

Antithesis without Thesis

Virtuality and its negation in Maputo, Mozambique

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Introduction

Through innovative explorations of the notion of 'virtuality', a rich body of anthropological work has documented the multiple and often unrealised layers of social life, e.g. by charting how different temporal moments (both futures and pasts) co-exist in the present as guiding tendencies. Following Gilles Deleuze, virtuality is thus understood as a 'reserve' of potentialities from which social life is actualised as series of becomings. In this presentation, I wish to extend our analytical understanding of virtuality by examining social life as its actualised negation. In particular, I will explore how multiple layers of reality (virtual and actual) co-exist through distance and negation rather than integration and confirmation. I build my argument on ethnographical data from Mozambique. In an attempt to leap into a socialist future, the ruling Frelimo party created the *Homem Novo* (New Man) immediately after Independence in 1975 as a figure devoted to the eternal revolution. As immoral antithesis, a peculiar cartoon figure, *Xiconboca*, was created to represent those moral aberrations which impeded the full realisation of the socialist utopia. Whereas the *Homem Novo* (and the socialist future) soon succumbed to the forces of neo-liberalism, the *Xiconboca* surprisingly continues to surface as antithesis to shattered but collective imaginaries. In other words, the *Xiconboca* indexes what it is *not* rather than what it is. Based on a detailed analysis of the *Xiconboca*, I shall consequently suggest that parallel worlds might co-exist as mutual negations and that social life is actualised through the distance (or void) which exists between them.

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 liberated zones in Mozambique's northern regions which constituted an equally intense combat zone where internal ideological struggles were fought on how to fast track an envisioned socialist future (Abrahamsson and Nilsson 1995:24-25). To be sure, the objective was not to reset Mozambique to some pre-colonial state. On the contrary, Frelimo defined a revolutionary agenda of creating a new 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) which 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 which 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, *Xiconboca*, was introduced on July 25, 1976, in the newspaper *O Tempo*. 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. The name *Xiconboca* is a neologism created of two words, *Chico* and *Nboca*. First, *Chico Feio* ('Xico' - Ugly Chico) was allegedly a dreaded agent from the Portuguese secret police, the PIDE (*Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado*). Second, in Tsonga languages spoken in Mozambique, *nboca* (or *nyoka*) is the word for snake. Hence, *Xiconboca* (or in English 'Chico the Snake') is basically an amalgamation of 'the conqueror's spy' (Buur 2010) with both quotidian and cosmological imageries of ambiguous dangers lurking in the vicinity. In 1979, Frelimo's Department for Ideological Work published a collection of *Xiconboca* comic strips with an accompanying description of its degenerate moral character (DTIPF 1979). The description states that,

Xiconboca symbolizes the internal enemy; those Mozambicans who, through their ideas and actions, serve the interests of the imperial enemy and thereby compromise the...revolutionary process in our country. *Xiconboca* is the traitor who leads Smith's racist troops in their attacks on our territory; the agitator and rumour-monger who sows confusion among the masses; the racketeer and speculator who consciously makes necessary products disappear in order to make an easy profit; the bureaucrat who complicates the lives of the workers, the marginal alcoholic and criminal; the lazy ganger who boycotts the production; the opportunist who focuses only on his own personal ambitions and uses every means possible to satisfy his needs; the racist, the tribalist, the regionalist. Those who defend the interests of capitalism and imperialism

are identified with the *Xiconboca* figure. As such, they need to be subjected to a revolutionary vigilance, identified, fought and neutralized.

The *Xiconboca* was associated primarily with the immoral vices of urban life which, according to Frelimo's political elite, had spread excessively during colonial rule (Hall and Young 1997:84; cf. 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 the 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 thus 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). Perhaps not surprisingly, Operation Production ended up as a complete failure which paralyzed the agricultural sector and disrupted systems of land distribution which had functioned since before the colonial rule.

During the 1980s, Frelimo's hard-core Marxist-Leninist stance became increasingly difficult to maintain. Already 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 sur-

rendered completely to the neo-liberal economic policies of international lending institutions with the well-known and severe consequences for the Mozambican population.

