historical setting of Mozambique. Hitherto, this is a setting that has long been described in terms of a Manichean division between separate sociopolitical blocs that are frequently portrayed as a photo-negative of each other—at least in much of the literature that has come to influence academic understandings of and discourses about Mozambique.

We are very excited to see the possibilities of extending this analysis to cases often deemed similar (i.e., Angola) or more generally, and both Schubert and Blanes are helpful in charting some possible courses here: for one, Schubert underlines how, when also approaching Angola, a focus on "multiple metamorphoses" (Navaro-Yashin 2002) allows for understanding "how people's actions and discourses can at the same time be subversive and participate in and perpetuate existing power structures." Similarly, Blanes asks, when also reflecting on Savimbi's death in Angola, "to what extent is this binary ontology [integrity/alterity or domination/resistance] inescapable within an anthropology of the political"? As we have attempted to underline in the article, what Blanes also very aptly calls a "bifurcational logic"—a template form of analysis that has been undertaken in many anthropological analyses across highly different contexts—is what we have attempted to move away from by emphasizing what we have analyzed as the imminent political ontology in Mozambique. The comparative potential lies, as we see it, not necessarily in merely comparing similar (or dissimilar) fates of figures like Dhlakama or Savimbi but "by way of providing alternative analytical pathways into how the political operates on many registers beyond the formal and identitarian," as Blanes also notes.

Theme 3: Duration, Externalities, and Fracture— or the Wider Theoretical Significance of a Notion of Political Ontology

Most of our commentators (van de Kamp, Wiegink, Blanes, Schubert, and Nielsen) have asked us—in different ways— about possibilities of escape from the enduring political ontology

we are analyzing as salient for Mozambique. Furthermore, they also point to a seeming underlying pessimism of our analysis as we describe a society trapped underneath a monstrous and totalizing political semiotic that is endlessly dying but that is nonetheless immortal. Let us try to respond with some empirical and theoretical reflections.

At an empirical level, when we first wrote this article, we felt that there was a chance that Mozambique was on the brink of a form of radical change—although it now seems that such a possibility may be fading, with the introduction of totalitarian laws on publications and media reporting during early 2021 and endless fracturing of political parties other than Frelimo. Furthermore, despite presiding over the nation's worst financial scandal and well-documented cases of voter fraud on a massive scale, Frelimo has claimed a resounding victory in the face of muted criticism from Renamo and total inaction from the international community. While Frelimo remains as politically entrenched and as stagnant as ever—for example, as a party in control of the state and government—it does seem incapable of dealing with a simmering Islamic insurgency in the north, in addition to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nor is the failure to escape a shambling system that seemingly cannot be killed restricted to Mozambique, as we can see with another totalizing system par excellence, that is, the liberal capitalist order that is oriented toward privatizing profits and communalizing costs also during a pandemic. The absolute inability of many of the world's most powerful nations to effectively deal with the current pandemic and looming threat of climate catastrophe have highlighted the limits of the current political imagination.

More theoretically—and as we have also described above—several commentators question the validity of or have qualms about the contents and components of what we have analyzed as a political ontology in Mozambique. Noting how we in our article emphasize *both* "ontological difference as an analytical heuristic" *and* "the dynamism of its transformation"—hence, stasis and reproduction—Nielsen nonetheless questions whether Renamo and Frelimo "become mirror images of each other." Nielsen's critique does not follow the same line as Wiegink (about the hierarchy/power differences), but instead emphasizes a Dumontian point where the crux is not mutually dependent political parties but rather "a situation where pairs of values are sought . . . encompassed by their contrary." We believe Nielsen's point comprises an important corrective to our analysis in the sense that our intention of describing a total political ontology theoretically infused it with a form of horizontal and stable dichotomization that does not reflect the very real tensions that tear at and constantly also transform it. Because, as Nielsen also points out, the possibilities for transformation of the ontology are there: much like in the Lévi-Straussian argument of transformation from myth to legend, key narratives, such as the liberation script imbuing Frelimo with epic and eternal political authority, are increasingly challenged—a process that may move the signposts of the political ontology. However, it would not, we hold, eclipse the salience of

it as an enduring semiotic order within which political subjects operate, reflect, and struggle.

—Jason Sumich and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen

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