



**Regulating Reciprocal Distances  
House Construction Projects as Inverse  
Governmentality in Maputo, Mozambique**

Morten Nielsen

DIIS Working Paper 2009:33

**MORTEN NIELSEN**

Research Fellow at the Centre for Cosmopolitan  
Studies, Department of Social Anthropology,  
University of St. Andrews

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Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS  
Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark

Ph: +45 32 69 87 87

Fax: +45 32 69 87 00

E-mail: [diis@diis.dk](mailto:diis@diis.dk)

Web: [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although reciprocal relationships with neighbours and local-level civil servants are of paramount importance to people living on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique, they also harbour destructive potentials. In an unstable urban environment built on a presumption of malice, it is consequently important only to reveal what needs to be seen while concealing those facets which might awaken unwanted desires. This working paper examines how residents in a peri-urban area seek to position themselves at appropriate distances to important but potentially dangerous others. It is argued that house-building constitutes a potent medium for proportioning viable distances so that reciprocal exchanges can be realized without being harmed by presumed greedy and envious others. In particular, the paper explores how house-builders imitate urban norms which state and municipality claim to be using but which they are incapable of implementing. Through such processes of inverse governmentality, illegal occupancy acquires a form of pragmatic legitimacy when appearing to materialise state-defined urban norms.

## INTRODUCTION

To many urban residents living on the fringes of Maputo, Mozambique, everyday life contains incessant struggles to decipher and properly respond to the actions of others, such as relatives, neighbours or local-level officials. Without them social agency in an unstable urban setting is impossible, yet at the same time they may just as likely try to take advantage of one's exposed socio-economic position. What initially seems to be a mutually beneficial exchange might turn out to be harmful to either one of the interacting agents who momentarily make themselves available to others. Indeed, to people living on the outskirts of Maputo not everything is known – but what is known is that power works in hidden and often capricious ways.

Mulwene is a peri-urban neighbourhood on the northern perimeter of Maputo, which rose to significance as a resettlement zone after the devastating floods of 2000. In this paper I explore how its residents attempt to engage with others *from a distance*. In particular, I focus on relations with state agents, who are considered by urban residents to be of paramount importance but who also harbour destructive potential, for example when they bend public rules and regulations for private gain. Indeed, in an unstable setting where social life is built on a presumption of malice, the individual agent has to assume that anyone with the motive to cause harm *will* cause harm. When engaging in reciprocal encounters with those in more powerful positions, such as local-level state agents, it is consequently important to display only what needs to be seen and conceal those facets which might potentially awaken unwanted desires. As I will show, house construction projects and land parcelling processes have

become potent media through which urban residents in Mulwene seek to proportion proper distances to neighbourhood chiefs and local-level officials, in order to realize continuous reciprocal interactions without being harmed by these presumed envious and greedy others. Still, although such socio-political processes indicate possible ways of creating viable relational distances between interacting agents, the outcome is never certain. In an unstable peri-urban setting such as Mulwene, individual and collective strategies constantly misfire, producing situations very different from what was initially envisaged.

I begin by presenting an extended case study of how a local bricklayer commenced an illegal construction by imitating formal urban standards. As I will show, he thereby became visible in the eyes of particular state agents and was thus capable of engaging in reciprocal interactions from a proper distance. I then examine how mimicking formal parcelling and construction standards has become a way of achieving legitimate use rights to land. After outlining the historical trajectory of urban planning in Maputo, I return to the case study before broadening out to its wider socio-political implications. As I will argue, informal parcelling in areas such as Mulwene might best be conceived as a form of *inverse governmentality*; in other words, despite lacking legal anchorage, given that residents build *as if* they are realising formal urban norms, they come, in a sense, to create those norms. In the conclusion, I emphasise how new forms of urban socialities emerge as an outcome of house construction projects and how the patterns of interaction arising from such projects can thus be seen to constitute a particular socio-political infrastructure (*pace* Simone 2004).

## THE UNFORTUNATE BRICKLAYER<sup>1</sup>

In February 2005, Marta Mucavela, a primary school teacher, was allocated a 15x30 metre plot in a part of Mulwene that had been parcelled out by the Ministry of Education in the late 1990s as an attempt to provide land for the growing number of school teachers who could not afford housing. Several years earlier, Mucavela had participated in the initial draw when plots were being distributed among landless school teachers. However, as she later argued, the draw was obviously rigged and her name was rejected. Still needing a place to construct a cement house, she then bought a piece of land from an old *nativo* (native) living in Mulwene. Unfortunately, Mucavela's misfortunes continued unabated when her plot was confiscated by the neighbourhood administration immediately after the floods in 2000, when land in that particular section of Mulwene was being parcelled out for disaster victims. But now, it seemed, Mucavela had finally struck luck and after signing the formal transfer documents during a small ceremony in front of her new plot, she immediately began contacting local bricklayers in order to commence building a small, one-room cement house. Before long, however, the propitious situation was radically changed and Mucavela was again potentially without a piece of land in Mulwene.

As it happened, Mucavela's plot had apparently already been allocated to another person. In 2002, Alberto Obadias, a local bricklayer, requested a plot of land from the local quarter chief, Munguambe, who had in turn forwarded a written application to the neighbourhood leader, Magalhães. According to

both Obadias and Munguambe, the former was subsequently allocated Mucavela's plot. According to Magalhães, however, he never authorized any request for land put forth by Munguambe on behalf of Obadias. Needless to say, this outright rejection complicated the situation somewhat for Obadias, who then had to consider other strategies for accessing what he believed was his legitimately owned plot.

Originally from Inhambane, the 38-year-old Obadias came to Mulwene in 2001 when his aunt let him rent a plot. In December 2004, however, the aunt wanted the plot back in order to sell it. As Obadias had already established a good rapport with Munguambe through the local Catholic Church, he contacted him in order to find a permanent place to stay. Although initially denying it, they both later admitted to having made a deal that should have been mutually beneficial: given his status as quarter chief, Munguambe would find a vacant plot for Obadias who, in return, would build a cement house for Munguambe. Confident that their reciprocal scheme would succeed, Obadias told his aunt that he would vacate her plot before the end of the month. Only a few days after, however, Marta Mucavela was allocated the plot and so Obadias and his family were potentially without a place to stay.

When Obadias realised that Mucavela had been allocated the plot – where he had already piled up stacks of reed and wooden pegs for a temporary *casa de caniço* (reed hut) for his family to stay in during the construction of their much-desired cement house – he felt prompted to act in order not to lose the piece of land. Early in the morning on 11 April 2005, Obadias consequently invaded the disputed plot and immediately started making his presence visible. I visited Obadias the next day and it was clear he had been busy.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mulwene.



