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The negativity of times. Collapsed futures in Maputo, Mozambique

This article explores how urban temporalities in Maputo, Mozambique's capital, erupt from collapsed futures, which endure within the present as traces of that which will no longer be. The argument is built on an ethnographic analysis of *kuzama utomi* ('trying to make a life'), a temporal trope, which pre-figures the future as a failure on a linear scale. Still, although it is identified by its collapse, the future wedges itself within the present as a trace of that which will never be. While manifesting the efforts needed in order to reach a desired objective, it also exposes the powers at work that inhibit its eventual realisation.

Key words collapsed futures, house-building, Mozambique, socialist ideology, urban time

Introduction[1]

Is it possible for something to be what it is by being what it is not? Might we imagine a negation without something to negate? In this article, I explore certain temporal domains of urban life in sub-Saharan Africa, which have forced me to grapple with these seemingly paradoxical conundrums. Based on ethnographic research carried out in Maputo from 2004 to 2012, I wish to examine how urban temporalities erupt from collapsed futures, which endure within the present as traces of that which will no longer be. I build my argument on an ethnographic analysis of *kuzama utomi* (litt. 'trying to make a life'), a cosmological temporality unique to the southern part of Mozambique, which pre-figures the future as a failure on a linear scale. Still, although being identified by its eventual collapse, the future asserts itself in the present through what might best be described as an internal doubling. While manifesting the efforts needed in order to reach a desired objective, such as a cement house for the family, it also exposes the powers at work in the universe, which inhibit the eventual realisation of this goal. *Kuzama utomi* thus allows for a process of impossible identification; or rather, a kind of *dis*-identification through which individual perspectives emerge by being something they cannot be.

I begin by examining the temporal dynamics of *kuzama utomi* with a particular emphasis on the ways in which collapsed futures are wedged into the social fabric of the present. Using the distinction between ideas of provisional houses and permanent homes, I unpack how people 'make a life' on the outskirts of Maputo. As I will argue, although being acknowledged as impossible to actually achieve, ideas about permanent homes elsewhere enable poor residents living on the fringes of the city to calibrate their temporal orientation towards a shifting urban environment without sacrificing a notion

1 This article is based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2004 and 2011 in Mulwene, a peri-urban neighbourhood on the northern outskirts of Maputo.

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of (eventual) permanence. After having established the cosmological context of *kuzama utomi*, the second part of the article broadens out the discussion by focusing on the intersection between cosmological imageries and failed political visions. In particular, I examine a peculiar cartoon figure, *Xiconhoca*, that was introduced in 1976 in the Mozambican newspaper *O Tempo*. Envisaged as a tool for popular ideological education, *Xiconhoca* was politically cast as the immoral antithesis to the *Homem Novo* (New Man) that was believed to spearhead the socialist Mozambican state after Independence in 1975. Still, whereas the socialist future of the *Homem Novo* soon collapsed under the weight of civil war and subsequent adoption of a full neoliberal package, the *Xiconhoca* endures as an ironic figure. While remaining strikingly ambiguous, it continues to surface as antithesis to a collective but shattered future. In other words, the *Xiconhoca* indexes what it is *not* rather than what it is. I conclude the article by examining an extended case study of a prolonged dispute over land rights that pulls the different strands of the discussion together and charts how collapsed futures might structure the temporal orientation of the present as a retrograde and mobile moment of origin.

Futures in the present

To residents living on the outskirts of Maputo, *kuzama utomi* crystallises an existential modality framed by a future that seems to already exist. It thus indicates a capacity to inhabit a temporal universe that is structured by a set of properties that have not yet been realised. This might pertain to a house not yet built, a social position not yet achieved or even a political vision not yet realised. In this regard, people make their lives by gazing backwards at the present from an imagined future moment when the efforts that go into realising such projects may be fully estimated. When people try to 'make their lives', say, by building cement houses, they will consequently position themselves imaginatively at the moment of the finished construction project and by retrospectively gazing upon themselves in the present the social universe is illuminated in novel and often surprising ways (Nielsen 2011, forthcoming). Still, although perhaps a seemingly counter-intuitive argument, the future is preserved by acknowledging its inherent impossibility as endpoint on a linear scale. As a cosmological temporality, *kuzama utomi* operates by outlining a relationship between the present and a future moment, which is pre-figured as a failure. This, however, does not imply that it can be considered as a subjunctive concept or even as a utopian imagery. From my conversations with researchers from the Department of Linguistics, University of Eduardo Mondlane, it seems that by using words and phrases associated with the concept *kuzama utomi*, the speaker makes a definite (rather than a subjunctive) statement about a future occurrence while also indicating that it will most likely never happen. A current house-builder might describe his construction project as 'I am trying to make my life (*mina nizama automi*) so that my family has a place to live when our kids start in school'. By inserting the *nizama automi* in the sentence, it is thus emphasised that the project is being realised but also that the imagined endpoint (a cement house at the moment when the children start in school) will most likely not be reached. As Daniel, a house-builder living in Mulwene on the outskirts of Maputo poignantly told me, '*kuzama utomi* is like knowing that you are capable of doing a 2 metre high jump … So what happens when you

