Review of African Political Economy

Filling in the Blanks: The Potency of Fragmented Imageries of the State

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Recent neo-patrimonial approaches to the state see the sub-Saharan state as a façade that serves – with different degrees of effectiveness – to disguise the play of clientalistic relations and the interests of kin and kith. Drawing on an analysis of how ideas are reproduced in peri-urban areas of Maputo, Mozambique, this article argues that no pre-given causality exists between encounters with a dysfunctional state apparatus and subjectively held understandings of ordinary people. We cannot a priori determine that incoherent and partial state practices necessarily lead individuals to perceive the state as devoid of legitimate moral value. On the contrary, locally situated individuals use ideas associated with the state to define entitlements and create standards for evaluating state-defined programmes or international donor-driven initiatives. Ideas of the state can thus be a basis for social action; even when the reality of state dysfunction is widely accepted, 'ordinary people' continue to invest themselves in these ideas.

When referring to the state, scholars increasingly acknowledge that it comprises much more than political or administrative structures. Fundamentally it is also an *idea*, manifest perhaps most saliently in the widely held equation of state and nation[1] (Connor, 1994:92). I follow Young's description of the ideational aspects of the state as the 'ensemble of affective orientations, images and expectations imprinted in the mind of its subjects' (Young, 1994:33) and analyse how such ideas are produced in the context of contemporary Mozambique. I argue that even though the production of local ideas of the state occurs through what state officials perceive as informal and frequently illegal practices, the ideational constructs in question often end up buttressing state-derived objectives. Thus, in order to understand the functioning and reproduction of the state in African political economies, ideational aspects of the state need to be addressed.

To examine how ideas of the state are reproduced and transformed I focus on the everyday practices of people as highlighted by recent approaches to the analysis of the state (Gupta, 1995, 2005; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Hansen & Stepputat, 2001; Herzfeld, 1992; Ferguson, 1998; Taussig, 1992, 1997; Hansen, 2001). Where I depart from these writers is that when they explore 'discourses of stateness'.[2] they usually focus on the reproduction of the state through encounters between state and citizen. My research, however, has shown that local understandings of the state are produced and acted upon *even in the relative absence of the state*, a condition which affects much of contemporary Africa. Moreover, I argue that the discourses of stateness that circulate among, and become transmuted by, local citizens are

generally heterogeneous and fragmented. And it is their fluid meaning and interpretation that enables local agents to incorporate discourses of stateness within their individual worldviews. People immerse themselves by way of 'blank spaces' immanent to the discourses which arise because of the state's failure to produce transcendent ideas functioning equally well throughout its territory. Blank spaces are thus a metaphor for discursive inconsistencies and absences which inhere in ideational constructs. They are filled by the everyday experiences of individuals, including their hopes and fears, but also rumours and gossip regarding practices and personalities of state officials. I will show that locally produced discourses of stateness might ultimately serve as catalysts for the pursuit of individual strategies that can actually be beneficial to and strengthen state-promoted projects. Consequently, I propose that when exploring African political economies, we need to analytically capture the socio-cultural dynamics through which ideas of the state are reproduced and given impetus.

I start by giving a brief introduction to the Weberian roots of widely held analytical approaches to sub-Saharan African states. Using empirical case studies on land conflicts in peri-urban areas of Maputo I proceed to argue that current understandings fail to capture how ideas of the state are reproduced locally. Subsequently, I contrast these analyses with a reading of normative understandings of current governance reform processes in Mozambique. I argue that these reform programmes are marked by a *discursive closure*[3] promoting a decisive moral stance. However, all external phenomena (including normative understandings of development programmes) undergo radical transformations when inserted locally where everyday pragmatic considerations take priority. Consequently, it is unlikely that adherence to a clear-cut moral framework can be achieved. I conclude by broadening the scope of the debate by relating the discussion to the emergence of global norms such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Defining the State

