Time and Again
Locality as Future Anterior in Mozambique
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War and Politics

June 2014. Mozambique is technically at war again. The country has enjoyed two decades of peace since a post-civil-war agreement between the Marxist government of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and the guerrillas of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) ended a fifteen-year-long devastating conflict that was emblematic of “hot” struggles fought within the context of the Cold War. At present, the two former enemy camps in the war are the two main parties in the country’s democratic system, yet every event of local or general electoral politics, its ritualized competition of sublimated violence and its secrecy, evokes the dynamics and discourse of the war. At the elite level, chicaneries, animosity, and pressure, as well as negotiation, saturate the political sphere; at the local level of the majoritarian rural population, the dread of a possible, certain, return to war reemerges in the form of rumors about local political alliances having been broken, the resurgence of spirits and other invisible forces, or the circulation of information of concealed deposits of weapons from the war in the 1980s, buried underground, ready to be used.

In Mozambique, general elections are scheduled to take place in October 2014. The levels of contention have reached unprecedented levels. Since early 2013, small RENAMO platoons have carried out sporadic attacks against military and civilian targets. A year ago, RENAMO moved its headquarters back to the Sorongosa Mountains, the mythic and symbolic center of a civil war that articulated material and spiritual war machines, visible and invisible forces. As local elections approached, the combats became more frequent, and this month FRELIMO attacked the compound. The RENAMO leader, Alfonso Dhaklama, escaped, and his party declared the end of the peace agreements of 1994.

In its analysis of the conflict, the international media emphasize political struggles, the deficiencies of the democratic system, the inaccuracy of its constitutional division of powers, its mechanisms of distribution of resources, or political and military maneuvers. Yet something crucial that is seldom highlighted and remains relatively obscured is the fundamental role that the
level of locality—that is, the realm of the rural customary—has played within this dialectics among violence, law, and the political throughout Mozambique’s recent postcolonial political history.

**Locality/Customary**

The regional standard to compare all processes of postconflict conditions, collective memory, and transitional justice in sub-Saharan Africa is constituted by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The success, failure, or shortcomings of its mandate; its procedures; and its final report have been widely debated from different perspectives. Across the border, in Mozambique, a related yet paradoxically different process has taken place in the last twenty years through the connected modes of democratic transition and transitional justice.

Besides national union, what is lacking today in Mozambique is—as some local organic intellectuals put it in interviews I conducted—“a process of reconciliation between the people and the state.” Emerging from a bloody civil war and eighteen years of an Afro-socialist experiment, the Mozambican state began a deep process of legal and administrative reform in the late 1990s. This extensive postwar legal reform, which to a large extent was engineered and funded by foreign donors, was aimed at developing the internationally mandated goals of decentralization, democratization, and rule of law. In this process, an ambiguous legal recognition crucial to the politics of state decentralization was accorded by the state to the realm of the “customary” and its authorities. Through policies such as the recognition of chiefs and the legal redefinition of local “custom” in terms of the global neoliberal category of “community,” the state implicitly engaged with the past and its legacies of violence. Indeed, this legal engineering constituted a revision of a most conflictive political history and functioned as a politics of memory whereby the state attempted, through new legislation and legal inscriptions, to rewrite late colonial and postcolonial history, harnessing it toward the project of a democratic future.

In the absence of large, state-sponsored theaters of truth and reconciliation, this juridico-political recognition of locality can be seen as an attempt to develop an implicit policy of national understanding. This process, which produced a new narrative on the recent trajectory of the nation-state, also represents a politics of mourning. Yet this condition, which could be defined as a process of “reconciliation without truth,” begs the question of an impossible
mourn. If mourning takes place within certain time limits that establish the threshold of the future around the certainty of the presence of the (dead) body, then certain African nations such as Mozambique, lacking in a process of materialization of memory, could be defined as pathological, “melancholic” states. These nonplaces of memory open up complex spaces for a reflection on futurity, temporal territories where the modes of repetition and the return of past figures and practices under new guises seem to shape the contours of the political, time and again. Who hegemonizes this process? Who controls the flow of this politics of time?

