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Analogic asphalt

Suspended value conversions among young road workers in southern Mozambique

Morten NIELSEN, *Aarhus University*

This article explores the obviational process through which the value of salaries is continuously being transformed, based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out among young road workers employed by a Chinese construction consortium to rehabilitate the N1 highway in the southern part of Mozambique. To the Mozambican workers, the value of salaries emerged by gradually dropping the traces of its own origin rather than indexing a fixed ratio between labor and money. Only when money received enabled the workers to supplant the fraught relationship to their Chinese superiors—for example, by buying construction materials for a projected cement house—was it considered as a proper salary that connected the present (purchase of building materials) to the past (road work) in a viable manner. Following this initial conversion, I then chart how the emergent temporal association (road work :: house building project) opened toward new images of altered and improved social positions for the young Mozambican road workers. The article proposes to consider *value* as an optimal way of supplanting (rather than confirming) existing forms of relational meaning by relating a process of suspended value transformations to an over-arching temporal cosmology widespread in the southern part of Mozambique (tomorrowness).

Keywords: Future, Mozambique, obviation, time, value conversions

In May 2010, Ramón had finally gathered enough money to commence building the much-desired cement house that was to serve as the future home for his family. During the previous three years, Ramón had been living with his wife and two children in a small two-room reed hut on the outskirts of Xai-Xai in the southern part of Mozambique, but the coming construction project seemed to promise a significant improvement of their housing conditions. Ramón was working for CHICO,[1] a Chinese construction consortium, to rehabilitate the N1 highway between the towns of Xai-Xai and Chissibuca. In general, all local workers were required to show up at the construction compound seven days a week but on this hot Sunday, Ramón had decided to stay at home with his family despite the cut in

1. China Henan International Cooperation Group. Co Ltd. (CHICO).

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his already meager salary. While showing me where he would soon begin pouring a cement foundation for the house, Ramón told me about the recent occurrences that prompted the decision to commence the house construction project.

> Well . . . to tell you the truth, I actually don't know how much I make at the construction site. They [i.e., his Chinese superiors at the road construction site] never tell us how they calculate our salaries so we don't know how much we actually make. Ah! What they pay us cannot even be considered as proper salaries. . . . The way they treat us, it's almost like being offered handouts as if we were simple beggars. It was only when I bought the first sack of cement that I got a proper memory (*lembrança*)[2] of having carried out work at the road construction site.

Somehow it seemed as if the value of Ramón's salary changed at those precise moments when it sufficed for buying construction materials for his projected cement house. No longer the equivalent to "handouts" (which also indexed a problematic employee-employer relationship), it crystallized the work Ramón had previously carried out at the road construction site. Put somewhat differently, it appears from Ramón's statement that the paid out money could be considered as a proper salary because it sufficed for buying building materials; its *salary-ness*, as it were, emerged as an after-effect of the use to which it was subsequently put. It is then interesting to note the continued value conversions even after the purchase of construction materials. After pacing out the house construction site, I sat down with Ramón in the shade outside his somewhat dilapidated reed hut located at the far end of the plot. In a soft voice, Ramón explained the complicated process he was now facing.

> I am not sure (*não tenho certeza*) whether I will ever complete the house building project; we Mozambicans like to build "little by little" (*pouco a pouco*) and hope that we might get lucky. Also . . . whether I will actually be able to build a house at all depends on the aesthetics, you know. A well-rooted house (*casa de raiz*) is located three meters from plot limits and is erected according to a construction plan. If I don't follow the plan, I remain a poor squatter and I'll never build a house.

The construction process that Ramón embarked upon when he bought the first sack of cement seemed to be oriented by the end result—that is, the cement house in which he will hopefully come to live with his wife and children. Still, as Ramón acknowledged during our prolonged conversation, it is only after having completed the construction process that he will know for sure whether he has, in fact, built a house. If the aesthetics of the building do not adhere to a set of seemingly well-defined standards (e.g., a fixed location three meters from plot limits and a continuous adherence to a construction plan), Ramón cannot obtain status as legitimate occupant and the construction project will never result in a proper house. Many urbanites living on the outskirts of Mozambican cities, such as Ramón, occupy land illegally and can therefore—at least potentially—be removed with force by the government (Carrilho et al. 2008: 130–58; Jenkins 2009). Still, provided that peri-urban (and illegal!) residents build houses that imitate state-authored urban aesthetics, their occupations are often pragmatically, if not legally, accepted by official

2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are between Portuguese and English.

authorities (Nielsen 2010, 2011). In a nutshell, if Ramón succeeds in building in accordance with officially sanctioned standards, his previous status as illegal squatter is most likely transformed into that of a legal urban citizen and he will know that he has, in fact, erected a proper house.