With the current development focus on 'good governance', bureaucratic transparency and heightened public ethics, the state again emerges as a pivotal figure. As argued by Sampson, such foci come and go in waves, and we are currently in a conjuncture of 'doing good' (2002:6), which necessitates the stable functioning of the state. According to Max Weber's classic definition, the state can be seen as a 'human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*' (1958:78, his emphasis). Not surprisingly, the World Bank mirrors Weber's characterisation in describing the state as 'a set of institutions that possess the means of legitimate coercion, exercised over a defined territory and its population, referred to as society' (World Bank, 1997:20). In both versions, the constitutive elements entail a human community, a government/military, and a territory. At the outset, then, development programmes which follow the World Bank's conceptual framework can be said to conceptualise the state as 'a system of structures' (Easton, 1957) or even a supra-local political entity mastering 'a set of functional imperatives of regulation' (Hansen & Stepputat, 2001:1). It is important to note, however, that the Weberian conceptualisation of the state is a creation of a specific Western cultural cosmology which dates back to the Westphalian peace treaty in 1648, whereby an interstate system constituted by sovereign states was established, each covering a population of citizens with obligations and rights defined by citizenship and allegiance to the state (Lundin, 2001:26-27).

When analysing states in sub-Saharan Africa, the above definition encounters several conceptual dilemmas. African states generally fail to meet Weber's criteria given their heterogeneous ethnic structures, often predatory governments and inefficient claims to force (Englebert 2004:74). As a further elaboration of two of Weber's dominance typologies (patrimonial and legal-rational bureaucratic), *neo-patrimonialism* has consequently been introduced as an analytical tool to capture the complexities of African states (Bayart, Ellis et al. 1999; Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Bayart, 1993; Chabal, 1992, 2005; Erdmann & Engel, 2003; Bratton & Van de Walle, 1994). Although the expanding literature on neo-patrimonialism lacks consensus, recent contributions agree that it interweaves two types of domination, namely patrimonial and bureaucratic (Erdmann & Engel, 2003:12-13). Under patrimonialism all power relations are personalised: no distinction between public and private spheres exists. Neo-patrimonialism, however, emphasises at least a formal divide between the public and private and so reference to legal-rational bureaucratic realms can be made. The fact that two systems of rule constantly permeate each other means that preserving a public domain unaffected by private interests is impossible and leads several scholars to argue that the African state is 'no more than a décor, a pseudo-Western façade masking the realities of deeply personalised political relations' (Chabal & Daloz, 1999:16).

Neo-patrimonialism is thus a derivative from the Weberian conceptualisation of the state. Through its emphasis on the personalisations of power relations, it emphasises that the state is more than 'functional imperatives' used to govern citizens and things; it is also a mental construct or an *idea* (Englebert, 2004:74) with morally laden state institutions.[4] Consequently, ideas of the state might provide flexible cognitive frames which, to some extent, shape everyday practices in accordance with particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends (Dean, 1999:10; Foucault, 1991). What is important, though, are the analytical presuppositions inherent in this line of thinking which take the dysfunctionality of the state as a premise. I argue that this Weberian-inspired approach hinders a thorough understanding of the ways that locally produced ideas of the state ultimately buttress the workings of the latter even in its relative absence.

According to the neo-patrimonial line of argumentation, sub-Saharan states are somewhat different from Western manifestations given the inefficient and clientelistic dynamics of the former. It is argued that instead of serving as a normative anchor point, the neo-patrimonial state is a 'vacuous' medium, merely functioning for the interests of kin and kith (Chabal & Daloz, 1999:14); an amoral domain based on material returns, where public officials seek to gain without reciprocating (Ekeh, 1975:107).

One might, however, question certain premises of the neo-patrimonial line of argument. I argue that there is no pre-given causality between encounters with a dysfunctional state apparatus and peoples ideas and beliefs. Thus, we cannot *a priori* determine that because of incoherent and partial state practices, individuals necessarily perceive it as a 'cadaver' (Mbembe, 2001:241) devoid of legitimate moral values. These complex interrelations between the ideational and practical aspects of 'stateness' are what Blom Hansen defines as the difference between its sacred and sublime dimensions (2001:225-226, passim). It is consequently through mundane practices of interacting with state institutions and officials that its sublime character as a 'higher form of rationality' is sustained and reproduced (Hansen, 2001:226; Hansen & Stepputat, 2001:21; see also Herzfeld, 1992). What happens, then, where

such everyday interactions do not occur? Where the state is weak and only emerges through fragmented representations? Does this *of necessity* lead to the production of local ideas of the state as amoral and vacuous?

