

## **Just out of reach: Imminence, meaning and political ontology in Mozambique**

Jason Sumich, University of Essex

Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, University of Bergen

### **Abstract**

The leader of Mozambique's Renamo party, Afonso Dhlakama, died on May 3, 2018. His death both necessitates an ethnographic, regionally comparative re-thinking of the analytical approach to the dominant Mozambican political parties (Frelimo and Renamo) as diametrically opposed formations from independence onwards and invites to a more general re-consideration 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 underline politics as fundamentally shaped by the formation and manipulation of broader systems of meaning, registers, and their spatio-temporal context—aspects which elude analyses based on 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.

**Keywords** Frelimo, Renamo, politics, state-making, subjectivity, political ontology, Mozambique

## **Introduction**

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) has long dominated the Mozambican political landscape.<sup>1</sup> With extensive support in the south, parts of the north, and many of the nation's urban centers, Frelimo has held power since independence. Renamo, on the other hand, 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 of a diabetes-related illness in his mountain hideout in central Mozambique on May 3, 2018. His death not only led to a significant crisis of leadership for the party: it has also 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. For,

during the state funeral for Dhlakama, Nyusi observed that he was “depressed to be unable to help his brother [survive]” (Mediafax 2018a).<sup>2</sup> The influential Christian Council of Mozambique even went so far as to compare Dhlakama, once infamous for massacres and the use of child soldiers, to Moses, lauding him as “hero of the nation,” and claimed that he had “inscribed himself into the heart of many Mozambicans” (Mediafax 2018b). On the other hand, 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, he attained the rank of general in Renamo during the civil war (Club of Mozambique 2018). In fact, all three of Renamo’s leaders since its inception began their careers as Frelimo soldiers, a tradition which implies that this hostile political duality rests on a shared foundation.

Despite 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 went so far as to argue that the identification of an enemy is the “...ultimate act of sovereignty, the ultimate political act” (cited in Buck-Morss, 2002:9). However, what makes the Mozambican case so intriguing, is the ways in 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. For, 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 versus Frelimo) these are, nonetheless, integral to each other and, we argue, reflective of a wider and shared political system of meaning.

A Mozambican order which, thereby, fluctuates between a totalizing system of meaning and various forms of dualities thereby *transcend* 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 are 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 pre-determined problems (say, from general anthropological theory about politics) but 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 being 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 re-orientation generally inspired also by the much-criticized so-called ontological turn (see, e.g., Graeber 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2015; Bertelsen and Bendixsen 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 2016).<sup>3</sup> In particular, Ghassan Hage (2014:np) sees the recent turn towards 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 re-reading politics in a situation beyond bifurcated, identitarian notions, like that of Mozambique. Indeed, when applied to Mozambique, a focus on political *being* as that which *is* (Hay), alongside an attentiveness to the *possible* and the *potential* (Hage)—i.e. 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 argues that the liberal worldview is based on ideas of *space*, and sovereignty is conceived as representing a named population whose shared identity is circumscribed by the borders of the nation-state (2002). The worldview of communism, on the other hand, 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" (ibid: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 in 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 ten 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 which 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, on the other hand, 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.<sup>4</sup> Elements of this dualistic vision survived the fall of socialism, if shorn of its messianic attributes. In Guinea, McGovern argued that Touré created a conception of politics which rested on "a tight cluster of self-referential terms and phrases (and) constituted a closed system of signification" (2017:159). 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 increasing become mirror images of each other, both promising to construct a utopia, while knowing it will never 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 refers to as ‘fettered circularity,’ that is, attempts to conceptualize change through the use of pre-existing categories (2008:9). 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—whose origins and ongoing evolution 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 longstanding imbrication of the two dominant parties, reflecting an intimacy that dominates political thinking and horizons.<sup>5</sup> While violent contestation has been a central feature of independent Mozambique since the start 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—should also be 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 she mentioned Frelimo it was usually with bemused contempt. However, despite all her criticisms, she still described herself as 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 above called the “futurist disposition” in the case of Guinea (2017)—manifests itself through their social world. It can be seen in the ways they privilege the nuclear family, in attitudes towards 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”.<sup>6</sup> 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), which evidences a system of meaning from which, as we will see, it is difficult to imagine an outside or an alternative.

Secondly, 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*— “owners of the nation”. However, although he 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 (see Bertelsen 2016c, for instance).