Along the left side, a *casa de caniço* had been erected on a stamped raised platform held in place by a row of cement blocks. Additional blocks were positioned on the zinc roof, and in the back left corner a small radio antenna was pointing towards the sky. Starting a few metres from the boundary line, a rectangular furrow had been dug reaching about halfway across the plot, and cement blocks had been placed along its edges. Nearly half of the plot had already been cleared, but the area right at the back was still covered by grass and wild *espinhosa* (thorny bushes). Obadias returned shortly after my arrival. He had been in the city centre trying to arrange a meeting with the municipal ombudsman (*provedor*), but after hours of waiting outside his office, he returned home empty-handed. Célia, Obadias's wife, Alberto Obadias and I sat down outside the *casa de caniço* to discuss recent developments in the dispute. "I built a house because that's what the government wants. The neighbourhood leader came today to inform me that I have to stop the building project. But I really didn't start making the foundations to construct a house but, rather, to prevent her (Marta Mucavela) from building a house here. It's my land, but it's been usurped because I'm poor." Célia nodded. "She (Marta Mucavela) was the real intruder because we were the ones planting the *espinhosa*. She even tore up some of the plants. It's a lack of respect!"

Interestingly, Obadias was not the only one to have started a construction project on the 15x30m plot. When Marta Mucavela found out that Obadias had not only invaded her piece of land but, even more worryingly, had erected a *casa de caniço* and dug out a furrow for a future cement house, she immediately contracted a local bricklayer, who erected a fragile skeleton for a one-room *casa de caniço* at the far end of the plot. I met Mucavela while she was buying construction materials for the

reed hut. "Actually, I really wanted to build a cement house because I'm afraid that Obadias will build a cement house as well, considering that he is a bricklayer. If he erects a cement house, he can say to the district administrator that he's already living there." I asked Mucavela if she was constructing a *casa de caniço* so that she would appear as the proper owner of the plot. "They [the neighbourhood administration] told me that the three-month time limit has expired<sup>2</sup>. If I don't erect a house now, they'll confiscate the plot. I have to build a house on the plot where Obadias is building his *casa de caniço*. Later, I'm going to speak to the Tchuma Bank in order to borrow five million MZM (208 USD) to make foundations for a cement house."

On 18 April, the district administrator<sup>3</sup>, Ussene, became actively involved in the increasingly tense dispute, in which the opposing parties were now accusing each other of using witchcraft in order to get use rights to the plot. At about noon, Ussene's Toyota crossed the square and parked in front of Obadias's plot. She was accompanied by six members of the military police, who immediately entered the plot, together with Magalhães and Samuel from the neighbourhood administration and Kombane, the municipal councillor in District 5. The already upset Ussene quickly realised that Obadias was not at home and this seemed to infuriate the administrator even more. "This is wrong!" Her characteristically gruff voice made the exclamation sound almost like a threat. She turned towards me: "Now you can stay to watch how we demolish the house ... to see that the state is func-

<sup>2</sup> In order for Mozambican citizens to maintain legal use rights to a plot (DUAT), it is necessary to commence a building project within 90 days after having acquired the initial DUAT (República de Mocambique 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Maputo is divided into different urban districts, each having their individual administrators. Mulwene is located in District 5.

tioning! They made foundations, although they were told to wait.” Ussene ordered two of the military policemen to cover the furrow. “It’s a lack of respect for the government that they are making a foundation. If only Obadias had made a written account, then we could have allocated a plot to him.” Magalhães, the neighbourhood leader, fumbled with some papers while approaching the administrator. His otherwise calm appearance was somehow shattered, apparently held together only by a permanent stiff smile. “He entered the plot last Sunday.” Magalhães gave a brief, nervous laugh. “How is that possible,” the administrator wanted to know. “Those who allocated this plot to Obadias did something illegal. It’s that Munguambe.” Although Célia, Obadias’s wife, told her otherwise, the administrator maintained the accusation. “He is Munguambe’s bricklayer,” she said while looking at me. “He made Munguambe’s house in return for this plot.” Realising that Obadias’s absence made any current progress in the case impossible, Ussene decided to postpone the forced resettlement, and a new meeting was set for 25 April.

On 25 April the district administrator and Kombane, the municipal councillor in District 5, arrived at the disputed plot, together with a delegation from the neighbourhood administration, and quickly summoned all involved parties for a final meeting. Ussene and Obadias immediately started discussing the process of fencing off the plot. According to Obadias, he had planted *espinhosa* at the boundary lines in order to demarcate the plot and because he was afraid that snakes (*cobras*) might crawl into his reed hut at night. Ignoring this, the administrator said Obadias should have presented her with a written account, after which she would have allocated a plot to him. “Don’t abuse me, *senhor* Obadias,” Ussene said, raising her voice. She then

ordered Obadias to reveal who had allocated the plot to him. Once again, Obadias claimed that he had acquired the plot through Munguambe’s legitimate request at the neighbourhood administration. This assertion was flatly denied, not only by Magalhães, the neighbourhood leader, but also by Boavida Wate, a former quarter chief who had allocated land to many of the current residents in the area and who, according to Munguambe, had also signed Obadias’s request for land as a means of attesting that the disputed plot was, in fact, vacant and that Obadias ought to be given use rights to it. “He is lying!” Obadias nodded towards Wate, who was sitting on a vertical cement block near the entrance. “That bottle of wine that we drank at my place – who gave you that?” Wate ignored Obadias’s outburst and continued looking straight ahead. “You’re not telling the truth, Wate,” Munguambe shouted. “The night you were drinking with Obadias until daybreak, who paid for the wine?”

Ussene continued to question why Obadias had invaded the plot before receiving an official resolution of the case. Apparently still agitated, Munguambe anticipated Obadias’s response. “This *senhor* constantly went to the administration trying to speak with *mamãe* (mummy, i.e. the administrator), but *mamãe* didn’t give him a chance –” Ussene interrupted: “Say ‘administrator’; I’m not your mother. Don’t mix things up here!” Munguambe then started talking about Marta Mucavela and what he took to be an illegal authorization of her occupancy. “We authorized it,” Ussene shouted. “I have already told this *senhor* (Obadias) that he isn’t a schoolteacher, and therefore he has to request a plot like everybody else.”

