

**Zeitschrift:** Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am  
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Herausgeber:** Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

**Band:** - (2020)

**Heft:** 36

  

**Artikel:** Entangled dichotomies : fieldnotes from Maputo, Mozambique

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-981448>

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*«Maputo seems to be defined, as most of the African cities, by frictions between opposite polarities that can be traced back to the longstanding historical tension between nature and culture.»*

ENTANGLED DICHOTOMIES —  
FIELDNOTES FROM  
MAPUTO, MOZAMBIQUE  
Silvia Balzan

It is six in the morning of a mid-summer day when I approach Maputo, the largest city of Mozambique, from the sky. Through my airplane window, I can only view empty fields and meager groups of trees: an exotic species that I cannot recall to have seen before. The city emerges clumsily from these fields, first as a continuous spread of suburban shantytowns and a few minutes later as a dense urban agglomeration that I can only glimpse from my seat. Maputo seems to be defined, as most of the African cities, by frictions between opposite polarities that can be traced back to the longstanding historical tension between nature and culture.

## I NATURE AND CULTURE, A NEW DIALECTIC RELATION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

«The New York Times», which I oddly find in the lobby of Maputo's airport, reminds me that we are living in the age of the Anthropocene, where a climate crisis calls for a revisited reading and overcoming of the inherent tension between the Western romantic idea of untouched, pure nature in antithesis to society.

In this era, human activities are massively altering the conditions of the living environment in a network of relations between human and non-human actors (Latour, 1993). Imagining alternative ways of relations between these actors starts from the re-definition of what social and natural is within the current discourse on science and environmental preservation. Thus, approaching Maputo, I wonder how African indigenous or marginalized cultures might not reproduce the nature-culture dualism in the same way as modern, urban societies have been doing since the colonial time. Indigenous alternative «ethnoepistemologies» (Descola & Palsson, 1996:4) often highlight conflicts with this understanding. It can be argued, for example, that the kind of nature Western sustainable ideologies «preserve» is, therefore, a social construct that we agree on nurturing and protecting, reproducing a perception of nature which is neither pure nor good, but highly political, shaped by social expectations. Natural space becomes a space of relations where the socio-cultural and material conditions at its borders are crucial.

According to human geography, a science that studies people in their interactions with the environment by examining their relations across space (Johnston, 2000), the definition of «space» in itself has taken new connotations. In 1988, Swiss geographer Benno Werlen introduces in his writings an «action-oriented geography» where the central role given to space in human geography has to be replaced by «action». Space, therefore, «[...] is neither an object nor an a priori, but a frame of reference for actions. Space has to be both an object of research and a meaningful constituent of «social processes», and processes can only be social if they involve human action.»

In the Anthropocene, nature and culture, central dogmas in anthropology for over forty years, stand one to the other in a new dialectical dialogue that requests the transcendence of many other increasingly problematic and long-sustained dichotomies which characterized the description of African cities in the past.

In other words, this bipolar tension works within the scope of this article, as a pretext to critically discuss simplistic binary definitions of African urbanities and search for alternative, emergent narratives.

## II POLANA CANIÇO BEYOND THE DICHOTOMY OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL

I drop «The New York Times» on a crooked bench outside the airport to take a taxi to the city center. I depart from a sprawl of shacks that border the area spotting in the distance «a cidade do cimento» (The City of Cement).

It is pitch dark when I finally enter a posh air-BnB mansion, rented for only 30 Euros in Polana Caniço, a district of Maputo that shatters any attempt to label it with preconceived terms such as formal or informal. The booming urbanism of Polana Caniço demands to leave these polarities behind and identify other potential analytical approaches to the city.

Formerly outside the Portuguese colonially derived «cidade do cimento», Polana Caniço was planned to be the northern expansion of Laurenço Marques, now Maputo. Despite the colonial plans, after Mozambique's independence in 1975, the area has been occupied by indigenous African city dwellers «informally» who established the so-called «cidade do caniços» (City of Reeds).

Today the district is going through a process of gentrification, encouraged by the administration that favors private-public investments and does not recognize present inhabitants. They are mostly XiRhonga speaking civil war refugees who built their urban huts, called «palhotas», that over the years turned into structures of wood and zinc. Those houses are now being replaced by gated communities, a shopping mall, and elite free-standing mansions as in Sommerschield, an adjacent district.