In this article, I chart the intricate process whereby the value of paid out money received by a group of young Mozambican road workers from their Chinese superiors is undergoing continuous transformations. To the Mozambican workers, rather than indexing a fixed ratio between labor and money, the value of salaries emerged by gradually dropping the traces of its own origin. Only when money received enabled the workers to supplant the untenable relationship to their problematic Chinese superiors (for example, by buying construction materials for a projected cement house), was it considered as a proper salary that connected the present (purchase of building materials) to the past (road work) in a viable manner. The emerging house construction project thus transformed its own origin, as it were, by eliminating the Chinese counterpart as the source of the paid out money. Still, although having cancelled the employee :: employer relationship, the road :: construction project constellation did not *ipso facto* remain stable. If a house-builder succeeded in building a cement house, his status was fundamentally transformed from illegal squatter into (potentially) legal urban citizen. If we consider these two value transformations schematically, we end up with the following figure:

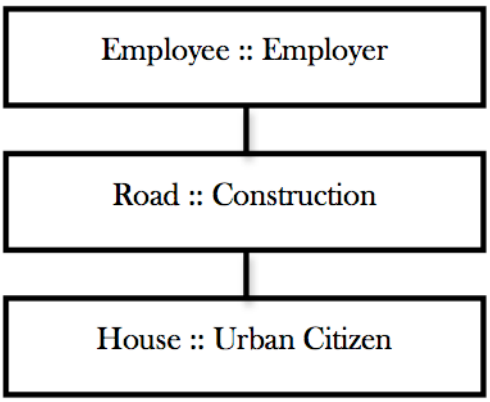

Figure 1. The sequence of suspended value transformations

As might be noticed from the figure, the sequence of suspended value transformations closes when it returns to its beginning point—that is, the image of the Mozambican road worker. Whereas in the first constellation, the young Mozambicans such as Ramón are caught in fraught working relationships with their Chinese superiors, in the last one, they have achieved secure occupancy within the urban domain. Hence, as will also be the argument of this article, the sequence described above (potentially!) resolves a fundamental problem, which is that of connecting different value regimes in order for the road worker's productive transformation to occur. And, as I shall soon describe, as a temporal configuration the sequence of suspended value transformations operate by connecting discrete

occurrences in a nonlinear way so that a subsequent event, paradoxically, seems to precede (or counter-invent) the prior one from which it originated.

Obviating Dumont

In *The fame of Gawa* (1986), Nancy Munn gives an insightful account of Gawan value creation through long-distance kula-shell exchanges. For the Gawans, the value of a given act needs to be seen in relation to its "essential capacities" or possible outcomes. For instance, the giving of food to a stranger has the capacity to yield not only hospitality in return but perhaps also in the long run the acquisition of kula shells and renown. Value may therefore be "characterized in terms of differential levels of spatiotemporal transformation—more specifically, in terms of an act's relative capacity to extend or expand . . . intersubjective spacetime—a spacetime of self-other relationships formed in and through acts and practices" (Munn 1986: 9). In short, value is ultimately the power to create social relations; a transformative capacity, as it were, to extend oneself in space and time beyond the here and now. In a sense, we might therefore see Munn's analytical account as a form of labor theory of value given that objects, items, and artifacts become meaningful as crystallizations of the efforts that people put into a sequence of social processes (Graeber 2001: 45).

What I take from Munn is her emphasis on value as a transformative capacity lodged in current acts. As David Graeber put it (and here he is contrasting Munn with Marilyn Strathern's Melanesian work), "(r)ather than value being the process of public recognition itself . . . it is the way people who *could* do almost anything . . . assess the importance of what they do, in fact, do, as they are doing it" (2001: 47). Still, by focusing on the value effects of current acts, it seems as if Munn is suggesting that any act ultimately has a singular meaning ascribed to it that can be read from, say, the extension of a person in space and time. Basically, in Munn's work, value emerges as an effect of how an intentional act in the present is extended outward so that a spatial and temporal environment is aligned with its interior properties (e.g., the fame of an important person). What happens, then, when transformative capacities lodged in current acts become suspended in time? Do present acts, in fact, maintain singular values that are then merely folded outward in space and time? Might we not imagine temporal inversions where values elicited through current acts are encompassed by subsequent but contrary ones? We would then have a temporalized version of Louis Dumont's classic hierarchical scheme where pairs of values are always encompassed by their contrary (1980). In its temporalized version, it would be a subsequent act (rather than a higher level of values) that comes to stand for both itself and its contrary (that is, the former act).