attempt to do 1.4 metre? You try once, you try again and then you start having difficulties…'.[2]

It is relevant to ponder, then, what role might be ascribed to the imagined endpoint when it is *ipso facto* prefigured as a failure. What does the collapsed future *do* in the present? Understood as an endpoint on a linear scale, any future moment seems to have a temporality of its own. It exists as an anticipated occurrence, which is accessible only through a progression of forward-moving steps. However, as we have already seen, *kuzama utomi* obviates linear time by collapsing the exterior relationship between anticipatory actions and their expected outcome. Without any distance between present and future, the latter returns to the former; it invades and instils within the present a series of futuristic properties by opening ongoing actions as being always *in potentia*. As such, the future operates by uniting with its surroundings, or rather, by distributing its own dimensions into the world (Pedersen and Nielsen 2013). We might argue, then, that the futuristic properties that the present is endowed with allow for a 'swelling' of time rather than its linear progression. Despite its seemingly utopian foundation, the imagined future frames, or perhaps more accurately, *scales* the world in accordance with its inherent temporal properties (cf. Strathern 1991). As a temporal cosmology, then, *kuzama utomi* may fruitfully be considered as a medium for proportioning a multiplicity of objects, individuals and relationships whose capacities for relating become activated by the image of the collapsed future.

Provisional urban times

In xiChangana, the language most widely spoken in Maputo, *kaya* is the concept that denotes a permanent house or home. Similar to the house societies studied by Lévi-Strauss (1983, 1987), it is both a physical location and a social organisation that encompasses both living and deceased members of a family. In contrast, *yìndlò* is the material structure of a house; it refers to the bricks, wood and cement that go into creating the physical foundation for a family's social life. According to people in Mulwene, the city is not a place for creating a permanent home.[3] Just before Christmas in 2004, I was talking to the neighbourhood chief (*secretário do bairro*)[4] while we were both admiring a procession of dancers from the local primary school. I asked whether he would spend the holidays within the local community or if he considered going elsewhere. 'This is not my people',

2 Located on the northern periphery of Maputo, Mulwene rose to prominence in 2000 when it was used as resettlement zone for victims having lost their homes to the devastating flooding that hit Mozambique during the first three months of the year (Nielsen 2010b). Whereas prior to the flooding, the area was inhabited by approximately 100 families of small-scale farmers and newcomers, a census carried out in 2005 documented that there were 30,813 residents occupying an area of 6.8 square kilometres.

3 Interestingly, during the colonial period, the capital was known as *Xilunguine* (place of the strangers) to which male migrants went to undertake forced labour or work in domestic service. As Jenkins argues, '[t]heir main objective was to benefit from the economic opportunity that the city offered as a strategy for the consolidation and maintenance of their long-term rural existence' (2006: 125).

4 Installed by the Frelimo party after national independence in 1975, the *secretário do bairro* (litt. neighbourhood secretary) ideally functions as party administrator at neighbourhood level. Since the late 1980s and until the early 2000s, the *secretário do bairro* was without formal status but has, in recent years, regained its legitimacy as a state cadre (Buur and Kyed 2006; Meneses *et al*. 2006).

he replied with a nod towards the dancers. 'I return to my *kaya* in Gaza'. These sentiments were widely shared by urban residents in the area. Maputo was considered as a place of temporary opportunities and so people would build houses in the city without creating homes. Eventually, they imagined, the momentary urban life established by building a *yìndlò* would be replaced by the permanence of the *kaya* when returning to their natal place. At the same time, many residents also recognised that they would probably never be able to create a proper *kaya* at their place of origin. While they rejected the idea of the city as a temporal terminus, it had become a permanent place of provisionality where interactions occurred through loosely knit and constantly changing networks. By means of a regular circulation of odd jobs and favours, these networks kept people in the cities who imagined themselves as ending up elsewhere.

