

# Twins, Albinos and Vanishing Prisoners: A Mozambican Theory of Political Power

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**Abstract.** In coherence with old ethnographic references, twins and albinos are still seen, in southern Mozambique, as the result and the cause of cosmic calamities. They were struck by lightning bolts inside their pregnant mothers, and they will dry the land unless they are buried under special conditions, or just 'vanish' from the Earth. The special conditions imposed on their lives and deaths were extrapolated, in recent decades, to depict an unexpected category of people: the political prisoners who vanished from colonial jails, or were sent by the post-independence state to 're-education camps.' However, this was not the case of the 'unproductive' urbanites who disappeared under domestic exile in the Niassa region. The beliefs about twins and albinos were used in order to express a local moral statement about political power: it is socially threatening to jeopardise the established power; but it is illicit, for a legitimate power, to take unfair decisions about the people under its responsibility.

**Keywords:** Africa; albinos; land dryers; Mozambique; Operation Production; political prisoners; rain rituals; social contract; twins

## 1. Introduction

Some years ago, I paid a visit to Martins Matsolo, the hereditary chief of the region where the aluminium smelter Mozal was built, near Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. I wanted to question him about an idea which was becoming common among the workers that during the ceremony preceding the construction

of the factory, <sup>1</sup> he had forbidden snakes to be killed inside the plant, otherwise accidents would happen.

He told me it was not true, and we debated for a while the reasons for that new rumour, which derived from the local belief in snakes possessed or owned by spirits (Granjo 2008a). But since those ‘special snakes’ are supposed to live in places with special characteristics, our conversation led me to the unusual Matola cemetery, nearby the smelter (Image 1). “That’s a bad graveyard, isn’t it? I mean, just near the river, which even overflows...,” I asked.



Image 1. Matola cemetery, near the river, a salt-pan and the Mozal plant.

He was silent for a while, and, as often happens when questioning an older Mozambican person about a touchy matter, he did not answer me directly. Instead, he told me a story with no apparent connection to the subject, although easily understandable by somebody who might know the cultural references which link it to the question.

“Yes,” he said, “In colonial times, PIDE <sup>2</sup> even used to hide there the prisoners they killed in their headquarters. Not really there, but just beside, even closer to the water.”

<sup>1</sup> It is the *kuphalha*, an invocation of the ancestors in which their leading descendant inform them about a plan of the living people and asks their authorization and protection to that plan (Granjo 2005). The data for this article were indeed collected during my fieldwork for the research projects “Social Appropriation of Danger and Industrial Technology: Comparative Perspective Mozambique/Portugal,” “‘Tradition,’ Modernity and Family Rights in Mozambique: Negotiation and Conflict about Family Law” and “Healers and Hospitals: Mozambican Healing Logics and Practices,” all financed by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia. I express my gratitude to João Pina Cabral, José Fialho Feliciano, Omar Ribeiro Thomaz, Philip Peek and the anonymous referees, for their critical reading of the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> *Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado* [International Police for the Defence of the State], the Portuguese political police, who operated during the fascist-like dictatorship of 1926-1974. It was renamed DGS (*Direcção-Geral de Segurança* [General Directorate of Security]) in the last years of the regime. It is, therefore, usually mentioned in texts as ‘PIDE/DGS,’ although people normally refer to it orally as ‘Pide.’

It was the first time I heard about a symbolic connection between twins, albinos and prisoners who had disappeared. Because, in short, twins must be buried in moist land or they will dry the country; albinos (who have the same cosmic origin) are not supposed to die, but to vanish; and vanishing prisoners were buried in the wettest land.

It is disrespectful to bury ordinary people in wet soil, since this corresponds to treating them as 'people who dry the land.' And that was the reason for my question. By telling that story, Mr. Matsolo agreed with me and even emphasised the issue I raised. And, by responding as he did, he taught me something new. This new issue – the symbolic equivalence of the three categories I mentioned and its meaning – is the reason for the current article.

