

Does all that is Solid Melt into Air?: Questioning ‘Neo-liberal’ Occult Economies in Mozambique

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This article examines a scandal, concerning a foreign investor who was supposedly the head of an organ trafficking ring that broke out in the northern Mozambican city of Nampula in 2003. I use this scandal as a way to critique ideas of ‘neo-liberal occult economies’. Instead of ‘occult interpretations’ arising in an almost predetermined way as people revert to familiar idioms of sorcery to cope with their incomprehension at the changes wrought by neo-liberalism, I argue the Nampula organ scandal shows that it is people’s particular relationship to the state explains the scandal rather than simply economic changes. That is why this particular scandal ended up speaking far more convincingly to the fears of the better-off than of the poor.

Introduction

In 2003 a scandal broke out in the northern Mozambican city of Nampula that gained international attention. It started when a Brazilian Catholic lay missionary, Maria Elilda dos Santos, accused her mission’s neighbours, Gary and Tanja O’Connor, a white Zimbabwean businessman who owns an industrial chicken farm and his Danish wife, of running a ring that kidnapped local children and trafficked their organs. It was further rumoured that body parts of these children had been sold to ‘witch-doctors’ for use in sorcery. The scandal quickly spread as the accusers claimed that many members of the ruling Frelimo party in the municipal and provincial government were complicit. As the furore grew, investigative teams were sent by the Spanish government, Amnesty International and the Mozambican League of Human Rights. However, as quickly as the scandal flared up, it then faded away, and the allegations proved to be baseless. Maria dos Santos left the country shortly after (she claims this was under duress) and one of her chief co-accusers, Sister Doraci, was found murdered, although this appears to have been the result of an unrelated dispute concerning the embezzlement of funds.² No charges were ever filed and some of the major government figures implicated were later promoted.

While conducting fieldwork in Nampula City in 2008 I became interested in stories about the scandal. Although stories have various social meanings, depend-

1 I would like to thank Edward Simpson, Fraser McNeill, Casey High, Linda van de Kamp, Sean Fox, Peter Loizos, Andrew Bank and the reviewers for their help with this article. All mistakes are, of course, mine though. I am also indebted to the Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics, where I held the position of Research Officer when I conducted this research, for allowing me the time and funding to undertake this project.

2 British Broadcasting Corporation, ‘Mozambique “Human Organ” Nun Dead’, 27.2.2004. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3493016.stm>

ing on who is telling them and the context in which they are told, and of course sometimes stories have no deeper meaning, there were commonalities in the tales of the organ scandal that seemed to speak to wider social tensions. In this article I follow the example of Luise White, who has done extensive work in chronicling rumours and vampire stories through Central and East Africa during the late colonial period. White has demonstrated how these stories highlight tensions, fears and social fractures during times of political instability and change.³ Thus stories of vampires, baboons or lion men, and organ theft often highlight moments of crisis and social change, whether this takes the form of rumours, popular interpretations of events, actual organised groups committing murders, or a combination of all three.⁴

With the expulsion or death of some of the principal accusers, it is now almost impossible to learn first-hand the initial motivations of those who brought the scandal to attention. What interests me, however, is the differing opinions about the scandal, although admittedly with the benefit of five years of hindsight. Among what can be described as a professional middle class whose members are often linked to Frelimo, opinions were divided, with some thinking it had been a political set-up, while others felt it had actually happened. For Indian merchants, the reaction was different.⁵ They are the dominant economic group in Nampula City, and one whose members are also frequently connected to Frelimo, although their history with the Party is more problematic. While the allegations had been disproved and traced back to various land and political disputes, many Indian merchants did believe that organ trafficking had happened and that the government was deeply involved.⁶ Their style of telling the story differed, ranging from darkly conspiratorial to cynically knowing, depending on whether they wanted to emphasise the horror of the trade and the evil of Frelimo or their own personal unflappability. The conclusions they drew were very similar. Among the poorer sections of society though, especially workers in the informal sector, many had either never heard of it or thought the scandal was completely without factual basis. Even though it was social groups such as these whose members would presumably be the victims of an organ trafficking ring, the dominant response I found was bemusement that anyone would even ask them about the scandal. While it is not surprising that people hold conflicting opinions over events, I became curious as to why this story tended to be more credible and circulate more widely with such commonalities among the better-off as opposed to the poor. This was particularly interesting, because despite

3 L. White, 'Cars out of Place: Vampires, Technology and Labor in East and Central Africa', *Representations*, 43, 1993, 27-50; L. White, 'The Traffic in Heads: Bodies, Borders, and the Articulation of Regional Histories', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23(2), 1997, 325-338; L. White, 'Telling More: Lies, Secrets, and History', *History and Theory*, 39(4), 2000, 11-22.

4 P. Israel, 'The War of Lions: Witch-Hunts, Occult Idioms and Post-Socialism in Northern Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35(1), 2009, 155-174. C. Murray, *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho: The Anatomy of a Moral Crisis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); D. Pratten, *The Man-Leopard Murders: History and Society in Colonial Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

5 Many Indian merchants are actually born in Mozambique. I am using the term Indian here with its local meaning, which refers to people of Indian or Pakistani descent.

6 This was despite the fact that one of the highest-ranking government officials was implicated in the scandal, the then governor is of Indian descent.

the wealth of Indian merchants and the numbers of informal workers, both are, to some degree, socially marginal.

