



Natural Resource Extraction in the Interior: Scouts, Spirits and Chinese Loggers in the Forests of Northern Mozambique

Morten Nielsen & Mikkel Bunkenborg

To cite this article: Morten Nielsen & Mikkel Bunkenborg (2020): Natural Resource Extraction in the Interior: Scouts, Spirits and Chinese Loggers in the Forests of Northern Mozambique, Journal of Southern African Studies

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2020.1744975>



Published online: 28 Apr 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Natural Resource Extraction in the Interior: Scouts, Spirits and Chinese Loggers in the Forests of Northern Mozambique

MORTEN NIELSEN

(National Museum of Denmark)

MIKKEL BUNKENBORG

(University of Copenhagen)

In their search for precious hardwood in the forests of northern Mozambique, Chinese logging companies employ locals with knowledge of the forest to scout for trees. Known as olheiros, these tree scouts are indispensable to both Chinese and Mozambican participants in the industry, but, strangely, they are also regarded with scepticism and sometimes even hostility from both sides. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Mozambicans and Chinese involved in the local logging industry of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique, this article traces the social and cultural ramifications of natural resource extraction in a rural environment that is currently undergoing radical changes. We begin the article by discussing the economic and political transformations brought about by opening up the local logging industry to foreign agencies. By outlining the genealogy and increased importance of the olheiro figure, we then move to examine the cosmological implications of this intensified form of resource extraction in a rural universe. Acquiring new skills and capacities working for Chinese companies, many olheiros are seen as embodying Chinese spirit forces and, along with locating hardwood, they are assigned the task of mediating between Chinese and local spirit worlds. In a context where logging companies operate largely unchecked by state agents and often collude with local elites, however, the hunt for hardwood has affected local communities in ways that cannot be repaired by the untrained ritual efforts of the olheiros.

Keywords: Mozambique; China; sub-Saharan Africa; logging; natural resource extraction; alterity; hardwood

In late autumn 2012, Morten Nielsen accompanied two Mozambican *olheiros* (scouts) as they made their way through the dense forest of the northern province of Cabo Delgado in order to locate certain kinds of rare hardwood to be cut and exported to China as unprocessed trunks. Encouraging the senior *olheiro*, 66-year-old Jaime Paguri, to explain his trade, and hoping for an extended lesson on how to survive in the forest, Nielsen turned on his recorder. The tree scout's response was, however, as puzzling as it was short. 'Well, Morten, we do it the Chinese way. Before they came to our land (*a nossa terra*), we didn't even know where the trees were'.

Based on fieldwork in Mozambican communities and Chinese timber companies in northern Mozambique, we explore in this article the crucial, albeit contested, status of the *olheiro* figure. Having come to prominence with the increased Chinese economic activities in Cabo Delgado and other heavily forested areas in Mozambique, many if not most *olheiros* make a living from working as ‘tree scouts’ for Chinese loggers. But, coincidentally, they have also come to assume a key cosmo-political role previously performed only by local chiefs, namely the ritually important and prestigious responsibility of appeasing and being in continuous dialogue with ancestral spirits controlling the forest where the hardwood is being cut. Given their crucial importance to Chinese and locals alike, it is quite surprising that many *olheiros* are looked upon with a certain sense of reserved scepticism. For some reason, the *olheiros* did not quite seem to fit in. During the annual commemorative rituals in honour of those deceased ancestors that continue to protect the local communities, for example, the Chinese timber agents (those with proficient language skills, that is) would only hesitantly engage in a conversation with the *olheiros* who co-ordinated and carried out these all-important rituals. Likewise, relations between *olheiros* and other residents of the local communal villages in which most of the *olheiros* both live and work are often tenuous, with conflicts erupting over even relatively minor disagreements. As we shall soon see, a primary reason for these tensions is precisely the coincidental way that present-day *olheiros* have come to assume a cosmo-political role that they were rarely prepared for.

The fieldwork on Chinese logging operations in Cabo Delgado was conducted by the two authors as part of a larger collaborative research project that aimed to produce an ethnography of Chinese globalisation.¹ As an anthropological response to a rapidly growing literature on China in Africa that was primarily written from the perspective of political science,² we aimed to explore through ethnographic fieldwork how Chinese and locals interacted in specific sites of natural resource extraction, infrastructure construction and trade. An integral part of the project was to approach both local and Chinese interlocutors in the chosen field sites, but time constraints meant that Morten Nielsen conducted six months of fieldwork on local views of Chinese projects in Mozambique while Mikkel Bunkenborg had only three months to explore the Chinese side.³ Having determined that hardwood was one of the primary natural resources extracted by Chinese companies in Mozambique, we first went to Cabo Delgado in 2010 and visited a series of logging companies. After some initial success, where Bunkenborg interviewed Chinese managers and employees while Nielsen talked to Mozambican workers, the fact that we were working with both sides and sharing information in a social context rife with allegations of illegality and corruption became a problem. On our second field trip, in 2011, we approached separate interlocutors more discretely, and finally Nielsen pursued the figure of the *olheiro* on a solitary trip into the interior in 2012.⁴

Both Mozambique and China can point to a socialist heritage, and this has no doubt been a factor in the development of intimate political and economic ties between the two

1 *Imperial Potentialities*, a study of Chinese globalisation funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research in the Social Sciences (FSE) for the period 2009–12. The project included, in addition to the two authors, a third anthropologist specialising in Mongolia, Professor Morten Axel Pedersen from the University of Copenhagen.

2 C. Alden, *China in Africa* (London, Zed Books, 2007). C. Alden, D. Large and R. Soares de Oliveira, *China Returns to Africa : A Superpower and a Continent Embrace* (London, Hurst, 2008); D. Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift : The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009); I. Taylor, *China and Africa. Engagement and Compromise* (London, Routledge, 2006).

3 In addition to logging, we explored numerous other Chinese projects in Mozambique, primarily the national football stadium, a section of the national highway EN1 and the bridge to Catembe that was being planned.

4 The methodological twists will be presented more fully in M. Bunkenborg, M. Nielsen and M.A. Pedersen, *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2020[forthcoming]).

countries in the 21st century, which has seen a dramatic rise in trade volumes and a significant number of Chinese investments and construction projects that have an element of development aid.⁵ The Chinese involvement in logging in Mozambique has not, however, been a high-profile endeavor, and it is mainly driven by private Chinese entrepreneurs operating far from the political centre. By focusing on logging and the role of the *olheiro*, we wish to draw attention not just to the significant environmental and economic effects of the hunt for hardwood but also to the puzzling cosmological implications of Sino-Mozambican collaborations.