There are, indeed, several ethnographic references to the social restrictions suffered by twins, albinos and their mothers in Mozambique, and even some anthropological interpretations about them – which I will mention in the following pages. If we compare these references and talk to people nowadays, it seems that such restrictions have not changed much during the last 100 years, nor have the geographical exceptions changed where twins have, on the contrary, a positive social valuation, related to fertility and protection against sorcery.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the old resilient rules and their underlying concepts were pertinent enough to be selected as a way by which to talk and to think about political prisoners who had disappeared, both during colonialism and post-independence. But this is not, as we shall see, how one should think about the many thousands of people expelled from the towns to the remote Niassa province, in the early 1980s, accused of being 'unproductive.'

Was the twins/albino equivalence employed just because those prisoners vanished? For a while, I believed this explanation to be enough – at least, if we added to it the restrictions and stigma that political prisoners suffered. However, many more exiled people had vanished from Niassa. They also suffered restrictions and stigma, but the equivalence is not used to talk about them.

I will, therefore, suggest that the symbolic equivalence between twins, albinos and vanishing political prisoners is not only formal; it expresses a concept of the political power relations in which abstract 'subversive' prisoners, even if they were fighting for independence, are presented as negative and threatening social abnormalities – unlike the victims of domestic exile by State decision who were

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<sup>3</sup> It is mostly the case of Catembe, near Maputo. In this area, their role as fertility propitiators seems to be a peculiar inversion of the surrounding beliefs, taking the abnormal plurality of babies as a value, instead of an excess, and therefore marginalising the representations which, elsewhere, try to control that excess. Twins' role as detectors and protectors against sorcery, meanwhile, seems to derive from the belief that lightning bolts (which, as we will see, are connected with twins) will hit unknown sorcerers during storms.

understood to suffer from an unfair abuse of power. And this symbolic speech is reproduced by people who would easily recognise that some such prisoners were in fact heroes, while others were innocent of the charges brought against them.

## 2. Twins and cosmic order

According to the data provided by Henry Junod (1996: 266-272) on southern Mozambique, the connection between twins, the rain and wet burials was already seen as something consensual and old during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>4</sup> and it was the object of complex rituals when drought threatened some region.

When that happened, the reason was mostly ascribed to a previous burial in dry soil of twins, miscarriages or babies who died before their presentation to the moon (which marks their social existence and integration in the community). Thus, the first step in order to get rain was to find their graves and to correct the situation. Along with purification rituals of their mothers (if they hid such incorrect burials), their bones were exhumed to mud or wet land, and their previous graves were soaked with water. This action was carried out by all the women, marching behind a twins' mother.

By these times, infanticide of the weakest twin was no longer practiced, "unlike in the old days" (Junod 1996: 371-378), but they and their mothers were the object of special restrictions and social control.

On the day after the twins' birth, nobody could farm, or the crops would dry. All women in the village should depart in the four cardinal directions, singing "May the rain fall," and gather water that would be poured over the mother and the twins. Her hut would be burnt and they would start living in a new one, outside the village, using objects that nobody else could touch and gathering water from an exclusive spot. The twins were not presented to the moon and would be fed with goat milk as soon as their mother menstruated again. They would only return to the village when the woman gave birth to a 'normal' child. This could only happen after the woman had seduced four men who were not aware of her condition. After having sex with them, her impurity would be passed on, causing their deaths. Even then, twins were not allowed to play with other children, they were pointed out as examples of bad temper and, like their mothers, were the object of special ritual protection during funerary ceremonies.

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<sup>4</sup> Although his book *The Life of a South African Tribe* was first published in 1912, Junod started to write it in 1898, based on data collected between 1889 and 1895; some extra materials were collected in 1907 (Harries 2007), but this does not seem to be the case for his remarks about twins.