Finally, Magalhães tried to unravel the details. As the neighbourhood leader perceived the dispute, Obadias only started building

the *casa de caniço* when he realized that Marta Mucavela had been allocated the plot. Consequently, the reason for Obadias invading the plot had less to do with the fear of being evicted by his aunt than of losing the attractive plot to Marta Mucavela. The proper solution would therefore be, Magalhães reasoned, for Obadias to return to his previous house and await the allocation of another plot. Obadias tried to refute Magalhães's claim by, once again, describing the process leading up to the current situation, but Kombane, the municipal councillor, brushed him off: "You have to understand (*meter na cabeça*) that this place does not belong to you. When the state wishes, it removes people and places them elsewhere." Kombane suddenly had to leave and so the meeting ended abruptly with the decision that Magalhães should investigate Obadias's previous residence to ascertain whether it was possible for him to return there.

I stayed talking with Célia Obadias. During the meeting it really surprised me to find out that Obadias had apparently bought a bottle of wine and shared it with Wate. I was therefore eager to explore this relationship further. "Wate told Obadias to pay him four million MZM (167 USD) out of gratitude (*agradecimento*)", Célia told me. "Obadias didn't have the money, but he bought five litres of wine. Consequently, Wate went to Obadias's place, where they drank until daybreak." I met Obadias the next day when he returned from doing an odd job nearby. I asked Obadias if it was true that he had to pay Wate four million MZM. "Yes," Obadias nodded. "I was supposed to give him four million MZM, but it wasn't as payment for the plot. It was just to show my gratitude. Munguambe told me to give the money to Wate because he had found the plot and that sure wasn't easy." I asked Obadias if he had given the money to Wate before or after submitting the document to Magalhães. "Before.

Then we submitted the document and I was allocated the plot. Wate already knew all these places, but he couldn't allow me to enter before submitting the document."

Although at the meeting it seemed that the untenable situation would be resolved soon, this did not happen. In fact, it was only in March 2006 that a viable solution was found: Obadias was allocated a plot in the same area but, since he lacked the financial means to buy construction materials for a new *casa de caniço*, Marta Mucavela agreed to pay all relocation costs. When I returned to Mulwene once again in February 2009, Marta Mucavela had begun building her much-desired cement house on the disputed plot and had, in fact, made peace with Obadias, who was now living with his family in a two-room reed hut nearby.

## THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A RECTANGULAR FURROW

This complex dispute illustrates how access to land in sub-Saharan Africa can often entail the activation of overlapping authority regimes and shifting registers of rights (Lund 2002:20; Gough and Yankson 2000:2486). This was perhaps best seen through the attempt to legitimate Obadias's request for land by using the signature of Boavida Wate, the former quarter chief in the area; something which was apparently achieved by giving the latter five litres of wine. We might, however, stretch this analysis further. As I will argue, given the intricate ways that authority regimes and registers of property rights were interwoven, the process of (potentially) constructing a cement house in the disputed plot became a possible way for Alberto Obadias to establish proper distances to important but potentially malevolent others, such as the district admin-

istrator. In this regard, three interrelated occurrences are particularly illuminating:

- 1) After having invaded the disputed plot, Obadias immediately fenced it off with *espinhosa* and began digging out a rectangular furrow starting about three metres from the boundary line towards the street.
- 2) When the district administrator first visited the disputed plot intending to remove Alberto Obadias forcibly, the accompanying military police officers were ordered to cover the furrow and remove the cement blocks that Obadias had placed alongside its edges.
- 3) At the final meeting on 25 April 2005, the administrator constantly returned to the fact that Obadias had fenced off the disputed plot and dug out the furrow. Both acts were apparently seen as direct provocations against the Mozambican state.

One may rightfully wonder how a rectangular furrow and small *espinhosa* plants became key focal points in a heated dispute over access to land and housing rights. First, what prompted Obadias to dig out the furrow and place cement blocks along its edges while knowing that he couldn't afford to actually build the house, whether in the short term or even longer? Second, why did the district administrator order the military police officers to cover the furrow when she also knew that Obadias was financially incapable of realising a construction project? And, finally, why did these acts and not the invasion itself cause such heated debate during the subsequent meetings? As I will argue, the rectangular furrow and the *espinhosa* plants are at the core of this paper's central theme, i.e. how construction projects and processes of land parcelling enable urban

residents, such as Alberto Obadias, to position themselves at a proper distance from important but potentially malevolent others. In this particular situation, the parties involved were very much aware that if Obadias succeeded in maintaining the furrow (and thus the basis for making foundations for a future cement house), he would have gained a vantage position from which to engage in reciprocal encounters with local leaders and state officials.

In order to understand how a rectangular furrow might give an urban resident a more powerful position from which to establish a proper distance from capricious others, we need to focus on the socio-political significance of house construction and land parcelling in this particular peri-urban setting. Below, I will therefore flesh out in detail the practical-cum-aesthetic and socio-political ideals that guide house construction projects and land parcelling processes in this peri-urban area and in the urban setting more broadly, with a particular emphasis on how they have affected the mutual positionings of urban residents and local-level civil servants.

## PERI-URBAN IDEALS

Given an overall lack of available space within the city limits, Mulwene and neighbouring areas have since the 1980s been politically defined as expansion zones (*zonas de expansão*), i.e. when it needs urban land, the municipality should focus on this region (Secretaria de Es-

<sup>4</sup>This point appears from the 1985 structure plan for Maputo (Secretaria de Estado do Planeamento Físico 1985), which, although never formally implemented, is still being used by public officials as a blueprint for 'basic urbanization' (*urbanização básica*) (Jenkins 1999a:12). According to the 1985 structure plan, urban expansion zones can be defined as peripheral areas of the city in which no formal occupation was planned until 2010.

tado do Planeamento Físico 1985)<sup>4</sup>. This status also implied that only small-scale agriculture was allowed, as the municipality wanted to preserve the area as a reserve for future plans. The reason that Mulwene had not been used for urban projects before 2000 was its proximity to a military compound where explosives were stored. In 1988 the compound had exploded, and fearing that this might happen again, the municipality was hesitant to use the area for habitation. After the flood in 2000, the pressing need to resettle flood victims overtook this danger and the planned urban expansion became a reality<sup>5</sup>.

From official documents outlining the planning of the resettlement zone and interviews with public officials involved in the process, it is clear that the Maputo municipality envisioned Mulwene as a ‘model neighbourhood’ (*bairro modelo*), with all the ‘requirements that constitute adequate habitation’<sup>6</sup>. In Mozambican terms this meant parcelling in accordance with a fixed set of urban norms dictating that individual plots had to be 15x30m with houses located three metres from the boundary line towards the street. Within a year after the 2000 floods, a section of Mulwene, what was later known as *Matendene*<sup>7</sup>, had indeed been parcelled out in evenly sized plots that were allocated to

the homeless flood victims, many of whom were installed in small cement houses built by international donor organisations working in collaboration with the Maputo municipality. As the rapid influx of people necessitated a strengthened administrative framework, Mulwene was established as municipal neighbourhood in 2001 (Município de Maputo 2001). Soon afterwards, it was constituted as an operational municipal entity subdivided into 56 quarters, each with 80 to 120 households headed by individual *chefes de quarteirões* (quarter chiefs) and subordinate block chiefs.

