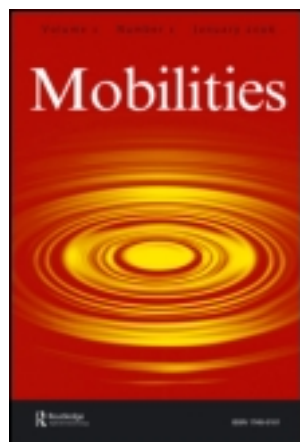


This article was downloaded by: [Statsbiblioteket Tidsskriftafdeling]

On: 03 November 2012, At: 03:30

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Mobilities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmob20>

Roadside Inventions: Making Time and Money Work at a Road Construction Site in Mozambique

Morten Nielsen ^a

^a Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Version of record first published: 14 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Morten Nielsen (2012): Roadside Inventions: Making Time and Money Work at a Road Construction Site in Mozambique , Mobilities, 7:4, 467-480

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.718428>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Roadside Inventions: Making Time and Money Work at a Road Construction Site in Mozambique

MORTEN NIELSEN

Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

ABSTRACT *Based on ethnographic fieldwork at a road construction site in southern Mozambique, this article explores the peculiar inverse process through which the road project acquired valuable meaning for young Mozambican workers hired by a Chinese construction consortium to rehabilitate the north–south N1 highway. Without viable alternatives, the Mozambican workers were often compelled to accept the intolerable working conditions that the Chinese company presented them with while still acknowledging that it did, in fact, only aggravate an already difficult situation. Hence, given that the problematic connections to their Chinese superiors obviously lacked the qualities of reciprocal relationships, the money received could not be considered as proper salaries and the hardships endured while mixing sand, cement and gravel did not seem to result in the construction of a road. Still, when the monthly payment could be used, say, as down payment for a piece of land, it unfolded a virtual scenario very unlike that experienced in the present. Rather than indexing an untenable social relationship with the Chinese, it actualised a generative connection between the road and a future house. Although we might imagine the initial moment when the money was first received as indexing an employer–employee relationship, this was subsequently obviated by a new significant connection set-up between the road and a future house that was unfolded from the former (relationship) as the ‘real’ manifestation of salaries. The emerging house project thus transformed its own origin, as it were, by eliminating the Chinese counterpart as the source of the paid out money.*

KEY WORDS: Infrastructure; money; Mozambique; obviation; roadwork; social relationality

Introduction

It was Alex, one of the young Mozambican workers hired by China Henan international cooperation group (CHICO), a Chinese construction consortium, to rehabilitate

Correspondence Address: Morten Nielsen, Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark. Email: etnomn@hum.au.dk

This article is based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork (participatory observation and semi-structured interviews) carried out between 2009 and 2012 as part of the collective research project ‘Imperial Potentialities’. Besides the author, the project team is composed by Morten A. Pedersen and Mikkel Bunkenborg, University of Copenhagen. The research project is fully funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research, Social Sciences (Forskningsrådet for Samfund og Erhverv).

1745-0101 Print/1745-011X Online/12/040467-14 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2012.718428>

and upgrade the EN1 highway between the towns of Xai-Xai and Chissibuca in the southern part of Mozambique, who first called my attention to the complicated nature of the employer–employee relationship at the construction site. ‘We are really not building a road here’, Alex told me in a soft voice, ‘because there is nothing to remember. Ah! I will never be able to build a house from the money I earn here’. Indeed, many of the young Mozambican workers were desperately trying to gather enough money to make a down payment for a piece of land or even to buy construction materials so they could commence building cement houses for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, however, as salaries most often sufficed only for basic foodstuff and transportation to and from work, improvement of housing conditions seemed like an unlikely outcome of the hardships endured while working for the Chinese. And, as a surprising effect, the meaning of the road project seemed to be elicited retrospectively from salaries received. In what follows, I trace this backward elicitory process and suggest that the meaning of the road project is predicated on the (future) conversion of paid out money into physical ‘memories’ (*lembranças*), such as construction materials for projected cement houses.

It is of course no startling realisation that salaries were of paramount importance to the Mozambican workers hired by CHICO to rehabilitate and upgrade the EN1 highway between January 2009 and April 2011. Those fortunate workers, who actually had signed contracts with CHICO, received monthly payments of roughly 3000 MZM (92 USD).¹ For the large majority without a contractual agreement, however, salaries varied and rarely exceeded 2000 MZM (61 USD). ‘This money is not enough’ (*esse dinheiro não chega*). Alex, a slight young man from Xai-Xai approached me while I was discussing wage policies with a group of Mozambican road workers during their lunch break. ‘It’s not enough for me to start building a house. It’s barely enough to buy a few things to eat ... That’s not really a salary, is it?’ Jaime, an elderly man working as truck driver, shook his head before responding Alex’s rhetorical question. ‘Nope! (*Nada!*). They are offering us handouts. That’s all it is!’