In many ways, the Nampula organ scandal tells a story that has become increasingly familiar in anthropology, that of ‘occult economies’ that have followed the rise of unfettered ‘neo-liberal’ capitalism.⁷ Here we have the state abandoning many of its cherished socialist principles for a form of ‘free market economics’ that is often locally referred to as ‘savage’ or ‘gangster’ capitalism. How are people to make sense of the very public and spectacular, if deeply anti-social, ascent of the few combined with the perhaps semi-permanent exclusion of the many? Why has the Party revoked its ban against speaking about witchcraft? Can it guard against it? Is there a connection?

This situation is not unique to Mozambique and aspects of it can be seen across the world, from Latin America (described in the foundational text on the subject, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*)⁸ to Africa and Asia.⁹ The connection between forms of neo-liberalism and the occult are popularly understood through pre-existing idioms, including religion and sorcery. Accordingly, under conditions where the production of wealth seems divorced from actual work and people’s labour seems increasingly superfluous, the new economy is understood through ideas of invisible plantations tended by zombie slaves, pyramid schemes and prosperity cults.¹⁰ Organ trafficking rings also have pride of place in this heady mixture of free-wheeling capitalism and magic. This is due both to the association of human organs with sorcery, at least in southern Africa, and because it is the ultimate form of exploitation, where body parts are the only thing of value the poor have.¹¹ In this manner the Nampula organ trafficking scandal and the dark hints of the complicity of the powerful appear simply as another example of the mistrust and bewilderment that have accompanied neo-liberalism’s social onslaught.

Much of the work associated with ‘occult economies’ began as a principled rejection of the world-wide imposition of Reagan–Thatcher economics and the Bretton Woods consensus by analysts who had witnessed first-hand the devastation and social polarisation these policies left in their wake. Furthermore, this body of work highlighted many important social practices. To the bafflement of any surviving modernisation theorist, sorcery remains an idiom of power in much of Africa that meshes quite well with the ‘logic’ of capitalism. In fact, the interconnected phenomenon of ‘neo-liberalism’ and ‘occult economies’ (rampaging across the continent and producing almost predetermined reactions) has proven so ideologically attractive that Sanders describes it as approaching an ‘anthropological

7 For a further critique of ‘occult economies’ and a more nuanced view of the practice of sorcery in a different area of Mozambique, see P. Israel, ‘The War of Lions’; B.E. Bertelsen, ‘Multiple Sovereignties and Summary Justice in Mozambique: A Critique of Some Legal Anthropological Terms’, *Social Analysis*, 53(3), 2009, 123–147.

8 M. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

9 For a brief history on the connection between the occult and neo-liberalism in anthropology, see T. Sanders, ‘Buses in Bongoland: Seductive Analytics and the Occult’, *Anthropological Theory*, 8(2), 2008, 107–132.

10 J. Comaroff, and J. Comaroff, ‘Introduction’ in Comaroff and Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xi–xxxvi; Comaroff and Comaroff, ‘Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on the Second Coming’, *Public Culture*, 12, 1999, 291–343; P. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*.

11 N. Schepers-Hughes, ‘Bodies for Sale: Whole or in Parts’, *Body & Society*, 7(2 & 3), 2001, 4.

orthodoxy'.¹² In many ways it is reminiscent of Marx's famous phrase concerning an earlier form of capitalism: 'All that is solid melts into air.' At first glance the Nampula organ scandal seems to fit this model perfectly. However, I argue that it actually points us in a different direction. The idea of 'neo-liberalism' as a quasi-universal juggernaut, battering down the state and sweeping aside former social structures and sets of obligations, is less plausible in this ethnographic context. So too is the assumption that 'neo-liberalism' almost inevitably gives rise to 'occult economies' in the 'Third World' as people revert to familiar idioms as they confront a situation with incomprehension and horror. Like many of the buzz words of the past two decades, including 'modernity' and 'globalisation', 'neo-liberalism' has become so all-encompassing and so many contradictory trends fall under its rubric that it is difficult to use it as an analytical concept to describe an actual social process.

The fall of socialism in 1990 and the implementation of privatisation and structural adjustment did bring many wrenching changes to Mozambique. But considering the country's colonial history, liberation struggle, implementation of state socialism and civil war, traumatic change has tended to be the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, Frelimo's adoption of capitalism did not lead to a 'roll-back' of the state in the face of uncontrollable market forces. Instead of sweeping away structures of power, capitalism revitalised a formerly socialist government mired in civil war and teetering on the brink of collapse, allowing the Party to extend its grip and consolidate itself on a scale that has probably never been seen before. This is especially evident in places, such as Nampula Province, which were heavily contested during the civil war and where, until recently, the presence and capabilities of the state were sporadic at best. Finally, neo-liberal occult economies do not help us to understand why the Nampula organ scandal seemed more plausible to Indian merchants, the big winners of the turn to capitalism. They presumably have some familiarity with the ways the market works and, because of their adherence to various forms of fundamentalist Islam, tend to treat 'local' ideas of sorcery with contempt. On the other-hand, informal workers, the big losers of the transition, did not seem to find it nearly as compelling.