In Roy Wagner's obviational analyses of Daribi mythology, we find one of the most convincing anthropological attempts at charting temporal value conversions (1979, 1981, 1986). According to Wagner, 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 recognized usage that 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 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" (Wagner 1979: 31, 28).

It might be relevant to ponder, then, to what extent other (nonmythical) processes might be considered as sequences of tropic substitutions through which new meanings are formed that "conventionalizes the unconventional and deconventionalizes the conventional"? Indeed, according to Wagner, although myth does imitate "the forms and situations of secular and religious life . . . it could equally well be argued that kinship, subsistence, magic and ritual imitate the forms and situations of myth" (Wagner 1979: 54). A myth gives an origin account emerging retrospectively from the substitutions that gradually allow new and often paradoxical meanings to be everted from former ones. As such, the potential meanings of the myth are projected backward from the ongoing series of substitutions toward a moment of origin that nevertheless seems to continuously displace itself. It might be argued that in order for a sequence of events to exhibit mythical qualities, it is first and foremost a question of manifesting certain temporal traits so that each subsequent 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'" (Wagner 1986: 81). Hence, whereas it is often assumed that a given value is predicated on a capacity to retain history, say, as the elicitation of a sequence of exchanges (Mauss 2005; Strathern 1988, 1992) or even as the social biography of an object (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), what the obviational analysis affords is a quite different account where values emerge from the capacity to *supplant* history.

In the following, I will examine suspended value conversions as they take place among young Mozambican road workers hired by a Chinese construction consortium to rehabilitate the N1 highway. After an initial account of nonlinear time in the southern part of Mozambique, I proceed to chart the intricate sequence of substitutions through which the value of paid out money is continuously being transformed. Inspired by Roy Wagner's obviational analysis, it will be my overall argument that suspended value conversions potentially resolve the seemingly insoluble temporal conundrum of connecting discrete events in a nonlinear way in order for productive transformations to occur. As such, the value of paid out salaries emerges from its continuous substitutions; that is, from the particular ways in which salaries drop the traces of their own origin.

Tomorrowness

Among the young Mozambican road workers, a frequent leisure activity during their days off was to watch poor DVD versions of American action movies. Besides allowing for a much-needed escape from the hot backyards (*quintal*) where most of our quotidian conversations took place, these movie sessions also provoked a series of puzzling questions regarding my friends' understanding of

linear time. While sitting in the shady living rooms, I was always amazed at how my young friends seemed to completely spoil the plot for each other by continuously revealing what would come next. Hence, if the lead character in a movie was about to experience, say, a surprise attack, one of the viewers would almost certainly let us know what was about to happen—even when knowing that he was the only person to have seen the movie. Still, these plot spoilers never really seemed to constitute a problem. In fact, after having had subsequent scenes revealed, a heated and very lively discussion would follow where plot spoilers were debated and explained in greater detail and when my fellow viewers finally saw the scene in question they would loudly express their satisfaction that the story unfolded as promised.

Notwithstanding the annoyance of having the plot spoiled, these afternoon movie sessions did reflect an interesting understanding of time that was widespread in the southern part of Mozambique. Generally, a sequence of consecutive scenes in an action movie would seem to indicate a narrative connection based on conventional chronology; that is, scene A is either before or after scene B if understood on a linear scale. And from this perspective, the plot is logically spoiled if subsequent scenes are prematurely revealed to the viewer. However, if we bracket the proclivity for understanding time as chronology, we might consider a slightly different temporal account that affords an alternative reading of the afternoon movie sessions and, more crucially, will serve to orient the analysis of suspended value conversions among the young road workers.

Many if not most Mozambicans living in the southern part of the country believe that life does not end at the time of physical death; people live on as spiritual forces who guide the lives of their descendants (Granjo 2012; Honwana 1996; Nielsen 2012; see also Junod 1962). According to Bento Sitôe who is professor in linguistics at the Universidade de Eduardo Mondlane,

> Many people have difficulties understanding their lives in terms of the future because here (in the southern part of Mozambique) time doesn't operate with the limit that the moment of death constitutes elsewhere. As we see it, life doesn't stop. We might die but we go on living in the heart of our family (*no seio da nossa familia*). So, this thing about the future being something that only pertains to me . . . that's not quite right. (Personal communication, May 2012)