To Alex and his colleagues working for the Chinese construction consortium, a primary problem to be resolved was precisely how money received might come to constitute proper salaries. The value of a monthly wage was predicated not on its possible but unlikely equivalence to the hardships endured while working for the Chinese but, rather, on the conversion whereby the payment was transformed into something else – preferably building materials for a cement house or down payment for a piece of land. As I came to understand, if considered as a conventional salary, the money paid out by the Chinese superiors would objectify a mutually recognised social relationship between employer and employee. Inácio lived in a two-room reed-hut with a colleague close to the construction site. While sitting by the roadside, waiting to commence the laborious work of mixing the layers of sand, cement and gravel to stabilise the asphalt road, he summed up the relational significance of proper salaries.

It’s important to be properly paid so that I feel that my boss is appreciating (*valorizar*) me like a person. So it’s not like he’s offering me something but, rather, rewarding me for my efforts.

As Strathern (1992, p. 177) tells us, a reciprocal exchange is ‘based on the capacity for actors ... to extract or elicit from others items that then become the object of their relationship’. It logically follows, then, that a donor (say, an employer) must

be compelled to perceive a recipient (say, an employee) as the cause of a debt which the reciprocal exchange momentarily eliminates. However, as Inácio and his peers saw it; their superiors were incapable of engaging in meaningful reciprocal relationships. Even minor mistakes made by the Mozambican workers ignited the short-tempered Chinese and more than once had it resulted in serious beatings. Equally worrying, the monthly wages were paid out without the Chinese explicating how it was calculated and often they did not include overtime pay. To be sure, only small variations in income were potentially detrimental to the basic subsistence level of individual households and so Inácio and his colleagues anticipated with anxiety the monthly payment date when they would line up and be called forth by the Chinese counting the money. 'It's almost like they are offering us money ... as if we were simple beggars', Alex wryly told me. I asked him about the difference between being offered money and paid a salary. 'To receive a payment is to be remunerated. And when you remunerate me, it's a secret between you and me [i.e. employer and employee agree on what the remuneration is for and mutually recognise each other through it]. But the way they do it, it's like they are just giving us peanuts'. Without viable alternatives, workers like Alex and Inácio felt compelled to accept the intolerable working conditions that the Chinese company presented them with while still acknowledging that it did, in fact, only aggravate an already difficult situation. And so, given that the problematic connections to their Chinese superiors obviously lacked the qualities of reciprocal relationships, the money they received could not be considered as proper salaries.

In a very concrete sense, the negation of relational ties seemed to acquire its social efficacy through the materiality of the road being gradually rehabilitated. According to the Mozambican workers, the layout and construction of the road was as unintelligible as those governing the project. 'They probably have a plan ...'. Augusto, a 24-year-old worker from Chissibuca, nodded towards two Chinese standing a few metres away before continuing. '... but if you take a look at the road, you can't really tell, can you?' It is interesting to note, however, that the road acquired a strikingly different significance when associated with properly paid out money. 'The road brings many benefits', Augusto told me after having described how a higher wage would enable him to commence a much desired house building project in Chissibuca. 'A good road makes transportation so much easier ... It will be easier to do my daily shopping at the market'. In this regard, the same material object (i.e. the road) seemed to index radically different social worlds. To use Strathern's (1991, p. xv; 2005, p. 121) vocabulary, it 'eclipsed' the strained relationship to the seemingly unintelligible Chinese superiors while also containing the prospective of a completed house built from properly received salaries.² Hence, while rehabilitating the highway between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca, the Mozambican workers were seeking to extract from the layers of gravel, cement and sand road the capacities for temporal and physical displacement which might catapult them far beyond the hardships endured in the present. And, as we shall soon see, the 'real' albeit virtual road enveloped by the seemingly unintelligibility of their superiors could be rendered visible only through the acquisition of proper salaries.

Based on the work of Wagner (1979, 1981, 1986), I argue below that the untenable relationship with a seemingly incomprehensible other was 'obviated' through proper salaries. From Wagner's seminal studies of Daribi mythology, we learn that obviation constitutes the recursive and processual form of tropes when a series of consecutive symbols act upon each other as innovative elaborations on a

conventional background. Hence, through a mythical narrative, the initial premise is gradually developed and expanded upon so that, by the end, it invariably collapses. This expansion occurs through a series of metaphorical substitutions where previous ones are dissolved into something else in illuminating ways. A new and self-contained tropic image is thus constituted as an innovation upon some conventionally recognised usage which is supplanted by the former as it is unfolded through the latter. It is this process of inserting novel elements ‘in the way of’ existing relations that Wagner (1979, pp. 28, 31) defines as obviation.

Obviation is the effect of supplanting a conventional semiotic relation with an innovative and self-contained relation ... The result is a novel expression that intentionally ‘deconventionalizes’ the conventional (and unintentionally conventionalizes the unconventional): a new meaning has been formed (and an old meaning has been extended). The novel expression both amplifies and controverts the significance of the convention upon which it innovates.

When the monthly payment could be used, say, as down payment for a piece of land, it unfolded a virtual scenario very unlike that experienced in present. Rather than indexing an untenable social relationship with the Chinese, it actualised a generative connection between the road and a future house. Following Wagner, I will therefore argue that the road–house constellation obviated the employer–employee relationship which, as we have seen above, was potentially detrimental to the Mozambican workers. Moreover, it was this differential capacity for eliciting temporal and physical displacements through material objects that constituted the true value of salaries for the hard-working young Mozambicans at the road construction site between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca. Through proper salaries, the workers were stretched out, so to speak, between the EN1 highway and a future landscape connected to the former through a leap of intensive transformation.