The melancholic return of the customary has been a central feature in many postwar conditions in Africa, especially in the field of transitional justice. Within this context, Mozambique presents some highly salient and original features. Even though a large number of local chiefs provided crucial support to FRELIMO’s anticolonial guerrilla war, the socialist regime led by FRELIMO after independence in 1975 dismantled the system of “customary” authorities and laws, repressing all “traditional” ritual and magico-religious practices. Numerous scholars and political leaders, both inside and outside Mozambique, have underscored FRELIMO’s fierce repression of “customary” authority, law, and ritual as one of the main causes for the explosion of the civil war (Geffray 1990). At present, different works of memory and different juridico-political practices of commemoration are overlapping “on the ground.” The power of chiefs as juridico-political authorities is still widespread in the rural areas; initiation rites shape subjectivities, and legal institutions created by the party-state regime combine aspects of a socialist ethos with supposedly antithetic “customary” norms. Various local temporalities and regional historical narratives about the recent articulations of war and history resignify, contest, or oppose the new hegemonic narratives promoted by the state.

Yet the realm of the customary far exceeds the restricted space of chieftaincy, where it is usually circumscribed. As ethnographic examples presented later in this chapter show, the fields of ritual, magic, rumor, and legend are fundamental axes of the customary, usually articulated as more or less coherent local politics around various grammars of “kinship.”

The state-sponsored legal reform also aimed at recognizing a majority of the country’s “customary” courts, which are informal instances of various sorts (mosques, Zionist churches, associations of healers, neighbors’ and elders’ councils, and chieftains). The rationale of this reform regarding processes of informal conflict resolution was enacted through encounters between “traditional” and Western imaginaries of power and between law and sacredness. Both
“customary” authority, on the one hand, and diverse traditional spiritual practices, on the other, are also deeply embedded in the legacies of colonialism and Socialism. The colonial regime shaped the realm of the “customary” and repressed the spirit cults, while the postcolonial government, labeling them as “obscurantism,” attempted to do away with both in favor of an enlightened “rational modernization.”

Moreover, as RENAMO mobilized numerous chiefs across the country against the government, these chiefs restructured certain expressions of “customary” rule and also reinstated traditional practices, such as diverse spirit cults. The civil “war of spirits” (Wilson 1992) thus further extends the connections among violence, spiritual forms of healing, and “customary” rule. In today’s democratic context, shared by the two former camps in the war, the state’s recognition of the legitimacy of these practices is an implicit way of dealing with a most disturbing past and constitutes the background of the current process of peace building.

As it has been extensively documented, the domain of the “customary” was central to colonial governance in Africa, later becoming crucial in postcolonial reforms of the state and citizenship. The reappraisal of the legality of custom and chieftaincy was central to an implicit politics of recognition and reconciliation, also constituting a fundamental, if striking, feature of the postsocialist transition from civil war toward a liberal democratic regime in Mozambique. Yet this process is shot through with deep ambiguity, presenting entwined relations between law and violence, illustrating the way in which the might immanent to juridical right—the force of law—at the same time enables and interrupts the process of legal recognition (Derrida 2002).

For the sake of a pragmatic political calculation, the state implemented a politics of recognition in the early 2000s that reproduced the simulacrum of “traditional” juridico-political practices and authorities deeply involved in the history of colonial dominance. The limits to this recognition of difference were given not only by this fetishization of the past and its figures but by a political history marked by violence from colonial oppression and civil war. This history of enforcement of state law encompasses the role of the local “customary” chief as a depository of colonial repression as well as the punishments enacted under “customary” laws, which at times collide with human rights and international law while reflecting a larger process of continuity between the arbitrary violence of both colonial and postcolonial regimes.

The realm of the customary—chieftaincy, segmented communities, magic, and ritual—occupied a central role not only in late colonial times but also during the first years of socialism
and the war. Let us examine a brief example of how current segmented reformulations of the meaning of this recent history, understood as a process of difference and repetition, frame the unfolding of state politics in the locality.