The project of building a *yìndlò* in the city was thus traversed by the absence of its endpoint; something that gave to the process a peculiar ephemerality. Through the absence of the *kaya*, a discontinuity was inserted within the layers of urban life that displaced their internal organisation. Take, for example, the rapidly increasing informal land transactions on the fringes of the city. Whereas a permanent home constituted the family's existence in an objectified form and therefore could not be transacted (cf. Munn 1970), a temporary house was not encompassed by this cosmological order. Even if urban residents lived their entire lives in what they took to be temporary houses, it was relatively unproblematic to invest in Maputo's burgeoning land market (Negrão 2004). Hence, by operating as a signifier of a fundamental void, the image of a future elsewhere enabled people who were living in Maputo to calibrate their temporal orientation towards a shifting urban environment without sacrificing a notion of permanence. Whereas the notion of *kaya* involved an implicit distance to ideas of land transactions, the traces of its absence caused a reconfiguration of what a house might be. In this regard, the temporary house was the after-effect of a future that collapsed before it was even realised (cf. Cooper 1998: 128).

In sum, functioning almost like a hinge, *kuzama utomi* tacks together ideas of permanent homes and provisional houses. Paradoxically, it thus seems that certain spatial properties are elicited through the temporal operation of wedging an already collapsed future within the present. *Kuzama utomi* opens time to space, as it were, and lets it become with the varying paces and shifts of velocities that hold together otherwise detached temporal moments (cf. Corsín Jimenéz 2003). It might even be argued that the spatial properties arise as an effect of the non-linear workings of *kuzama utomi* when the future returns to the present and allows for a swelling of time that manifests itself by connecting the future home and the provisional house (cf. Nielsen 2012). In these instances, the collapsed future asserts itself within the present through an internal doubling of the social landscape as both immediately readable and, at the same time, radically uncanny (Rancière 2004). To many of the residents I spoke to in Mulwene and elsewhere in Maputo, this implied a process of impossible identification with otherness in general; or rather, a kind of *dis*-identification through which individual perspectives emerged by being what they were not. The attempts at making a life (*kuzama utomi*) at the fringes of the city acquired an almost theatrical quality where individuals emerged as social personae by pretending to be something they could never be, e.g. inhabiting a provisional house while aiming towards a permanent home somewhere else. As previously argued, *kuzama utomi* implies a gaze backwards from a future moment when the efforts needed in order to arrive at this (imagined) point in time can be properly evaluated. If we consider the moment of the full realisation of, say, the creation of the

permanent home, it implies that people evaluate not only the efforts needed to arrive at this moment, but also the forces that cause this imagined future to collapse. What is particularly interesting, then, is that in the southern parts of Mozambique, these two seemingly oppositional sets of properties are, in fact, part of the same phenomenon. To people in Mulwene and elsewhere in Maputo, everyday life constitutes a latent exposure to malignant but also important forces beyond their control, ranging from ancestral spirits to erratic state administrations (Nielsen 2010a). To be sure, not everything is known and what is known is that power works in hidden and often capricious ways. By positioning themselves at the imagined moment when the permanent home is fully realised, then, people are allowed a momentary glimpse of the real workings of power. Emerging as a spectacle of the future, the collapsed idea of the permanent home carves out a stage for the acting out of the uncanny forces operating in the universe. At play within the local social universe, something both tacks together otherwise disparate entities while frequently preventing the full potentials from being realised. As previously mentioned, this 'something' might crystallise as the *kaya* that sutures different situations in seemingly contradictory ways.

In a sense, collapsed futures, such as the *kaya*, are 'unhinged' from their fixed temporal location on a linear scale and reappear as nonlinear and 'trixster-like' figurations that threaten the stability of any temporal configuration. They constitute retrograde and *mobile* moments of origin that fasten the present to a trajectory that will never reach its destination. Hence, in the remaining part of the article, I wish to examine precisely how collapsed futures manifest themselves as figurations of something that can never be but that, nevertheless, seem to structure the temporal orientation of the present as a retrograde and mobile moment of origin. What I wish to suggest, then, is that collapsed futures assert themselves also as broader cosmological-cum-political figures that potentially coordinate a wide variety of social actions across the urban domain. Below I consequently introduce and discuss one such figure, the *Xiconhoca*, a peculiar cartoon figure, which first appeared as antithesis to the socialist 'New Man' in the immediate aftermath of Independence in 1975. Whereas the New Man gradually evaporated, the *Xiconhoca* stayed behind as a symptom of a future that will no longer be. I then proceed to bring together the different strands of the discussion through an in-depth analysis of study of a dispute over land rights on the northern outskirts of Maputo that outlines how collapsed futures suggest new configurations of social life by operating as retrograde moments of origin in the present.