In another example, while “João” 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 as Paulo. During a conversation in 2015, he noted, “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 him in an informal bar in Chimoio, Bertelsen asks what it means for Renamo if Frelimo is like a father who errs. He grins, “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: As them, they also conceive of Frelimo as a total framework within which all formations find expression but, crucially, adding 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 given 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 transcends the narrow confines of formal party structures. Similarly, for Paulo and João, Frelimo is cast in kinship, paternalistic, or quasi-cosmogentic 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* co-existing in the same world of political being: erstwhile political adversaries 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 post-liberation Mozambican independence—a liberation that in the post-war 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 re-deploy meaning, and rather than championing political projects based on 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 following section, we delve into the dynamics of this system.

The shared, if conflictual, nature of political ideals have often been ignored or under-communicated 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 writings (e.g., 1997, 2002), 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, we take, however, 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 observes, 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” (2017:205). 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 towards 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 has, at its post-war peak, 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 violent 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 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*.<sup>7</sup>

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 serve as short-hand 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 upon Verdery's (1999:23) 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". She further contends (1999:22) 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.

As noted by Bonnell, the goal of a revolutionary movement transcends the seizure of formal domains of power (1997). It also aims to seize meaning and the ability, in Verdery's words, to shape and manipulate the cultural categories through which power is contested, accepted, and understood (1999:22). This does not entail the creation of a new system of meaning from scratch, but the movement endeavors to transform existing tropes and discourses, changing their underlying moral meaning, and redirecting them towards 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 their 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, unlike the racist rule of other colonial powers, Portugal 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, it drew on pre-existing elements, such as the cultural underpinnings of parts of Christianity and colonial forms of modernity for its 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, 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 (1977:25). As mentioned in the introduction, Frelimo held a futurist orientation that was similar to other radical nationalist movements in Africa, this orientation though was also intertwined 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 pre-existing cultural traditions were a source of 'backwardness' and needed to be abolished, although this form of it was far more ambitious (Vieira 1977:25). Further colonial elements were re-absorbed 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 their urban condescension towards 'rural backwardness,' which was regarded as a symbol of all that needed to be changed.

As shown 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 (Wiegink 2015; Bertelsen 2016b, 2016c; 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 the 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 as having permanent borders—a criticism sometimes aimed at the so-called ontological turn (Vigh and Sausdal 2014). Contrary to this, and indeed any form of primordialism or essentialism, through demonstrating the formation and transformation of Renamo and Frelimo 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 ground-breaking analysis of Renamo sources of the civil war recently undertaken by historian Michel Cahen (2018). His analysis is based on notes captured from Renamo bases in the Gorongosa mountains of central Mozambique (the so-called *Cadernos de Gorongosa*), Cahen shows that Renamo political organization and, moreover, the slogans they used to rally the local population around their cause, i.e. the overthrow of Frelimo, mimicked or were similar to those of Frelimo at the time (Cahen 2018:144):

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 “2<sup>nd</sup> struggle for national liberation” or “the revolution until its final victory.” It is not by chance that there were “political commissars”...

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; 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 must all occur in a few short years (Isaacman 1978). For the new society to flourish, citizens must be remade as the above-mentioned *homem novo* (new man), 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 their most grandiose ambitions; however, the forward march of the social revolution was brought to a shuddering 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 counter-revolutionary, as it were) transformations to refashion the nation as a liberal, capitalist polity (see Obarrio 2014 for details), 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 post-socialist Guinea, the state went from being omnipresent in social relations to 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, "for many people it just seems like Frelimo has always been there and always will." Another woman told Sumich in 2013, "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." This did 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 is progressively scaled back. A well-off resident of Maputo told Sumich in 2009:

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 2005–2015) 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 an 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, he 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 passers-by 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 he 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 he had risen above his fellow peasants whom he regarded as, sadly, untransformed and animal-like. Mateu's comments also underlines 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 was no longer able to claim that only their 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 post-war 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 in 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 substantive issues. The head of the Renamo *bancada* claimed 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 amongst 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 this 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. Leaving a note for his girlfriend that he was leaving for Gorongosa (Renamo's historic base and its headquarters in the recent fighting), he disappeared in 2013. Then, suddenly, in 2015 he re-appeared 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 “a big man.” However, returning after two years, he only presented MZN 50 (around USD 1) to his girlfriend and his two children, spending the rest of the (little) money he had on *nipa* (a locally brewed alcohol) and eating at various family households. Having spent only three days in Chimoio, Tchopa disappeared again, returning to the promised land of Gorongosa.