Recently, a growing body of work within the human sciences has critically explored the variegated effects of road construction projects in different parts of the world. First, focusing on the developmental aspirations of international and state-authored infrastructure projects, a series of studies have documented how roads have been projected as harbingers of economic progress to otherwise desolate regions (Belotti 1990, Dawson and Barwell 1993, Scott 1998, Windle 2002, Gibson and Rozelle 2003, Tsing 2005, Bryceson *et al.* 2008, Nyíri 2008, Campbell 2010). As argued by several authors, although the imaginary potentials of roads as developmental catalysts have prevailed until the present, the actual positive impact on poor segments of local populations remains relatively limited. Secondly, by affording new and efficient forms of connectivity, e.g. between rural communities and urban centres, roads often activate past experiences regarding transportation, physical movement and the appropriate structuring of physical space. Recent studies have thus explored how roads endow the past with a tangible immediacy by embodying either colonial experiences (Masquelier 2002), latent ideological-cum-territorial conflicts (Dalakoglou 2010) or contested socio-political relations between local communities and their surroundings (Roseman 1996). Indeed, as argued by Pina-Cabral (1987, p. 731), through contestations over the historical significance of particular infrastructure projects, roads may disrupt stable temporal imaginaries and ultimately open local social worlds to the ‘permanent instability, irreversibility, and movement’ of the future. Thirdly, by examining how construction projects destabilise existing

value regimes (both moral, temporal and spatial), several studies have documented the imaginary potentials of roads (Augé 1995, Harvey and Knox 2008, Dalakoglou 2010, Harvey 2010). In a particularly illuminating piece, Harvey and Knox (2008, pp. 82–83) unpack how road-building in Peru affords a ‘disjunctive and equivocal co-habitation of ideas and desires about connectivity and progress’. Although roads promise smooth economic and social integration, multiple and often disjunctive perspectives reverberate off their imagined benefits. Still, as argued by the authors, the productive excess of continuous disruptions and misunderstandings (equivocations) need to be seen as drivers of the developmental process by continuously re-energising all parties involved to seek solutions based on ideas of enhanced connectivity.

This article builds and elaborates upon the recent body of work mentioned above by exploring the transformative properties of a road construction project in Mozambique. As I will shortly show, the layers of sand, gravel and asphalt take on the qualities of a road through the obviational processes by which Mozambican workers catapult themselves beyond the hardships endured in the present. As my interlocutors constantly told me, when paid out money sufficed to buy construction materials for a cement house, the latter constituted a physical memory (*lembrança*) of the road built in an environment governed by incomprehensible Chinese superiors. Put somewhat differently, in a future setting very unlike the present, the cement house manifested the outcome of an appropriate value conversion and thus confirmed that a road had, in fact, been built.

How *not* to Build a Road

With the Mozambican peace agreement in 1992, the destructive civil war between the ruling Frelimo party and the Renamo movement that had lasted since shortly after Independence in 1975 was finally brought to an end. Faced with the overwhelming challenge of reviving a paralysed state administration and rebuilding an infrastructural system in ruins, the Frelimo government turned to international lending institutions and political allies for support (Hanlon 1991, 1996, Abrahamsen and Nilsson 1995). During the protracted struggle against the Portuguese colonisers, Frelimo had established a collaborative relationship with China that involved military support and guerrilla training (Dinerman 2006, p. 21). Although the friendship cooled down somewhat in the mid-1980s when Mozambique made its ‘turn toward the west’ by adopting a series of international monetary fund-sponsored economic adjustment programmes, China remained a potential political ally (cf. Hanlon 1996, p. 16, Roque 2009). From the early 1990s onwards, the relationship has been massively reinvigorated through a series of inter-governmental agreements and memoranda preparing the way for China’s intensified presence in Mozambique. And judging from recent statements by the political elite in Mozambique, their Chinese counterparts will be confronted by few hindrances (if any at all!) on the road towards further economic involvement in the country. In a response to the increased Asian presence in sub-Saharan Africa, Armando Guebuza, Mozambique’s president, stated that ‘China é muito bem vinda em Mocambique (China is very welcome in Mozambique) (Horta 2009). The cordial openness towards China might be read from the seemingly unlimited economic room for manoeuvre allocated to the latter. From an insignificant position in 2003 as the 260th ‘biggest’ investor, China is now among the 10 biggest investors in Mozambique alongside countries such as Portugal, Italy and France (Macauh

2009). The same gigantic leap can be read from the bilateral trade between the two countries which reached \$284.11 million in 2007, eight times more than in 2001 (Chichava 2008, p. 9). Hence, although relatively modest in comparison with other African states, such as Angola and Sudan, Mozambique's economic collaboration with its Asian counterpart is worth noticing simply because of the current pace which has one of the fastest growing rates for any single nation trading with China (Horta 2007).