As Paguri emphasised in the above ethnographic anecdote, the *olheiros*' capacity for locating the much coveted hardwood is perceived to inhere in their affiliation with the Chinese timber agents. Prior to working for Chinese timber merchants, the large majority of active *olheiros* were making a meagre living as small-scale farmers with an additional income from small game (birds and small antelopes). And it was in their capacity as hunters that they were initially approached by timber agents: living off the forest, they knew the area like no one else. Still, as we shall describe in further detail below, it was only after being approached by Chinese timber merchants that their unique capacities for locating trees were discovered. Crucially, it is widely believed that skilful *olheiros* are guided by powerful ancestral spirits on whose benevolence they rely. Taken together with the fact that the *olheiro*'s capacities for scouting trees are perceived to be an effect of the tenuous Sino-Mozambican relations themselves, it seems to follow that his actions are understood to be guided by Chinese spirit forces asserting themselves in the form of an 'interiorized alterity'⁶ that is potentially detrimental to the *olheiro* as well as to the local community. Hence, over time, a certain relational efficacy arose where the Mozambican *olheiro*'s scouting skills seemed to improve significantly through their interactions with Chinese timber merchants. The increased, albeit reluctant, approximation to the Chinese timber merchants did not, however, eliminate the *olheiros*' sense of being exposed to a potentially dangerous other, who was both crucial and detrimental to their everyday actions.

The problem is that many present-day *olheiros* were never trained to master the crucial skills of communicating and working with ancestral spirits. Indeed, while it has become a widespread practice for the *olheiros* to lead the collective rituals to appease the ancestral 'owners of the land' (*donos da terra*), this is predominantly a result of pragmatic considerations: the *olheiros* are collaborating with the Chinese loggers on a daily basis and therefore have hands-on knowledge about the location and quality of all trees to be cut. Either voluntarily or through nomination, they have taken it upon themselves to lead the commemorative rituals on site, but often without fully mastering the skills to do so. According to many local residents, the problems caused by logging may be considered a direct consequence of the *olheiros* lacking knowledge about the workings of the spirit world and their consequent inability to deal with spirit forces of Chinese origin.

In addition to tracing out the evident environmental, economic and political consequences of Chinese logging operations in Cabo Delgado, we thus argue that the Chinese presence also has cosmological implications. Developing new skills and capacities while working for the Chinese logging companies, the *olheiros* come to be seen as vectors for Chinese spirit forces and, in addition to the badly paid job of locating hardwood, they face the unenviable task of mediating between Chinese and local spirit worlds, a task for which they are ill prepared. The outcome is a form of productive interiorisation of alterity whereby the Chinese appetite for hardwood is interiorised, with potentially damaging repercussions. In

5 C. Alden and S. Chichava, *China and Mozambique: From Comrades to Capitalists* (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2014); D. Robinson, 'Chinese Engagement with Africa : The Case of Mozambique', *Portuguese Journal of International Affairs*, 6, Spring/Summer (2012), pp. 3–15.

6 M. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 130.

this regard, we argue, the *olheiro* figure can be seen as a contested manifestation of a more than local and less than global tension arising from excessive natural resource extraction that occurs with little or no administrative and legal control.

A Chinese Take-Away?

Jaime Paguri⁷ started scouting for precious hardwood in the mid 1990s, when South Africans and Israelis were competing with Mozambican companies to dominate the local timber industry. In 1992, a viable peace agreement was finally made between the ruling Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo) party and the Resistência Nacional Mocambicano (Renamo), a guerrilla movement supported by South Africa.⁸ Not long after, the government attempted to increase timber production by granting Mozambican nationals so-called ‘simple licences’ that allowed them to cut up to 500 cubic metres of wood per year. From the mid 1980s, Mozambique gradually opened up to outside investors and, with the peace agreement, timber export was considered a viable means of ‘generating significant foreign currency with minimal capital investment’.⁹ According to Daniel Ribeiro of *Justiça Ambiental* (a Mozambican non-governmental organisation focusing on environmental politics), the Chinese timber industry in Cabo Delgado ‘wasn’t part of a national strategy’. During an interview in autumn 2012 at his damp Maputo office, Daniel explained to Nielsen that ‘the forestry sector was essentially passed over, and there was never sufficient information for the big Chinese companies to become interested in the Mozambican market’. From the late 1990s, however, the Chinese government began making loans available to companies wanting to invest in the Mozambican timber industry and, according to Daniel Ribeiro, a second influx of Chinese timber companies was facilitated by the network of smaller Chinese operators already active in the area.

Encouraging the involvement of foreign agents, the 1999 Forestry and Wildlife Law (Law no. 10/99) specified that nationals could still apply for ‘simple licenses’ to cut 500 cubic metres per year with a required renewal of the approval each year, but the law also introduced a new harvesting and logging regime based on concessions of up to 10,000 hectares with a 50-year renewable management period. In contrast to the ‘simple licences’ that had regulated the timber industry for several decades, both nationals and foreigners were now eligible for concessions and there were no specific annual allowable cut quotas to observe.¹⁰

At the beginning of the 21st century, Mozambique thus welcomed foreign investment in the timber industry, and the invitation was soon accepted by a number of Chinese companies, responding to a growing need for hardwood in China.¹¹ If one focuses on only the formal documentation of wood exported to China, one might get an initial sense of China’s rapid rise as primary export destination of Mozambican hardwood. As early as 2001, China replaced South Africa as Mozambique’s largest buyer of forest products, receiving approximately 85 per cent of the 430,000 cubic metres of logs shipped from

7 The names of all informants and companies have been changed to ensure anonymity. As the material touches upon corruption and illegalities, we have deemed it necessary to take the additional precaution of changing certain biographical details to prevent identification.

8 H. Abrahamsson and A. Nilsson, *Mozambique: The Troubled Transition from Socialist Construction to Free Market Capitalism* (London, Zed Press, 1995).

9 C. Sun, L. Chen, L. Chen, L. Han and S. Bass, *Global Forest Product Chains: Identifying Challenges and Opportunities for China through a Global Commodity Chain Sustainability Analysis* (Winnipeg, International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2008).

10 Assembleia da República, ‘Regulamento da Lei de Florestas e Fauna Bravia’ (Maputo, *Boletim da República*, 22 [I Series], second supplement [6 July 2002]).

11 Environmental Investigation Agency, *Appetite for Destruction: China’s Trade in Illegal Timber* (London, EIA, 2012).

Mozambique between 2001 and 2005.¹² Since then, China's share of Mozambique's timber export has remained impressively stable. In 2010, 80 per cent of all exported timber went to China, at an estimated value of US\$134 million.¹³ Conversely, Mozambique's export of all wood to China in 2005 amounted to merely 0.12 per cent of the total value of China's timber imports.¹⁴ In other words, whereas China, at the time of our fieldwork, unquestionably had become Mozambique's most important trading partner when it came to timber, Mozambique's importance to China's timber-related industry was minimal.