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 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). This statement can undoubtedly be read as an ironic commentary to the increasing informality of social life in Mozambique today. The IMF demanded that government spending be drastically reduced, and the only way for the Mozambican government to do 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. The solution for many state cadres was consequently to begin moonlighting or, more frequently, to use their posts as a means of generating an income from bribes to 'subsidise' their meagre salaries (Harrison 1999:544; Stasavage 2000:81). 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 manoeuvres within the municipality, my close friend Felix argued that 'Malaquias is like *Xiconhoca*... he knows how to talk to people... to access the system. Given that 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 (*xi-Changana kujenjha*) 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, such as when attacking human bo-

dies 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.¹

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 wholes 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 can be seen as analogue to 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.

Ontological distantiation

Whereas the emergence of the *Xiconhoca* figure can be explained as an effect of a modernist desire for a purified and independent African nation-state, we need to relate the peculiar phenomenon to a unique ontology of time existing in the southern part of Mozambique in order to account for its surprising tenacity. In the Changana-speaking region around Maputo, temporal progressions are frequently understood through the notion of *kuꞑama utomi* ('trying to build a life'). Although the concept literally suggests a movement towards the completion of a given project, this is surprisingly understood to occur within a temporal horizon that is defined by its inevitable collapse. We might fruitfully understand this temporal distinction by referring to the quotidian process of building houses in urban areas. In xiChangana, *kaya* is the concept which 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 which encompasses living as well as deceased members of a family. In contrast, *yindlò* is the material structure of a house;

¹ Although we might compare the *Xiconhoca* with the *dubriadur* of Guinea-Bissau (Vigh 2006) and the skillful master of the *jeitinbo* in Brazil (Barbosa 1995), there are significant differences. Whereas the latter two figures excel by navigating murky terrains like adept poachers (*pave* de Certeau 1984), the *Xiconhoca* figure asserts itself as a negation of any social order.

it refers to the bricks, wood and cement which go into creating the physical foundation for the family's social life. According to Mozambican urbanites, the city is not a place for creating a permanent home.² Maputo, the country's capital, is considered as a place of temporary opportunities and so people build houses in the city without creating homes. Eventually, they imagine, the momentary urban life established by building a *yindlò* will be replaced by the permanence of the *kaya* when returning to their natal place. At the same time, many residents also recognise that they will probably never be able to create a proper *kaya* at their place of origin. While they reject the idea of the city as a temporal terminus, it has become a permanent place of provisionality where interactions occur 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 *yindlò* in the city is thus traversed by the collapse of its endpoint; something which gives to the process a peculiar ephemerality. Through the absence of the *kaya*, a discontinuity is inserted within the layers of urban life that allows for a functional displacement of their internal organization. Whereas a permanent home – a *kaya* – constitutes the family's existence in an objectified form and therefore cannot be transacted, a temporary house is not encompassed by this cosmological order. Even if urbanites live their entire lives in what they take to be temporary houses, it is thus relatively unproblematic to invest in Maputo's burgeoning land market. By operating as a signifier of a fundamental temporal collapse, the image of a future elsewhere is what enables urban residents to calibrate their temporal orientation towards a shifting urban environment without sacrificing a notion of permanence. Put somewhat differently, we might argue that the permanent state of provisionality which is structured around the collapse establishes a dynamic synthesis between otherwise incompatible concepts. Whereas the notion of *kaya* contains an implicit distance to ideas of land transactions, the traces of its absence cause a reconfiguration of what a house might be. In this regard, the temporary house (like the *Xiconhoca*) is the after-effect of a future which collapsed before it was even realised (cf. Cooper 1998:128).

² 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 (2006:125), '[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'.

Hegelian traces

In his attempt to elaborate an ontology of difference, Deleuze distances himself from Hegelian dialectics where the essence of a thing lies in its contradiction and in the dissolution of that contradiction in order for the unity of identity to be synthesized into a third term. Rather than having identity as being dialectically identical to itself, Deleuze claims that identity is an actualization of multiple confused, inchoate and undetermined differences; a momentary contraction, if you will, of overlapping virtual tendencies which are known only by their effects (2004:261-264). As Deleuze tells us, the notion of virtual differences makes it impossible to maintain simple ideas of negation-in-identity because it introduces multiplicity into an otherwise fixed dialectical progression. In contrast to Hegelian dialectics, Deleuze's notion of virtual multiplicities consequently reveals how differences evolve beyond the sets they have been distributed into (Williams 2003:60).