According to the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Chinese government is currently financing 12 major infrastructure projects in Mozambique totalling nearly \$1 billion,³ the most visible being perhaps the high-profile construction of a new national stadium on the northern outskirts of Maputo inaugurated in April 2011. Not all construction projects are realised through inter-government agreements, however, and the more than 30 Chinese companies active in Mozambique work also for municipalities, international donor organisations and private enterprises (Jansson and Kiala 2009). Of particular importance is the CHICO which has proven to be a remarkably competitive actor during tenders for infrastructural projects; not least when pertaining to the rebuilding of national roads. Since 2007, CHICO has constructed a 154 km road between Muxungwe and Inchope, 200 km tarred road between Chitima and Mágoé in the Tete province and concluded a 300 m bridge over the Incomáti river in the Maputo province (Macauhub 2007, 2008a, 2008b).

In December 2008, CHICO was awarded the contract of rehabilitating and upgrading 96 km of the EN1 highway between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca. Funded by the international development association, the project is undertaken as part of the Government of Mozambique's Integrated Road Sector Programme with an agreed contract sum on MZM 1,269,447,739 (40,557,400 USD). In January 2009, work began on the highway between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca and, with only minor setbacks, the construction project was completed in March 2011 with a final delivery to the national road administration (ANE, Administração Nacional de Estradas) the following month (Club of Mozambique Lda 2011). In its final phase, the construction team was composed by 56 Chinese on site and 261 local Mozambicans hired directly by CHICO (Scott Wilson Ltd 2010). As an important third party, ANE assigned Scott Wilson Ltd, an international construction consultancy, to supervise the project and throughout the process 21 full-time staff members headed by Samuel Nhemachena have accompanied the construction team while working on the road.⁴

Similar to other infrastructure projects carried out by Chinese companies, a fenced compound has been built to accommodate the Chinese workers from CHICO during the construction phase. Every morning, the Mozambican workers arrived outside the compound in Chidenguele and depending on the planned activities for the day, they were transported to different sites where they worked in teams headed by Chinese foremen. At the outset, the stretch of the EN1 highway to be rehabilitated was divided into smaller segments with each work team operating from the outer end-points towards the centre. Broadly speaking, the construction process was constituted by three consecutive phases: (1) preparation; (2) milling and (3) surfacing. The process began by preparing the road bed and securing the pavement layers (i.e. the three layers of sand, cement and gravel underneath the surfacing asphalt). After a meticulous milling process where the top-layer (the 'stabilised base') was mixed with cement, water was poured on for hardening the mixture and sprayed with

tack coat before asphalt was put on as final surface. Although some Mozambicans were assigned to particular tasks, e.g. truck drivers or guards, the majority has worked on all three phases of the project with the two first (preparation and milling) being the most time-consuming.

Each month, Scott Wilson has drawn up a 'Work Progress Report' to be distributed to all stakeholders. In the report from September 2010, it is stated that the contractor's (i.e. CHICO's) ability to complete the work within the contracted period depends on '[p]roper execution of the work to required standards. If work is not properly executed, the Contractor has been advised to re-work. This is a waste of time and resources on the part of the Contractor and should be avoided' (2010, p. 7). According to Samuel Nhemachena, head of the Scott Wilson unit, this small quotation aptly sums up a predominant difficulty regarding the collaboration with the Chinese construction company. After having accompanied the Chinese engineers for more than two years, Samuel was completely convinced that his Asian counterparts had little or no knowledge about actually building roads and this was the primary cause for the innumerable difficulties and frequent reworkings of the highway. During the milling process, checkers from Scott Wilson walked a few metres behind the imposing milling machine and continuously tested the thickness of pavement layers. As was frequently the case, the blade cut too deep so that the cement from the stabilised base was mixed with the two bottom layers. If the blade was immediately adjusted, the milling continued without further delays. Numerous times, however, the attempted corrections did not have the desired effect and after inspection from the materials engineer at Scott Wilson, the stretch of road under construction had to be remade. According to Samuel, problems like these occurred almost on a daily basis. When making the top stabilised base, the proportion between sand and cement would be incorrect or the density and compaction of the pavement layers unsatisfactory. Not surprisingly, Samuel was quite puzzled by the whole set-up. Even when instructed about proper construction techniques, the young engineers did not seem to be particularly interested in improving the quality. Still, as Samuel and his team tried to remain adamant regarding the quality of the construction work, CHICO was forced to spend huge amounts of money remaking their own previous work. 'I don't think that they generate any money here at all!' We were having dinner after a long day at the construction site when Samuel voiced his overt bewilderment about the Chinese and their peculiar comportment. 'The way I see it', Samuel continued, 'they must be getting capital injections from the company in China'. I asked why CHICO would possibly want to keep funding a project carried out by seemingly inexperienced and incapable engineers and thereby enduring continuous financial losses. 'That's also what I don't understand', Samuel said before bursting into a roaring laughter. 'The road might be there but it's already crumbling. Only a few years down the line, there won't be any road'.⁵