**Locality I: Segmentation and Local Politics**

Angoche, the ancient capital of a Sultanate established in the seventeenth century in today’s Nampula province, is a town located 250 kilometers away from the provincial capital. In 2004, I interviewed the newly elected RENAMO mayor of Angoche along with a young local FRELIMO politician. The mayor offered a delicately woven history of the region, from ancient precolonial times to the moment of conquest, and a political explanation of the civil war—a story that, the young FRELIMO cadre said, with its emphasis on historical difference along ethnic lines of conflict, “put in question the feasibility of democracy in Africa.”

The mayor had started his political activity as a young FRELIMO cadre after independence in Angoche. He occupied various positions in local administrative units until the early 1980s, when he became the head of the local state company that produced cashew nuts. He worked in the Portuguese-run cashew factories at a time when Nampula was the largest-producing province in the country.

His trajectory in managing both local state units and state-owned productive companies encompassed political changes that dovetail with the dynamics of historical difference in the region. In 2000, the mayor switched allegiances and joined RENAMO, as did other high- and lower-ranking officers of the FRELIMO forces in the province. One night, close to the date of local elections, as we were discussing matters with the mayor and local FRELIMO politicians, he sought for his to appear amicable, as he seemed to want to leave the possibility of future negotiations open.

The night in which we spoke at length, the mayor deployed a tale of circulation and politics. He spoke for hours about the movements of currency and commodities, the traffic in slaves, the subsequent incursions of foreign sovereigns—Arabs, Portuguese—into the coastal region, the colonial military campaigns, their advancements and retreats. Developing a regional version of national history, he materialized armies, navies, trading expeditions, multitudes of enslaved workers, the meandering trajectory of regional military, economic and political elites.

The mayor explained regional and national divisions and enmities through versions of
historical facts. He spoke about social divisions in the province, segmentary splits (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987) between Makhuwa groups from the coast and those from the hinterland, cultural differences that find their expression in political, partisan struggles or quarrels within factions of one single party. The mayor attributed this opposition to the historical process by which local Makhuwa elites who trafficked in slaves settled in the coastal areas in the eighteenth century, capturing people from the hinterland that they would sell to Arab trading elites from the Sultanate, centered in Angoche and nearby islands.

The conversation then switched toward issues of ethnicity. The young FRELIMO officer referred to various different groups, their age-old aspirations and novel forms of organization, and the way in which an ethnic revival, generated by the deregulation and decentralization of the former socialist state apparatus, was then sweeping the nation, from local politics in the north to struggles among white, mulatto, and black intellectual, political, and economic elites in Maputo. The discussion of the reethnicization of the political and neonativistic ideologies echoed the political climate in the province at the time, marked by a revivalist notion that at long last the north, relegated from political power and control of the economy since independence by the FRELIMO southern elites, finally had a possibility of attaining a larger share of recognition and management of resources.

The ongoing policies of decentralization of the state—and FRELIMO’s need to reach out to emergent movements that suffused local politics with the reappraisal of elements from local language, ethnicity, and religion that had been dismissed by the nationalist postindependence regime—generated a reinforcement of “local power,” or different versions of the “customary” that reemerged as legitimate, even if deeply ambiguous, modes of governance. This economy of differences, its effect in terms of regional variations, was addressed that night by the mayor in terms of an interpretation of relations between politics and war produced through the lens of custom: “The civil war took place because African ideology demands reciprocity. There was one given sector or faction that was accumulating too much power and resources, absolutely marginalizing other sectors. They were consuming, eating everything without sharing with the others.”

He presented an interpretation of the civil war that emphasized the original split in FRELIMO ranks and the officers who formed RENAMO a few years into the postindependence period. He placed the relevance of this historical fact over the crucial early support that
RENAMO received from Lisbon and former Portuguese settlers, as well as from the South African apartheid regime and the CIA. In his account of recent history, the war had been more of a local process, a regional type of conflict along ethnic or customary lines, than an epiphenomenon from Cold War dynamics.