The area is at risk of flooding, and this is the official reason why «the municipality never granted the residents of this unplanned section tenure security for their houses and hence denied their applications for usufructuary title DUAT<sup>(1)</sup>» (Heer, 2019: 150). Currently, inhabitants are temporarily dislocated in the suburbs with the promise to be relocated one day in the newly built high-rise buildings erected by private investors. The process of gentrification is inevitable, and people feel disregarded by the municipality, which does not consider their rights, whilst undergoing high lucrative land transactions with private foreign investors.

After spending the night in Polana Caniço, I decide to have a walk and explore the surroundings of Avenida Marginal, where I take the first picture which accompanies this article.

The first image (Fig. 1) illustrates a construction plot of a private house that I notice while walking along the border between Sommerschield and Polana Caniço. The picture

(1) *There is no private ownership of land in Mozambique. Land is property of the State. The Land Law, however, grants private persons the right to use and benefit from the land known as «Direito do Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra» (DUAT).*



(Fig. 1) Construction site in Polana Caniço, Maputo, Mozambique, 2019. Photography: Silvia Balzan



(Fig. 2) Tree in Avenida Armando Tivane, Maputo, Mozambique, 2019. Photography: Silvia Balzan



Palm in Rua Henrique Lopes Mendonça, Maputo, Mozambique, 2019. Photography: Silvia Balzan

reveals the ambiguous nature of the site that appears to be <not-professionally> organized. The building seems to take shape in a somewhat unstable manner, which makes it impossible to foresee the potential completion of the work. The structure, though, attempts to follow ordinary concrete construction techniques and basic modernist architecture principles. The construction is unfinished, and the site abandoned: a remarkable example of the hybridity of this area <in transition> where an interplay between different spatial projects takes place: «diverse urban dwellers' agentic possibilities, property developers' aspirations, capitalist resources, and the state's visions and its capacities.» (Heer, 2019:148) I wonder about the story behind the construction of this building that seems to be neither initiated by wealthy foreign investors favored by the local administration nor by African spontaneous settlers. The intervention appears instead to be a vernacular attempt to stay on track with a <new-middle-class urbanism> model imposed by the gentrification that reclaims the occupied land evicting the previous occupants.

Sommerschield's and Polana Caniço's gentrified expansion started in the '90s and is commonly called by Maputo citizens <a cidade nova> (The New City). Intended to follow the neoliberal global urban development model in Maputo, <a cidade nova> has developed different facets, puzzling those who try to segregate a part of the city to a single urban <imaginary>, wiping away the city's layered history. <A cidade nova> hence moves beyond the old City of Cement-City of Reed's duality. The first picture visually documents this impossibility to confine the portrayed subject into formal and informal categorizations. The tree in the center of it resonates with the organicity of the gloomy concrete structure in the background as if the two things spoke the same language: the tree as being part of an «architecture without architects.» (Rudovksy, 1964)

The conventional dualistic discourse on African cities needs to go above and beyond the pure physicality of the urban structure to explore new narratives provided by the citizens <imaginaries> of urbanity. <Imaginaries> are here intended in «Castoriadis' terms as the perpetually unstable constellations of meaning that are the result of the human capacity to create.» (Castoriadis, 1987 in Bertelsen, Tvedten, Roque, 2014: 2754)

### III TREES AS ANCESTORS: INDIGENOUS ETHNOEPISTEMOLOGIES AND WESTERN ONTOLOGIES

From Polana Caniço I take a taxi towards the City of Cement. After a twenty-minute ride in the traffic of Avenida Marginal, I reach Avenida J. Nyerere. There I start wondering around the core of Maputo, where the modernist legacy of Portuguese colonization is more visible in its urban grid structure. It is while strolling along Avenida Tivane, a quiet street close to the art market, that I take the other pictures that accompany this article.

The second picture (Fig. 2) captures a tree that attracts my attention for what is hanging on it. The tree represents a sort of urban totem, an actual landmark in the urban-scape. A series of obituaries and advertisements cover the robust trunk, which becomes a free public space for

communication. The tree seems to emerge from the paved walkway as if nature was reclaiming its space in the urban, domesticated landscape. The cement tiles of the walkway crumble under the strength of the tree roots that surface from the red natural soil concealed by the harsh cement.