The goal of this paper is thus to explore how the Nampula organ trafficking scandal illuminates the tensions and fractures of the current social order in that city. Instead of examining the scandal through the lens of 'neo-liberal occult economies', I argue that the crucial factor here is the relationship between members of different social groups to the state and its structures of power. My aim here is not simply to replace one set of unitary concepts with another, but to trace why members of different social groups in the same setting can develop diverging conceptions of the role of the state, its power, and its capability for benevolence or evil. In the following section I shall briefly describe the history of Nampula City and give a more detailed account of the organ trafficking scandal. I will then discuss what it means to belong to or be excluded from the structures of power in Nampula City, before returning to the question of neo-liberalism and occult economies in conclusion.

12 T. Sanders, 'Buses in Bongoland'.

Nampula City

To understand how the organ trafficking scandal sheds light on the social order and practice of power in Mozambique, we must first briefly discuss the city where it erupted. Nampula is Mozambique's third largest city, with an estimated population of nearly half a million.¹³ The city is situated inland in a rich agricultural region and is the provincial capital. In addition to the city's administrative functions, it is an important trade hub for both internal consumption and international products that enter Mozambique through the nearby port of Nacala and are then re-shipped to Central Africa. The city is home to a thriving Indian merchant community and is often referred to as the 'Indian capital' of Mozambique.

Frelimo has an ambivalent history in Nampula. Although the province was a theatre in the ten-year liberation struggle against the Portuguese, the Party's hold was tenuous in large areas. The effects of Frelimo's post-independence socialist modernisation programme in Nampula Province were contradictory and often unwittingly exacerbated local conflicts in many rural areas.¹⁴ Some sections of society were enraged by Frelimo's policy of abolishing traditional leadership. Frelimo's policy of villagisation tended to disenfranchise recent arrivals in government-sponsored villages and farms while favouring the original villagers and lineages. Finally, there was a growing population of frustrated and alienated youth that were denied opportunities in most economic sectors, creating a pool that Renamo, forcibly or otherwise, could recruit from.¹⁵ Due to the party's mistakes, the Renamo rebels were able to take advantage and entrench themselves in parts of the province, leading to fierce fighting during the civil war.¹⁶ Nampula City's population surged as peasants fled the war-torn rural areas for the comparative safety of the town. However, Renamo spread its influence, despite its brutality, and after the end of the war began to build a base of support when it became the official opposition party, especially among the poorest and most marginalised.

Sixteen years after the end of the war Nampula City's economy is booming, but the benefits seem to be monopolised by a select few. Many of the plantations and factories (especially the cashew sector, which was the largest) that managed to survive the war and economic crisis of the socialist period were finally shut during the post-war structural adjustment programme, creating even more unemployment.¹⁷ A frequent complaint is that despite the construction of a cement plant, a Coca-Cola bottling factory and the O'Connor's industrial chicken farm, much of the economy is based on trade and commerce, which can create great wealth but

13 Instituto Nacional de Estatística, available at <http://www.ine.gov.mz/>

14 See C. Geffray, *A Causa das Armas* (Oporto: Edições Afrontamento, 1991) and A. Dinerman, 'The Imaginings of Christian Geffray in *La Cause des Armes au Mozambique: Anthropologie d'une Guerre Civile*', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 1994, 569-586; M. Hall and T. Young, *Confronting Leviathan: Mozambique since Independence* (London, Hurst & Co, 1997); A. Pitcher, 'Recreating Colonialism or Reconstructing the State? Privatisation and Politics in Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 1996, 49-74.

15 See Dinerman, 'The Imaginings of Christain Geffray' for a balanced and in-depth account of Renamo's actions in Nampula during the war.

16 Geffray, *A Causa das Armas*; M. Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (London: C. Hurst, 1995).

17 J. Hanlon, *Peace Without Profits: How the IMF Blocks Rebuilding in Mozambique* (Oxford and Portsmouth NH: James Currey and Heinemann, 1996).

relatively few jobs. Even though Frelimo is entrenching itself more deeply in the province, only certain social groups are incorporated into its structures and enjoy the possible benefits that arise from incorporation. This is exacerbated by contradictory government policies that try to encourage productive enterprises while taxing them heavily. Furthermore, the fall of socialism has not ended the antagonism of powerful local actors, such as the provincial hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which was singled out during the revolutionary period as being the church of the colonial state and thus lost land and influence.

Dissatisfaction with Frelimo manifested itself during the first two national elections, when Renamo won the majority of provincial votes despite their largely inchoate political platform. The organ trafficking scandal broke out in the run-up to the first municipal election that Renamo decided to contest. The municipal elections occurred during a period when frustration towards Frelimo was growing due to public scandals, growing corruption and the Party's seeming indifference to the poor and the province. After Frelimo's possibly rigged national election victory in 1999, it had become clear that the centre of power was to remain inviolate. In spite of this, Renamo built a base of support in parts of the province. Nampula was a city the opposition could realistically expect to win, and implicating Frelimo officials in the municipal and provincial government in trafficking organs could be seen as a clever tactic bolstering Renamo's effort to gain control of the second most economically important city in the country.