During my first months in Mulwene, I was constantly struck by the homogeneity of the area, with its evenly structured blocks, each consisting of 16 15x30m plots laid out in a uniform grid separated by straight, ten-metre wide roads. When I compared Mulwene to peri-urban neighbourhoods in Mozambique and other sub-Saharan states, the spatial organization was, indeed, impressive. The new *bairro* was in many ways the antithesis of most unplanned communities on the outskirts of African cities, which lack everything from basic infrastructure and sanitation to functional housing mechanisms (Briggs and Mwamfupe 2000; Potts 2006). Surely, I imagined, the physical environment in Mulwene reflected the initially stated ideal of creating a *bairro modelo* that adhered to a set of ‘fixed urban norms’. I was therefore quite surprised when I realized that the greater part of the well-organized *bairro* had never been parcelled out by formal administrative authorities (see Figure 1).

<sup>5</sup> Sadly, though, on 22 March 2007, the fear materialised as a devastating explosion in the military compound that caused at least 103 deaths and 515 injuries (allAfrica.com 2007). Afterwards, President Guebuza promised that the compound would be closed down.

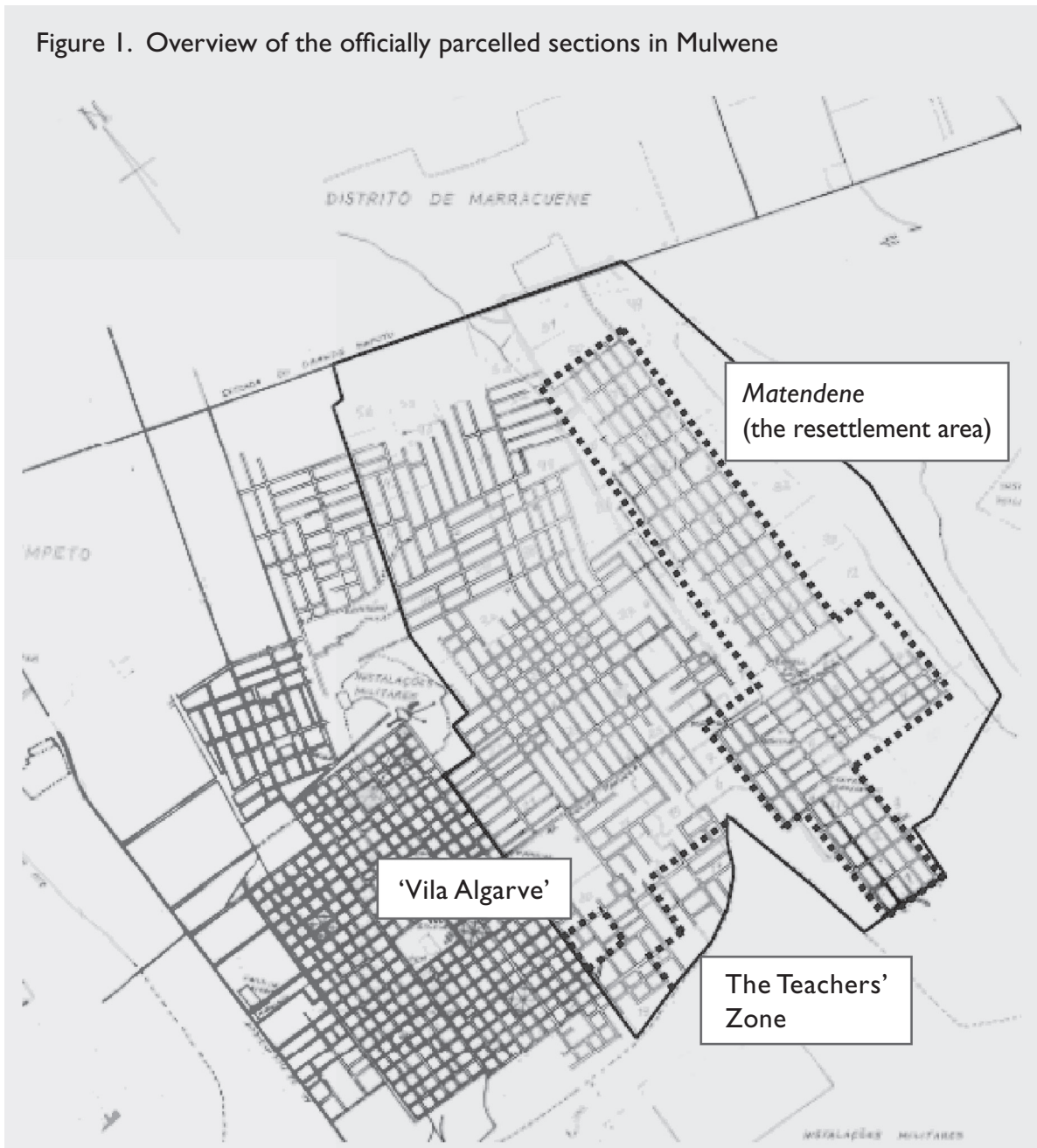
<sup>6</sup> República de Moçambique: I Draft do Projecto de Reassentamento das Populações em Mulwene (April 2000). Document in municipal archive, Mulwene.

<sup>7</sup> *Matendene* is the proper name used to describe the section of Mulwene where the flood victims were resettled. The word is essentially a mixture of xiChangana (xiTsonga) and Portuguese. With the plural xiChangana prefix ‘ma’ attached to ‘tendas’ (Portuguese for ‘tents’), *Matendene* comes to indicate ‘the area of the tents’.

<sup>8</sup> With the nationalisation of land at independence in 1975, monetary transactions in land were formally banned (Garvey 1998).