The mayor located at the root of so much conflict and terror the alienation supposedly felt by vast groups within the Mozambican population, particularly in the center and north of the country. It was a hypothesis similar to those presented by Christian Geffray (1990), who, following his field research in Nampula in the mid-1980s, had explained the support lent to RENAMO by rural populations in the countryside in terms of their rejection of the central state’s policies against the “customary” and chiefs, as well as the program of collective villages implemented in order to restructure both kinship formations and the rural economy.

Yet the mayor’s version of the history of the war, while also assuming the northern regions’ rejection of FRELIMO party-state policy, located its roots in different factors: ethnicity and segmentation. In his account, war was waged by groups such as the Sena—the dominant group in the central regions—which were ethnically and culturally different from the southern Shangana elites who had led FRELIMO since the days of the anticolonial war and had ruled the country since independence. These groups had allegedly felt alienated for years from the distribution of power and resources organized by southern elites, unleashing what amounted to an ethnico-cultural conflict. He reinforced his view, in which political parties, war machines, and ethnicity seemed to dovetail across similar cleavages: “FRELIMO did not circulate the revenues, they did not reciprocate; given African ideology it was obvious that we would lean towards war.”

Yet the account was given backward. History seemed to be thought and debated from the vantage point of the present juncture, from the perspective of the votes that have given RENAMO the electoral hegemony in the province. There was, at the time, a consensus within the public sphere at both the national and regional levels that to achieve hegemony in the political present, the battle over the narration of recent history first had to be won. Hence the political present as a continuation of a past of warfare across segmentary divisions—of ethnic groups, of clans—was shaped by contemporary conundrums of power and law.

By the end of that long night in which we talked at length, the mayor spoke about the two opposing political camps while subtly implying the resilience of the customary and its segmentary dynamics, which constituted the main, underlying local political structure,
encompassing the seeming political transformations of changing allegiances toward parties and state units. It was a recognition of the crucial role of segmentation in local politics and the opposition that the segmentary community had always exerted against all forms of centralized political power in the region, from the time of the Sultanate to the colonial state and its postcolonial, socialist successor.

Toying with two empty glasses, switching their positions to represent FRELIMO and RENAMO tactics, he smiled dizzily and said, “It is always the same. It seems as though it changes, but nothing ever actually changes.”

**Time/Space: Of the Customary**

The “customary” as an oral domain of norms has always been a concept defined by the state in opposition to its official written codes and legislation. This key issue also signals to the apparent arbitrariness of violence deployed under “customary” law, which is supposedly not regulated as in codified state legislation. Yet this field appears to be crucial for the state to perform its functions. Through the demarcation of this allegedly external realm by means of constant research and inscription, the colonial state actually delimited itself. After a postcolonial interregnum, this invocation of the “customary” for self-fashioning has been reproduced at present: in rural areas and urban centers—through ritual-political and religious ceremonies of recognition of the “customary” or juridical-historiographic discourses, such as the contents of legal reform—the state deploys an ambiguous politics of memory, harnessing a version of history and an imaginary of natural law and sacred violence linked to war that fuels the legitimacy of the state apparatus itself. Through the juridical reconstruction of the realm of rural “custom,” the urban Afro-modern sphere actually shapes itself and, through a double movement, both differentiates and distances itself from the space of customs and tradition while implicitly drawing its political legitimacy vis-à-vis local political actors and international donors from the very existence of that realm.

Nevertheless, both spheres, the urban and the rural, are contiguous not only in spatio-temporal terms but also in economic and political terms, and the interconnections between both are so profuse that the distinction really only exists at an abstract, administrative level. The traffic of continuities and links along the rural-urban continuum denies the state’s construction of differentiated spaces and temporalities separated by a tangible border. Their differentiation along
social segregation, economic enclaves, labor reserves, and development corridors, which goes back to colonial governmental policies, is merely a matter of juridical discourse. This depiction of difference is not merely an abstraction that (mis)represents the actual state of things, but rather it is itself a discursive practice that has palpable effects on the real; through its expression in the juridical instruments, it reveals itself both as a technology of state power and as a productive discourse that structures the political field itself. The rural-urban administrative distinction, as the neoliberal creation of the juridical concept of “community” shows, is a dangerous supplement to local collective memories and their charge of remembrances, of spectral, absent/present pasts projected onto the near future.