I argue, using data from the peri-urban areas of Maputo that even where the state is weak and relatively absent, people reproduce mythological discourses of the state which are often laden with positive moral value. Second, because of the state's overall weaknesses, such ideas are fragmented, displaying apparent 'blanks' which people fill up drawing on their everyday experiences in order to make what is essentially a heterogeneous construct appear homogeneous. And it is *because* of these blank spaces that people manage to reproduce discourses of stateness even in the relative absence of the state given their personal investment in the process. Third, I note that it is this lack of closure that sets local discourses apart from official political discourses. Consequently, in order for programmes of decentralisation and democratisation to gain a foothold in local socio-cultural universes, they have to take into account how discourses cannot be anything but products of local practices.

Mozambique: The Fragmented State

Mozambique has all the traits of a neo-patrimonial state with a chaotic bureaucracy and high levels of corruption. This, however, says little of how ideas of the state are produced and to what extent these, in fact, reflect deeply felt desires among individuals at the periphery of the state to participate as full-fledged citizens.

Mozambique is a land of stark contrasts. The political period following the 1975 liberation was marked by a strong rhetorical adherence to marxist ideological thinking, which was hampered by the innumerable party cadres and bureaucrats taking advantage of the fragile administrative system in their quest to acquire private gains (Abrahamsson & Nilsson, 1995; Harrison, 1999; Sahn & Desai, 1995). By the mid-1980s, it became increasingly clear that external aid was needed in order to prevent an economic crisis. This led to the 1987 adoption of the World Bank/IMF-initiated structural adjustment programme, known as PRE (*Programme for Economic Rehabilitation*) (Hanlon, 1991; Abrahamsson & Nilsson, 1995). In a short period of time, centralised planning gave way to market-driven thinking emphasising a gradual pull-back of the state (República de Mocambique, 2001). Since then, there has been a continuing espousal of the market economy.

Macroeconomic indicators have been favourable, showing rapid growth, averaging 8.1 per cent per annum since 1993, resulting mainly from foreign investments. However, the socio-economic impacts have been very variable. Many formal sector jobs have been lost and few new ones created. In the urban areas in particular, there has been a rapid informalisation of the economy. According to a 1997 survey, approximately 50 per cent of the active workforce in Maputo was employed in the informal sector. Thus, with only a minority benefiting from the economic growth, there are growing differentials between the rich and poor. Wealth is increasingly concentrated in Maputo and neighbouring areas in the extreme south of the country, which are favourably located on the transport corridor from South Africa to the coast. It is also here that the state's presence is most pronounced through relatively well-functioning infrastructure, healthcare, policing, and judicial structures.

Irrespective of the state's stronger foothold in the capital, its weaknesses are also felt in Maputo's public sectors, such as urban management, land distribution, health

and policing which are all notorious for incessant red-tape and bribery (Scanteam, 2004; Danida, 2003; Mosse, 2005). In fact, since liberation in 1975, Mozambique has been afflicted by several corruption scandals and examples of political misconduct; the worst of which was the bank scandal in the mid-1990s, when more than $400 million went missing from the Mozambican banking system. Subsequently, journalist Carlos Cardoso and lawyer Siba-Siba Macuácua were assassinated, allegedly because of their investigations into this case which, among other things, revealed that former president Joaquim Chissano's son, Nyimpine Chissano, might be involved (Hanlon, 2001).

Since the introduction of PRE, Mozambique has been seen by donors as a success story given, first, the government's acceptance of structural demands formulated by the Bretton Woods institutions (Hanlon, 2002) and, second, a concomitant annual growth at approximately 8 per cent. According to OECD-DAC data, development assistance to Mozambique in 2004 amounted to approximately $1.2 billion or 23 per cent of the national income making it the eighth most aid dependent country in the world. Thus, external actors, whose involvement continues to be extensive, do not seem to be deterred by the fact that Mozambique seems to fit the description of a 'criminalised state' (Bayart, Ellis et al. 1999). Herein lies an important paradox: increased donor support and structural adjustment programmes have been followed by parallel increases in illegal appropriations of state-owned assets and overall corrupt behaviour (Harrison, 1999). First, with the introduction of PRE, several radical adjustment initiatives were implemented, such as a 50 per cent cut of public salaries (Renzio & Hanlon, 2007:8) which ultimately caused many officials to accept bribes in order to maintain a reasonable subsistence level. Second, the overall privatisation process turned out to be beneficial to elite groups who bought up privatised companies through 'family and friends' within the ruling circles (Hanlon, 2002:7). Rather than eliminating illegal activities, the last two decades of donor involvement and structural adjustment programmes have created new forms of corruption through a process of 'pathological equilibrium' (Renzio & Hanlon, 2007:7) where donors accept a certain degree of individual enrichment and corruption in return of economic stability and frictionless implementation of reform initiatives.