No matter the initial intention of the accusers, the claim that Gary and Tanja O'Connor, the foreign owners of Farm Fresh Chicken, were running an international organ trafficking ring that preyed on local children and were supported by the police and many powerful government figures, quickly took on political connotations. If this was the intention, however, it failed. Frelimo retained control of Nampula City in the municipal elections of 2003 and have since gone on to win control of every municipality in the country but one. The political opposition has fractured and all but collapsed, leaving Frelimo in a dominant position for the foreseeable future. While the frustration with Frelimo remains strong, the Party still appears to be the only viable option. The political system in Mozambique now operates as an elected single-party state. Still, to understand the backdrop to this scandal one also has to be aware of the larger social context. This includes political tensions and growing resentment as the effects of the much lauded economic boom seemed to be largely limited to just a few social groups, including Indian merchants (or *monhes* as they are derogatorily known), Frelimo party bosses, well-connected people from Maputo (the national capital) and foreign investors.

Politics, Nuns and Organ Traffickers

I first met Gary and Tanja O'Connor in 2008. I had been told by members of the municipality that their Farm Fresh Chicken operation was the perfect example of what could be achieved when the government and foreign investors work together. It was hard to believe that just five years before the O'Connors were at the centre of a scandal that received international attention. In addition to numerous Mozambican articles written about the subject, lurid headlines such as 'Organ Trafficking

is Undeniable'¹⁸ and 'Organ Traffickers Threaten Nuns'¹⁹ appeared on major news services.²⁰

Gary O'Connor was born in Harare and he left for South Africa in 1982. In 1996 he moved to Malawi to open a business. While there he met his wife, Tanja, who was working for an NGO. When they heard of the boom conditions in Mozambique they decided to relocate. They initially set up a business selling seafood to Zimbabwe from the coastal city of Angoche, but as the Zimbabwean economy began to collapse their market disappeared and they moved to Nampula City to open an industrial chicken farm. In the beginning the move to Nampula City worked out well. In one of the richest agricultural regions in the country, many of the basic foodstuffs are imported, including chickens from Brazil. The Mozambican government was eager to attract foreign investors, and the municipality gave the O'Connors land for the farm a few kilometres out of town, neighbouring a Catholic mission. Financing for the O'Connors came from a state-owned bank that charges close to 30 per cent interest, but in Gary's view this is an advantage as it makes the state something akin to a silent partner and offers a degree of political protection. The farm currently produces around 96,000 chickens per year and the O'Connors have a contract system with various small farmers that produce another 36,000 chickens per year.

The actual running of the O'Connors' operation is more difficult. The Mozambican system is heavily bureaucratic with strict labour regulations. Strikes and pilfering are constant problems with the workers and, according to Gary, it is very difficult to fire anyone. His relationship with the government is generally good. While neither he nor Tanja is particularly political, they prefer Frelimo: 'They may be dictatorial, but they know how to keep things under control.'²¹ The O'Connors' relationship with their neighbours is more antagonistic. Renamo is strong in the area near the farm and it was their constituency that lost land when Farm Fresh Chicken was established. Renamo leaders have since organised the local peasants to engage in frequent land invasions. There have also been acrimonious land and boundary disputes with the neighbouring Catholic mission. Long-simmering local disagreements and the run-up to municipal elections formed the social context when Maria dos Santos first accused the O'Connors of kidnapping local children and harvesting their organs.

When the O'Connors first heard that Sister dos Santos was accusing them of kidnapping children, trafficking children and cannibalism they did not take the accusations overly seriously. They felt Sister dos Santos was unbalanced and that she was primarily motivated by malice stemming from their disputes with the church. It became more serious when a local man backed up Sister dos Santos and accused Gary of trying to murder him. The police became involved, but the accusation of murder soon fizzled out. One of the accusers that Sister dos Santos brought forward

¹⁸ Associated Free Press, 'Organ trafficking is Undeniable', 03-03-2004. Available at http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/News/0,2-11-1447_1492332,00.html

¹⁹ British Broadcasting Corporation, 'Organ Traffickers "Threaten" Nuns', 13-02-2004. Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3493016.stm>

²⁰ In fact it was a Mozambican newspaper *Savana* that exposed the false allegations of the Catholic Sisters.

²¹ Interview with Gary and Tanya O'Connor, Nampula, 3.2.2008.

had been caught stealing mangoes by the villagers, who beat him and brought him to Gary so that they could borrow his mobile phone to call the police. It seemed probable that the accuser was trying to enact his revenge. However, by now the organ scandal had caught the attention of the media and the story began to grow. Although multiple police inquiries turned up no evidence, Sister dos Santos simply claimed that the police were complicit. As the attention on the scandal gathered pace, Sister dos Santos's claims also grew and she further accused the staff at the local airport of transporting body parts, the police for covering up and intimidating witnesses, and the upper levels of the provincial party and government of facilitating the trade and profiting from it. Sister dos Santos provided peasant witnesses to back up her claims but, as this was the run-up to the local elections and many of her co-accusers appeared to be connected to Renamo, this was not necessarily credible evidence. In Gary's opinion, it was the local Catholic hierarchy that took advantage of the accusations to try to damage the O'Connors and Frelimo, and enlisted Renamo in support.