Figure 1. Overview of the officially parcelled sections in Mulwene



As transport facilities and basic infrastructure were gradually improved, a growing number of people who were in no position to obtain land closer to the city centre became interested in buying a plot in the emerging *bairro*. And to be sure, these demands for peri-urban land did not go unnoticed, by either former *nativo* owners or local-level officials and mu-

nicipal architects operating in the area. When realising the economic opportunities in land transactions<sup>8</sup>, municipal cadres collaborating with *nativo* owners began parceling out plots informally which, although being officially illegal and thus lacking cadastral registration,

<sup>9</sup> Municipal Department for Construction and Urbanization.

nevertheless imitated the ‘fixed urban norms’ associated with the uniform grid of the *bairro modelo* described above. In other words, although the physical landscape appeared to be ordered in accordance with an overall formal urban plan, this was not the case. Rather, the structured appearance of the larger part of Mulwene emerged through overlapping processes of informal parcelling carried out by municipal land surveyors and architects, acting either on their own or in collaboration with local chiefs, who sold individual plots to needy newcomers in the initial post-resettlement process (Nielsen 2007). Today, the effects of these informal land parcelling projects are visible, as seen from Figure 1. The magnitude of the informal planning can be further corroborated by exploring current mechanisms for accessing land in Mulwene. From a household survey I conducted with all 131 household heads in Quarter 20, it emerged that 24.4% (32 respondents) were allocated land by the municipality, either after individual requests or through a resettlement process. Equally interestingly, 7.6% (10 respondents) acquired access through a friend, 36.6% (48 respondents) through a relative and 3.8% (five respondents) through the quarter chief. If we include the 16% (21 respondents) who gained access through ‘other channels’, at least 64% of all 131 households acquired a plot using non-legal channels.

### **‘PARCELAMENTO’**

Clearly, we need to ask ourselves how the initial intentions of creating a *bairro modelo* where legitimate urban residents would acquire legal use rights to officially parcelled out plots were supplanted by an alternative but equally organized spatial grid whose most prevalent feature was perhaps its informality. In order

to respond to this question, we need to focus briefly on the historical trajectory of *parcelamento* (parcelling).

During the colonial era, urban areas in Mozambique were reserved for the white elite, with the result that urban governance structures focused on the city centre without integrating the African population into the formal city (Jenkins 2006a:6). With the exodus of the Portuguese colonisers after independence in 1975, the already fragile urban administration was unable to tackle the problems caused by a large influx of people seeking shelter and better opportunities in the city. Further, the new independent Frelimo government operated from a nationalist socialist ideology with an explicit anti-urban bias that neglected comprehensive urban development in favour of grand agricultural visions. In fact, in parallel with simultaneous political processes in Brazil (Ramsdell 1990), the urban population was envisioned as parasites in need of removal. Seen through this ideological prism, urban development had no productive value; instead it symbolised the spirit of consumption that Frelimo so desperately sought to eliminate (Jenkins 2006b:120). The limited engagement with the broader urban population during colonial rule thus continued after Independence. Although it was now an indigenous political group in power, ‘its response to the needs of the urban majority was seriously constrained by an over-reliance on past socialist models and lack of capacity’ (ibid.) Thus, out of the 86,300 new housing units built between 1980 and 1997, only about 7% was supplied by the state or formal private sector (4000 and 1500 respectively). The remaining more than 80,000 units were built without state assistance (Jenkins 1999b:23-24).

The explicit state-dominated approach to urban management was gradually loosened after 1987 with the World Bank/IMF-initiated

restructuring of the Mozambican economy. In 1990, the first ever national housing policy was approved, which, in accordance with the altered perspective on free market forces, assigned to the state a facilitatory role and introduced the liberalisation of real estate activity and thereby the basis for a housing market (Jenkins 1998). Nonetheless, the state continued to assert its key role in the allocation of plots, not least given the continued nationalisation of land. With no improvement in administrative capacities, however, its ability to enforce this assertion remained limited. Thus, between 1990 and 1999, 48 urban plot layouts were developed by state and other institutions with no overall co-ordination or even a land register (Jenkins 2001:637). Many of these developments were parcelled out through illicit land transactions between individual civil servants and different private agents. In other words, the introduction of structural adjustment programmes and the liberalisation of the housing market did little to strengthen the functioning of urban management structures. In fact, given the low salaries combined with the markedly discretionary powers enjoyed by individual civil servants, illegal activities continued unabated.

When it came to inadequate urban administrative capacities, DMCU [*Direcção Municipal de Construção e Urbanização*]<sup>9</sup> was the locus *par excellence*. Since its creation in 1980, DMCU had been responsible for urban planning including the demarcation, allocation and registration of land (Boucher et al. 1995:12). However, from its inception, the stable functioning of the institution was hampered by

<sup>9</sup> According to the 1997 Land Law, an urbanization plan is a “document which establishes the organisation, design, concept and boundaries of urban perimeters, as well as occupancy parameters and building plans, properties to be protected, areas destined for installation of equipment, open spaces and schematic diagrams for road networks and principal infrastructure” (Art. 1).

incapacity and political neglect. DMCU was originally created only for the small city centre and not for the expanding peri-urban areas, although these were also within its municipal limits. As Cani, the former chief of the urbanization department told me, “DMCU was designed for a city which is no longer Maputo”. This applied not only to the layout of the city, but to human resources as well. 10 civil servants within the institution had a university degree and of the total technical staff of about 100 employees, 75% had finished only secondary school (Carrilho et al. 2005:5). These surveyors and architects worked with a land cadastre that had not been updated since 1985 (Jenkins 2001:637). Consequently, as indicated by a recent report on the urban management structures in Maputo, the number of inconsistencies between actual use of land and the official registration was staggering (Swedesurvey 1999). Similar to the situation in Botswana and Zambia (Rakodi and Leduka 2005), the consequence of the fragile urban administration is the near total incapacity to survey and register existing and requested titles to land. The absurdity of the situation is apparent in Garvey’s estimation that it would take about 120 years to survey and title the Mozambican national territory (1998).

Acknowledging the need to change things around, newly elected mayor Eneas Comiche in 2004 ordered DMCU to stop processing new requests until the administrative structures had been strengthened. As a follow-up measure, when realising the ‘total chaos’ in DMCU created by corrupt civil servants, Comiche compelled more than 50 architects and surveyors to retire (Sambo 2007).

To residents in areas such as Mulwene, parcelling [*parcelamento*] is paramount. Unless the plot is parcelled out by an appropriate authority and allotted a registered number, it is impossible to apply for use rights and a build-



ing permit. However, no functional national regulations exist that stipulate how urban land should be administered (Allen 2004)<sup>10</sup>. It follows, then, that urbanisation plans should indicate the use and regulation of these areas. According to the 1997 Land Law, it is clear that rights to use and benefit from land can be obtained through occupancy – either in accordance with customary norms, or in good faith for at least ten years – or through a legal authorisation (Art. 12). These criteria, however, create problems for many urban residents. Not only are customary norms extremely difficult to assert in urban areas, but many residents have no way of proving ten years of residence. Thus, legal property rights can only be obtained based on the prior existence of an urbanization plan. It follows, then, that urbanisation plans should indicate the use and regulation of these areas.