In sum, Mozambique appears to be an apt illustration of a weak sub-Saharan state pervaded with a ubiquitous neo-patrimonial logic. I will explore below whether weak state practices at a national level do in fact also produce fundamental dispositions for self-interest at a local level as the neo-patrimonial approach claims (Therkildsen, 2005:49). I shall argue that this is not always the case. It will become apparent that discourses of stateness are reproduced *even in the relative absence of the state*.

Producing Local Discourses of Stateness

Located in an area hitherto inhabited by small-scale farmers and *nativos* (natives) on the outskirts of Maputo, Mulwene was probably the neighbourhood most seriously affected by the serious floodings in 2000. Large numbers of homeless families from other parts of peri-urban Maputo, which were literally washed away, were resettled here in the wake of the floods. And, as transportation links, electricity and water were slowly restored, more people moved to the area, prompting the municipality not only to redefine neighbourhood borders but also to reconfigure the administrative structure. Thus, instead of having only a handful of *quarteirões* (quarters), 56 new

quarteirões were constituted (comprising approximately 150-200 households each), which required the nomination of 56 *chefes de quarteirões* (quarter chiefs). The intention was to regularise the allocation/occupation of plots in the different quarters, install electricity and provide street lighting.

However, inadequate funding for, and the illegal diversion of available resources by, municipal and state bureaucracies have limited progress in service delivery of this kind, and resulted in strong dissatisfaction among residents in the most deprived quarters. Thus, although most quarter chiefs had little actual say in how available resources were spent, they soon became scapegoats, and had to bear the brunt of popular disaffection. In one neighbourhood, the chief, who was accused of corruption and inefficiency, tried to single out and publicly denounce the residents who had made the allegations but to no avail. In the event, a small group of residents succeeded in forcing new elections to be held, during which the chief in question was voted out of office.

Two points are important here. First, the neighbourhood leadership and municipal district authorities were opposed to the idea of holding elections. Thus, although the neighbourhood chief was unable to actually prevent the process, he used all the means at his disposal to disrupt election arrangements. For example, while scheduled public meetings were normally held irrespective of the size of the turnout, during the run-up to the elections, he cancelled several such meetings on the grounds of low turnout. Second, what had ignited public protest in the first place was a widespread perception that the chief was corrupt and incapable of protecting local interests in the face of continued neglect by the relevant municipal authorities. In reality, of course, the chief's mandate was so circumscribed, that he had little or no influence over decision-making at the municipal level. Thus, what precipitated the political change were rumours of corruption uttered in a context from which the state was relatively absent.

After the floods, municipal surveyors drew partial plans for an expanding Mulwene. These maps outlined various industrial reserves which residents could not inhabit. However, as pressure on land increased, natives and neighbourhood leaders distributed plots in these reserves to needy families. In surrounding areas which had already been parcelled out, individual plots were organised into blocks separated by 15 meter wide sandy roads. The *quarteirão* were thus made up of squares of different sizes. Within the industrial reserves, which were deliberately not parcelled out in this way by municipal authorities, residents took it upon themselves to parcel out the area using state-defined norms of 15 meter wide roads and 15x30 m^2 plots. Headed by a former quarter chief who still enjoyed local legitimacy, an informal commission was set up and charged with responsibility for applying municipal regulations locally and thereby ensure physical access to all houses. While the initiative was not devoid of problems (the informally designed roads encroached on several plots, for example), and bearing in mind that all settlements in the reserves are technically illegal, residents have had to resolve problems themselves, itself an ongoing process involving *chefes de quarteirões*, informal leaders, *nativos* and residents.

In sum, these two cases originating from the same overall processes of population resettlement and neighbourhood growth reveal how, in the relative absence of the state, individuals and groups act upon fragmented knowledge of the political processes which cause social/physical infrastructure to function poorly or not at

all. A lack of greater insights notwithstanding, local residents appear to be succeeding in the pursuit of their aspirations. In this process, distinctions between public/private and legal/illegal appear to be of little importance; what matters is that the meaningful discourses of stateness are reproduced so as to facilitate individual and collective strategies. I now go on to discuss this important aspect of how 'discursive blanks' can be understood analytically, by arguing that development projects need to reconsider whether clear-cut unequivocal moral frameworks are, in fact, beneficial to attaining their desired objectives.