Despite the flimsy evidence, the scandal gained international attention and, considering the political situation, the government took action. The O'Connors first realised that the accusations were being taken seriously when their movements were monitored by a car full of nuns from the neighbouring mission. The car followed them wherever they went. However, it still took them by complete surprise when a detachment of police officers carrying AK-47s arrived at their farm with a warrant to search the premises. The search turned up nothing, and disproved Sister dos Santos's claims of a private airstrip on the farm where the O'Connors would load crates of arms severed from kidnapped children. However, Gary had a good relationship with the provincial police commander. Their friendship was taken as evidence of further police complicity. Various international media outlets, Amnesty International and the Spanish Embassy carried out investigations. Even the national Prosecutor-General in Maputo sent a team to investigate, but they also turned up no evidence. Despite this, the scandal did not abate, perhaps in part due to a power struggle within the ranks of Frelimo. Mozambique's president of eighteen years, Joaquim Chissano, was standing down in favour of a long-time party veteran, Armando Guebuza, former Internal and Transport Minister. With both national and municipal elections approaching, there was the prospect of a shake-up in the hierarchy. According to Gary, the provincial Prosecutor-General decided to make his name with this case. He also claims that the Prosecutor-General was Sister dos Santos's lover:

We were driving through Nampula City with our daughter when we were stopped in the middle of the street by a man in plain clothes with a gun (who turned out to be the provincial Prosecutor-General). He opened the door and grabbed my wife. He was very nervous and his gun accidentally went off twice. No one was hit, thank god. Two security guards saw this and ran over to try and help us, and that is when he showed his I.D. and told us we were under arrest.

They left my car sitting in the middle of the street with the doors open and my daughter still inside as they took us to prison despite interven-

tions from Maputo and the Danish embassy [Tanja is Danish]. I was put in a cell with 60 people and my wife in a cell with 15. She was lucky; she got to share a thin mattress with the cell leader. We did not have any trouble there; if anything, everyone was curious. The police commandant came in and looked at us and then gave some orders and a guard went to my wife and asked, 'What's going on?' She did not understand and asked what the guard meant. The guard looked a bit confused and asked why they had been given orders that we were not to be beaten.

We spent a weekend in jail, I guess the protests from the Danish ambassador and Maputo finally reached the right person. The charges by now had spread all the way down to Beira [a major city, where Renamo was very strong in the central province of Sofala]. From what I hear, Chissano had enough. He told the Archbishop that the church was to stay out of politics or things would go back the way they were under socialism, and then everything died down.²²

Surprisingly for a story of such magnitude, unless one specifically asked about it, the scandal was rarely mentioned in Nampula City. If it did come up in conversation, opinions tended to be divided among the better-off, with many Indian merchants thinking there was some basis to it. Responses from those who were poorer, especially workers in the informal sector, tended to be quite different. Surely some of them also believed in this underground trade, and I was not able to carry out a comprehensive survey. Gary told me that on a number of occasions during the scandal, residents of the *bairros* had offered to sell him people they claimed were relatives. However, most of those I spoke to during my research had never even heard of the scandal. For those who had, they tended to be dismissive. The response of one informal trader was especially revealing: 'Our problem is that we do not go to school, so I guess people believe stupid stories like this.'²³ Those who found it the most credible tended to be the people who are included in Frelimo's structures but, like Indian merchants, are still marginal to a degree. Although they enjoy the benefits of the new economy, this is dependent on a precarious relationship with those in power.

I do not mean to argue that the occult cannot serve as an idiom to explain unequal relationships of power. West has demonstrated how sorcery forms a popular discourse for understanding power and governance in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.²⁴ Teixeira has shown how vampire beliefs in Nampula Province also have connections with long-established inequalities between colonialists and 'natives', villagers and urbanites and, more recently, party members and everyone else.²⁵ There is also widespread fear and social mistrust demonstrated by a his-

22 Interview with Gary and Tanya O'Connor, Nampula, 23.4.2008.

23 Interview with E. and H., Nampula, 6.6.2008.

24 H. West, 'Creative Destruction and Sorcery of Construction: Power, Hope and Suspicion in Post-War Mozambique', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 147, 1997, 675-698; West, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press. 2005).

25 P. Teixeira, 'Ma-Tuga no Mato: Imagens Sobre os Portugueses em Discursos Rurais Moçambicanos', *Lusotopie*, 2003, 91-112.

tory of attacks in northern Mozambique where villagers accused the better-off of poisoning their wells with cholera and the idiom of sorcery is often present in the popular lynching of suspected thieves in the centre of the country.²⁶

This social context of fear and uncertainty, gross inequality, growing social polarisation and the overwhelming and now largely unchallenged political dominance of Frelimo provides a fertile terrain for the growth of the conspiratorial logic of occult forces. In Israel's work on the 'War of the Lions' in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, he documents how a spate of killings by lions and, it appears, by men disguised as lions in 2002 led to an outbreak of sorcery accusations and summary vigilante justice.²⁷ He traces the lynching of 'lion men' in part to an outgrowth of Frelimo's earlier socialist efforts at 'total politicisation'. The vast and heroic mission of building a nation required the efforts of everyone, and those who obstructed this undertaking were regarded as outside the body politic; they were traitors, 'enemies of the people', parasites, and would be dealt with accordingly. This is especially prevalent in the Mueda Plateau, where the 'War of the Lions' took place. Mueda is the 'cradle of the revolution', where Frelimo was initially based during the liberation and whose inhabitants provided the Party with much of its military force. If Frelimo would not deal with the lions (animal or men) that were hunting the people, the populace would assume Frelimo's role and deal with them themselves. Instead of an occult interpretation arising simply because of wider economic forces, it was the specific circumstances of the 'War of the Lions' and the populace's relationship to Frelimo and its institutions that formed the social context in which events took place.