The Mysteries of Chinese Payment Policies

To be sure, the Mozambican workers were as puzzled about the seemingly illogical behaviour of their Chinese superiors as was Samuel and his colleagues from Scott Wilson. I was sitting by the roadside with a group of workers waiting for the materials engineer to decide whether the improper mixture of sand and cement recently detected by the checkers was sufficient cause for a reworking of the road. Inácio nodded towards the young Chinese foreman engaged in an intense discussion with

the engineer. 'They have to use more cement'. He looked the other way while shaking his head. 'Ah! I don't know why they work like this. There are already cracks (*rachas*) in the road'. Throughout the course of the project, many local workers had, indeed, considerable difficulties deciphering the peculiar actions of the Chinese. The particular tasks to be executed during the day were indicated by the foremen through the use of physical signs and monosyllabic exclamations as most of the Chinese spoke little or no Portuguese. According to the Mozambicans, the minimal degree of verbal communication often gave rise to unmanageable problems and particularly so when working with short-tempered or even violent superiors. While describing the quotidian and violent assaults, Inácio introduced me to a colleague a bit further down the road. The right side of his face was visibly swollen with several scratches running from the hair line towards the chin. As Inácio told me, the young Mozambican worker had been severely beaten by his Chinese foreman who was apparently upset by the former's inability to decipher how to carry out a particular task. Still, although the frequent attacks were considered as being both completely unacceptable and extremely stressful, their significance waned when compared to the complete lack of dialogue regarding the incomprehensible wage policies and the still missing contracts for most of the workers. According to the 'Work Progress Report' by Scott Wilson Ltd (2010, p. 19),

The Contractor [i.e. CHICO] has, from the beginning of the works, been encouraged to make sure that all of his workers have signed contracts before they start to work and that they were being paid salaries in line with the Government gazetted ranges of wages. In June, the Contractor submitted some copies of employment contracts for about 100 workers.

During the final phase of the project, out of a total of 261 Mozambicans working for CHICO, only 103 (39.5%) had signed contracts and very few of these were formulated according to Mozambican labour laws. Hence, without contractual agreements, demands for improved rights were accompanied by uncertainty and fear of losing jobs. At the construction site, the only outside agent was the Scott Wilson unit and being contracted by ANE purely to carry out the overall audit of the project, Samuel and his colleagues were essentially incapable of anything else than reporting to their Mozambican counterparts of the untenable labour situation. The overt risks notwithstanding, three times during the project period a group of workers did initiate a walkout to protest against the unfair wage policies and, particularly, against the refusal of the Chinese to pay holiday allowances and overtime. Although the initiatives did seem to have positive effects as the Chinese agreed to pay one holiday per month, it was still quite difficult to decipher how and if the days were in fact registered. I asked Alex whether he thought the strikes had been successful. 'The result of the strike was that we made demands for holiday allowances and they accepted that ... only ... it's very little money. And I don't know whether I am actually getting the correct salary. You see, it's impossible to tell whether I get my holiday allowance or not'. As Alex and his colleagues explained to me, the main problem was the incomprehensible manner in which their wages were paid out. Monthly salaries were handed out as wads of money to the Mozambicans standing in line and being called forth one after the other. Besides the general discomfort about exposing to one's peers the amount of money earned (Nielsen and Pedersen 2012), this procedure made it

virtually impossible to verify whether the received amount was correct or not. If salaries were accompanied by pay slips at all, they were written in Chinese which made it somewhat difficult to figure out how the money had been calculated. When the Mozambicans questioned their salaries, they were immediately pushed forward by Chinese superiors monitoring the process. Inácio, the young worker mentioned earlier, expressed his frustrations about the situation while sitting at the roadside with a group of colleagues. 'They don't even put the money in an envelope. They just count the money and hand it to us as if they were offering it to us ... it doesn't even seem like they are paying us at all (*nem parece que estão a pagar*)'. One of Inácio's colleagues intervened. 'He is right, you know. The Chinese is no good (*O chinês não é bom*). The money he is giving us is money without value'.

'Something to Remember'

One may perhaps rightfully wonder why road workers at the EN1 highway did not consider money received by their Chinese superiors as proper salaries. It could be imagined, for example, that the paid out money constituted 'real' albeit extremely low salaries such as those the young Mozambicans had previously received when working for local (rather than Chinese) companies. To many of the workers I spoke to during my visits at the construction site, it seemed as if the project as such made it impossible to establish a meaningful ratio between labour and money. 'They [i.e. the Chinese] are building the road', Alex explained. 'This is not something which we are involved in. We are merely witnessing their work ... but they are the ones doing it in accordance with orders coming from abroad'. Basically, the Chinese foremen and engineers from CHICO were making the construction project by themselves and although the Mozambican workers did mix cement and sand, they endured the severe physical hardships without actually building a road. As I would gradually come to realise, the layers of cement, sand and gravel actualised the qualities of a road only through a transformative process where the ratio between money and labour was determined not on the basis of the initial relationship between employer and employee but, rather, on the elicited relation between the road and projected house building projects. Through their daily encounters, the local workers had come to know in a very concrete way the radical difference of their Chinese superiors and the consequential impossibility of establishing conventional reciprocal relationships. This was made abundantly clear to me during a prolonged conversation with Inácio at a dimly lit bar close to the construction site.