Blank Figures

When playing cards, the joker holds a certain privileged position as the *underdetermined* wildcard that either buttresses or overturns an established or expected order (Hetherington & Lee, 1999). We have a similar situation in dominoes, where the double blank can be used in place of any number of white dots. Thus, in both games, the underdetermined blank figure 'provides a foothold for the conditions of possibility for both stasis […] and change' (Hetherington & Lee, 1999:170); order and chaos. At a functional level, blank figures, such as the joker, operate by tacking together what is otherwise a set of heterogeneous elements so as to produce an arrangement that passes for homogeneity, as when a series of clubs lacking a crucial card is temporarily completed by the addition of the joker. Hence, blank figures are, in a sense, what makes increased coordination possible by bracketing incommensurabilities between the elements involved; e.g. when the joker manages to connect hitherto unconnected cards. Needless to say, this aspect gives to the process a certain degree of ambiguity and motility.

I propose that we tentatively see the lacunae inherent in discourses of stateness as blank figures. Particularly in states where the functional capabilities of the public administration are limited, local perceptions of state practices are often based on scarce information. Thus, in the deprived quarters of Mulwene, people had no clear knowledge as to why electricity and water facilities were still not provided, and so circulating fragments of information were tacked together by rumour and gossip.

As argued by Stewart and Strathern, rumours and gossip have certain crucial social qualities (2004; see also West & Sanders, 2003). Through reciprocal transactions of gossiping, community norms of acceptable behaviour are continually reproduced (Gluckman, 1963). Locally, we might therefore see rumour and gossip as constitutive of, rather than simply reflecting, social realities (Stewart & Strathern, 2004:56). Consequently, rumours do not constitute deviations from the truth *per se*, but should rather be seen as efforts to arrive at a temporary consensus of what is the truth.

In sum, people are exposed to circulating information regarding state activities. Even in regions marked by a relative absence of the state, people tack these heterogeneous fragments together using experiences from their daily lives which, in the cases described above, entail rumours and gossip on corruption. Through these interweavings are produced relatively stable and apparently homogeneous discourses of stateness, which people use as flexible catalysts in their endeavours to reach whatever objective they might be striving towards.

Normative Closure vs. Blank Figures

The current process of reforming the public sector in Mozambique is closely interlinked with parallel initiatives, such as combating corruption, reducing poverty and decentralising sectors of municipal and state sectors (Negrão, 2002; CIRESP, 2004; Helgason, 2002; Republic of Mozambique, 2005a). Let me briefly mention a few examples of normative understandings regarding corruption at play in the reform process and subsequently contrast these with the everyday reproductions of stateness described above. My argument will be that *normative closures* implicit in the ongoing political reform process will have little success in local contexts where the state's reach is weak and information is scarce. Hence, rather than perceiving citizens as passive relays for political-cum-ideological projects, a reformed perspective which sees local transformations and adaptations as beneficial to the process must be formulated.[5]

In most public institutions, an overall 'zero-tolerance' approach to corruption is made apparent; if not in practice then at least in principle. Hence, in a direct appeal to all national citizens, the following announcement is displayed in A4 posters at public counters:

> *Report all illegal payments that you have been forced to pay directly to the Director. We guarantee absolute anonymity and all possible support for the resolution of your personal problem. [...] The public workers thank you in the name of dignity. [...] Do not attempt to exhibit or offer money in return for favours. You will be retained immediately and held in custody until charges can be elaborated by competent authorities.*

A similar recurrent credo for the anti-corruption strategy is the explicit statement: 'Against corruption: do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep quiet' (Republic of Mozambique, 2005a). Such proclamations should be read as direct manifestations of the political-cum-ideological understanding rooting the reform process, where an explicit objective is to create 'conditions for the change of attitudes, values and behaviours, in order to foster greater integrity, transparency, fairness, accountability and professionalism; and, thus, contribute towards the establishment and consolidation of a culture of excellence within Public Service' (Republic of Mozambique, 2005b:7). However, procedures for the establishment of such radical transformations should be implemented only on an individual level, as structural factors allegedly do not cause corrupt practices (Ibid. p. 4). Rather, 'the promotion of acts of corruption is the purview of some public officials who know the norms, the laws and are privy to information but who, motivated by the desire to live in luxury, use their power and knowledge to extort the citizens and deplete the coffers of the state' (Ibid. p. 4). Interestingly, this last argument is directly rejected by a consultancy report from 2004 which concluded that overall structural transformations are crucial if public sector reform shall meet its objectives (UTRESP, 2004). At the same time, Ética Mocambique, a local anti-corruption organisation funded by USAID, has set up 'whistleblower hotlines' in all national regions but with only limited success: the national director told me in August 2005 that they had registered less than ten denunciations in total. While the reasons for this lack of success are varied, the director highlighted people's fear of the repercussions of reporting illegal behaviour as a particular deterrent.