One of the first Chinese timber companies to become established in Cabo Delgado was the Cabo Delgado Logging Consortium Ltd (CADEL). While many of the Chinese companies in the northern region essentially operate as timber merchants, CADEL has invested in the production set-up in Mozambique, and the owner also has a factory and a company in Guangzhou, where the wood is processed and marketed. Bunkenborg never managed to meet the owner of CADEL, a man from Guangzhou known as Wang Guoqiang,¹⁵ but he did speak to number of Chinese and Mozambican employees and visited a local manager, Stanley, in his spacious home. A tall, vivacious man in his 40s, Stanley was happy to explain that it all started when Wang Guoqiang had dinner in a restaurant in Beira and ran into the governor of Cabo Delgado. The governor was looking for investors, so he urged Wang Guoqiang to start up in Cabo Delgado, and CADEL was accordingly set up in 2000. By 2010, the company had 65,000 hectares of concessions and employed a score of Chinese as well as 700–800 local workers. As the first Chinese company to have an impact in Cabo Delgado, CADEL was widely known, and Stanley claimed that locals would often shout out 'CADEL!' whenever they saw an Asian person driving past. After two or three years at CADEL, Stanley told Bunkenborg, the new arrivals had learned the ropes in Mozambique and started to get 'oily' (油) and difficult to control. Then they were asked to move on, and many of them found employment as managers in other Chinese companies or started their own business ventures. CADEL also played a central role in the establishment of the Chinese Business Association of Pemba (彭巴华人商会), an organisation that catered mainly to the Chinese timber industry by helping to fix things with the local authorities and by facilitating liaison with the Chinese embassy in Maputo, which had hitherto taken very little interest in the small private companies operating in the distant province of Cabo Delgado.

Stanley himself evidently had the language skills to do business and cultivate lasting relations with members of the local elite, a highly useful ability in a business climate as precarious and unpredictable as the Mozambican one. Even so, there was no policy in the company that required or encouraged the temporary Chinese workers to learn Portuguese, even when they were in charge of teams of Mozambican workers, and many of the Chinese employed by CADEL had only the most rudimentary command of the language. Stanley insisted that things worked out despite the language barrier, but as to how it was done, he was as mystified as everyone else: 'people from the upper class here ask me "how do your workers communicate with our people?", and I think it is a mystery. I don't know how they communicate. But they get things done'. Collaboration, it seemed, did not necessarily depend on the acquisition of formal language skills but involved a more or less mysterious process of mutual adaptation that enabled Chinese managers and drivers to communicate

12 *Ibid.*; see also Sun *et al.*, *Global Forest Product Chains*.

13 L.A. German and S. Wertz-Kanounnikoff, *Sino-Mozambican Relations and their Implications for Forests: A Preliminary Assessment for the Case of Mozambique* (Bogor, CIFOR, 2012), p. 31.

14 Sun *et al.*, *Global Forest Product Chains*, p. 138.

15 If Wang Guoqiang was somewhat wary of talking to foreign researchers, it was not without reason. In 2012, investigators involved in the EIA research posed as timber buyers and exposed one of his Chinese competitors in the final report, which contains a clandestine photo and relates how he bragged about his government contacts and his one million hectares of concessions.

with the *olheiros* and other local employees and allowed them intuitively to understand each other.¹⁶ It was a form of understanding that made it possible to get things done without wasting too much time on rules and regulations.

With the Forestry and Wildlife Law of 1999, the Mozambican government aimed to strengthen the national timber industry by requiring the domestic processing of all but two sorts of precious hardwoods (see Articles 12.1 and 12.2), but, in the Chinese market, there is little or no interest in sawn timber.¹⁷ According to Mackenzie and Ribeiro,¹⁸ Mozambican timber is used in China predominantly for reproductions of Ming and Qing dynasty furniture (sorts especially sought after are *pau ferro*, *mondzo*, *pau preto* and *jambire*) and for solid wood flooring veneers and carvings that are sold both domestically and internationally (with *jambire* and *chanfuta* as the preferred sorts). When making high-quality furniture and carvings, the grain of the wood is of paramount importance, and unprocessed logs are therefore required by the Chinese craftsmen. Also, there is an import duty on timber that does not apply to logs, and thus Chinese governmental support for local industries also plays a role in maintaining the preference for logs to sawn timber.

Despite the Mozambican government's attempts to regulate international transactions in precious hardwood, and occasional seizures, a large number of timber companies continued to export unprocessed logs illegally to China. The extent of this trade is suggested by trade data: the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) estimated that China imported 11.8 million cubic metres of illegal logs in 2011 (worth US\$2.7 billion), out of which 183,000 cubic metres came from Mozambique.¹⁹ Nineteen years after the implementation of the Forestry and Wildlife Law, it is therefore probably no exaggeration to conclude that the forestry sector in Mozambique is out of control.²⁰ In 2012, Chinese authorities registered 323,000 cubic metres of Mozambican log imports, whereas Mozambique's total registered global log exports during the same period amounted to merely 41,543 cubic metres.²¹ Such a staggering discrepancy indicates systematic under-reporting of the actual volume of timber exported to China and elsewhere. It would be missing the point, however, if current irregularities were written off simply as a sign of a dysfunctional customs management system. Rather, it seems that the timber industry in Mozambique *as such* operates with few measures to secure the observance of existing laws and regulations.

In 2011, Nielsen visited Alberto Tiago, a Mozambican employee at CADEL. At the time, there was a consistent but unconfirmed rumour that a government minister had both personal and financial interests in CADEL. Reluctant to ask directly about the relationship, Nielsen made some vague remarks about the impressive efficiency of Chinese companies in a political landscape with so many overlapping interests. Tiago looked at him almost

16 M. Nielsen, 'Roadside Inventions: Making Time and Money Work at a Road Construction Site in Mozambique', *Mobilities*, 7, 4 (2012), pp. 467–80.

17 C. Mackenzie and D. Ribeiro, *Tristezas Tropicais: More Sad Stories from the Forests of Zambézia* (Maputo, Justiça Ambiental/ORAM, 2009), pp. 38–42.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

19 Environmental Investigation Agency, *Appetite for Destruction*.

20 Cf. A. Lemos and D. Ribeiro, 'Taking Ownership or Just Changing Owners?', in F. Manji and S. Marks (eds), *African Perspectives on China in Africa* (Cape Town, Fahamu, 2007), pp. 63–70. This claim is corroborated by a series of important studies carried out by Yussuf Adam and a group of associated researchers from the Universität Bern and Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), who claim that, while a juridical and administrative framework for regulating forestry activities in Mozambique is in place, it has little actual impact, due to weak capacity and corruption at all levels. Y. Adam, A. Kläy and J. Machele, 'NO FIM NÃO VAI FICAR NADA': *Exploração dos Recursos Florestais em Cabo Delgado Relatório do trabalho de campo em Namiune, Nkonga e 5º Congresso* (Maputo, Universität Bern and CDE, 2011); A. Kläy, Y. Adam and D. Stantchev, *Forest Regeneration Capacity and its Enhancement by Forest Management and Silviculture in Cabo Delgado* (Bern, CDE, 2008).

21 Environmental Investigation Agency, *First Class Connections: Log Smuggling, Illegal Logging and Corruption in Mozambique* (London, EIA, 2013).

condescendingly before replying: ‘CADEL currently ships off between 100 and 200 containers each month that are packed with, in quotation marks, “unprocessed logs”. As a distinguished partner, we have a government minister. So, you tell me: do you think that there are any obstacles or any doors closed for this company?’ Overall, the response to Tiago’s rhetorical question was surely negative, but there were nevertheless occasional hiccups in the otherwise smooth operations of CADEL and other Pemba-based logging firms. A few weeks before our visit to Pemba in May 2011, the port authorities boarded a freighter bound for China and seized more than 100 containers of unprocessed logs belonging to CADEL. For a while, the incident seemed to create a heightened awareness of the massive plundering of forest resources by a predatory Mozambican elite colluding with Chinese timber operators. CADEL was fined for attempting to smuggle precious hardwood to China, and more than half of the forestry agents at the regional department for agriculture and forestry were fired. Less than a year later, however, it seemed that CADEL was again up to speed. Through personal ties to members of the local party elite, CADEL had re-acquired the seized logs, which were now awaiting shipment to China.