As can be seen by the new Territorial Regulation Law [*Lei de Ordenamento do Território*], urbanization plans are integral parts of a hierarchical system of different plans, ranging from national planning devices to the Detailed Plans [*Planos de Pormenor*], which “define in detail the occupational typology of any specific area in the urban centre” (Art. 10). These different devices outline all aspects of urban and rural territorial planning ranging from infrastructure and road systems to potential industrial zones and residential areas. *Parcelamento* is, therefore, the only planning instrument available. To parcel out a plot is at the same time to transform the urban or rural landscape and must therefore occur in

<sup>10</sup> According to Foucault, this particular form of governance emerges when the “population comes to appear above all else as the ultimate end of government. (...) It is the population itself on which government will act directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of population into certain regions of activities, etc” (1991:100).

accordance with the planning devices created for the particular context. The only problem is that such legal devices for the planning of particular areas do not exist.

For several months I inquired into the juridical framework of urban management in Mulwene. As time went on, my frustration increased. “If you’re looking for a legal document, you won’t find it,” Chambe, an architect at DMCU, assured me. “But that doesn’t complicate anything because everyone knows that’s how it works. [...] We have to go around things [*dobrar*]. Often, we are confronted by a situation out of the ordinary where we have to depend on our creativity. If we had to wait for a legal instrument, we would immediately come to a standstill.” As Cani, the former head of the urbanization department at DMCU, poignantly put it, urban management was, in fact, “administration ad hoc” [*gestão ad hoc*] functioning simply to secure “a minimum of urban order”. The need to continue regulating the urban landscape was thus what made it possible in the first place to reach any decision regarding future plans. An architect at MICOA?? told me how “at this moment, things work because they are based on good faith [*boa fé*]... on the arguments we have to make to get decision-makers to use certain planning instruments. We say to the mayor, ‘look, if you don’t approve this, we will have problems in the future’. So we believe in good faith.” In a situation without legal, human or administrative capacities to realise broad-ranging urban planning, urban management in the peri-urban areas amounts to *parcelamento* as simple ad hoc interventions. “The plans don’t exist,” Chambe concluded. “That’s the problem. And that is why *parcelamento* is all there is.”

Ideally, *parcelamento* would occur when the need for a residential area was formulated, either by the local administrative structures or by

a municipal entity. Subsequently, physical planners from DMCU would survey the area before topographers marked out individual plots whose allotted numbers would be registered in the municipal cadastre. Reality, however, is markedly different. In fact, besides the three formally parcelled areas indicated in Figure 1, no formal urban plan exists. In other words, plots are not registered in the municipal cadastre and no official map of the area has ever been drafted. When I started to inquire into the matter, architects at DMCU were equally puzzled but suggested that the old maps of Coelhos, the bordering neighbourhood, might include these areas; something I soon found out that they did not. What I did find out, however, was that the quarters near the 'Teachers' Zone' had been informally parcelled out by (at least) one architect from DMCU collaborating with residents in the area. As I would later realise, this kind of 'pirate parcelling' [*parcelamento pirata*] was ubiquitous and frequently involved participation of individual DMCU surveyors and architects and members of the local administrative structure.

Irrespective of its nonexistent legal basis, however, *parcelamento* is what residents in Mulwene strive for, not least given the expectations for increased tenure security. In fact, when an area has been parcelled, it is very unlikely that resident will ever be removed. As Cani told me, DMCU is not at all interested in how a person acquires access to a plot; what matters is whether it is in conflict with ongoing municipal projects such as the recent construction of a rest home for elderly people, or the Teachers Zone. If not, the resident remains. Thus, despite acquisition through a corrupt civil servant and a consequent lack of cadastral registration, residents and officials agree on the practical legitimacy obtained through *parcelamento*. This was succinctly explained by Daniel, my good friend

and neighbour. We were sitting in the shade of a *canbú* tree outside his house, admiring the incomprehensible activity of his 50-odd ducks and discussing the intricacies of legally acquiring a plot, when Daniel commented on municipal construction norms:

I have a suspicion that they [i.e. the municipality] wish to urbanise here. [...] Imagine saying to a person that he has to construct his house according to a particular plan. The kind of *bairro* [neighbourhood] that they want is a dream. I witnessed the same thing in South Africa, particularly this thing regarding demands: You make a *bairro* according to the law and afterwards people can live there if they pay for 50 years. However, the state can't come now and tell me to make considerable improvements in relation to what exists elsewhere in Mulwene. We're still in the first phase where it's about avoiding the rain [*apanhar a chuva*] and getting a place for my children to read.

Morten: But wouldn't you like the area to be better organised?

Daniel: Yes, but not so that they can enter the houses to make demands. We want streets improved so that ambulances can get in here. There's nothing better than *parcelamento* so that I can say that 'this is mine'.

According to Daniel, municipal interventions carry the seeds for both benefits and impediments to individual projects. Daniel bought his plot informally from an old *nativo*-owner before the flood, when Mulwene was largely beyond municipal reach. However, beginning in 2000 the influx of people also brought the state closer to the residents, which is something that particularly concerned Daniel considering the potential loss of not only the plot

he bought informally, but also of the cement house erected without a building permit. In this regard, the consequences of *parcelamento* are advantageous. Not only is it considered as a relatively certain indication that individual property rights will soon be allocated. *Parcelamento* is more generally the catalyst that triggers individual construction projects even though, as we have seen above, its legal status is ambiguous. Residents such as Daniel thus consider it advantageous to keep a proper distance from state norms that might deflect a set course towards a completed concrete house, opting instead for what is locally considered legitimate allocation.

Summing up, given the overall weak administrative capacities mentioned above, state and municipal agencies have proven completely incapable of realising the ambitious vision of a *bairro modelo* in Mulwene. Nevertheless, as an outcome of the resettlement process, the ideal of the *bairro modelo* and the accompanying ‘fixed urban norms’ have come to condition both formal and informal processes of parcelling out and house building in Mulwene as a viable way of securing ‘a minimum of urban order’. Similar to the general idea of ‘administration ad hoc’, the ‘fixed urban norms’ do not have any legal or formal status. However, despite the lack of legislation, given that residents build *as if* they are realising formal urban norms, they come, in a sense, to create those norms. Thus, without a proper original to imitate, the only real original is the copy.

### **PROPORTIONING PROPER DISTANCES**

With these last comments, we come back to the central theme of the paper, which is how proper distances to potentially malevolent others are established through house con-

struction projects and land parcelling processes. I therefore return to the land dispute between Alberto Obadias and Marta Mucavela in order to discuss its relational potentials.