In sum, at a political discursive level, we detect the emergence of unequivocal normative codes of conduct allegedly aiming to alter individual perceptions regarding the public sector, what I define as *normative closures*. I now wish to

problematise such approaches in light of the analysis of local reproductions of stateness described above.

Moralities in Practices

I agree with Alexander (1997) that the problem with Mozambican reform processes is that democratic aspirations are assumed rather than investigated. Hence, the public/private distinction is rarely debated and so all individual practices not corresponding to public norms are rejected as informal predatory attacks on the national corpus. Following this line of thinking, local agents, either public officials or stakeholders involved in public projects, ought to *transmit* rather than *transform* officially sanctioned norms so that, ultimately, personal choices are aligned with government objectives (Rose & Miller, 1992).

I am sceptical regarding the usefulness of such assumptions to ongoing reform processes. No agent acts simply as a relay station for the transmission of external information. Rather, all parties involved participate in the constant reshaping of circulating phenomena according to different life projects, constraints and needs (Latour, 1986). Thus, a central feature of most social dynamics is *transformation* rather than *transmission*, given the tendency for individuals to engage in struggles that take place over the attribution of social meanings to particular ideas and events (Long, 1992:24). As this is a constant process, state-driven projects and implicit norms will everywhere be modelled according to local socio-cultural contexts which give new meaning and impetus to external phenomena.

My argument is that 'blank figures' immanent to all social orders have a decisive role to play. By facilitating a particular tacking together of heterogeneous elements, they enable local individuals to acquire a sense of agency as it is the creative potentials inherent in their individual lifeworld that guide the production of meaning and not, say, global norms regarding anti-corruption. Even in situations where the presence of the state is relatively weak and fragmented, blank figures enable the illusion of homogeneity. What is important, however, is that local productions of meaning do not correspond to state-sanctioned norms as all parties involved participate in the constant negotiations over its 'truth condensate'. At the local level in Mulwene, this occurred through incessant rumours and gossiping. I argue therefore that in order for reform projects to succeed, it is important to adapt political initiatives to these social dynamics, rather than vice-versa.

Normative Closures & Beyond

Analytically and politically, a tendency has been to understand social change as having a source external to social orders (Hetherington & Lee, 1999:172), which, by the way, is why international development workers remain important to reform processes.[6] However, as described above, transformations from within occur constantly. They are partly caused by the ubiquity of blank figures which local agents fill up with experiences from their daily life in order to win the struggle over meaning and consequently facilitate individual strategies towards desired objectives. What should be acknowledged is the potential value to political reforms of these social processes. Thus, because of the constant transformations, local discourses of stateness might be beneficial to state-driven initiatives, even in the relative absence of the state, given the tendency of individuals to invest personally in the meaning-making process. In Mulwene, land in municipal reserves was

distributed so that squatters acquired plots and, in so doing, the possibility of public legitimisation of their tenure rights. In the other case, although based on wrong accusations, residents of a needy quarter managed to elect a new chief and, in the process, create a space favourable to the reopening of unresolved land disputes and the local installation of electricity.

Needless to say, similar processes occur at the national level. Thus, prior to the already mentioned bank scandal, all banks were nationalised by the Frelimo party with the result that there emerged a total overlap between treasury and the banking system. Thus, whenever president Machel was travelling, someone from his office would phone the bank and ask for thousands of dollars (Hanlon, 2001). And still the banking procedures continued to function 'because of the honesty, integrity, and good will of most of the people in the banking system' (Ibid.). In other words, irrespective of a fragmented and inefficient system, the practices of agents gain impetus from ideational constructs.