As we shall see, in Nampula City where the state is not so deeply entrenched and Frelimo's legitimacy is more contested, the scandal was paradoxically easier for wide segments of the population to ignore. The trafficking of children in Mozambique is not simply a dark fantasy, but something that does happen and causes considerable fear. However, the Nampula organ trafficking scandal became politicised so quickly that it did not seem to be an actual occurrence or an 'organic' idiom that people used to explain the circumstances of their lives, but instead a story made for them and one that appealed far more convincingly to the fears of the better-off than of the poor. As Gary O'Connor told me when I asked him while visiting his farm if he thought people actually believed the organ trafficking charges:

Look around, I am about six kilometres out of town and there are no police here. I am surrounded by little villages, and if they really believed I was killing their children, do you think I would still be alive? I would have been lynched long ago.²⁸

26 C. Serra, *Côlera e Catarse*. (Maputo, Imprensa Universitária: Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, 2003); B.E. Bertelsen, 'Multiple Sovereignities and Summary Justice in Mozambique: A Critique of Some Legal Anthropological Terms'.

27 P. Israel, 'The War of Lions'.

28 Interview with Gary and Tanya O'Connor, Nampula, 2.8.2008.

To Belong or to Be Excluded

Instead of neo-liberalism acting as a sort of causal force that, in Africa, almost inevitably results in ideas of occult economies, reactions to the Nampula organ scandal seem to speak more to the ways in which members of different social groups interact with, and conceive of, the state. This section examines the relationship of Indian merchants and informal workers to the state and discusses the continuities and disjunctures that the transition to capitalism has created. The adoption of capitalism has allowed Frelimo to co-opt social groups on whom it had difficulties imposing its will during the socialist period, and thus allowed the Party to pursue its long-held goal of constructing national unity. Nevertheless, despite the period of revitalisation that has strengthened Frelimo's hold, its reach still encompasses a comparatively small percentage of Mozambique's population, even in urban areas. As the organ trafficking scandal allows us to see, the adoption of 'neo-liberal' reforms has opened up some space for elites to jockey for position. These struggles are viewed with fear by some of the better-off as they can have direct effects on their lives. For many others, though, the battles of elites are viewed as something distant and perhaps as a matter of indifference to themselves.

However, trying to maintain a social base that includes important allies means Frelimo has to engage in a delicate balancing act. Pitcher argues that a process of 'organised forgetting' is taking place in Mozambique whereby the government deliberately downplays or distorts the socialist period to enable it to court new allies amongst business communities and build a new 'neo-liberal' national identity amongst an emerging black middle class.²⁹ This effort is contested by industrial workers who make use of socialist rhetoric, rights and obligations to advance their own struggles.³⁰ Pitcher makes a valuable argument and documents the change of strategy and rhetoric from a 'worker and peasant' state to one that encourages entrepreneurial vigour. Furthermore, the social contract has changed. Where urbanites once could demand that the state take care of their minimum needs for subsistence, it has now become the right of a lucky few to be rich. Nevertheless, it can be misleading to assume a smooth trajectory of state obligations receding in the face of 'neo-liberal' opportunities. Frelimo did try to actively recruit and ally itself with business communities it had previously antagonised, but as the Party's power has grown, these mercantile groups increasingly have few other options. On the other hand, the Party has recently passed pro-worker legislation. A former minister explained to me that this is both because it is a populist move to win votes and because the party leadership still feels a responsibility towards whatever is left of the proletariat it once tried to create. Instead of consistently championing one group or another, in practice it appears as if the results of Frelimo's balancing act penalise everyone. I asked an official of the nation-wide official trade union OTM (Organisation of Mozambican Workers) whether he felt the current labour laws favoured workers or capital. He replied by laughing and then saying: 'The law does

²⁹ A. Pitcher, 'Forgetting from Above and Memory from Below: Strategies of Legitimation in Postsocialist Mozambique', *Africa*, 76(1), 2006, 88-112.

³⁰ Pitcher, 'Forgetting from Above', 88.

not favour anyone. It's like the laws of nature, it favours the one who survives.³¹ To illustrate some of the complexity of the urban social hierarchy in Nampula City, I will now give examples from two groups that at first glance appear to be the embodiment of the new economy, Indian merchants and informal traders.

Although the vast majority of Indian merchants I met in Nampula City are members, or at least supporters, of Frelimo, the fact that they tended to give more credibility to the organ trafficking scandal is not surprising, considering their history with the Party. Almost all of them had tales of how their families suffered during the socialist period. Homes and businesses were nationalised, and family members had to flee the country or were arrested for what was then known as economic sabotage. Stories of Frelimo's assumption of power often sounded like an invasion of the barbarians. Many continued to stay in Mozambique, though, and not all suffered at the hands of the Party. Nationalisation was not universally employed; only those businesses that Frelimo felt were exploitative, or those abandoned by their owners after independence, were directly taken over.³² Small shops were generally left alone and Indian merchants gradually began to take over this sector during the socialist period, as the previous Portuguese merchants often fled the country after independence. Still it was very difficult to import stock during socialism, and as the civil war grew in intensity, businesses were often at risk of being looted by one side or the other, or sometimes both. The fortunes of Indian merchants have improved considerably since the end of the war, but complaints against the government still are legion, with 'corrupt' and 'half-socialist' being amongst the most prominent labels. These difficulties did not appear to overtly affect Party support. As I was told by one merchant who spoke of the opposition with evident disdain:

Renamo? They do nothing and they do not really have the capacity to do anything. They make all sorts of promises, but they could not deliver anything. The peasants and the marginalised support Renamo because they have no capacity to think about the future. They just want something now regardless of the consequences. Renamo would just come in and take something and then try to sell it to somebody else. That is how Dhlakama (Renamo's president) got his house in Maputo. Someone else had the legal title, but he just took it. We, the businessmen and the middle classes, we all vote for Frelimo. We have the capacity to think about the future and the peasants do not.³³

In addition to fears over property rights and the growing hostility of the larger population, especially as the militant non-racialism of the socialist period fades, political dependence is also a factor. An Indian businessman resignedly told me that they had to support Frelimo. One can run a family shop largely independently, but if one has greater ambitions it is extremely difficult to do this independent of the Party.

31 Interview with A., Nampula, 12.6.2008.

32 A. Pitcher, *Transforming Mozambique: The Politics of Privatisation, 1975-2000*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

33 Interview with C., Nampula, 7.7.2008.

Indian merchants have been among the most visible winners of the capitalist transition in Nampula City. Many were able to consolidate the economic base they built in the socialist period and have gone on to become major financial players. Despite their wealth, their success to a large degree depends on the goodwill of Frelimo, a Party with which they have an ambiguous history. Many of the larger merchants are engaged in what can be described as a structural relationship with the Party, as it does not depend on bribing a single official, but instead on links to the leadership in Maputo. Despite the growing alliance between the Party and Indian merchants, the relationship remains fraught and characterised by mutual distrust. Popular feeling against *monhes* is strong as they are perceived by many Party members and the wider population as dishonest and exploitative. These feelings are often fully reciprocated; one of the reasons for Indians' disdain of sorcery and other local beliefs was a claim of cultural superiority. Furthermore, several Indian merchants have first-hand experience of the corruption and unscrupulousness of certain Party officials and, if there was a profit to be made in organ trafficking, it stands to reason that they would do it. Many members of Frelimo also view Indian merchants with considerable distrust, as nothing but disreputable opportunists, especially as the fortunes of some of the leading businessmen are widely believed to be based on the trade in heroin.

The fact that many Indian merchants believed that Party members would be complicit in organ trafficking follows an internal logic when viewed against this backdrop. They are included in the structures of power, but in a tenuous way, based on mutual benefit, distrust and fear. This has led to a paradoxical relationship, wherein the state was seen as all-powerful, but merchants held many of its functionaries in contempt, viewing them as ignorant, incompetent and corrupt. The state serves as a protector for Indian economic interests against the wider population, but its capacity for evil is seen as boundless; it could easily leave Indian merchants to the tender mercies of the mob should the situation arise. The relationship between Indian merchants and the Party is deeply ambiguous. Their view of the state is of a powerful but capricious and evil protector that could turn on them the minute they are no longer useful. This sense of insecurity was underlined by rumours of organ trafficking circulating through the Indian merchant community, this time centred on Nigerian traders, a group that seems to be trying to replicate the economic pattern that led Indians to prominence and to be a possible competitor in the future. I was told:

These things [organ trafficking] happen here you know, they believe in sorcery. Just a few weeks ago they caught a Nigerian trader at the airport trying to transport 18 kilos of organs.³⁴ The government does not do anything. Every time the charges are dropped for the same reason: 'lack of evidence'. They are being paid off and maybe they are involved themselves.³⁵

³⁴ I heard the tale of the Nigerian trader who was caught with 18 kg of organs multiple times, but I did not find any official record of it.

³⁵ Interview with C., Nampula, 7.7.2008.

The informal traders I spoke with gave the scandal far less credibility and occupied a very different social position. They have become a ubiquitous symbol of capitalism as every urban street is now occupied by people selling various commodities. It is misleading, however, to view informal traders as an entirely new phenomenon or as a single unified group. One of Frelimo's major mistakes when formulating policies during the socialist period was to view the population as members of single categories, workers or peasants, and not to take into account the large variety of strategies people employ to make a living.³⁶ This tendency has survived into the capitalist period. Numerous people combine trading in the informal market with farming, or as a means to earn extra money while they study, as we shall see in the following examples.

Helder is a 21-year-old street vendor. He sells mobile phone top-up cards that he buys for a small discount from the state-owned national mobile service provider, MCEL, through an Indian owned shop with links to MCEL. His average profit is about 50 MTN per day.³⁷ Helder was born in a village 20 kilometres outside Nampula City and his mother survives by farming the family *machamba* (small plot of land). He came to stay with his brother and cousin who were already in the city; they live in a *palhota* (shack) in a peri-urban area on the outskirts of town with his cousin's pregnant girlfriend. Other street vendors engage in the informal sector simply to raise funds for school fees, or to get some pocket money.

Sergio is 20 years old and also sells MCEL cards with Helder. He was born in the city and lives with his parents. His mother is a waitress at a coffee shop and his father used to work for the national railway but is now unemployed. Unlike Helder, he is still studying and is in the 8th class.