When Alberto Obadias first dug out the rectangular furrow three metres from the boundary line towards the street, he was, in a very concrete sense, attempting to proportion the proper distances to capricious others in his environment, such as municipal cadres and community leaders. By becoming visible through the physical manifestation of a (future) cement house, Obadias was acting on widely shared ideas of how pragmatic legitimacy is acquired in an unstable peri-urban setting where state and municipal agencies constantly fail to deliver what they have promised. According to Corsín Jiménez, proportionality is “a matter of finding the right balance between the visible and the invisible elements of social life” (2008:180) and in this regard, the furrow indicated a particular balancing of the distance between house-builder (Obadias) and state agents (e.g. the district administrator). In other words, by digging out the furrow, Obadias sought to re-code his status from illegal invader to that of a legitimate citizen. A partial (and insecure) invisible existence on the fringes of the neighbourhood would thus be transformed into partial (and relatively secure) visibility within the local community.

The effects of this attempt were soon apparent. A few days after having invaded the disputed plot, I accompanied Obadias to a meeting with the district administrator at her office. As he told me before the meeting, Obadias hoped for the administrator to acknowledge the legitimacy of his occupation and consequently allocate use rights to the current plot or, alternatively, relocate Obadias and his family to another plot in the vicinity. Without entering the debate on the

possible legitimacy of Obadias's occupancy, the administrator stated that Marta Mucavela had been allocated the plot simply because Obadias had waited too long with commencing his construction project. "And that's why I gave the plot to the schoolteacher," Ussene said with a raised hand. "If you had only erected a *casa de caniço*, I would say that the schoolteacher who requested a plot should pay all expenses for a new *casa de caniço* for you. But when I saw the reed in your plot, I knew that I was not doing harm to anyone."

When we were about to leave the administrator's office, however, Obadias gave a strong indication that his status – and thus his ability to engage in reciprocal encounters with state agents – might already have been transformed. Standing in front of Ussene while staring at the floor, Obadias asked if she had considered the issue regarding the name for his still unborn child. Ussene's response was brief, and it was apparent that her answer was negative. Outside the administration building, I asked Obadias what their brief exchange was about. As Obadias told me, he had previously asked Ussene if she would consider giving her name to his unborn baby. Although the administrator had originally agreed, for some reason she now declined the offer.

In the southern part of Mozambique, most living persons have a spiritual namesake (Portuguese *xará*; xiChangana *máb'ĩzweni*; see Junod 1962:38). Name-giving thus constitutes an extension of the living person (xiChangana *náválálá*), whereby his or her personhood is formed in a dialectical relationship between the living person and the deceased ancestor. Similar types of relationship are established between living persons with slightly different dynamics. If the child of A is given the name of A's uncle (B), the latter is, so to speak, re-configured as A's child, whereby implicit reciprocal power relations between A and B

obviously change accordingly. Returning to the relationship between Obadias and the district administrator, if she had agreed to share her name with Obadias's baby, the district administrator would, in a symbolic sense, be (inferiorly) positioned as Obadias's daughter. Needless to say, if Obadias had succeeded in establishing this reciprocal relationship, problems regarding the plot would probably have become manageable.

Emerging as an effect of digging out the rectangular furrow, it was Obadias's (imagined) status as a legitimate citizen that potentially proportioned the distance from the district administrator. In a sense, the furrow balanced this distance; it was the medium through which Obadias engaged in reciprocal transactions with the municipal agent. Stated differently, by mimicking the urban standards associated with the idea of creating a *bairro modelo*, a particular kind of visibility was produced that made Obadias a possible (i.e. visible) counterpart to important but potentially malevolent others.

Another indication of this emerging visibility was suggested by Obadias the day after he invaded the disputed plot. I met Obadias on his way to visit Munguambe, the quarter chief, and I followed along. When just about to leave the disputed plot, we noticed a white four-wheel drive Toyota crossing the nearby square. Obadias stopped and followed the car with his eyes. "Is it them?" Obadias's question was suspended in mid-air without a proper addressee. I replied by asking who he thought it could have been. Obadias resumed walking before responding. "I don't know." His voice barely audible, he continued: "Someone who's coming to resolve my problems." Again, in a peri-urban setting where illegal occupation of land is frequently accepted when reflecting simply a 'minimum of urban order', adherence to urban standards associated with

the initial idea of a *bairro modelo* is likely to position urban residents as legitimate citizens. In this regard, Obadias expected to be illuminated, so to speak, by his manoeuvres in the disputed plot so as to gain visibility in the eyes of some (unknown) agent capable of resolving his problems.

In the end, Obadias did acquire use rights to a plot in Mulwene; something which was undoubtedly made possible through his initial invasion of the disputed plot. What is equally apparent, however, is the failure of his many attempts to proportion the distances to capricious others, such as the district administrator and Boavida Wate, the former quarter chief. In a sense, Obadias's invasion of the disputed plot constituted a crucial junction between two intersecting registers of rights: on the one hand, the formal allocation of property rights in the 'Teachers' Zone' and, on the other, the pragmatic legitimacy acquired through a house-builder's appropriation of urban norms associated with the *bairro modelo*. In a situation where exposure of weak administrative capacities is a constant threat to public office, the district administrator clearly felt compelled to act in accordance with formal juridical standards. Regarding Wate, he most likely signed Obadias's request and could thus have played a significant role in the dispute. He probably chose to distance himself from Obadias and Munguambe, however, based on the assumption that if the latter was to be considered guilty, it was better to stick to the winning team.

Still, things could easily have turned out differently. As the district administrator emphasized at the meeting with Obadias at her office, if he had already commenced constructing a cement house at the time of Marta Mucavela's acquisition of formal use rights, Obadias would most probably have remained on the plot. Consequently, although Obadias's initial

readings of the reciprocal potentials from digging a rectangular furrow were somewhat off the mark, this should not be understood as an overall failure to relate means to ends in realistic ways, or what Bourdieu defines as the inability to work out a 'coherent hierarchized system of goals' (1972:69, cf. 2000: 221). In an unstable social setting such as Mulwene, *parcelamento* is nothing more than a momentary equilibrium constantly on the brink of breaking down, with situational constraints conditioning the miniscule normative shifts. Nonetheless, Obadias's position was ultimately altered as a result of the invasion and subsequent digging out of the rectangular furrow. Rather than being an illegal squatter who could easily be relocated with force, he was transformed into a potential, though still contested, legitimate citizen.

## INVERSE GOVERNMENTALITY

Let me broaden out the discussion of producing proper distances through house construction projects and land parcelling by suggesting some implications for our analytical understanding of state-citizen relationships in unstable socio-political environments such as Mulwene.