Locality, as the space of the colonial “customary” or the neoliberal-democratic “community,” appears thus as the place of a future anterior: a condition in which current practices of governance bring together elements from the past and a still-emergent present and in which the alchemy of precolonial, colonial, and early postcolonial temporalities are enmeshed.

**Locality II: Customary against the State**

Toward the end of our interview, in mid-2004, the mayor of Angoche alluded to the widespread gossip in the region about the local government’s debts and its involvement in the propagation of cholera. Stretching his ambiguous place as mediator between camps, he attributed the escalation of rumors and covert accusations to undefined “opposition groups.”

A few days earlier, I had spoken with the former FRELIMO mayor. He had told me, complaining with a regretful grimace, that during the electoral campaign of the previous year, in the light of a local state campaign to purify water with chlorum, RENAMO groups had spread the word that he had gone to the city of Nampula to “buy cholera” and infest the town’s running water with it. Soon thereafter, the rumors expanded to encompass other corpses, trafficking in people, and disappearances: an antigovernment sentiment had begun to expand throughout the province.

If recent theorizations on biopolitics have analyzed ways in which the law captures life as an object of governance (cf. Agamben 1998), customary notions of life and the living that exist on the ground unfold through a resilient materiality that presents a strong counterpoint. Being based on singular conceptualizations of the body and the relations between its flesh and the realms of kinship, ancestrality, and spirituality, they might be considered a reversal of the
biopolitical paradigm, showing how, momentarily, the local turns the tables against broad schemes of governance and in precarious, provisional ways, life might capture the law for its own purposes.

In order to look at another angle of the predicament of African democracy as a balancing act between the politics of life and death, let us consider, through the specific case of Mozambique, another aspect of the continuities between war and the political, or between colonial and postcolonial social dramas, through something that might be called the “folklore of biopolitics”—that is, local imaginations of the governance of the body.

In 2004, during my fieldwork in peri-urban and rural areas in Nampula province around the time of local elections, the mysterious appearances of corpses and body parts, as well as rumors about the disappearances of children in the region, generated a chaotic social context that achieved its zenith with the emergence of widespread gossip that the “state knew everything” regarding these events and the culprits. “The government,” so the buzz went, “knows the identities of the criminals and is their accomplice.” Soon afterward, in northern cities and in nearby rural areas, the accusations were interpreted as the return of the “Chupasangue” vampire (Meneses 2008).

The Chupasangue, or Bloodsucker, was a vampire figure whose myth emerged in the northern region for the first time around 1977 (cf. Serra 2003). Experts have underlined the connections between the legend on extraction of blood, or life, and the establishment of *Grupos Dinamizadores* (GDs), Marxist party state units and the beginning of primary care medical services and blood donation campaigns implemented by FRELIMO in the northern rural countryside. Other versions of the myth implied that strangers attacked people at night and extracted blood with from their heads with syringes. In 1978, local rural populations in the north would stay up all night chanting and clapping ritual hymns in order to ward off the vampires and foreign beings. It was at that time that a certain economy that entangled bodily fluids and governance begun to take shape: it was widely assumed that the extracted blood was used to fund the consolidation of the new independent status of the country, which was somehow related to the stocking of hospitals. The myth also supported connections between blood and money: the trade in vital bodily fluids, it was also believed, financed the creation of a new currency (in 1980, the metical replaced the colonial escudo as the national currency).

The imaginary of a war that ended in 1991 continued to permeate regional politics in the
years to come. The early 1990s were marked by deep social tension in Nampula. As in other parts of the country, RENAMO’s boycott of the local elections was associated, by large sectors of the population, with the danger of a return to war: it was widely believed that RENAMO leaders were retreating to their former military garrisons. Rumors about large deposits of weapons buried underground, ready to be used, proliferated in the region.

Meanwhile, the spread of a cholera epidemic created even further alarm and turmoil in the rural and peri-urban areas. In this context, several events took place that would produce, as a common effect, an indictment of the state.