Maputo’s few middle-class supporters of Renamo deployed 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 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 2016c). 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 signification, 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. However, 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, in 1988, 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 mentioned 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 outlined 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.

Firstly, *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 of her shock as a child when she saw pictures of the General Peace Agreement 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 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 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<sup>8</sup> [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 could be found amongst Renamo supporters. During the civil war, Renamo often claimed that it was the true inheritor of Eduardo Mondlane’s<sup>9</sup> 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, by 2014 the country had plunged into political and economic crises.<sup>10</sup> 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.

Secondly, 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 (for example, 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 and the siphoning off of public funds to the tune of billions of dollars, the 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, 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 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.

## **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 "neo-traditional" 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 co-existed, transformed into a regime—albeit one with ossified components that are continuously challenged, as our material also reveals.

Buck-Morss, as mentioned in the introduction, has argued that socialism 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, to recall, 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 though, 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 mantle 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 endpoint. Renamo, on the other hand, 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 was, not only would the victor have no further reason to exist but the victor 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 etc. Such an ontology has shaped the way in which 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 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 (2014:214). This concept has many parallels with the political ontology described here, where the basic premise can never be achieved, but it 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.<sup>11</sup> 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—as well as structuring power relationships more generally, outside strictly defined party politics. Such explorations offer a possible way forward, towards 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. While the outlining of both a historical genealogy of Mozambican postcolonial history and the powerful ethnographic expressions of such a political ontology has been undertaken here—and we believe similar analyses may have purchase in other postcolonial contexts—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 believe an attentiveness to the force and duration of political meaning as ontology may re-energize the critical vision of an anthropological analysis of politics—and what that might be.

### References cited

- AllAfrica. 2018. Mozambique: Renamo wins Nampula by-election. Article available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201803160091.html> (accessed April 15, 2018).
- Bertelsen, Bjørn Enge. 2016a. Effervescence and ephemerality: Popular urban uprisings in Mozambique. *Ethnos* 81(1):25–52.
- . 2016b. Multisemic speech genres as vehicles for re-inscribing meaning in post-conflict societies. A Mozambican case. In *Violent reverberations. Global modalities of trauma*, Vigdis Broch-Due and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, eds. Pp. 193–217. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2016c. *Violent becomings: State formation, sociality, and power in Mozambique*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Bertelsen, Bjørn Enge, and Synnøve Bendixsen, eds. 2016. *Critical anthropological engagements in human alterity and difference*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bonnell, Victoria E. 1997. *Iconography of power: Soviet political posters under Lenin and Stalin*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Brito, Luís de, ed. 2017. *Agora eles têm medo de nós! Uma colectânea de textos sobre as revoltas populares em Moçambique, 2008–2012*. Maputo, Mozambique: Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (IESE).
- Buck-Morss, Susan. 2002. *Dreamworld and catastrophe: The passing of mass utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MS: MIT Press.
- Cabaço, José Luís. 2010. *Moçambique: Identidades, colonialismo e libertação*. Maputo, Mozambique: Marimbique.
- Cabrita, João. 2000. *Mozambique: The tortuous road to democracy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Cahen, Michel. 1997. “Entrons dans la nation”. Notes pour une étude du discours politique de la marginalité: le cas de la RENAMO du Mozambique. *Politique Africaine* 67:70–88.
- . 2002. *Les bandits. Un historien au Mozambique, 1994*. Paris: Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian.
- . 2018. The war as seen by Renamo. Guerilla politics and the “Move to the North” at the time of the Nkomati Accord, 1983-1985. In *The War Within: New perspectives on the civil war in Mozambique*, Eric Morier-Genoud, Eric, Michel Cahen, and Domingos M. do Rosário, eds. Pp. 100-146. Suffolk: James Currey.
- Carbone, Giovanni M. 2005. Continuidade na renovação? Ten years of multiparty politics in Mozambique. Roots, evolution and stabilisation of the Frelimo–Renamo party system. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43(3):417–442.
- Club of Mozambique. 2018. Mozambique: Who is Ossufo Momade Renamo’s newly appointed interim leader? Article published online May 8, 2018 at