‘Without *Olheiros*, There Is No Timber!’

In 2012, Nielsen visited Augustinho Diogo, a former work manager for CADEL, and asked him how many *olheiros* were currently employed by the company. ‘Well, you can’t do it without the *olheiros* ... [*olheiros nunca podem faltar*], it’s as simple as that’. Augustinho paused and thumped the table several times. ‘But how many ... They are often quite complicated individuals so we generally leave it up to the local team leaders to deal with the *olheiros*’.

Jaime Paguri was one of these ‘complicated individuals’. Having worked for Inancio Tivane at Makaneta Ltd for more than a decade, he resigned in May 2006 and returned to live with his wife and children in a small mud-built house outside Nairobi, just north of Montepuez. Although having no alternative income strategy, Paguri had decided that the unsatisfactory work conditions could no longer be ignored. ‘I built my house while I was working for Tivane and I didn’t even make enough money to buy a wooden door; it’s all bamboo!’ Paguri roared with laughter and continued to repeat several times that it was, indeed ‘all bamboo’. Nielsen was sitting with Paguri in the shade outside his house while his wife and two daughters were shelling a huge pile of *feijão manteiga* (butter beans). During their walks in the forest, Nielsen had several times inquired about the Makaneta period, but he was rarely given more than a monosyllabic response. In this familiar setting, however, Paguri enthusiastically shared his experiences from nearly two decades of working as a tree scout:

during the first period with Tivane, I continued to set up traps in the forest to catch *galinhas do mato* [helmeted guineafowl]. That’s what I have always done, you know. But Tivane didn’t like that: he thought that I ought to work only for my *patrão* [boss]. To be an *olheiro* is to work for a *patrão* and you have to fear your *patrão*. And the money ... He never paid us enough money. We received MZM1,200 or maybe 1,800 per month. That’s not really worth the trouble ... (*não vale a pena*).

After resigning, Paguri returned to his *machamba* (cultivated field), but his household was unexpectedly augmented when his two granddaughters came to live in the small house. Realising the need to generate a stable income, Paguri approached CADEL through a friend and was hired as the main *olheiro* in the Balama area. During the prolonged conversation in the shade outside his house, Nielsen asked Paguri whether he found the work conditions at CADEL different from his prior position. ‘Well, Tivane never really paid us anything’, Paguri told Nielsen with a headshake. ‘But in some ways, it was even worse with the

Chinese. With Tivane, our pay depended on the number of trees being cut, whereas the Chinese pay per cubic metre. So, we might find, say, 1,000 *pau preto* and still not make MZM300 per month [laughs].

The difference in salary policies that Paguri mentioned was also a theme when Nielsen sat down with another *olheiro* by the name of Alberto to learn more about what a ‘tree scout’ does:

the *olheiro* walks in the bush [*no mato*]. That’s what he does. It’s like in the army. In the army, it’s called reconnaissance [*reconhecimento*]. Only ... we don’t use maps and compasses. We never received any maps. Our map is our eyes and what we know in our hearts about where to go next.

Before working for CADEL, Alberto used to provide meat for his family by hunting and trapping, and he occasionally supplemented his meager income by selling a few animals in Namalala or Balama in the south-west of the region. ‘The bush practically belongs to the *olheiros*!’ Alberto cast a sideways glance towards the forest that encircled the *aldeia*. ‘We have been walking in the forests for a very long time ... setting up our traps in order to catch *galinhas do mato*, and that’s how we discovered what’s an *umbila* and what’s a *pau preto*. So, when a *patrão* asks me whether there are any *umbila* or *pau preto*, I’ll tell him where they are’. Back in 2012, the large majority of *olheiros* were hired by Chinese timber companies through community chiefs (*líderes comunitário*). ‘They wanted someone who knew the forest’, Alberto explained, ‘and that’s why the community chief chose me. He told me to sort things out with them [*entende com eles* – the Chinese] and then get to work’. Entering his third season working for CADEL, Alberto imagined that he would continue as their main *olheiro* in the area west of Kwékwe until all the precious hardwood was gone.

According to Alberto, it was much more difficult to maintain a stable income when working for Chinese timber companies. Whereas Chinese companies like CADEL paid around MZM300 (US\$9.8) for one cubic metre of hardwood, most Mozambican concessionaires calculated the salaries based on the number of logs that were hauled back to the main camp (approximately MZM150 [US\$4.9] per log). Given the size of the trees that the Chinese timber companies were interested in, it was significantly harder to make a cubic metre of hardwood than it was to spot two *pau preto* or *jambire*.

Considering the poor wages offered to skilled *olheiros*, it was interesting that all the different agents involved in the logging process expressed an unequivocal dependence on the *olheiro*. Irrespective of position and work obligations, ethnicity or cultural background, both the quantity and the quality of the output was perceived to reflect the scouting skills of *olheiros* like Jaime Paguri and Alberto. According to a high-ranking Mozambican CADEL employee, the forests might be dangerous to outsiders without the *olheiro*’s thorough knowledge of the area: ‘if you and I were to enter the forest alone, we might end up going in circles without ever finding one single tree. We would never work here if we didn’t have *olheiros*, you know’. In Mackenzie and Ribeiro’s analysis of Chinese logging activities in Mozambique,²² the importance of *olheiros* is also emphasised. As the authors argue, ‘... felling teams work through the forests relying on the memories of the tree spotters, cutting timber where they find it’.²³ Small wonder, then, that when Nielsen discussed the initial employment terms with Alberto, the latter seemed to be fully aware of the crucial importance ascribed to his work by his colleagues and employers, be they Mozambicans or Chinese. ‘Well, I knew that he [the manager of the Namalala crew] would have to work with me. Without *olheiros*, there’s no timber! [*sem olheiros, não há madeira!*]’

²² Mackenzie and Ribeiro, *Tristezas Tropicais*.

²³ *Ibid.*; see also Sun *et al.*, *Global Forest Product Chains*.