Inácio: A salary has value because someone was working.

Morten: What kind of value?

Inácio: A symbolic value because he [the employer] is rewarding me for my efforts. He has to respect (*considerar*) me like I respect him for being in charge.

Morten: So, in order to be valued in that way, you have to be paid a proper salary?

Inácio: Yes. You have to be paid in a proper manner (*tem que ser pago de boa maneira*).

Morten: And are you paid in a proper manner by the Chinese?

Inácio: Ihh! (makes a high-pitched sound). Never!

Through the exchange of labour and salaries, each party comes to give something of themselves. At an interactional, everyday level, we might define this ‘something’ as the recognition of the other as a social person with whom interaction is not only possible but desirable. When the interaction is successful, proper salaries ‘eclipse’ the originating relationship between employer and employee out of which they emerge (Strathern 2005, p. 121). In a nutshell, the salary objectifies and thereby makes visible the interaction between the Mozambican worker and Chinese superior through which the identity of the other is read (cf. Gell 1998, pp. 13–15). To the Mozambicans, however, the problem was precisely that money paid out did not eclipse a relationship between employer and employee based on mutual recognition of the other as a social person with whom interaction was desirable. Received money sufficed only for buying basic foodstuff which made it no different from picking up a few banknotes from the street or being offered alms (*esmolos*) like a simple beggar who receives something that is essentially of little or no importance to the donor. It could never be considered as a salary and so, consequently, the sand, gravel and asphalt mixed together in layers could never actualise the qualities of a road. Of course, this argument might equally be formulated in an inverse manner. The significance of paid out money was predicated on the extent to which it could catapult the young Mozambicans beyond the untenable conditions at the construction site. Only then could money received be considered as proper salaries and the hardship endured as outcome of a viable social relationship. However, given the lack of mutual recognition, paid out money only seemed to acquire proper value when it did not index a reciprocal relationship. In fact, the ‘real’ value of salaries seemed to be their potential capacities for obviating the untenable connection to the Chinese superiors. ‘With a salary, I would start building a house in order to live in a better way’, Alex explained. ‘It could be a cement house or just a “bedroom and living room” (*quarto e sala*)⁶ in order for me to have a memory (*para ter uma lembrança*) of having worked in this place. That would enable me to have a life until I die’. I asked him whether the money received from the Chinese could also be considered as a memory. ‘It might become a memory (*ia tornando lembrança*)’. Alex nodded several times before continuing. ‘We consider it as a memory only when the money can be used for commencing a construction project’. In other words, the material trace (such as a construction project) that proper salaries produce were logically predicated on the amount of money that the Mozambicans received from their Chinese superiors. And, as my Mozambican interlocutors saw it, if paid out money constituted proper salaries, it would *ipso facto* elicit viable social relationship between employer and employee.

In a sense, the value of paid out money emerged by moving backwards from its current manifestation towards a grounding moment. Only when the money received enabled the workers to supplant the untenable relationship to the problematic Chinese superiors by realising alternative temporal horizons was it considered as a ‘memory’ (*lembrança*) that connected the present to the past in a proper way. Although we might imagine the initial moment when the money was first received as indexing the employer–employee relationship, this was subsequently dissolved by the road–house constellation which was unfolded from the former as the ‘real’

manifestation of salaries. The emerging house project thus transformed its own origin, as it were, by eliminating the Chinese counterpart as the source of the paid out money. Stated somewhat differently, we may argue that the transposition of the failed reciprocal relationship between the Mozambican workers and their Chinese superiors was gradually dropping the traces of its own invention. As Gell tells us, the difference between the symbolic operations of 'eclipsing' and 'obviation' is that while the former implies that prior sets of relations are still implicit, though latent, in succeeding ones, the latter 'carries a stronger implication that the imposition of one set of relations gets rid of the preceding set' (1999, pp. 41, 42). New meaning is thus created by disposing of what is initially taken to be a conventional element through its innovative transformation into something new.

As a recursive processual form, obviation does not imply an explosion of meaning where emerging configurations seem to point everywhere at once. The transformation of meaning that occurs, say, when a reciprocal relationship is obviated and a new constellation between a road and a cement house takes its place, charts an intricate interplay between conventional social practices and unconventional figurative constructions that stretches the possible limits of the former.⁷ Consequently, when paid out money received as a wad of notes successfully stitched together the hardship endured at the road construction site and a future cement house, it revealed itself as an actualisation of a virtual potentiality contained in the failed reciprocal relationship between employer and employee (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2010). Although the linear progression might suggest otherwise, it was the innovation of new meaning that established the employer–employee relationship as the (retrospective) ground upon which the road–house constellation can be figured. Occurring as a reversal of perceived cause and effect, it held the multiple formations of meaning together and thus suggested that a road construction project could contain more than an untenable relationship to incomprehensible Chinese superiors.