- <http://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-who-is-ossufo-momade-renamos-newly-appointed-interim-leader/> (accessed May 25, 2018).
- DeLanda, Manuel. 2002. *Intensive science and virtual philosophy*. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1994 [1991]. *What is philosophy?* London: Verso.
- Dinerman, Alice. 2006. *Revolution, counter-revolution and revisionism in post-colonial Africa. The case of Mozambique, 1975-1994*. New York: Routledge.
- Donham, Donald. 1999. *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution*. Berkeley, CA and Oxford: University of California Press and James Currey.
- Farré, Albert. 2015. Assimilados, régulos, Homens Novos, moçambicanos genuínos: A persistência da exclusão em Moçambique. *Anuário Antropológico 2014* 40(2):199–229.
- Fortes, Meyer, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, eds. 1987 [1940]. *African political systems*. London: KPI in association with International African Institute.
- France 24. 2019. Mozambique's President Nyusi Wins a Second Term, Opposition Rejects Results. Article Available at <https://www.france24.com/en/20191027-mozambique-s-president-nyusi-wins-second-term-opposition-rejects-results> (Accessed 26 November 2019).
- Graeber, David. 2015. Radical alterity is just another way of saying “reality”: A reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. *Hau: Journal of ethnographic theory* 5(2):1–41.
- Hage, Ghassan. 2014. Critical Anthropology as a Permanent State of First Contact.

- Theorizing the Contemporary*, Cultural Anthropology website, January 13, 2014.  
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/473-critical-anthropology-as-a-permanent-state-of-first-contact>.
- Hay, Colin. 2006. Political ontology. In *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, eds. Pp. 78–96. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holbraad, Martin, and Morten Axel Pedersen. 2016. *The ontological turn: An anthropological exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Humphrey, Caroline 2008 The creative bureaucrat: conflicts in the production of Soviet Communist Party discourse. *Inner Asia* 10(1):5–36.
- Isaacman, Allen. 1978. *A luta continua: Creating a new society in Mozambique*. Binghamton, NY: Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations, State University of New York at Binghamton.
- Israel, Paolo. 2013. A Loosening Grip: The Liberation Script in Mozambican History. *Kronos: Southern African Histories* 39:10-19.
- Keesing, Roger M. 1981 [1975]. *Cultural anthropology: A contemporary perspective*. Second Edition. Fort Worth, TX.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kirshner, Joshua. and Marcus. Power. 2015. Mining and Extractive Urbanism: Postdevelopment in a Mozambican Boomtown, *Geoforum* 61:67–78.
- Lewellen, Ted C. 1992. *Political anthropology. An introduction*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Macamo, Elísio Salvado. 2017. Power, conflict, and citizenship: Mozambique's contemporary struggles. *Citizenship Studies* 21(2):196–209.

- Manuel, Sandra. 2013. Sexuality in cosmopolitan Maputo: the aesthetics of gendered practice through the lenses of class. In *Living the city in Africa: Processes of invention and intervention*, Brigit Obrist, Veit Arlt, and Elísio Macamo, eds. Pp. 195-212. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- . 2014. Maputo has no marriage material: sexual relationships in the politics of social affirmation and emotional stability amongst cosmopolitans in an African city. PhD dissertation, School of African and Asian Studies, University of London.
- McGovern, Mike. 2017. *A socialist peace? Explaining the absence of war in an African country*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mediafax 2018a. Beira despede-se de Dhlakama. Cerimónia de muitos recados. *Mediafax*. May 10, 2018, no. 6560.
- Mediafax 2018b. CCM compara Dhlakama a Moisés e o catalogo como “heroí na nação.” *Mediafax*. May 16, 2018, no. 6564.
- Morier-Genoud, Eric, Michel Cahen, and Domingos M. do Rosário, eds. 2018. *The war within: New perspectives on the civil war in Mozambique, 1976-1992*. London: James Currey.
- Muchemwa, Cyprian, and Geoffrey Thomas Harris. 2019. Mozambique’s post-war success story: Is it time to revisit the narrative? *Democracy and Security* 15(1):25-48.
- Newitt, Malyn. 1995. *A history of Mozambique*. London: Hurst.Nielsen, Morten. 2014. The negativity of times: Collapsed futures in Maputo, Mozambique. *Social Anthropology* 22(2):213–226.
- Obarrio, Juan. 2014. *The spirit of the laws in Mozambique*. Chicago: Chicago University

Press.