While there was, indeed, no timber without the *olheiros*, the opposite argument seemed to be equally valid. To the Chinese loggers, the crucial importance of the *olheiros* was obviously tied to the growth of the local logging industry. But, surprisingly, that was the case also for local residents in the area. As far as Nielsen was able to determine, there were no tree scouts working in the area around Montepuez before the arrival of international logging companies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Most, if not all, of the *olheiros* who were currently active in the area had previously been making their living as hunters and small-scale farmers, and it was only through the intervention of local chiefs that their unique skills as tree scouts were discovered by the Chinese loggers, and by themselves. What they rarely had, however, was knowledge about how to mediate ritually between the living and the dead. In other words, while the *olheiros* were increasingly given the responsibility of ritually appeasing the ancestors ‘resting’ under trees, this crucial task was something that they were not trained to do.²⁴

Sino-Mozambican Resemblances

Working with Asian logging companies such as CADEL enabled the *olheiros* to identify marketable species of trees in the forest, but the close collaboration also had an effect on the Chinese, and, among the dozen interviews with mid level Chinese managers that Bunkenborg conducted in Cabo Delgado, there was one conversation that offered a particularly interesting perspective on the gradually shifting relations between Chinese and Mozambicans. Having banged loudly on the metal gate of a walled compound in a small town, Bunkenborg was admitted by one of the Mozambican workers, who led him to a cement house with a roof of corrugated iron. With a view of the machine shack and the logs and vehicles in the compound through the window, the house served both as the office and as makeshift living quarters for Mr Jiang, a former history teacher from Beijing, who now worked as a timber measurer and welcomed the distraction of an interview. Having found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet on RMB2,000 (US\$250) a month in Beijing, Mr Jiang had decided to leave China when a relative had offered to double his salary for working in a sawmill in Mozambique. Mr Jiang had spent four years there, and, while he was mainly preoccupied with the German Bundesliga, he did express some concern about the unequal power relations being forged in the timber business in Mozambique:

Mr Jiang: It’s as if we are masters and they are servants. And the majority of Chinese take this sort of relation for granted. I don’t. Maybe the reason why my attitude is different is that I come from one of the best places in China, Beijing. [...] But many of the Chinese come from the countryside, they are used to being bullied, but now they have ‘stood up’ (翻身 *fanshen*)²⁵ and become masters and it seems they get a kick out of that. [...] I have even

24 There is a rich body of work on the relationship between regimes of authority and spiritual agency in Mozambique: J. Feliciano, *Antropologia Económica dos Thonga do Sul de Moçambique* (Maputo, Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique, 1998); A. Honwana, ‘Spiritual Agency and Self-Renewal in Southern Mozambique’ (Phd thesis, SOAS, University of London, 1996); A. Huhn, ‘Enacting Compassion: Hot/Cold, Illness and Taboos in Northern Mozambique’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 43, 2 (2017), pp. 299–313; H. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe. Volume I: Social Life* (New Hyde Park, University Books, 1962); C. Laheij, ‘Dangerous Neighbours: Sorcery, Conspicuous Exchange and Proximity among Urban Migrants in Northern Mozambique’, *Africa*, 88, s1 (2018), pp. 31–50; M. Mathebula, *800 Years of Tsonga History (1200–2000)* (Burgersfort, SASAVONA, 2013); H. West, ‘Sorcery of Construction and Socialist Modernization: Ways of Understanding Power in Postcolonial Mozambique’, *American Ethnologist*, 28, 1 (2001), pp. 119–50; H. West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

25 Part of Chinese revolutionary vocabulary, the term 翻身 (*fanshen*) literally means to turn over, but, in the context of land reforms, it came to describe the process of freeing oneself from the dominance of landlords and acquiring land, livestock and housing.

quarrelled with a number of Chinese because of this. [...] For the midday rest, for instance, [...] some Chinese will call a Mozambican over from quite a distance to move the bed into the shade. Actually, they could easily move it themselves. That sort of thing happens all the time, and one day I finally had enough and said: 'why have someone run over from a such distance for a small thing that you could just do yourself?' When he didn't accept that, I asked him: 'did your hands rot? Did your feet rot? Why can't you do it?' [...] In the end, it's a lack of culture, and that's the attitude of the majority of the Chinese. None of the bosses are like that, it's the temporary workers. Once they're here, they think they are no longer peasants, they think they are superiors.

Even as Mr Jiang professed a belief in the equality of all men, he also emphasised that his education and urban background set him apart from the majority of Chinese and thus betrayed a strong consciousness of his own position at the top of a hierarchy of more or less developed places and people. For all his urban sensibilities, Mr Jiang seemed to share with his rural and less educated peers in mid level management a fierce developmentalism, where it is only to be expected that some people get rich first while others suffer at the sharp end of primitive accumulation.

The Wolf Totem, a widely celebrated Chinese novel published in 2004, describes the environmental and cultural destruction caused by Maoist modernisation policies and Han Chinese encroachment in the fragile grasslands of Inner Mongolia. What fuels the destructive behaviour of the Chinese settlers in this novel is a naive belief in man's ability to dominate nature and, as the author would have it, the sheepish character of an agricultural civilisation. While a few of the mid level Chinese managers in Mozambique were old enough to remember the heady optimism of Maoist modernisation portrayed in this novel, they generally adhered to a darker, post-Mao conceptualisation of development that was not so much naive as fatalistic about the environmental and human destruction that modernisation inevitably required. 'In today's China', Ann Anagnost claims, 'people cite phrases learned from Marx to substantiate their belief in the necessary violence of development. If tenant farmers in Britain were thrown off their land to starve so that sheep could graze, then China must also go through a "sheep eating people" (*yang chi ren*) stage'.²⁶ The idea of exploitation as an inevitable phase on the road to development served to justify the extraction of hardwood and labour in Cabo Delgado, but, as suggested by Mr Jiang's reflections on masters and servants, the political cosmology of developmentalism was increasingly haunted by relational forms associated with colonialism.

While Mr Jiang never learned much of the local languages and observed things from his vantage point in the compound, other Chinese timber operators spoke Portuguese reasonably well and collaborated much more intensely with the locals. For example, the manager of CADEL's main camp in Nairoto until 2012 was a middle-aged Chinese timber merchant named Peter, who was not only fluent in Portuguese but even mastered a few key phrases in Makua.²⁷ Despite his ability to communicate effortlessly with local employees, Peter had apparently never been interested in understanding Mozambican work ethics. 'Peter is bad, he is really bad! (*Peter é mau, é mau mesmo*)'. Taquinha repeated the last three words to Nielsen several times as if to remind himself of his former employer's questionable character. 'Peter prevented us from doing our jobs', Paguri chipped in, 'he didn't consider us as proper workers; that was the problem, you know. The only thing he really valued [*valorizou*] was the MZM50 note [laughs]. Even after having worked from 5 in the morning until 8 at night, he would still say that the salary for a day's work was MZM50'.

26 A. Anagnost, 'From "Class" to "Social Strata": Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-Era China', *Third World Quarterly*, 29, 3 (2008), p. 514.

27 Makua (also spelled Emakhuwa) is the primary Bantu language spoken by 3 million people living in the northern part of Mozambique.