The 'New Man' and his snake-like opponent

During the prolonged war for independence against the Portuguese regime, the Frelimo front established a series of so-called 'liberated zones' in Mozambique's northern regions. While waging a violent war against the colonisers, these areas constituted an equally intense combat zone where internal ideological struggles were fought on how to fast track an envisioned socialist future (Abrahamsson and Nilsson 1995: 24–5). In an attempt to demolish the colonial mentality from within, Frelimo defined a revolutionary agenda of creating a pure and healthy society guided by 'scientific socialism' (West 2005: 151, 163). In this regard, the liberated zones soon became a 'strategic politico-moral map' (Hall and Young 1997: 54) that spatially indexed the coming socialist future. Constantly under siege and surrounded by enemies, it gave birth to the image of the *Homem Novo* (New Man),

the vanguard figure who would lead the liberated society forward as a guerrilla warrior 'freed of racial and tribal prejudice and ready to devote his life to social equity and the revolution' (Coelho 2004).

As moral antithesis to the *Homem Novo*, a peculiar cartoon character, *Xiconhoca*, was introduced on 25 July 1976, in the newspaper *O Tempo* (see Figure. 1). It was created by Frelimo's Department for Information and Propaganda as a deliberate attempt to integrate the socialist project within people's everyday lives by aligning any opposition to the revolution with a series of immoral vices known to everybody, such as alcoholism, laziness and informal trade (Isaacman and Isaacman 1983: 114).

The name *Xiconhoca* is a neologism created of two words, *Chico* and *Nhoca*. *Chico Feio* ('Xico' – Ugly Chico) was allegedly a dreaded agent from the Portuguese secret police, the PIDE (*Polícia International e de Defesa do Estado*). In Tsonga languages spoken in Mozambique, *nhoca* (or *nyoka*) is the word for snake. Hence, *Xiconhoca* (or in English 'Chico the Snake') is basically an amalgamation of 'the conqueror's spy' (Buur 2010) with folklore imageries of ambiguous dangers lurking in the vicinity.

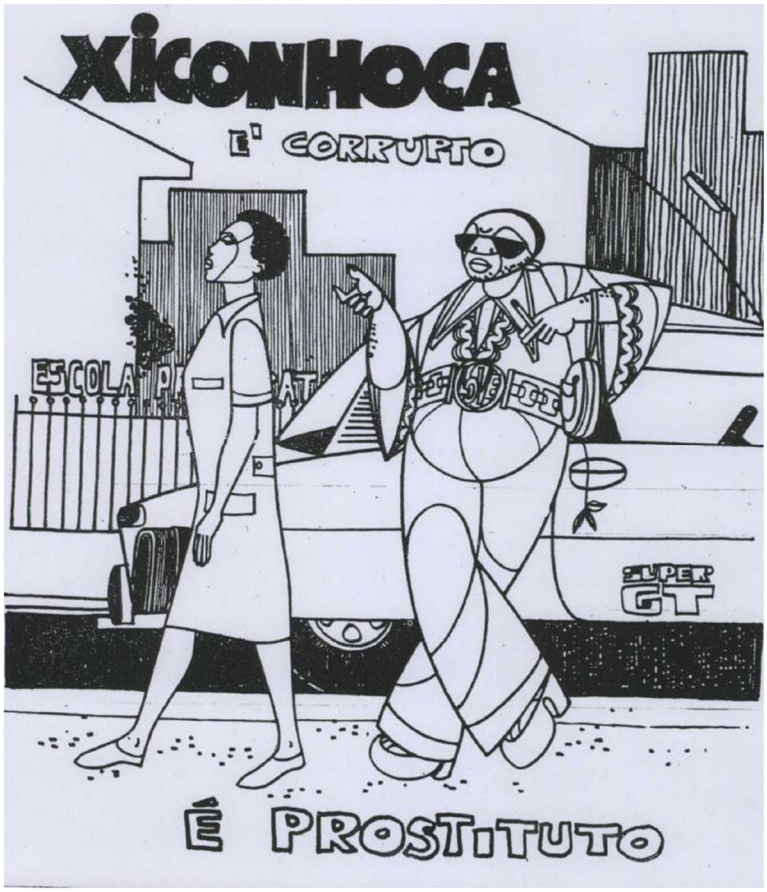

Figure 1 The Xiconhoca figure epitomizing the immoral vices associated with urban living. The Portuguese text reads: 'Xiconhoca is corrupt. Is a prostitute'