Peacock, Vita. 2015. The Negation of Hierarchy and its Consequences. *Anthropological Theory* 15(1):3–21.

People's power in Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. 1976. "Rhodesian racists attack Mozambique. Accounts of the devastation of Mapai, the FRELIMO directive on defence and support for the Zimbabwe struggle, and a report of the massacre of refugees at Nhazonia." *People's power in Mozambique and Guinea Bissau* (3):30-35.

Schubert, Jon. 2018. Wilful entanglements: Extractive industries and the co-production of sovereignty in Mozambique. *Ethnography*, DOI: [10.1177/1466138118802953](https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138118802953)

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sumich, Jason. 2016. The uncertainty of prosperity: Dependence and the politics of middle-class privilege in Maputo. *Ethnos* 81(5):821-841, DOI: [10.1080/00141844.2014.1002860](https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.1002860).

———. 2018. *The middle class in Mozambique: The state and the politics of transformation in Southern Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Michael, Taussig. 1993. *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of the senses*. New York: Routledge.

Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The political lives of dead bodies: Reburial and postsocialist change*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Vieira, Sergio. 1977. The new man is a process. A Speech by Sergio Vieira, member of the Central Committee of Frelimo to the Second Conference of the Ministry and Culture, December. Unpublished manuscript.

- Vigh, Henrik Erdman, and David Brehm Sausdal. 2014. From essence back to existence: Anthropology beyond the ontological turn. *Anthropological Theory* 14(1):49–73.
- Vines, Alex. 1991. *Renamo. Terrorism in Mozambique*. London: James Currey.
- Vines, Alex. 2017. Afonso Dhlakama and RENAMO's return to armed conflict since 2013: The politics of reintegration in Mozambique. In *Warlord democrats in Africa: Ex-military leaders and electoral politics*, ed. Anders Themnér. Pp. 121–155. London: Zed Books.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004. Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2(1):3-22.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2013. The Relative Native. *Hau: Journal of ethnographic theory* 3(3):473-502.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2015. Who is afraid of the ontological wolf? Some comments on an ongoing anthropological debate. *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 33(1):2–17.
- Wiegink, Nikkie. 2015. “It will be our time to eat”: Former Renamo combatants and Big-Man dynamics in central Mozambique. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41(4):869-885. DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2015.1060090.
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2008. *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements: While drawing on long-term and recurrent fieldworks in a range of contexts, both authors are currently part of the Norwegian Research Council-funded project “Enclaving: Patterns of global futures in three African cities” (project number 274943) and we hereby acknowledge its support. Furthermore, we would like to extend our thanks to both editor (past and present) of *Current Anthropology*, the insightful reviewers of the manuscript and to several who have given important input and critique to various incarnations of this

---

article, including Alessandro Zagato, Afia Afenah, Isabelle Hugø, Ørnulf Gulbrandsen, Edward Simpson and Kerry Ryan Chance. Thanks to all!

<sup>2</sup> All quotes in this text have been translated from the Portuguese by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> 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 socio-political worlds as flat and, thus, non-hierarchical ontologies (including Manuel DeLanda 2002; see also Peacock 2015 for a critique)—nevertheless, anthropology abounds with possibilities for re-thinking the political, stemming from various ways of relating politics to ontology.

<sup>4</sup> 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 *People's power in Mozambique and Guinea Bissau*, 1976, for an example details).

<sup>5</sup> 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 counter-revolutionary. 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 MPs have defected back to Renamo.

<sup>6</sup> Although we do not have space in this article to elaborate on such topics, for a fuller discussion, please see Manuel (2013, 2014) and Sumich (2018).

<sup>7</sup> 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 before 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.

<sup>8</sup> Mozambique's charismatic first president, 1975–1986, and a Socialist icon.



---

<sup>9</sup> Mondlane was Frelimo's first leader; he was assassinated in Tanzania in 1969.

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> The condition of fettered circularity seems set to continue. In the elections of 2019 Frelimo secured a landslide victory of 73% compared to 22% for Renamo. However, numerous cases of blatant fraud were recorded by local civil society organizations and international observers. Renamo has called upon the nation to reject the results and demand a fresh election. Frelimo has thus far refused such demands seeming drawing the battle lines for future confrontations between the two parties (<https://www.france24.com/en/20191027-mozambique-s-president-nyusi-wins-second-term-opposition-rejects-results>).