Despite the widely held scepticism towards Peter among former and current workers, it nevertheless seemed as if his alleged blatant lack of respect for Mozambican work ethics reverberated with local understandings of social relationality in particular, albeit paradoxical, ways. ‘He has been here for a long time’, Paguri explained, ‘and he has already habituated himself with the Mozambican way of life. So his characteristics, rather than being those of a Chinese, are those of a Mozambican [*já a característica dele em vez de ser dum chinês é dum mocambicano*]. In fact, it’s more than that. He’s a mobster [*mafioso*]’. Taquinha bellowed with laughter while nodding several times, confiding to Nielsen: ‘if you talked to Peter and heard him speak Portuguese, you really wouldn’t believe that he is actually Chinese ... Ihh! [makes a high-pitched sound] Peter is bad!’ To Paguri and Taquinha, Peter’s unjust treatment of local workers seemed to configure him as a fellow Mozambican and to suggest a peculiar similarity between Chinese and Mozambicans: given his excessive and repeated misuse of power, he almost appeared as an intensified version of ‘Mozambican-ness’ (recalling Paguri’s last statement that Peter was ‘... more than that. He’s a mobster’).

In view of the often rather fraught relations between Chinese superiors and Mozambican workers and the way young workers tended to emphasise seemingly insurmountable differences,²⁸ it was puzzling that the two *olheiros* emphasised how their Chinese counterparts resembled Mozambicans, but something very similar came up in an interview with an *olheiro* who had worked for another Chinese company for the past five years:

Olheiro: Well ... even though the Chinese are whites,²⁹ their characteristics are just like ours [*os chineses só embora eles são brancos, mas a característica é tal e qual como nós*].

Nielsen: Why do you think that the characteristics of the Chinese are similar to those of the Mozambicans?

Olheiro: China is a poor country, you know. And if you ask them where they lived before, they’ll tell you that they lived in the bush [*no mato*]. They don’t even try to hide it! And they are not hygienic at all. They could take a shit right here [*cagar*] and still sleep on the floor. Have you seen their food? They will boil the meat and keep it until it rots. And they won’t even throw it away; they’ll offer it to you!

Why did the *olheiros* note this resemblance between Chinese and Mozambicans? Or more precisely, how did ‘Chineseness’ end up as an ‘interiorized alterity’³⁰ to the *olheiros* working for Chinese timber companies in northern Mozambique? To explore this crucial question and its implications for our argument in this article, we need to unpack further the social and economic effects of Chinese timber operations in Cabo Delgado and, in particular, how they have reconfigured the already tenuous relations between *olheiros* and certain members of their local communities.

‘Furtivos’

At the time of our fieldwork, Chinese timber companies were increasingly cutting costs by acquiring hardwood from local loggers who did the cutting and hauling.³¹ This resulted in the emergence of a booming illegal market for small-scale loggers who cut without licences

28 M. Bunkenborg, ‘All Part of the Master Plan? Ethnographic Encounters with the Chinese in Mozambique’, in Alden and Chichava (eds), *China and Mozambique*, pp. 50–66; M. Nielsen, ‘Roadside Inventions: Making Time and Money Work at a Road Construction Site in Mozambique’, *Mobilities*, 7, 4 (2012), pp. 467–80.

29 ‘Whites’ (*brancos*) is frequently used as a plural generic term.

30 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.

31 German and Wertz-Kanounnikoff, *Sino-Mozambican Relations and their Implications for Forests*, p. 41.

and even sometimes stole hardwood from concession areas.³² In fact, according to several (legal) licence holders, the situation was becoming so critical that they considered cutting trees illegally³³ before outside loggers entered their areas to steal the logs.³⁴ The increasing number of unlicensed loggers, known as *furtivos* (literally, ‘poachers’), not only cut and sold hardwood themselves but also started to buy logs directly from local villagers and community chiefs in search of small profits.³⁵ As community chiefs were formally obliged to oversee the logging, they often came to function as gatekeepers for outside *furtivos* and assisted in concealing the illegality of such operations.

Needless to say, stealing hardwood is potentially a risky enterprise, and many local *furtivos* reduced the risk of discovery by using less noisy crosscut saws and by letting the buyers haul the logs from the cutting site. The small-scale illegal loggers were usually local farmers living off their land while generating an additional income from occasional sales of hardwood to larger timber operators. By contrast, outside *furtivos* (*furtivos da fora*) were organised loggers who used chainsaws and tractors to cut and haul the hardwood. As we discovered during several trips into the forests near Nairoto, many outside *furtivos* operated as illegal franchises of Chinese timber companies that lent them equipment and sometimes even personnel in return for exclusive purchase rights to the hardwood.³⁶ The local loggers found and cut the hardwood by themselves, but the outside *furtivos* needed collaborators with local knowledge. A number of experienced *olheiros* had therefore become of paramount importance to the illegal loggers: not only had they worked in or around the designated cutting areas, they also knew about the planned logging activities of legal concessionaires and licence holders.

As the timber industry increased the pace of its production, new opportunities for making money from illegal logging began to arise, and the *olheiros* who had experience working for Chinese companies were particularly in demand. In fact, as Nielsen was told in 2012 by an illegal logger, only the *olheiros* who had worked for Chinese timber companies were capable of finding trees that could later be sold to these very same companies. ‘Why do you think that they always find the trees? If I go into the bush [*mato*], there don’t seem to be any trees at all’. Before giving Nielsen a chance to respond, he proceeded to answer the question himself: ‘the *olheiros* think like the Chinese; that’s for sure. Ah! The Chinese ... They are a bunch of ugly, worn-out old men who only know how to eat [*só sabem comer*]’.

In many ways, the *furtivo*’s comments on the scouting skills of local *olheiros* were not entirely off the mark. As Nielsen was repeatedly told by Paguri and his colleagues, it was only after being hired by Chinese timber companies that they managed to find the precious hardwood. During Nielsen’s initial conversation with Alberto, CADEL’s *olheiro* in the area near Namalala, Alberto described the increased awareness of precious hardwood that arose with his new position working for the Chinese timber company: ‘originally, the *olheiro* wasn’t even aware that other people might be needing the wood. That started only after the Chinese [*os chinês*] told us that they needed *chamfuta*, *pau preto*, *muanga* [species of precious hardwood]’. To many *olheiros*, then, the value of precious hardwood (both in

32 See also Adam *et al.*, ‘NO FIM NÃO VAI FICAR NADA’.

33 Illegal cutting here implies cutting more than 500 cubic metres per year or, equally likely, to cut in an area belonging to another concessionaire. In 2009, 87,000 cubic metres of timber, worth approximately MZM71 million (US\$2.3 million), was cut without a licence, according to German and Wertz-Kanounnikoff, *Sino-Mozambican Relations and their Implications for Forests*, p. 39.

34 D. Ribeiro, ‘Disappearing Forests, Disappearing Hope: Mozambique’, in A. Harneit-Sievers, S. Marks and S. Naidu (eds), *Chinese and African Perspectives on China in Africa* (Cape Town, Pambazuka Press, 2010), p. 159.

35 In general, sellers, such as villagers and community chiefs, make approximately MZM100 (US\$3.2) for a log, which is later sold at a price of US\$120–450; see Mackenzie and Ribeiro, *Tristezas Tropicais*, p. 16.

36 German and Wertz-Kanounnikoff, *Sino-Mozambican Relations and their Implications for Forests*, p. 41.

monetary and relational terms) changed when they were approached by Chinese timber operators in need of their scouting skills. Enveloped by a simple reciprocal monetary relationship (of salaries and profits) between employer and employee, there was an equally crucial transaction of hardwood and skills. As the *furtivo* reminded Nielsen, the existence of precious hardwood seemed to be predicated on the *olheiros*' capacities for finding it, while, conversely, the *olheiros*' scouting capacities were predicated on them being hired by Chinese timber companies. In other words, the *olheiros* became capable of locating the coveted hardwood *by virtue of* their employer–employee relation with the Chinese, and not because of some innate capacity for tree scouting.