When life ceases to have a final conclusion, the significance of the future changes accordingly. Basically, a person's future cannot be considered merely as the remaining part of his or her physical life given the continued presence in the lives of descendants. In xiChangana,[3] the future is generally considered using the term *vumundzuku* (Portuguese: *amanhecidade*) that might best be translated as *tomorrowness*. In order to coordinate, say, the process of constructing a cement house, it is logically necessary to plan ahead; to decide when to purchase building materials, when to contract a bricklayer, when to order wooden doors and window frames, and so forth. And indeed, such planning activities are carried out by prospective housebuilders, many of whom seek to improve an unstable socioeconomic situation through a transformation of their housing conditions

3. A Bantu language spoken widely in the southern part of Mozambique.

(Nielsen 2008:130–58). What is interesting, then, is that these planning activities do not necessarily imply the actual realization of the desired outcome. Given the fragile economic situation in Mozambique, a housebuilding project often requires continuous financial investments that exceed the capacity of the housebuilder. Hence, although the process of building a cement house might be initiated, the prospective house owner also acknowledges that the project will most likely fail. And even so, the somewhat utopian qualities of these endeavors rarely lead to their cancellation. During my first visit to the road construction site in Chissibuca, I talked to Chico, a 23-year-old road worker originally from Inhambane, about his ongoing housebuilding project. "When I started the project, I really didn't know whether I would ever finish it. Initially, I didn't even have money for buying cement so I had to wait until I had enough [money] in order for me to begin making cement blocks. It's important to do these things in phases . . . little by little (*pouco a pouco*), you know. . . . But I believe in the project. I always believed (*sempre tinha esperança*) that my life would change from one day to the next."

Tomorrowness (*vumundzuku*) might perhaps best be described as this transformative potential of the future lodged in the present. Despite its likely failure, the future inserts itself in the present as an organizing tendency that connects multiple entities (persons, ideas, things) in a momentary durational assemblage. As such, it instills in the present a certain open-endedness that points forward while still maintaining the role of the accidental, change, or the undetermined in the unfolding of time (cf. Grosz 1999: 18–19). According to a widely known Changana proverb, "only if you know the depth of the river will you enter" (*a xiziva vacambeta hicupela*); that is, if one knew everything about all dangerous crevices and gorges at the bottom of sea, the likelihood of entering would be minimal. As if referring to the Changana proverb, my good friend Nelson argued that,

> The idea of, say, a finished house is fixed (*fixa*), but we don't know whether we will ever see its conclusion. We've got an idea . . . but what's an idea? We might make a blueprint with three rooms, but this does not give us the idea that we might conclude the house because the (necessary) money doesn't exist. But as soon as there is an idea, we start on the house (*a gente começamos a casa*).

Considered as tomorrowness, the future affords a certain transformative potential in the present by outlining a possible trajectory without the anticipation of a final destination. Whether pertaining to the act of crossing a river or building a house, plans that seem to orient one's path into an unknown future are thus developed and acted upon while knowing that their successful completion is uncertain if not unlikely. In this regard, tomorrowness reflects the fundamental cosmological understanding that a person's life transcends conventional temporal boundaries, such as death or even the time frame that guides a house-building project. With a phrase borrowed by Constantin V. Boundas, we might argue that tomorrowness makes the present not really present to itself, guided as it is by a future "that it is in the mode of not yet being it" (1996: 101). Only at the moment of its full realization will it be possible to know how the future is connected to the present and thus also how to understand the meaning of ongoing activities, such as receiving salaries from Chinese superiors or building houses that imitate state-authored urban aesthetics.

Before continuing the discussion of suspended value conversions, let me briefly return to the movie sessions that were introduced at the beginning of this section. If we consider the plot spoilers in terms of tomorrowness rather than merely as a premature (and annoying!) exposure of subsequent scenes, they seem to add to current scenes a certain transformative potential. Operating as detached (or even deterritorialized) futures within the present they indicate a momentary becoming of ongoing activities without the promise of reaching the point of their realization (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 232–309). To be sure, it was in this middle space between a future unhinged from linear chronology (by being inserted within the present) and a present that was no longer present to itself (by being infused by the future) that the intense debates between my fellow viewers took place.

Having thus outlined certain primary temporal qualities of tomorrowness, I shall now proceed to explore in detail the sequence of suspended value conversions as they take place among a group of Mozambican road workers. It will consequently be my overall argument that the sequence of obviational transformations potentially resolves the fundamental problem of connecting discrete events in a nonlinear way in order for the road workers' productive transformation to occur.