In some of the most densely populated urban neighborhoods in Nampula, where I was conducting research on justice and customary law, a rumor began expanding rapidly, affirming that the first care units were, in actuality, centers for the propagation of cholera. The government was allegedly behind a mega-operation to exterminate a large part of the population. Another rumor started spreading immediately afterward, based on supposed information about Europeans vaccinating children in schools, killing them on the spot by means of strange substances. In the face of the outburst of cholera, a government program of water purification was implemented in the city of Nampula. New rumors emerging in peri-urban neighborhoods had it that, actually, the government was adding cholera to the water under the pretext of cleaning it.

An economy of death soon reemerged. The corpses of people who died of cholera were not being returned to their relatives but rather kept in plastic bags to be disposed. The families were not allowed to visit their sick relatives at the hospitals, did not receive the bodies, and hence were unable to perform the proper cleansing and burying ceremonies. In Nampula and Angoche, covert information spread quickly about the alleged fact that the government was using the corpses of the cholera victims, as well as all the blood and organs supposedly extracted, to pay back the interest on the national debt to foreign donors.

Soon, two new facts would be uncovered that located these key social processes in a relational space between the “customary” and the “state.” Evidence was found by the police, throughout the province, of practices of bodily violence. Corpses, sometime dismembered or presenting signs of torture; body parts; organs; and hearts were uncovered in the midst of both rumors about and solid denunciation of the disappearance of people—in particular, children. Although these findings seemed to lend some credibility to the ever-expanding rumors, after a deeper investigation, the two conclusions to which these discoveries led were related to
“traditional” local practices and party politics. The bodily remains that were found were allegedly intended for use in ritual practices of sorcery. As in the recent past, healers and some of their “clients” were imprisoned, accused of ordering the killings and dismembering dead bodies. The second significant datum was that the groups of people initially detained in connection to these ritual crimes were “RENAMO militants.”

With the impending ritual of the secret ballot and the recurring accusations against it of nontransparency, fraud, and hidden maneuvers, other forms of political secrecy were also mobilized. Intentions and ultimate goals were duplicitous; nobody in the “public” sphere knew who was propagating the rumors, where they had started, or what aims they pursued. Was it the spontaneous work of a local “community”? Was it propelled by RENAMO? Or was it all staged as an ultimate ruse of political reason by the government itself? Both political parties blamed each other for the violent effects that the myth produced. Local modes of sociability understood as a scheme of debt relations spilled onto the field of the political. The various meanings of narratives being projected coalesced for a moment on the idea that the “government” was paying back its foreign debt with corpses. This mythic explanation for the governmental management of the effects of an epidemic made visible, for an instant, undercurrents within the space of the “customary” that dealt with the outcome of war and the effects of a new system imposed by strange foreign actors, a new political landscape of democratic electoral politics and structural adjustment policies.

**Conclusion: Future Anterior**

The resurgence of the customary represents a crucial aspect of the transition between colonial and postcolonial regimes throughout Africa. This political context shows how jurisprudence can be understood as constituting both a legal reform of the state and an implicit official historical narrative fit to revisit a recent, most conflictive, past. Since the democratic transition of the 1990s, the Mozambican state has been reflecting on the legacies of colonialism,

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6 Information for this section is based on the aforementioned volume by Carlos Serra, newspapers and television news from 2004, and interviews and observations I carried out with local dwellers and state officials during fieldwork in Nampula’s outskirts around the time of the events narrated here.
socialism, and the civil war as the historical conditions of its democratic present, through the relations between the poles of violence and the law, as well as between the “modern” and the “archaic.”

Based on this process of reflection, expressed in the state’s juridical discourse, two political conditions are thus unfolding in parallel: a broad politics of recognition and an alleged, deep process of reconciliation. But this analogical politics contains a fundamental paradox, which is best conveyed through the grammatical (and political) figure of the future anterior. The aporia consists in a situation whereby a postcolonial liberal democracy that enforces a modernist legislation, representing it as progressive and oriented toward the future, embraces the violent legacies of colonialism entrenched within the allegedly past-oriented modalities of “traditional authority” and “customary” law.