The problem was, however, that the *furtivos* seemed to get more than they bargained for, and several expressed a certain scepticism regarding the nature of the relationships between tree scouts and Chinese timber operators and, particularly, the effects these relations had on the social and cosmological life of the communities in which they worked and lived. Clearly, then, the perceived capacity for locating hardwood was not merely a practical skill that anyone could learn to master. Quite on the contrary, gifted *olheiros* were also perceived to be able to control the chaotic spirit forces that had often injured or even killed inexperienced loggers during the cutting season. And, as Nielsen was often told by illegal loggers, if the *olheiros* had acquired or even simply optimised their powerful skills through work relations with Chinese timber operators, this indicated that the Mozambican forest spirits were being controlled by Chinese forces.

Forest Spirits and the Question of their Chinese Ancestry

In April 2011, Nielsen witnessed the yearly commemorative ritual (*makua: sadaka* or *ipepha ontholoni*) to appease the ancestor of the community chief in Namalala before the cutting season. Throughout Mozambique, clan leaders are traditionally considered as the true owners of land, and this privilege is maintained also after their physical death.³⁷ Hence, before cutting and hauling hardwood that essentially belongs to deceased clan leaders, incumbent community chiefs must ask for permission to do so by presenting the ancestral spirits with traditional offerings, such as locally brewed beer, wine, goat meat and fried chicken. The ritual took place near the impressive baobab tree that graced the entrance to the *machamba* (cultivated field) where the family of the deceased clan leader had grown crops for more than 80 years. Corropa, the deceased clan leader, was now 'resting' in the shade under the baobab tree, whence he controlled the lives of his descendants and successors. All invited guests stood in a rather disorganised semicircle around Corropa's eldest son, Isténio, who was the area's main healer (*curandeiro*). Isténio knelt in front of the baobab with a plastic can in his right hand and poured wine on the ground while asking for Corropa's permission to cut hardwood in the forest during the coming season. During the ritual, Nielsen was standing next to Babo, a local farmer who was also working as a *furtivo* in the forest near the village. Shortly after the ritual had commenced, he moved closer in order to speak without being heard by anyone else. 'You know that Alberto paid Isténio to speak to Corropa, right? He has tried to do the ritual himself several times, but it always goes wrong [laughs]'. Babo nodded towards Alberto, CADEL's *olheiro* in the area, who was standing quite close to the community leader. '... [B]ut I wonder why Corropa accepted the money', he continued in a soft voice. 'Perhaps he couldn't see that it was Chinese money'.

As Nielsen was soon to find out, Alberto had been moonlighting for Babo and another local *furtivo* while keeping his day job with CADEL. Being the local representative for the

37 C. Menezes, 'Mito e cosmogonia na concepção do assentamento mocambicano', in J. Carrilho, S. Bruschi, C. Menezes and L. Lage (eds), *Um Olhar para o habitat informal moçambicano: de Licinga a Maputo* (Maputo, Faculdade de Arquitectura e Planeamento Físico, UEM, 2001), pp. 58–65.

Chinese timber company, he had donated a small amount of money in order for Isténio's wife to prepare food and wine for the ritual. It was not uncommon for Chinese managers to participate as silent spectators, but this year no one had appeared and so it was up to Alberto to represent CADEL – a fact that seemed to worry Babo. By accepting Alberto's donation (through his widow), Corropa signalled his approval of the *olheiro's* activities on his land and thereby also of the spirit forces that enabled Alberto to locate the hardwood. Crucially, whereas the benevolence of the landowner (living or dead) was required for the *olheiro* to operate in the forest, the capacity for locating hardwood was considered to be an outcome of one's power to control inner spirit forces.³⁸ And, as Babo reminded Nielsen, although nearly all the *olheiros* knew the forests from hunting, their capacity for finding precious hardwood was an unintended but often useful effect of their intimate relations with Chinese timber operators. For it was probably as an outcome of their limited knowledge of how to establish an efficacious relationship with the spirit world that the Mozambican *olheiros* had come to allow powerful Chinese forces to operate through them and perhaps even to take control of those ancestral spirits that oriented their everyday activities. Recalling the comments of the illegal logger from Namalala ('the *olheiros* think like the Chinese; that's for sure'), being *olheiro* was perhaps not merely a matter of thinking *like* the Chinese. To Babo and his peers who were acutely aware of the *olheiros'* limited skills when it came to controlling the spirit forces, the even more worrying question was to what extent the tree scouts were *becoming* Chinese.

To the large majority of the Mozambicans whom Nielsen got to know in Cabo Delgado, death was not considered the end of a person's existence. When a person died and the body was buried, ancestral spirits remained in the lives and bodies of their descendants as 'the effective manifestation of his or her power and personality'.³⁹ In *Spiritual Agency and Self-Renewal in Southern Mozambique*,⁴⁰ Alcinda Honwana describes how 'humans and spirits become one single entity because spirits possess people, live and grow in people and are there on a permanent basis. Thus, humans and spirits become part of the same agency as they share a combined and integrated existence'.⁴¹ Note, however, that the special kind of agentive force that is established through these human-spirit relationships is limited both by the strikingly human-like affects of the spirits (jealousy, suspicion, anger, love) and the kinship-based relationality through which it asserts itself. In other words, a living individual can be affected – or governed – only by the force of those spirits with whom he or she has a consanguine relation.

In Namalala, Carropa's spirit protected the land against harmful intrusions, such as the cutting of hardwood without proper acknowledgement of his historical ownership rights to all natural resources in the area. Since ancestral spirits assert themselves predominantly within a cosmological universe constituted by kinship-based relationships,⁴² they will rarely attack anyone who cannot be considered as somehow affiliated to his or her clan. It was, therefore, quite surprising to realise that a Chinese logger had recently been attacked by some unidentified spirit force while cutting in the forest near Namalala. According to Babo, the Chinese logger had been working in the area for an extended period, but during recent years he had repeatedly failed to ask Carropa's permission. As the Chinese logger had come to know the area quite well, he would often go into the forest without *olheiros*. 'And that is

38 Cf. Feliciano, *Antropologia Económica dos Thonga do Sul de Mocambique*, pp. 269–70.

39 A. Honwana, 'Healing for Peace: Traditional Healers and Post-War Reconstruction in Southern Mozambique', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 3, 3 (1997), p. 296. See also West, *Kupilikula*, pp. 116–17; M. Nielsen, 'Interior Swelling: On the Expansive Effects of Ancestral Interventions in Maputo, Mozambique', *Common Knowledge*, 18, 3 (2012), pp. 433–50.