What happens, then, when we consider the tenacity of Mozambican negativities, such as the *Xiconboca* and the *yindlò*, in relation to a Deleuzian ontology of difference? Surely, we are not dealing with a conventional dialectical contradiction given that the affirmative terms, i.e. the socialist utopia and the home built elsewhere, have collapsed entirely. And conversely, we can hardly define these peculiar phenomena purely as a 'swarm of differences, a pluralism of free, wild or untamed differences' which is how Deleuze describes his anti-Hegelian ontology (2004:61). Whereas Deleuze emphasizes the capacity for paradoxical associations to be made from a multiplicity of differences, *Xiconboca* and *yindlò* are both actualisations of an ontology of distance. Put somewhat differently, if an anti-Hegelian ontology describes flows of becoming through approximation and association, the Mozambican ontology of time outlined here shows how identities may arise through distance and negativity. Let me therefore suggest a formulation which allows for a distinction between a virtual flow of differences and their momentary actualisations while maintaining a notion of (non-dialectical) negativity. In Hegel's account, the negation that moves the dialectic is a 'determinate negation' which has its source in an immanent contradiction. Indeed, as argued by Nina Belmonte, 'both the opposition and the resolution that move the dialectic forward are already determined by the very identity of the previous moment, in accordance with its own ultimate form or purpose (*telos*)' (Belmonte 2002:23). However, as the Mozambican examples clearly show, affirmative terms may exhaust themselves, thus leaving the negation as the only remaining trace of that which will never be.

In contrast to the 'determinate negations' of Hegelian dialectics, this situation might best be described as instantiations of an 'intensive negativity' which displace themselves through an entire system by being what they are *not* rather than what they are. These movements, whereby the negative wedges itself in the social fabric, are made possible by the collapsed affirmative terms which calibrate the appropriate distance between negativity and environment. Hence, as an intensive negativity, the *Xiconhoca* may be operationalized in a variety of settings (e.g. during interactions with state officials or regarding alleged deviations from kinship-based moralities) but the immediate differentiating perspective is determined by the collapsed term which functions as the expressive instrument for negativity.³ We might take as an apt example the hesitancy and scepticism which is activated by the *Xiconhoca* figure. Although the initial opposition to a socialist utopia has gradually evaporated from quotidian usages, the negative dynamics - i.e. the way the *Xiconhoca* negates its environment - is aesthetically similar to the original contradiction. In a similar manner, the *yindlô* acquires its expressive dynamics through the idea of a permanent home which orients the actualization of temporary houses by making manifest what they are not. In a surprising inversion of conventional Hegelian dialectics, then, the affirmative term is paradoxically the way in which negativity and distance is apprehended whereas the negative as potentiality immanent to an ontology of time is shared by all, e.g. through the notion of *kuzama utomi* ('trying to build a life').

Concluding comments

Is it possible for something to be what it is by being what it is not? Might we imagine negativity without something to negate? In this presentation I have explored a particular Mozambican ontology of time which actualizes itself through negation of already collapsed end-points. As we saw regarding both the *Xiconhoca* and the *yindlô*, these intensive negativities wedge themselves into their environment by being what they are not and this has the immediate effect of establishing lacunae in the social fabric, irrespective of whether this pertains to an institutional organisation, a building process or even a human body. In a certain sense, then, we might consider negative potentialities as the dark side of Deleuzian becomings. Although they contract a

³ A similar distinction is to be found in discussions of Amazonian perspectivism between body (different) and spirit (the same) (Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2004)

multiplicity of overlapping virtual tendencies, they do so through distantiation and negation rather than affirmation and integration. Thus, the notion of intensive negativity invariably ends up inverting conventional relationship between emergence and social identity. In these particular instances, something is what it is because it has already prospectively collapsed. Phenomena, such as the *Xiconboca* and the *yindlô*, are thus liberated, so to speak, by their failed endpoints and remain as potent ontological forces capable of conjuring unique social universes by being what they are not.

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