The juridical reform of the state granted citizenship rights to a broad, ethnically diverse population, promoting a subtle articulation of future-oriented constitutionalism with past-oriented “custom,” which also constituted a problematic dialectic between bylaws with potential for emancipation and fierce, authoritarian statutes from the past. This operation of legal reform produces a conundrum: a future anterior time in which the modern—liberal democracy, citizenship rights—necessarily “will have been” traditional, uncovering “custom” as the telos of postcolonial history.

The contemporary moment seems to blend all possible epochs into a condition of potential becoming. The articulation of a diverse array of juridical regimes representing the colonial past and postcolonial present are mixed in schemes of governance into which insinuates itself the ghost of the “precolonial.” This is the precedent of the “customary,” the space of locality currently defined as “community.”

Within the postsocialist, neoliberal regime’s recognition of the “customary,” the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial epochs appear as almost indistinguishable historical moments within a deeper present. The dialectical circuit of governance that merges the various levels and epochs produces a leftover. The ongoing political operation of subtraction of the future from the past gives as its result a surplus of historical meaning.

The recognition of locality represented a late liberal technology of governance (negotiated between the postsocialist elites and the donor agencies) as well as a recognition of the force and legitimacy of customary structures after the role they played in the violence of the
civil war. It was also a response to a broad demand from local populations, which express that force of custom under various formations of imagination, ritual, and power.

As an infinite negativity seemingly interrupting all potential movement toward future progress, the current manifestations of the precolonial in terms of local authority, or as ritual practices and imaginations, cannot be fully assimilated into the official “recognition” enforced by the state. Crucial elements of violence and magic, central to the realm of the customary, cannot be articulated by the juridical reforms of the modern secular state and constitute an excess that undermines the process of “rule of law” and the foundations of the democratic regime that aim at encompassing all historical difference.

The neocolonial elements within the contemporary—political, economic, “developmental” in its structural adjustment variety—reproduce historical aspects of a colonial legacy (law, “custom,” economic extraction) that are tamed through the contingency of current politics. Both the broad field of governance (development, population management) and the restricted field of the locality (indigeneity, custom) seem to project a condition in which all possible imaginations of the future cannot represent anything other than a repetition of past schemes—that is, time and again, the eternal return of the same. Current technologies of governance—democratic transition, structural adjustment, juridical recognition of local custom—aim at transforming the infinite openness of the future into the closed circuit of a future anterior.

Yet the present moment appears to represent something novel, located beyond the mere label of the neocolonial. To be sure, an element of foreignness is at stake: the “neoliberal,” “transnational” moment related to the absolutism of markets, speculation, economic fragmentation, and restraint of national sovereignty. This foreign vector intervenes at every level—central, “local”—shaping the outcome of the political, from the ministerial and developmental capital city of dark financial flows to the rural countryside of the “customary” villages.

Through postsocialist juridical reform, the state claims to be able to process all historical remainders and subsume all negativity back into the dialectical system of governance. It attempts, for instance, to subsume the absolute explosion of “local” difference that emerged out of the transition after socialism: be it ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political, or “customary.” Yet the result of this operation is still unclear. As of yet, there is no answer to whether the movement
of difference can be halted, consolidating a hegemony on the political field that rejoins all differential elements, all past historical moments, “toward a better future,” as the governmental slogan for general elections had it back in 1998.

While the state aims at governing a local territory full of disjunctions and calibrating its multiple temporal fractures, a politics of anachronism emerges on the ground. Beyond the effects of juridical technologies and capital’s articulation of the “customary,” vernacular rituals and imaginaries of citizenship defy the calculus of the law and the economy.

In Mozambique, with its transitional peace and reconciliation process—through which a reformed civil state was shaped out of the devastating consequences of war and where former enemy political camps, armies, and ethnic groups are attempting to rebuild a common nation—the coalescence between the emergence of new technologies of governance and the return of old ones transforms this postcolony in a temporal space crowded with paradoxes, in which locality is experienced as the dominion of the future anterior.