40 Honwana, 'Spiritual Agency and Self-Renewal in Southern Mozambique'.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

42 Nielsen, 'Interior Swelling'.

just stupid!’, Babo sneered. ‘How can you cut a tree without anyone to tell you if it’s ok?’ Hence, one day, while walking in the forest, the unfortunate Chinese logger fell down and was carried to the local hospital, where the doctor diagnosed his illness as thrombosis. Yet, to most of the people to whom Nielsen spoke, the attack on the Chinese logger was a worrying occult occurrence connected to his intimate collaboration with a local *olheiro* who had not fully understood the workings of the local spirit world. The exact nature of their collaboration was unclear, but the *olheiro* had apparently acted as if he were a living relative of both the Chinese logger and the ancestral spirit and thus enabled the latter to ‘see’ the former.

Colonial Reverberations

As might be recalled, a striking similarity between local Mozambicans and those who were otherwise perceived as radically different Chinese superiors was discerned by local *olheiros* based on the former’s questionable moral character. One unresolved question is, consequently, how this uncanny resemblance of negative qualities might have been established in the first place. In other words, what is the genealogy of this doubling of negative qualities?

Like other former colonial nation states in the region, present-day Mozambique is today imprinted by ‘hierarchies of alterity within a colonial mosaic of attractions and repulsions’,⁴³ which have emerged through centuries of enforced obedience to the Portuguese colonial regime.⁴⁴ After the celebration of independence in 1975, a primary objective for the ruling Frelimo was to ‘decolonise individual minds’ and reconstruct a national identity based on a ‘scientific socialism’ that was purified of the vices of capitalist–imperialist exploitation.⁴⁵ Only a decade later, however, the Mozambican government made an irrevocable ‘turn toward the West’,⁴⁶ when agreeing to implement a series of economic structural adjustment programmes as a condition for immediate financial aid. Despite the total compliance with all conditions imposed by international lending institutions during the following years, it has since been possible for Frelimo to reproduce a political discourse of national superiority based on a revolutionary past⁴⁷ – what Coelho has called a ‘liberation script’.⁴⁸ When talking to people in the northern part of Mozambique, however, Frelimo’s modernist visions of nationalist independence and pride were rarely mentioned as an anchor point for collective identification. Instead, people would often express strong feelings of racial differences that were linked to individual and collective memories of colonial subjugation, and so, when Jaime Paguri and his peers recognised in their Chinese employers the negative traits of Mozambican identity, their comments probably echoed experiences of subjugation that were construed as expressions of racial difference. What was so remarkable about their comments, however, was the pronounced sense of resemblance to a radically different

43 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 48.

44 E. Allina, *Slavery by Any Other Name: African Life under Company Rule in Colonial Mozambique* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2012); J. Penvenne, *African Workers and Colonial Racism. Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenço Marques, 1877–1962* (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1995).

45 M. Cahen, ‘Check on Socialism in Mozambique – What Check? What Socialism?’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 20, 57 (1993), p. 48; H. West, ‘Sorcery of Construction and Socialist Modernization: Ways of Understanding Power in Postcolonial Mozambique’, *American Ethnologist*, 28, 1 (2001), p. 121.

46 J. Hanlon, *Peace Without Profit: How the IMF Blocks Rebuilding in Mozambique* (Oxford, James Currey, 1996).

47 A. Dinerman, *Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Revisionism in Postcolonial Africa: The Case of Mozambique, 1975–1994* (New York, Routledge, 2006). M. Nielsen, ‘Ideological Twinning: Socialist Aesthetics and Political Meetings in Maputo, Mozambique’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 23, s1 (2017), pp. 139–53.

48 J.P.B. Coelho, ‘Politics and Contemporary History in Mozambique: A Set of Epistemological Notes’, *Kronos*, 39, 1 (2013), pp. 20–31.

'other', whose primary characteristics was often illustrated by their allegedly unjust and abusive treatment of Mozambican workers. In a sense, the relationship between the *furtivos* and the *olheiros* seemed uncannily to double itself as an effect of the *olheiros*' intimate ties with their Chinese superiors. The fraught work relationship between the two sides reflected deep-seated hierarchical differentiations between 'whites' (*brancos*) and locals, where the Chinese superior became for the Mozambican worker a mirror of his or her value.⁴⁹ Via a transfer of scouting capacities from Chinese logging agents to Mozambican *olheiros*, made possible not least by the latter's lacking mastery of the spirit world, this exterior relationship revealed itself to operate on the inside, as it were, of a local cosmos of 'attractions and repulsions in which some alters exert positive, and others negative, charges'.⁵⁰

Conclusion

'It never ends [*nunca para*]. We will never govern our own country ... Now it's the Chinese who are running Mozambique ... When you come back here, you will have to talk to a Chinese community chief'. Nielsen was about to leave Paguri's house when the old *olheiro* summarised his analysis of living side by side with Chinese loggers in a few well-chosen words. Now, several years later, Paguri's cynically realistic prediction still resonates with the main social and political tensions at the heart of natural resource extraction in the northernmost parts of Mozambique. The local community chiefs are still Mozambican, and managers of the Chinese logging companies were already planning to move on as they foresaw that the hardwood resources in Mozambique would be exhausted in just a few more years, but the unrestricted room for manoeuvre given to external logging agents have destabilised and, in several instances, fundamentally ruptured local residents' relationship to the territories that they continue to occupy. As we have shown in this article, the entrenched weaknesses of the state administration not only render possible but seem almost to encourage misuse of power and illegal appropriation of public goods for private gains. But, to residents such as Jaime Paguri, that is not too surprising. After decades of encounters with corrupt state cadres and a gradually weakened state administration, the misuse of public office is something he and his fellow residents have come to see as simply the way things are. But what is potentially more worrying is the way that the free-roaming foreigners have disrupted the stability and functioning of social life at its very core. To be sure, in a social environment scarred by recurrent national and international socio-political conflicts, people are used to living through unstable times. But the ongoing invasion of community territories, the illegal cutting down of exotic hardwood and the everyday dominance of work activities by foreign logging companies in collusion with a cohort of local political agents do more than cause momentary disturbances. Through an extended analysis of the contested status of the *olheiros*, we have argued in this article that excessive natural resource extraction fundamentally reconfigures the workings of social life beyond just a passing sense of disequilibrium. In a sense, the *olheiro* figure is a very concrete outcome of this more than local and less than global tension, which operates by constantly shifting the co-ordinates of residents' relationship to each other and to the territory that they inhabit. Yet this new *olheiro* figure is inherently ambiguous: it is unclear precisely what the nature of his relationship to the Chinese might be and, consequently, how he acquired the status and impressive skills at identifying the much-coveted hardwood. As residents in the northernmost parts of Mozambique try to figure out their relationship to the land and the

49 S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, Verso, 1989), p. 24.

50 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 144.

forces that govern it in ever more opaque ways, the *olheiro* figure has become the ambiguous medium through which these seemingly irresolvable issues are being worked out.

MORTEN NIELSEN

Senior Researcher, National Museum of Denmark, Ny Vestergade 10, DK-1471 Copenhagen K, Denmark. E-mail: morten.nielsen@natmus.dk

MIKKEL BUNKENBORG

Associate Professor, Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Plads 8, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark. E-mail: msn512@hum.ku.dk