Forgetting the Chinese by remembering the road

In December 2008, CHICO, a Chinese construction consortium, won the contract to rehabilitate and upgrade 96 km of the N1 highway between the cities of Xai-Xai and Chissibuca in the southern part of Mozambique. Funded by the International Development Association (IDA), the project was 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). Work began in January 2009 and with only few setbacks the construction project was completed in March 2011 and delivered to the National Road Administration (ANE)[4] the following month (Club of Mozambique Lda 2011). During the most intense periods, the construction team was composed of 56 Chinese and 261 Mozambicans who were 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 twenty-one full time staff members accompanied the construction team while working on the road.

During my last visit to the road construction site in 2011, I met up with Matías and Celso, two young road workers from Xai-Xai whom I had known since 2009. At the time of our encounter, the project was rapidly reaching its conclusion and aside from the important task of painting lines on the new asphalt, there were few major work activities left to do apart from cleaning up in the materials compound. We had therefore plenty of time to evaluate the construction project while also discussing potential plans for the future. "If they [the Chinese superiors] were proper persons, we would have real memories (*lembranças*) of having worked here. . . . But we don't have anything; the only thing we've got is back pain." I had asked Celso whether the already problematic relationship to their superiors had improved since my last visit a year earlier but it appeared that little had

4. Administração Nacional de Estradas (ANE).

changed. Matías nodded. "Salaries are sacred, you know. It's important that you receive something that shows that you've been working . . . it's the work that creates the memory so that afterward when I buy cement I'll know that I worked for this company." "Yes, yes!" Celso intervened. "That's right. If we were treated correctly and the money was sufficient for us to start building our houses, then we would consider it as a memory (*era lembrança para nós*)."

As I had come to understand during my conversations with the young road workers, if considered as a conventional salary, paid out money would objectify a mutually recognized social relationship between employer and employee. While sitting by the roadside waiting to commence the laborious work of mixing the layers of sand, cement, and gravel to stabilize the asphalt road, Ináncio summed up the relational significance of proper salaries: "It's important to be paid properly because I will then feel that my boss is valuing (*valorizar*) me like a person. Not like he is offering me something but rewarding me for my efforts."

According to Marilyn Strathern, 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" (1992: 177). 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 that is momentarily eliminated by the reciprocal exchange. However, as Ináncio 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. To be sure, only small variations in income were potentially detrimental to the basic subsistence level of individual households and so Ináncio and his colleagues anticipated with anxiety the monthly payment date when they would line up and be called forth by the Chinese official responsible for counting the money. "It's almost like they are offering us money . . . as if we were simple beggars," Alex wryly told me.

Through the exchange of labor 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 also desirable. When the interaction is successful, proper salaries "eclipse" the originating relationship between employer and employee out of which they emerge (Strathern 2005: 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: 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 (*esmolas*) 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 failed to convey 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*) 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. Given the assumed lack of recognition from their employers, however, the (future) memory would no longer eclipse a mutually recognized relationship. Rather, at the moment when paid out money would suffice for buying construction materials; a new connection would be established between the housebuilding project and the road they had previously worked on. As Alex explained,

> We wish that we had had a memory (*nós desejíamos que nós teíamos uma lembrança*). What would we then remember? The road! . . . That we have a great road here in Mozambique. I would have a memory of living in a house that I built . . . living a quiet life knowing that I purchased these things while working on the road.

In a sense, the value of paid out money emerged by moving backward from its current manifestation toward a grounding moment. Only when the money received enabled the workers to supplant the untenable relationship to the problematic Chinese superiors by realizing alternative temporal horizons was it considered as a memory 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 employee :: employer relationship, this was subsequently dissolved by the road :: construction project constellation that was unfolded from the former as the *real* manifestation of salaries. The emerging construction 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.

The emergent qualities of cement houses

As Wagner tells us, obviational transformations imply a double process of invention and convention in which each mode of symbolization precipitates or *counterinvents* the other as a form of figure-ground inversal. Hence,

> We invent so as to sustain and restore our conventional orientation; we adhere to this orientation so as to realize the power and gain that

> invention brings. Invention and convention stand in a *dialectical* relationship to one another, a relationship of simultaneous interdependence and contradiction. (Wagner 1981: 52, italics in original)