As might be apparent by now, parcelling and house-building in Mulwene do not contain overt potentials for contesting existing social orders. Rather than transforming social structures, these processes aim to secure a stable position for the house-builders within the urban fabric by becoming partially visible through the appropriation of state-defined urban norms. As argued by Mbembe, it is fruitless to explore the relationship between state and citizens through an opposition between an ideologically driven regime and a "popular world" trying to bring about the



collapse of power (2001). Rather, we need to see how the “ideological repertoire of officialdom along with its idioms and forms” are borrowed and domesticated (op.cit.110). We might even argue that by building a house according to the ‘fixed urban norms’ introduced with the floods in 2000, residents were not merely copying the state; they were, so to speak, partially becoming the state by appropriating certain key aesthetic elements associated with state-authored urban planning. As Taussig tells us, mimicry corrodes alterity and thus allows the copy to share in the properties of the original (1993; cf. Ferguson 2006:164). In this regard, imitation is a ‘space between’, “in which it is far from easy to say who is the imitator and who is the imitated, which is copy and which is original” (Taussig 1993:78). Let me briefly expand on this intricate relationship between mimetic housing practices and state-citizen relationships.

During colonial rule, the African population was allowed to occupy urban land only on a temporary basis, and so permanent housing was illegal by definition (Bryceson and Potts 2006:15). However, as African migrants began to see the city as a place of permanent opportunities (Jenkins 2006b:125), the need for durable housing increased. According to my friends in Mulwene, residents in peri-urban areas therefore built cement houses inside the more unstable huts made of clay and reed. When they reached the roof, the surrounding hut was demolished and corrugated iron sheets were rapidly put in place as the roof on the hitherto concealed building. Realising that a cement house had been erected, the local chief would fine the house-builder, but allow the latter to continue living there given the ‘urban look’ of the new house.

We might argue that these previous housing practices are, to some extent, reproduced by urban residents such as Alberto Obadias.

In both instances, possibilities associated with the building process afforded house-builders a safer position from which to avoid further involvement with official agencies given the aesthetic norms used for parcelling and house construction. Indeed, as was the case during colonial rule, the parameters for accessing land could continue to be defined in accordance with kinship-based or communitarian normative codes *because* building practices began to occur in accordance with the urban norms defined by the Portuguese rulers. Similarly, in Mulwene, the apparent illegality of Obadias’s occupancy was pragmatically legitimized *because* he built in accordance with the ‘fixed urban norms’ associated with the *bairro modelo*. Following Ferguson, we might argue that these processes reflect a form of alterity that refuses to be other (2006:157). Rather than distancing itself from the locus of power, it seeks to be (partially) visible and recognized, given the imagined benefits emanating from such a position (Nielsen 2008).

Surely, such house-building practices are neither a condition for nor a rejection of urban governmentality, i.e. institutional attempts to reform not only socio-economic environments but also peoples’ desires and expectations so that the operations of both are in harmony (Foucault 1991; Li 2007; Rose and Miller 1992; cf. Osborne and Rose 1999; Outtes 1994; Scott 1998)<sup>11</sup>. Rather, we might perhaps argue that parcelling and house-building in Mulwene reflect a form of *inverse governmentality*, in which local agents actually strive to be partially met by the ordering gaze of power. When confronting the state with an imitation of those urban norms that the state is incapable of realizing, the activities of the house-builders create, so to speak, the ordering gaze of power by which they ought to be illuminated. The gaze radiates, as it were, back from the object towards the source.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the mimetic relationship between state and citizens does not *sui generis* stabilize reciprocal encounters. As argued, acts of house-building occur in a ‘space between’ which is characterized as much by difference as by similarity (Taussig 1993:129-30). Paraphrasing Willerslev, we might argue that, through the imitation of urban norms regarding the location of house and plot size, residents are securing a position where they are not entirely becoming the state, but equally are not *not* the state (2004; 2007:94,100,110). It is this ambiguous position that both enables urban residents to acquire pragmatic legitimacy – and thus potentially proportion distances to otherwise capricious others – and at the same time threatens to derail intended construction projects.

## CONCLUSION

In ‘People as Infrastructure’ (2004), Simone proposes a novel reading of urban socialities in sub-Saharan Africa. Although processes of urbanization lack overall coherence, we should not, Simone tells us, see them as somehow chaotically incomplete. In fact, when focusing on miniscule everyday encounters, we might detect a particular open-ended pattern emerging from the intersections of people’s flexible and mobile reciprocal interactions. It is this fine-meshed interactional grid that Simone suggests we see as a form of socio-spatial infrastructure through which urban residents precariously remake African inner-cities by rehearsing “new ways of navigating complex urban relationships” and thus end up producing senses of commonality that go beyond parochial identities (ibid.:427).

In this paper, I have unpacked one such socio-spatial infrastructure through the analysis

of relational potentialities inherent in house construction projects and land parcelling in Mulwene. As I have argued, a volatile and highly flexible pattern can, indeed, be discerned across various house construction projects through their appropriation of urban standards associated with the initial idea of making a *bairro modelo*. By parcelling out land informally and building houses without proper building permits, the imitation of public urban standards instantiates a momentary equilibrium between interacting agents, e.g. local leaders and state cadres. In a sense, occupancy of a cement house located three metres from the boundary line towards the street in a 15x30m plot is what defines urban citizenship in this particular setting as it is by commencing a construction project that visibility and proper distance to important but also potentially malevolent others is created.

In order to grasp the dynamics of these socio-political infrastructures, it makes little sense to adopt conventional dichotomies between formal/informal and legitimate/illegitimate. Rather, we need to focus on those concrete processes, such as house construction and land parcelling, through which diverse social positions are created and acted upon. When exploring how differently positioned agents seek to establish proper distances to potentially malevolent others, it is clear that distinctions between formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate, state and non-state, are relevant only as particular (momentary) instantiations that should be excavated *a posteriori* rather than functioning as *a priori* conceptual categorizations framing the approach to and understanding of local socio-political dynamics. Indeed, as we saw above, Alberto Obadias could potentially have acquired legitimate use rights to the disputed plot he illegally invaded if only he had commenced his construction project prior to Mucavela being

attributed the same piece of land. Legitimate occupancy, then, would have been an outcome of the illegitimate process.

Consequently, by exploring such socio-political infrastructures, we might get a deeper understanding of the “makeshift, ephemeral ways of being social” that characterize contemporary urbanization processes in sub-Saharan Africa (Simone 2004:426). As I have indicated, in unstable social settings such as Mulwene, house construction projects are primary media through which urban residents seek to position themselves properly in order to engage with the dynamics of a larger world. Without the capacity to regulate the pace of urban life, a cement house in a parcelled-out plot is what enforces upon a recalcitrant world the existence of its owner: it is a way of becoming a legitimate member of the surrounding society.



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