The informal sector contains many different social categories within it, and this does not preclude various types of connections to the Party held by individual members. Frelimo officials tend to view the sector as a singular entity that is uncontrolled and possibly a threat. This view has historical antecedents, ever since colonialism, when urbanites without fixed employment were viewed as possibly subversive. During the socialist period there were efforts to mobilise the entire population for the heroic effort of constructing a modern nation. However, many urbanites, especially those who would now be termed workers in the informal economy, were viewed by the leadership as lazy idlers and a criminal element.³⁸ This distrust increased as the economy faltered and the parallel or 'black market' economy grew. In desperation the Party resorted to coercive measures. The most infamous was 'operation production' in 1983, when those who could not prove employment and urban residence were rounded up and shipped to rural areas in the far north to 'build cities in the bush'. Between 30,000 and 50,000 were exiled.³⁹ Since the fall of socialism and the onset of structural adjustment, the number of people that survive to one degree or another on the informal economy has grown. The ruling party still seems to be unable to incorporate these people in its struc-

36 Hall, and Young, *Confronting Leviathan*; B. O'Laughlin, 'Class and the Customary: The Ambiguous Legacy of Indigenato in Mozambique', *African Affairs*, 99, 2000, 5-42; Pitcher, 'Forgetting from Above'.

37 At the time of writing the exchange rate was around 29 MTN to \$1.

38 Hall and Young, *Confronting Leviathan*.

39 J. Cabrita, *Mozambique: The Tortuous Road to Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Hall and Young, *Confronting Leviathan*.

tures, and party leaders and municipal authorities speak worriedly of the ways in which they can restrict urbanisation. Although the informal economy is interlinked with the formal in a variety of ways, especially as most vendors buy their goods from shops and warehouses, there is a palpable sense of disconnect.

When asked what they thought the social hierarchy in Nampula City is, Helder and Sergio broke it down into specific ranks. First are the Indians, then the people from Maputo, then the local government, followed by Nigerian merchants, and those who live in the cement city (the built-up area in the centre of town). Finally, there was everybody else, including themselves. It is not surprising that the struggles for power symbolised by the organ trafficking scandal seemed irrelevant. This does not mean the state does not have an effect on their daily lives. The preoccupations and policies of the party leadership will have an obvious impact. Furthermore, day-to-day interactions with the representatives of the state, especially the often arbitrary actions of the police, are an abiding concern. Yet, local government officials did not seem to inspire terror so much as mockery. As one informal trader described members of the municipal government to me: 'Yeah they talk big and like to pretend they are the masters, but they live in the same *bairros* as we do.'⁴⁰ The people I spoke to did not know anyone who had supposedly been snatched by organ thieves, and those who were closer to the centre of power seemed to reside somewhere very far away and their intrigues and struggles seemed to have little to do with their daily lives.

Conclusion

The critique of neo-liberalism, especially through idioms such as 'occult economies', has proven to be very ideologically attractive to analysts. Furthermore, it has been quite useful in pointing to many of the fundamental flaws of the leading economic policies of the past few decades. However, as an analytical tool to understand and describe social practices in particular ethnographic settings, it appears more dubious. In the first place this style of argument seems to assume that there was once a pristine past that was swept away by 'neo-liberalism', which is rarely the case. The second issue is trying to determine what 'neo-liberalism' actually is. Most commentators seem to be referring to a set of practices that include the fetishisation of the market as the ultimate source of freedom, the demonisation of the state and the reliance on mechanisms such as privatisation to unleash the entrepreneurial energies of the population.⁴¹ This view is backed by Harvey, who argues that neo-liberalism is primarily a political project, designed to restore the power of economic elites.⁴² However these views tend to conflate the ideology of neo-liberalism with the results of policies. In actuality the implementation of supposedly neo-liberal reforms is riddled with contradictions and unintended consequences, not least of which is the much commented upon irony that the state is supposed to preside over its own dismemberment. The fact that one can refer to countries such

40 Interview with E. and H., Nampula, 28.7.2008.

41 A. Kipnis, 'Neoliberalism Reified: *Suzhi* Discourse and Trope of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(2), 2007, 385.

42 D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

as the United States, the People's Republic of China and Mozambique as 'neo-liberal' despite their vastly different approaches in regulating society, providing social benefits and the ways in which they intervene in the market, shows how murky this term has become.

The third major problem of this critique is its lack of concern for the practice of politics. Global economics do overshadow the state in many countries of the Third World, considering the immense influence bodies such as the World Bank and the IMF have over government policy. This has been widely noted within Mozambique and many wonder about the future of their hard-won sovereignty. In many ways this critique seems to replicate, consciously or not, the orthodox Marxist argument that under capitalism states are simply the executive of the bourgeoisie. Therefore we do not need to examine the underlying political fissures that accompany occult economies; we already know them. This article has tried to demonstrate that this is a partial view at best. 'Moral panics' that accompany the outbreaks of organ trafficking, sorcery or the emergence of violent cults are deeply connected to wider political friction and social tension, whether the accusations be without factual basis, as in the case of the Nampula organ scandal, or the result of actual murders, such as the 'War of the Lions' in northern Mozambique or the 'Leopard men' of Nigeria. I have argued that it is the relationship between members of different social groups to the state and its structures of power that has played a major role in determining whether the organ trafficking scandal was more or less credible. Instead of tracing occult scares and moral panics to the wider economic environment and then watching them unfold in an almost predetermined way, perhaps we should ask a different set of questions. What is the social context of the story? When did it emerge? Who is spreading it? Among whom does it circulate most widely? For whom does it seem to be credible, for whom less so, and why?