The innovative effect emerges when some symbols act upon others in order to elicit new meanings from prior ones (Wagner 1979: 31). To achieve this innovative effect, it is necessary that the symbols being acted upon be accepted as a conventional context that is "perfectly self-evident, natural and innate, when in fact it is just as much a symbolic construct as the figure upon which it is built" (Weiner 1995: 34). The conventional context is consequently that collection of meaningful tropes that is held steady as a taken-for-granted background (Wagner 1981: 51). Still, as James Weiner also reminds us, irrespective of whatever interpretation might be made, any (conventional) symbolic image is always open to doubt and reformulations. It has "the power of eliciting (causing to perceive) all sorts of meanings in those who use and hear it" (Wagner 1987: 56). Inventions that subvert an interpretation occur when a symbolic trope is extended beyond its seemingly self-evident connection to a given reference by some motivating force that comes from beyond the conventional domain. In this regard, the roadwork was counterinvented as source of the paid out money at the moment when the young Mozambicans managed to buy construction materials for their house-building project. If we briefly return to the discussion of tomorrowness (*vumundzuku*), it might be argued that the house construction project did, indeed, assert itself as a particular transformative potential in the present. Rather than merely indicate a predefined (but unlikely) endpoint on a linear scale, it suggested new ways of structuring social life here and now. In other words, the potency of the future derived from the recursive elimination of the untenable employee :: employer relationship that was clearly detrimental to the young Mozambican road workers.

It could be imagined that the purchase of cement would "cut" the flow of inventions, as it were (cf. Strathern 1996). By commencing a housebuilding project, the value of salaries seemed to stabilize as a viable medium to connect the past (road) with the present (house-building project) and, further on, with the imagined future (the completed cement house). However, keeping in the mind that the future is actualized backward through the recursive transformation of a moment of origin, the event of purchasing cement essentially eliminated its immediate temporal importance (in the present) at the precise moment of its occurrence. In a nutshell, the future never really managed to become present to itself, as it were, because of its transformative "commitment" to its past. Rather than examine whether the purchase of construction materials did, in fact, result in the completion of a cement house, it is consequently more relevant to ask what presents were counterinvented by the latter future (that is, the completion of a cement house).

With the exodus of the Portuguese colonizers after Mozambique's independence in 1975, the already fragile urban administration was completely incapable of tackling the insurmountable problems caused by the increasing number of inhabitants who were seeking shelter and better opportunities in the cities. Rooted in a nationalist socialist ideology with an explicit antiurban bias that neglected broad-ranging urban development in favor of grand agricultural visions, the urban population was seen as parasitical and therefore in need of removal (Trindade 2006: 42). The limited involvement of the wider 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" (Jenkins 2006: 120). Thus, out of the 86,300 new housing units built from 1980 to 1997, it is estimated that as few as 7 percent were provided by the state or private sector (4,000 and 1,500 respectively). The remaining more than 80,000 housing units were built without state assistance (Jenkins 1999: 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 emphasis on free market forces, assigned the state a facilitatory role and introduced the liberalization of real estate activity and thereby the basis for a housing market (Jenkins 1998). The emergence of private activities notwithstanding, the state continued to play a key role in the allocation of plots, as the nationalization of land remained an inviolable pillar for the Frelimo government. Without any improvement in its administrative capacities, however, its ability to maintain this policy remains limited. Thus, between 1990 and 1999, the state and other institutions developed forty-eight plot layouts without overall coordination or land registration (Jenkins 2001: 637).

Although state agencies have proven incapable of implementing coherent urban policies, many settlers who live on the fringes of the city have found alternative ways to access land. According to Paul Jenkins, in Maputo 75 percent of all access to land occurs informally, that is, through local leaders or civil servants illegally parceling out plots that are later sold (2000: 145). Bearing in mind the weak administrative capacities at state and municipal levels, it is perhaps no surprise that urban governance is *de facto* carried out by residents who occupy land illegally. What is interesting, however, is that illegal occupations are pragmatically if not legally accepted provided that residents build houses that imitate those urban standards (e.g., regarding plot size and location and aesthetics of the house) that the state *ought* to have implemented (Nielsen 2011). In other words, if peri-urban residents manage to complete housebuilding projects that seem to adhere to official norms, they will probably never be removed—irrespective of its apparent illegality. During a fieldtrip in Maputo in 2005, I spoke with Sambo, a municipal architect, about the weak urban administrative structures. "We are a poor country," Sambo said with a smile. "Therefore it doesn't make much sense to remove a house which could easily stay there."