According to Frelimo's political elite, the *Xiconhoca* was the archetype of the corrupt bureaucrats who, during colonial rule, had caused a serious degeneration of urban life (Alpers 1999; see also Hall and Young 1997: 84; Jenkins 2009). During his journey throughout the country immediately after Independence in 1975, Mozambique's first president, Samora Machel, was thus more worried about an increasing moral degeneration in urban areas than about the capitalist exploitation caused by Portuguese colonisers (Macamo 2003). Whereas the city had been an emblem of civilisation during colonial rule, it was now viewed as parasitic and urban development as consumption rather than production (Jenkins 2006: 120). Through an ambitious development programme, Frelimo resettled more than 50,000 urbanites to communal villages in rural areas in order to create 'cities born in the forests' from a clean slate (FRELIMO 1976). 'Operation Production', as it was called, was carried out under the slogan 'Defend the Country, Defeat Underdevelopment, Build Socialism' and aimed to forcibly remove to the most underdeveloped rural areas those urban residents who 'lived as delinquents, idlers, parasites, outcasts, vagrants and prostitutes' in order to transform them into 'useful elements … worthy of being accepted into society' (Trindade 2006: 57). Today, it is generally acknowledged that Operation Production ended up as a failure that paralysed the agricultural sector and disrupted existing systems of land distribution (Dinerman 2006; Hall and Young 1997; Pitcher 2002). The party cadres in charge of the agricultural production units lacked the technical skills to operate the machinery and were often incapable of gaining the confidence of villagers accustomed to the kin-based authority structures of their former settlements. Hence, with an administrative structure that was ill equipped to administer the concentration of the rural population, many communal villages soon became overcrowded 'hotbeds of serious social tensions and discontent' (Dinerman 2006: 56). Despite the explicit encouragement to focus on the production of collective crops, residents in many communal villages continued to cultivate their own land elsewhere and, as a result, the productive and collective outcome was relatively minimal. Tentative estimates suggest that although they were projected for 6 million Mozambicans, only 1.6 million ended up living in *aldeais comunais*, which the Ministry of Agriculture eventually admitted had not made a profit (Hanlon 1984: 101). We might thus concur with Ottaway, who argues that communal villages were not, in fact, communal because they affected only 10% of the population (1988: 216).

During the 1980s, Frelimo's hard-core Marxist-Leninist stance became increasingly difficult to maintain. In 1983, Frelimo approached Western donors in order to alleviate the famine caused by a serious drought, and four years later Mozambique made its final 'turn toward the West' when agreeing to implement the first of a series of structural adjustment programmes in collaboration with the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and IMF) (Devereux and Palmero 1999: 3). The ideological shift was apparent at Frelimo's 5th Congress held in 1989. All references to Marxism-Leninism were carefully removed from official documents along with any associated phrase, such as 'scientific socialism'. The party's new political key terms were significantly less clear and some almost vacuous, such as the ideal of creating a 'democratic society of general well-being' (Hall and Young 1997: 202). A full abandonment of Marxism obviously entailed a concomitant removal of the *Homem Novo* as the vanguard figure leading the nation towards a socialist future. In his absence, the Frelimo government soon surrendered to the neo-liberal economic policies of international lending institutions with the well-known and severe consequences for the Mozambican population. Although macro-economic indicators seem to reflect the success of structural adjustment (Thaler 2011), there have been serious

detrimental social consequences for large sectors of Mozambican society. IMF's strict conditions were particularly harsh to civil servants, whose wages were more than halved. Teachers and nurses have thus been pushed below the poverty line, together with 60–70% of the rural population and more than 50% of all urbanites who live in absolute poverty as a consequence not least of the structural adjustment programmes (Cunguara and Hanlon 2010; Tvedten *et al*. 2009). Hence, although Mozambique can still pride itself of being a 'donor darling', given its uncritical acceptance of all economic restrictions imposed by external lending agencies combined with one of the fastest growth rates in the world over the last two decades (8% p.a.) (Pitcher 2012), the financial 'success story' covers only a few sectors and benefits only a small elite minority while leaving behind the large and impoverished majority. As argued by Saul (2011), the 'recolonisation' of Mozambique by transnational companies has given rise to several 'mega-projects' that have significantly strengthened the Mozambican economy. The paradox is, however, that although mega-projects such as the Mozambican Aluminium Smelter (Mozal) account for 60% of the country's overall export, they 'create few local jobs, have few local linkages, benefit from huge tax exemptions and rely heavily on imported goods, and only a small fraction of their production is consumed locally' (Cunguara 2012: 161).