Conclusion

To the Mozambican workers at the road construction site between Xai-Xai and Chissibuca, the value of paid out money was predicated on its capacity for generating spatio-temporal transformations that transposed the relationship between the present and its potential futures. When paid out money successfully actualised alternative temporal horizons, e.g. as building materials for a cement house, the transformation would confirm its value as proper salary. No longer an index of the failed reciprocal relationship with radical otherness, it connected the future cement house to the work done at the EN1 highway in a proportionally appropriate way. As we have seen above, it was through the emerging future contained in the house-building project that the sand, gravel and cement at the construction site came to constitute a road laden with generative potentials. In his discussion of processual obviation, Wagner describes how each new event '*differentiates* the character of the whole beyond anticipation, assimilating what has preceded it into its own relation', a 'now' that supercedes, rather than extends, its 'then' (1986, p. 81). As we have seen here, an obviational process works backwards by actualising itself (retrospectively) as a virtual potentiality contained in a previous and now supplanted state. Through the reception of proper salaries, the road–house constellation emerged out

of the failed employer–employee relationship which revealed itself to constitute merely a necessary ground upon which the former might figure. Hence, as Wagner (1986, p. 81) poignantly remarks, obviation can be considered as a ‘qualitative mathematic, one that “uncounts” successive events, making itself part of their resolution, rather than subordinating them to its order’.

In their article ‘Otherwise Engaged’ (2008), Harvey and Knox convincingly argue that,

[R]oads are also sites for passionate engagement holding the promise of transformative potential in ways that create an unlikely and unpredictable convergence of interest ... (op. cit., p. 80)

In this article, I have explored similar promises of ‘transformative potential’ by outlining how the actualisation of ‘road-like qualities’ as it were, can be predicated on innovative social processes through which novel associations are made between the materiality of road construction, potential futures and the value of paid out money. Diverging slightly from Harvey and Knox, however, I have suggested that transformations may occur through the *negation* rather than the convergence of interest (Stasch 2009, cf. Nielsen 2010). Indeed, to the Mozambican workers at the construction site, the sand, gravel and cement seemed to become road-like to the extent that particular social relationships were obviated. When successful, the untenable relationship to the Chinese superiors was supplanted by the memory (*lembrança*) of a road properly built. For many of the young Mozambicans, however, paid out money rarely sufficed for buying the sacks of cement necessary to commence much-desired construction projects let alone as down payment for a plot. Debarred from engaging in viable reciprocal relationships with their Chinese superiors, the Mozambican workers were therefore essentially mixing layers of sand, gravel and cement but without constructing a road.

Notes

1. The minimum wage for construction work in Mozambique is currently 2435 MZM (79 USD) per month.
2. The principle of eclipsing is based on the idea that the ‘content of whatever reading is eclipsed is present in the content of whatever is foregrounded. A view of the sun in eclipse is still a view of the sun, not the moon, though it is the moon one sees’ (Gell 1999, p. 62).
3. ‘*Projectos submetidos para o financiamento externo do Exim Bank da China do Governo da China*’, 06.08.09 (Projects submitted for external financing through the Exim Bank, Government of China). Document from the Ministry of Planning and Development.
4. The Scott Wilson team is composed by 4 engineers, 2 technicians and 15 ‘checkers’ responsible for the daily monitoring of the work activities.
5. Almost as a confirmation of Samuel’s premonition, in April 2012, nearly a year after the completion of the project, an inspection team contracted by ANE documented a series of critical cracks in the asphalt caused by a poorly stabilized sublayer. According to ANE engineers, however, these clearly visible weaknesses ought to cause no alarm. As I was told during a fieldtrip in May 2012, the road will serve both political and practical means for a long time. If, at some point, the quality should diminish drastically, it will merely appear as any other road in Mozambique while its origin will be long forgotten.
6. According to many Mozambicans in the southern part of the country, a proper cement house has more than two rooms (Nielsen 2008).

7. In 'The Invention of Culture', Wagner (1981, pp. 43, 44) argues that '[i]nvention ... is the obviator of conventional contexts and contrasts; indeed, its total effect of merging the conventional "subject" and "object", transforming each on the basis of the other, might be labelled obviation'.