Cândido, a young Mozambican road worker, bought his plot on the outskirts of Xai-Xai from a primary school teacher who wanted to move to Maputo. Since Independence in 1975, all transactions in land have been illegal and Cândido had therefore no official documents that proved that he was the owner of the plot. Still, the lack of formal ownership rights did not necessarily constitute a serious problem to Cândido's occupancy if only he managed to construct the house in the appropriate manner. "If I get fined by the community chief (*secretário do bairro*) for not having a construction plan, I'll know for sure that I won't move. Hey, I might even open up a bank account like a real person . . . (laughs)." As Cândido told me, only formal residents were fined for building cement houses without construction plans whereas illegal squatters would eventually be removed with force by some (unknown) official authority. In other words, the fine would effectively validate Cândido's status as formal resident and thereby confirm that a

proper cement house had been built. Still, with a weak administrative system without sufficient human and financial capacities, validation of formal occupancy does not happen overnight and many residents continue to occupy land informally for extended periods of time irrespective of whether they have completed a housebuilding project or not. From my conversations with the road workers, it was clear that those of them whose status as formal citizens were not yet validated seemed to evaluate their houses differently—even in those instances where the construction projects were already (or nearly) completed. "Ah! This is no well-rooted house (*casa de raiz*). I'm just trying to hide my head (*esconder a minha cabeça*)," Nelson noted when I asked him about his recently completed housebuilding project. "Why don't they just give me the papers?" he continued. "Am I not a proper person?"

With a monthly salary on less than the minimum wage,[5] not all of the young Mozambican road workers managed to gather sufficient money to buy construction materials for their much-desired housebuilding projects. Those who did, however, seemed to consider the completed cement house not as the eventual outcome of an ongoing building project (as would probably seem most likely) but, rather as an effect of their potentially altered status. Hence, rather than continue to occupy land as illegal squatters, the completed house would confer to them the status of legitimate urban citizens; or, more precisely, the result of the construction project could only be considered as a proper house provided that their social status changed significantly. As Nelson reminded me, the inverse relation (urban citizenship from a completed cement house) was not equally likely. On the outskirts of Xai-Xai and many other places throughout Mozambique, illegal squatters commence housebuilding projects but only legitimate citizens can have well-rooted houses (*casas de raiz*) built in accordance with officially sanctioned urban standards.

Conclusion

With the first obviational substitution, paid out money came to constitute salaries if they sufficed for buying construction materials. Rather than eclipse an untenable relationship between employee and employer, a productive temporal connection was established between the roadwork and the anticipated (or commenced) house-construction project. By everting or counterinventing a new symbolic relationship from the employee :: employer configuration, the completed house emerged as a potential future associated with the event of purchasing construction materials. However, as a paradoxical effect of the prior temporal inversion, this future fundamentally lost its chronological attachment to *its* past (that is, the purchase of cement). As we have seen above, the prior temporal relationship (road :: construction project) was obviated by the future (completed house) lodged in the present as a transformative potential that outlined a new durational configuration. Rather than serve to indicate a possible but unlikely endpoint on a linear scale, the completed house suggested new tropic images of a transformed social status for the young Mozambican workers. In a nutshell, the building that they imagined to be

5. The minimum wage for construction work in Mozambique is currently 2,435 MZM (79 USD) per month.

occupying in the future would only come to constitute a proper cement house if their status was transformed from illegal squatters to that of legitimate citizens.

In their discussion of Levi-Strauss's analysis of the canonical myth, Pierre Maranda and Elli Köngäs Maranda argue, "(i)n effect, myths are made to solve contradictions . . . and the formula can only be understood if it is read backwards, as the inversion of the first term" (1971: 30; see also Marcus 1997; Mosko 1991). Without claiming to imitate the progression of the canonical myth, the obviational analysis presented above does seem to correspond to the overall description. Hence, with the final image (urban citizen), we return to the starting point (the employee) but in a significantly altered form. No longer caught in a problematic social relationship with their Chinese superiors, the young road workers are gazing toward viable futures that seem to hold promises of legitimate occupancy and improved housing conditions. As I have tried to outline above, the process entailed a sequence of conversions where different temporal configurations were progressively obviated in order for new and meaningful images to be elicited from *inside* their point of origin. These radical transformations were made possible within the temporal horizon of tomorrowness (*vumundzuku*) as a particular orientation toward the future without the anticipation of a final destination. By bracketing the conventional understanding of a future moment as the endpoint of a predefined trajectory, the future was *unhinged*, as it were, from its chronological linearity and could thereby serve as connector between (and obviator of) different temporal configurations. It might be argued, then, that *value* essentially came to constitute the appropriate obviation of different temporal configurations in order for the optimal productive transformation of the road workers' status to occur.