The '*Xiconhoca*' as resilient negation

Whereas the socialist future of the *Homem Novo* collapsed under the weight of a fully adopted neo-liberal package, the *Xiconhoca* figure has proven to be more resilient and continues to surface in a variety of urban situations. As a civil servant from the Niassa province recently expressed it, '*Xiconhoca* did not die in the 1980s; he is still alive today and he has many more children' (Anstrey 2000: 26). This statement can undoubtedly be read as an ironic commentary to the increasing informality of urban life in Mozambique today. The IMF demanded that government spending be drastically reduced and the only way for the Mozambican government to do this was to cut wages (Hanlon 2002). Already in 1996, salaries for front-line staff, such as teachers and nurses, were one-third of what they had been in 1991. Given the increasing cost of living, many have had no alternative but to engage in illegal or informal activities in order to survive, such as the many public employees for whom bribe-taking has become a common resource to 'subsidise' their meagre wages (Harrison 1999: 544). In 1997, it was estimated that only 32% of all employees in Maputo were active in the formal sector, whereas the informal sector provided jobs for approximately 50% of the active workforce (Jenkins 2006: 121).

I will nevertheless argue that this reading leaves one question unanswered. Bearing in mind that the *Xiconhoca* emerged as moral antithesis to the ideal of the *Homem Novo*, we need to ask ourselves what the cartoon character negates in the present, or perhaps rather; how *Xiconhoca* is constituted as a negation today. Among those urbanites with whom I have carried out fieldwork since 2004, the *Xiconhoca* figure was associated primarily with the term *esperteza* (cleverness or cunning). While describing a neighbour's illicit manoeuvrings within the municipality, my close friend Felix argued that 'Malaquias is like *Xiconhoca* … he knows how to talk to people … to access the system. Because he is an expert, Malaquias managed to corrupt the entire administration'. Indeed, it was often argued that the *Xiconhoca* could manipulate wider

systems; e.g. bureaucratic institutions, kinship-based networks or even the spiritual realm of the ancestors. As an ambitious expert, the *Xiconhoca* was capable of making covert transactions with powerful ancestral spirits (xiChangana *kukenjha*) whose powers were used to eliminate unwanted opponents. Hence, in most quotidian situations, *Xiconhoca* was seen as an adept expert capable of manipulating potentially malignant forces in both the visible and invisible realms. This skilful manipulation was carried out by creating a fissure within discrete structures, e.g. when attacking human bodies through malevolent spirits or misusing bureaucratic institutions for private gain. What Malaquias did when he corrupted the municipal administration, then, was essentially to wedge into the system its own negation. As such, *Xiconhoca* was the emergent antithesis to any aspiration of closure.[5]

For urban residents living under such dire socio-economic conditions, everyday life was replete with fissures. Encounters with state or municipal institutions were mazes of gaping black holes threatening to absorb any activity. Residents applying for legitimate building permits frequently had to wait for years before finally receiving the response that the building project was rejected unless the state official in charge was paid a significant amount of money (Nielsen 2008: 59–61). As I will argue, these fissures in the social fabric are, in a sense, instantiated by the *Xiconhoca* figure. Erupting from collapsed futures, they assert themselves as indexes not of what they are but of what they are *not*, e.g. a collective socialist utopia, a functioning bureaucratic agency or an envisioned building project on the outskirts of the city.

In the final section of the article, I wish to bring the different strands of the discussion together and explore how collapsed cosmological-cum-political futures affect people's everyday temporal orientation as retrograde moments of origin. Through an analysis of a prolonged dispute over use-rights to land, I discuss the paradoxes and potentialities arising from living in a world replete with fissures and voids that exist by being what they are not.