A more in-depth reading of the second image asks for an enhanced understanding of the historical conception of natural elements among indigenous people in Mozambique. The function taken by trees, although situated in an urban context, is connected to symbolic systems linked with ancestral figures.

Even nowadays, natural elements in Southern Mozambique, particularly trees and tree groves, assume a specific cultural and historical significance for the indigenous population of the area. Processes of interpretations and memorializations of local ancestors transcend the Western nature-culture dichotomy «by articulating physical aspects of space and nature in networks of social relations» (Dores Cruz, 2014: 3).

Among the Mozambican indigenous population of the rural Mandlakazi region, the worlds of humans, ancestors, and nature blend into each other. In contrast, in Western perception, the social and symbolic relations between humans, natural elements, and the sacred are usually in stark disjunction. Official narratives of the states, based primarily on Western-type monuments as statues of official heroes, are replaced by natural elements in the construction of memory and local community history.

Within the rural archaeological sites called <khokholo>, individual trees represent specific ancestors, and it is in front of these trees that ritual ceremonies take place. When an important figure in the village is buried, his or her belongings are hung on the tree trunk. «The tree is simultaneously an altar and the visualization of the ancestor.» (Dores Cruz, 2014: 3).

The tree captured in this picture can be considered an urban adaptation of the ancestors' trees. Obituaries and rituals for the <house> of the spirit resonate with each other. Urban trees preserve a symbolic meaning, although artificially planted in the cement pavement of Maputo's Avenidas.

The third image (Fig. 3) was taken only a few meters away from the previous one. The baby palm planted in the paved walkway this time is neatly standing in the position where it was planned to be, waiting to occupy the place reserved for nature in the city.

The two last images (Fig. 2–3) are an exemplification of the tension between local ethnoepistemologies, cosmologies and Western ontologies. Whilst Fig. b shows a traditional understanding of the tree as <altar> in the urban context, Fig. c shows the attempt to domesticate nature by purging trees from their traditional meaning and translate it into the Western dialectics of nature/urban-scape.

### IV DE-COLONIZING THE DESCRIPTION OF AFRICAN CITIES: OVERCOMING CONCEPTUAL DUALISMS

This article encourages the renewal of the description of African cities in the academic discourse, which should aim to go beyond the preconceived dichotomies described above of

formal/informal urban development, indigenous/Western ontologies, and the resulting binary understandings applied to African cities as indigenous/colonized, colonizer/settler, high/low culture, colonial/postcolonial. Ultimately the text looks critically at the friction between the broader concepts of nature/culture.

Assembling different scholars' perspectives, the article highlights firstly the necessity to include indigenous «ways of seeing», that consider local interpretations of nature and culture as bound together, thus supporting the attempt to de-center the discipline of anthropology (Harrison, 1997) and urban planning.

Secondly, the article analyses the obsolescence of the formal/informal dualism to describe urban situations like the one in Polana Caniço, a booming district of Maputo. One of the possibilities of dismantling this opposition might reside in the encouragement of alternative ways of economic exchange as «Karl Polanyi's reciprocity, redistribution, and market» presented in Jenkins' text *Beyond the Formal/Informal Dichotomy* (2004).

Thirdly, I offer the point of view of Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, Inge Tvedten, Sandra Roque (2014), and Barbara Heer (2019), which recalls the importance of the «imagined city» versus the «physical city».

The «terrain of the urban imaginary» (2014); the phenomenological perception of the urban-scape where people «dwell-in» (Ingold, 2005); people's own «spaces of representation» (Lefebvre, 2003)—spatial meanings emerged from local social life, constitute a «spatial trichotomy» (2014) altogether. People's «discursive dynamics» on the potentiality of Maputo's urban space as experienced in their everyday practices are outcomes of an appropriated or rejected notion of this trichotomy.

Subverting dichotomies implies taking into consideration people's desires, «imaginaries of (and in) the urban», and conceiving African cities as «cities of entanglements» (Heer, 2019) ambivalent and contradictory, beyond long-standing polarities.