Conclusion

This discussion takes us back to my starting point. I hold that the widely held neo-patrimonial argument is too rigid if we are to understand current social processes at the local level in weak states. As argued by Therkildsen, other motivations besides predatory self-interest drive local agents involved in state-promoted projects (Therkildsen, 2005:49). Neo-patrimonialism therefore cannot serve as an analytical premise, only as a derivatory argument; other tools must be applied in the analytical exploration of local social dynamics in weak states. I have thus proposed that we analyse how fragmented discourses of stateness are integrated within local socio-cultural universes in order to understand how national citizens in fact react to the circulation and localisation of state-promoted ideas.

Let me finally broaden out the implications of the above-mentioned analytical arguments and briefly discuss ongoing political processes in sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, new waves of donor discourses are sweeping sub-Saharan Africa with a recurrent credo on the importance of national adherence to global norms such, as the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in order to secure continued flows of aid (Addison, Mavrotas et al. 2005). This 'new, New Poverty Agenda' (Maxwell, 2003) promoted through the MDGs signifies an important step towards establishing international consensus on poverty reduction measures which, needless to say, can have important consequences for sub-Saharan African political economies, not least due to the ambitious goal of halving the proportion of people living in absolute poverty. As argued by Cornwall and Brock, MDGs 'are a normative framework backed with a normative imperative' which ultimately defines 'international development [as] a measurable moral goal that the governments of all countries should strive towards' (2005:1049). In other words, development measures and objectives as stipulated by the MDGs should be accepted by national governments of aid dependent countries. However, as pointed out by Maxwell, 'it would be naïve to expect a national consensus on poverty reduction policy: the poor are not a homogeneous group, and will not have identical interests' (2003:21). Consequently, it is crucial to recognise national ownership rights of the process. One needs to ask, however, how international norms are translated down through the myriad of political levels so that inherent norms can be understood and acted upon as intended. In light of the discussion above on 'blank figures', the answer is most likely that they are not. Although this is most often perceived as a crucial obstacle to

the proper realisation of development initiatives, my argument is the opposite: political discourses intending to create socio-political transformations only succeed when they fail. In order for locally situated individuals to respond actively to externally derived phenomena, such as state-defined programs or international donor-driven initiatives based on MDGs, the discourses must be sufficiently open and flexible for people to invest in. Thus, as described through the empirical cases, practices initiated in the grey zone between formal and informal might end up buttressing state-defined objectives.

This line of argument might be taken as an implicit defence of the 'criminalisation of the state' (Bayart, Ellis et al. 1999) by accepting public misconduct at local levels. This is not my intention. However, it is important to understand that weak and inefficient state administrations do not of necessity cause a total rejection of the state as a productive ideational construct serving both local citizens in their daily lives and broader political goals. The moral status of local discourses of stateness depends on their ability to become integrated within local socio-cultural universes and thereby serve as catalysts for different aspirations. Consequently, political projects promoting *discursive closure* through unequivocal normative codes of conduct are likely to fail as local receptions will probably be marked more by transformations and reformulations than transmissions. As depicted through the empirical cases, such transformatory processes are not destructive to overall political initiatives *per se* given the tendency of individuals to invest in the process when beneficial to own needs. An imminent analytical and political task is therefore to acknowledge the legitimacy of and subsequent adaptation to these local social dynamics.

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Endnotes

1. Following Connor, I define a state functionally as a political subdivision of the globe (1994:92). However, as with most political phenomena, a functional definition says little of its ideational connotations.

2. Hansen and Stepputat see 'languages of stateness' as the 'widespread and globalised registers of governance and authority' invoked in the continuous process of construction of the state (2001:5). In order to avoid defining clear-cut registers, I take 'discourses of stateness' to encompass simply the meaning-making processes through which ideas of the state are (re)produced and their temporary fixations in time.

3. 'Discursive closure' designates the attempt to fixate meaning among an ensemble of signifying elements. As indicated by discourse analytics, closure is rendered impossible by the lack of a fixed center (Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 1998; Torfing, 1998). Thus, the 'West' or 'Democracy' are frequently displayed as occupying discursive centers with fixed meanings although they are constantly inserted in different discursive strategies serving often oppositional objectives.

4. For a thorough analysis of the ways that ideas of the state interact with deep-rooted local cultural understandings, see Herzfeld (1992).

5. On heterogeneous networks of power see Burchell (1996) and Rose & Miller (1992).

6. I am well aware of current trends of giving 'ownership rights' to local stakeholders in order for them to regain authority over the process. However, taken as a whole, I still argue that the development world is marked by a strong emphasis on development workers as agents of change.

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