The collapsed future strikes back

Until 1998, Aires Nhambine was living with his family in Mahotas, a peri-urban neighbourhood on the coastal plain north of the city centre. When his company decided to transfer Nhambine to a local branch in Pemba in the north of Mozambique for a three-year period, he asked Armando Tete, a patrilineal cross cousin, to stay in the house until his return. Having hitherto lived in a small two-room apartment in the city centre with his wife and two children, Tete immediately accepted. Less than a year after they entered into the seemingly uncomplicated agreement, however, the amicable friendship between the two relatives suffered an irredeemable blow. In 2000, Mozambique was hit by the worst flooding in the country's history and, within hours, Nhambine's house was literally washed away. In order to find shelter for his family, Tete travelled to Mulwene on the northern outskirts of the city where national and international donor organisations had put up military tents and provided materials for temporary reed-huts. Realising that the flooding victims would soon need permanent

5 Although we might compare the *Xiconhoca* with the *dubriadur* of Guinea-Bissau (Vigh 2006) and the skilful master of the *jeitinho* in Brazil (Barbosa 1995), there are significant differences. Whereas the latter two figures excel by navigating murky terrains like adept poachers (*pace* de Certeau 1984), the *Xiconhoca* figure asserts itself as a negation of any social order.

shelter, the Maputo Municipality decided to distribute plots of land to the many homeless families in Mulwene; which, at the time, was one of the only urban neighbourhoods where there was still vacant land to be found. According to official documents from the municipal archive in Mulwene, in May 2000 Tete was allocated a 15 × 30 metre plot and he soon started to prepare the foundations for a two-room reed-hut for his family.[6]

In 2001, Aires Nhambine returned to Maputo with his family and soon realised that he had lost his house to the flooding. A local quarter chief (*chefe do quarteirão*) in Mahotas informed Nhambine that Tete had been forced to move to Mulwene during the first months of 2000 and, furthermore, that he had acquired a plot in the area. Thinking that Tete had informed the local authorities that he (Nhambine) was the formal owner of the plot, Nhambine immediately approached the neighbourhood chief in Mulwene but only to realise that Tete had registered the plot in his own name. When Nhambine finally visited Tete's house, it was clear that the two relatives did not see the situation in a similar manner. Nhambine strongly argued that the plot in Mulwene was given to Tete as compensation for the destroyed house in Mahotas. Having acted only as caretaker during a three-year period, Tete could not be considered as the rightful owner of the plot. In contrast, Tete argued that the two sites (i.e. the house in Mahotas and the plot in Mulwene) were incomparable. Whereas the house in Mahotas did, in fact, belong to Nhambine, the plot in Mulwene had been allocated to Tete and he had paid all construction materials for the cement house he was planning to build in the plot. The two disputing relatives soon realised that they would not be able to resolve the unfortunate situation by themselves and they therefore asked the neighbourhood authorities in Mulwene to act as mediators.

When I met Nhambine and Tete in October 2004, it was clear that the handling of the case by the Mulwene authorities had been futile. For more than 30 months, the neighbourhood chief had continued to postpone a final decision arguing that the case was 'irresolvable'. In order to find temporary accommodation for his family, Nhambine was now renting a small plot in Mulwene from a colleague, whereas Tete, fearing that his substantial investments in construction materials might potentially be lost, remained in the two-room reed-hut with his construction materials piled up at the far end of the plot. Sitting in the shade outside his small reed-hut, Tete described the precarious situation to me. 'This is not even a proper home (*kaya*), Morten! I am just "hiding my head" (*esconder a cabeca*) until other opportunities arise'. Tete nodded towards his two daughters sitting on a rush mat beside his wife. 'I am "trying to make a life" in order for them to have a place to study, you know'. According to Tete, when the flooding washed away the house in Mahotas, the agreement with Nhambine lost its binding powers and he was free to claim use-right to a plot in Mulwene. 'There was no future for us in Mahotas', Tete explained, 'so why should we continue to live in a house that is no longer there?' With the dissolution of the accord, Tete did not have any problems with Nhambine acquiring a plot in the area. 'As all poor victims, he should be given a plot', Tete concluded.