In *Expectations of modernity*, James Ferguson famously claimed that "Zambia's recent crisis is not only an economic crisis but a crisis of meaning, in which the way that people are able to understand their experience and to imbue it with significance and dignity has (for many) been dramatically eroded" (1999: 14). Through a series of detailed case studies, Ferguson convincingly shows how the modernization project in Zambia fundamentally failed to capture the predicament of those urbanites living in the Copperbelt even during the heyday of the mining industries. It is, Ferguson claims, best considered as a "modernization myth," which, although it might be false or factually inaccurate, "lays down fundamental categories and meanings for the organization and interpretation of experience" (Ferguson 1999: 13–14). In this article, I have introduced a parallel but nevertheless radically different version of mythical realities, if you like, in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas Ferguson charts the "full house" of urban variation in a social setting that undergoes continuous transformations (Ferguson 1999: 102), my analytical strategy has been to emphasize how a Mozambican *crisis as meaning* might best be considered as myth through and through. Among the young Mozambican road workers, present experiences of extreme work conditions gradually collapsed and gave way to future scenarios wherein their Chinese superiors played little or no part. It might thus be argued that the recursive process of obviational transformations constituted a particular kind of temporal hypothesis that emerged as the after-effect of its own creation. As a reflection of tomorrowness, it allowed for a certain speculative or even experimental exploration of the future without necessarily expecting its actual realization. Mythical obviation needs

to be understood, Wagner tells us, as an autonomous expressive medium that subsumes elements from experiential (outside!) domains to its own form (1986: 85). As such, a mythic narrative makes particular situations and objects more than analogies; it makes them *real*, as it were, at the cost of merging them into the scheme of the myth. By gradually dropping the traces of its origin, the sequence of obviational transformations occurring among young Mozambican road workers did seem to establish an "autonomous expressive medium" that cannot be understood merely as a metaphorical effect of other more fundamental (i.e., social, political, economic) factors. The sequence of obviational transformations is, indeed, both ontologically and socially real; the paradox being, of course, that its effects can only be detected as an ongoing supplanting of history. This is the paradox, I argue, that constitutes the predicament of young road workers seeking to chart viable futures at a road construction site in the southern part of Mozambique.

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Asphalte analogique. Conversions de valeur en suspens parmi des jeunes travailleurs de la voirie (Mozambique sud)

Résumé : Cet article explore le processus de conversion (*obviation*) par lequel la valeur des salaires est sans cesse transformée. Pour ce faire, l'article se fonde sur un travail de terrain ethnographique mené auprès de jeunes travailleurs de la voirie employés par un consortium chinois de la construction pour la réhabilitation de l'autoroute N1 dans la partie sud du Mozambique. Pour les travailleurs mozambicains, plutôt que l'indexation d'un rapport fixe entre le travail et l'argent, la valeur des salaires a émergé en abandonnant progressivement les traces de sa propre origine. Ce n'est que lorsque l'argent reçu a permis aux travailleurs de supplanter la relation tendue à leurs supérieurs chinois (par exemple en achetant des matériaux de construction pour la construction d'une maison) qu'il fut considéré comme un salaire correct qui reliait le présent (achat de matériaux de construction) au passé (travaux routiers) de façon viable. Suite à cette conversion initiale, je retrace comment l'association temporelle émergente (travaux routiers :: projet de construction de maison) ouvre de nouvelles images de positions sociales altérées et améliorées pour les jeunes travailleurs de la voirie au Mozambique. L'article propose de considérer la valeur comme un moyen optimal de supplanter (plutôt que de confirmer) les formes existantes de sens relationnel en rapportant le processus de transformation de la valeur en suspens à une cosmologie primordiale temporelle répandue dans la partie sud du Mozambique, et qualifiée de *demain-itude*.

Morten NEILSEN is Associate Professor at Aarhus University. His first major fieldwork project was in Recife, Brazil (2000–2001) among community leaders in poor urban neighborhoods. Since 2004 he has been working in Mozambique doing ethnographic research in peri-urban areas of Maputo as well as in rural areas of Cabo del Gado, the northernmost region. Based on his fieldwork in Brazil and Mozambique, he has published on issues such as urban aesthetics, time and temporality, materiality, relational ontologies, and political cosmologies. He is currently involved in a comparative ethnographic research project on Chinese infrastructural interventions in Mozambique and Mongolia. In 2013 he commenced a new research project on land rights and "collapsed futures" in Islay, the southernmost island of the Inner Hebrides. Recent publications include articles in the following publications: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Anthropological Theory*, and *Critique of Anthropology*.

Department of Culture and Society
Section for Anthropology and Ethnography
Aarhus University
Moesgård Allé 20
Building 4236, Room 142
8270 Højbjerg
Denmark
etomn@hum.au.dk