References

- Abrahamsson, H. and Nilsson, A., 1995. *Mozambique: the troubled transition*. London: Zed Press.
- Augé, M., 1995. *Non-places*. London: Verso.
- Belotti, M., 1990. Book review: the district road improvement and maintenance programme – better roads and job creation in Malawi, by Steiner Hagen and Colin Relf. *Journal of Developing Areas*, 25 (1), 127–128.
- Bryceson, D.F., et al., 2008. Roads to poverty reduction? Exploring rural roads' impact on mobility in Africa and Asia. *Development Policy Review*, 26 (4), 459–482.
- Campbell, B., 2010. Rhetorical routes for development: a road project in Nepal. *Contemporary South Asia*, 18 (3), 267–279.
- Chichava, S., 2008. *Mozambique and China: from politics to business?* Discussion paper no. 05/2008. Maputo: Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos.
- Club of Mozambique Lda. 2011. *Chinese construction group CHICO due to deliver road in Mozambique in May*. Available from: <http://www.clubofmozambique.com/solutions1/sectionnews.php?secao=business&id=21391&tipo=one> [Accessed 14 April 2011].
- Dalakoglou, D., 2010. The road: an ethnography of the Albanian–Greek cross-border motorway. *American Ethnologist*, 37 (1), 132–149.
- Dawson, J. and Barwell, I., 1993. *Roads are not enough: new perspectives on rural transport planning in developing countries*. London: Intermediate Technology.
- Dinerman, A., 2006. *Revolution, counter-revolution and revisionism in postcolonial Africa, the case of Mozambique, 1975–1994*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Gell, A., 1998. *Art and agency. An anthropological theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gell, A., 1999. *The art of anthropology. Essays and diagrams*. London: Athlone.
- Gibson, J. and Rozelle, S., 2003. Poverty and access to roads in Papua New Guinea. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 52 (1), 159–185.
- Hanlon, J., 1991. *Mozambique. Who calls the shots*. Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press.
- Hanlon, J., 1996. *Peace without profit: how the IMF blocks rebuilding in Mozambique*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Harvey, P., 2010. Cementing relations: the materiality of roads and public spaces in provincial Peru. *Social Analysis*, 54 (2), 28–46.
- Harvey, P. and Knox, H., 2008. Otherwise engaged. Culture, deviance and the quest for connectivity through road construction. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 1 (1), 79–92.
- Horta, L., 2007. *China, Mozambique: old friends, new business*. Available from: <http://farmlandgrab.org/2322> [Accessed 10 July 2009].
- Horta, L., 2009. *China's relations with Mozambique: a mixed blessing*. Available from: <http://forums.csis.org/africa/?p=97> [Accessed 10 July 2009].
- Jansson, J. and Kiala, C., 2009. *Patterns of Chinese investment, aid and trade in Mozambique*. Stellenbosch: Centre for Chinese Studies, University of Stellenbosch.
- Macauhub, 2007. *Chinese company builds Moamba bridge in Mozambique*. Available from: <http://www.macauhub.com.mo/en/news.php?ID=2683> [Accessed 11 April 2011].
- Macauhub, 2008a. *Chinese company to build road in Tete province*. Available from: <http://www.macauhub.com.mo/en/news.php?ID=6312> [Accessed 10 April 2011].
- Macauhub, 2008b. *Chinese contractor finishes work on bridge over Incomati river at the end of the month*. Available from: <http://www.macauhub.com.mo/en/2008/06/03/5147/> [Accessed 10 April 2011].
- Macauhub, 2009. *China and Macau amongst 10 biggest investors in 2008*. Available from: <http://www.macauhub.com.mo/en/2009/02/19/6582/> [Accessed 19 February 2010].
- Masquelier, A., 2002. Road mythographies: space, mobility, and the historical imagination in postcolonial Niger. *American Ethnologist*, 29 (4), 829–856.
- Nielsen, M., 2008. *In the vicinity of the state. House construction, personhood, and the state in Maputo, Mozambique*. Dissertation (PhD). Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen: Copenhagen.

- Nielsen, M., 2010. Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism: distantiation as social relatedness among house-builders in Maputo, Mozambique. *Social Anthropology*, 18 (4), 396–402.
- Nielsen, M. and Pedersen, M.A., 2012. Trans-temporal hinges: comparing Chinese investments in Mozambique and Mongolia. *Social Analysis*.
- Nyíri, P., 2008. The Altai road: visions of development across the Russian-Chinese border. *Development and Change*, 39 (1), 123–146.
- Pina-Cabral, J.D., 1987. Paved roads and enchanted Mooresses: the perception of the past among the peasant population of the Alto Minho. *Man*, 22 (4), 715–735.
- Roque, P.C., 2009. *China in Mozambique: a cautious approach. Country case study*. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs.
- Roseman, S.R., 1996. 'How we built the road': the politics of memory in rural Galicia. *American Ethnologist*, 23 (4), 836–860.
- Scott, J., 1998. *Seeing like a state. How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Scott Wilson Ltd, 2010. *Works monthly progress report No. 18 September 2010*. Maputo: Administração Nacional de Estradas.
- Stasch, R., 2009. *Society of others. Kinship and mourning in a west Papuan place*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Strathern, M., 1991. *Partial connections*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Strathern, M., 1992. Qualified value: the perspective of gift exchange. In: C. Humphrey and S. Hugh-Jones, eds. *Barter, exchange and value. An anthropological approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 169–191.
- Strathern, M., 2005. *Kinship, law and the unexpected. Relatives are always a surprise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsing, A.L., 2005. *Friction. An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Viveiros de Castro, E., 2010. Intensive filiation and demonic alliance. In: C.B. Jensen and K. Rødje, eds. *Deleuzian intersections. Science, technology, anthropology*. New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 219–254.
- Wagner, R., 1979. *Lethal speech: Daribi myth as symbolic obviation*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wagner, R., 1981. *The invention of culture*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wagner, R., 1986. *Symbols that stand for themselves*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Windle, J., 2002. Envelopment or development? The role of roads as conductors of change in upland areas of Sarawak, Malaysia. *Bijdragen tot de taal, land en volkenkunde*, 158 (4), 821–836.