A few days after my conversation with Tete, I met with Nhambine in a small liqueur stall outside the central marketplace in Mulwene. Despite his initial calm appearance, it only took a few minutes before Nhambine was visibly agitated. 'You know what we call such persons (referring to Tete), Morten? We call them parasites! Ah! He

6 '*Nota do Secretário do Bairro de Magoanine "C", senhor Machaca* – 19.07.01'. Document from municipal archive in Mulwene.

is not even a person. He is a snake…!' Nhambine pointed towards the sky with a stiff right index finger while fixing his gaze at a point in the horizon. His manners and posture immediately reminded me of the late Samora Machel, Mozambique's first president, whose charismatic presence at political rallies had been abundantly documented in photos, audio recordings and film clips. 'And now he has infected the *circúlo* (local administrative unit) with his lies', Nhambine continued. During our hour-long conversation, Nhambine repeatedly expressed the frustration and sorrow caused by Tete's refusal to renounce his rights to the plot in Mulwene. Without a stable location from which to 'make a life', Nhambine was exposed to the latent dangers lurking in the vicinity, such as envious neighbours or malevolent relatives trying to arrogate what remained of his savings from the three-year stint in Pemba. Clearly, the only viable solution was for Tete to transfer use rights to the plot to Nhambine and leave the neighbourhood permanently.

In a sense, Nhambine and Tete engaged with two radically different futures, both of which seemed to contain their own collapse. When the flooding eradicated all possibilities for remaining in Mahotas, Tete's relational commitment to Nhambine equally disintegrated. For Tete, the future that was no longer accessible in Mahotas became a momentary vantage point; or perhaps rather, a retrograde moment of origin, from which to reconsider the composition and directionality of the present. And although the planned cement house in Mulwene could not be considered a proper home (*kaya*), it would enable Tete to 'try to make a life' for himself and his family.

From Nhambine's perspective, Tete constituted a major threat to the survival of his family. Epitomising the infamous traits of the deceitful *Xiconhoca*, Tete prevented Nhambine from accessing a viable future in Mulwene. As an uncanny and disruptive force, he kept harrying Nhambine by making apparent that the latter's future now belonged to someone else. Following Kristeva (1982), Tete might be considered as an 'abject' figure, or perhaps rather, a negative counterpart, who successfully managed to unhinge Nhambine from his future. Hence, given Tete's uncanny position as the antithesis to Nhambine's imagined future, he needed to be completely removed before further housing projects could be initiated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me briefly return to Mozambique's political history. During an interview with the Mozambican historian João Paulo Coelho in May 2006 on the collapsed socialist future of the *Homem Novo*, the conversation turned to its consequences for the everyday lives of urban residents today. As Coelho told me,

> There isn't anything that unifies us now. You see, the socialist regime had a mission; they had a transitory role while pursuing a new future. Currently there is no mission, only administration (*não há missão*, *há gestão*). The government is administering the present; this is an era that is culturally of the present. The families are administering the present (*as famílias gerem o presente*) while the threats of the future are falling down on our heads.

Based on my analysis of the collapsed futures of socialist ideologies and housebuilding projects on the outskirts of Maputo, I agree with Coelho that urban residents do, indeed, manage a present that is the after-effect of futures that will never be realised. Still, as indicated above, the fissures that are wedged into the present by the absence of a

temporal endpoint do create openings in the social fabric that suggest new possible orderings. Certain realms of urban life in sub-Saharan Africa are perhaps best understood as repositories of temporal voids whose traces can be discerned in images such as the *Xiconhoca* or the *yìndlò*. As symptoms of what they are not rather than what they are, they destabilise and sometime even paralyse temporal agency, which is essentially what happened to Nhambine in the case study described above. As I have also argued, however, new urban times may erupt from collapsed futures when functioning as retrograde moments of origin. Like temporal excrescences, they grow from things falling apart, such as ideas of permanence among house-builders in Mulwene or houses that are being washed away in Mahotas. It is these openings and voids that enable some house-builders on the outskirt of Maputo to be in sync with urban life without losing a sense of permanence. Interestingly, despite the prolonged disagreement between Nhambine and Tete, both cross cousins imagined the new plot in Mulwene as a viable place of provisionality that become accessible only when the house in Mahotas was brutally washed away by the flooding in 2000. Although it was not considered as a permanent home (*kaya*) by Nhambine and Tete, it indicated novel ways of acquiring a relatively stable position within a shifting urban environment. In these instances, collapsed futures cross-cut different socio-political registers of what is legitimate and illegitimate, public and private, external and internal, and thus come to operate as a proportioning of urban sociality (Corsín Jiménez 2008: 188; Nielsen, 2010a, 2010b). They define a momentary scale by which urban life is measured; not through the enactment of a collective ideal but, rather, by suggesting particular perspectives and positions from where the potentially capricious powers in the universe might be illuminated.

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