According to Junod, many such restrictions were parallel to those suffered by widows. Basically, it was believed that the creation of twins results from a lightning bolt striking the mother which kills the original child and turns it into twins. The cosmic significance of this event is signalled by calling the twins 'storms without rain' and the mother 'the sky' or its creator. However, the threatening aspects which derived from this cosmic familiarity could become socially useful in moments of crisis: in the stronger rituals against drought, it was necessary to place a twins' mother inside a hole and cover her with water up to her neck. If frightening lightning bolts approached the village, only a twin could successfully ask the storm to go away.

As one should expect, Junod interpreted those practices and beliefs, which he heard in a fragmentary way, according to the theoretical tools available to him, Frazer's typology of magic principles (Frazer 1922): since twins were equalized to lightning bolts, people ascribed to them, by sympathetic magic, similar burning and drying characteristics. However, Feliciano (1998) was able to provide us more details and a global interpretation of twins' position in southern Mozambique.

Besides the data already provided by his predecessor, Feliciano points out some other practices from the late 1970s which, as I could verify, are still in use today. When a twin falls ill, it is forbidden to express sympathy, to give him/her medicines, or to ask if the person is getting better; on the contrary, the sick person should be insulted by sentences like "When will he die?" or "You will be eaten by the fishes anyway." In the funerals, twins must keep a distance from the crowd. When one of them dies, it is forbidden to cry and ashes should be spread over the other one's fontanel, in order to prevent his/her fainting. Furthermore, the surviving twin is not allowed to attend the funeral, or he/she would fall into the grave (Feliciano 1998: 334-336).

In addition to this, I observed that the surviving twin cannot speak of the death of the other one. He/she must act as if the deceased just went somewhere faraway and, if somebody who does not know about the death asks for news of the deceased, the surviving twin will lie, inventing some trip or saying that the deceased now lives in some other country or province. As often happens, many people cannot present a clear reason for this behaviour and just say that it would be dangerous to do otherwise. Other people, though, explained to me that talking about the other twin's death would bring the death of the surviving one. Therefore, as the surviving twin cannot speak of such a death, it is as if, in his/her point of view, the deceased twin simply vanished.

The twins' relevance to the issue at hand is, however, the fact that they must be buried in a wet environment or, like some other abnormal births and people (see Feliciano 1998: 326-352), they will dry the land.

The reasons for this practice and the other restrictions imposed on twins in southern Mozambique became clearer after Feliciano's analysis of the dominant local symbolic system (Feliciano 1998: 305-308). In short, the author states that all social and cosmic pertinent phenomena are 'traditionally' conceived according to a set of different codes, with special reference to sexual, thermic and culinary ones. However, those codes are isomorphs and each one of them can be used in order to analogically represent (or even lead the representation of) phenomena belonging to another code's scope, as indeed happens regularly.<sup>5</sup>

In this framework, human reproduction is analogous to the interaction of an incubating pair: fire/water. The successful result, the living baby, is represented as water (which may or may not result from a storm) and, as the water, normal babies propitiate global fertility. Only provisionally, until the navel cicatrization and the end of the parturient bleeding, the baby and his/her mother are considered 'hot.' However, an abortion or a baby who dies while being hot, causes a global thermic imbalance which demands the burial of the corpse in a humid place, or the land will dry.

But the analogies and mutual substitutions between different codes go further: "If the lightning bolt, the fire that dries the land, is like an abortion, expelled blood that burns the baby, and the abortion dries the land, like a lightning bolt; then the lightning bolt burns the babies as if it was an abortion" (Feliciano 1998: 310).<sup>6</sup>

This point is crucial because, although other folk hypotheses do exist nowadays,<sup>7</sup> the birth of twins is currently ascribed, like the birth of albinos, to a cosmic accident. They were both struck by lightning bolts inside their mother's uterus, with slightly different results: twins were split in two and albinos were burnt. This is why twins are called 'children of the sky' and are the efficient interlocutors with the storms. This is also why albinos were mentioned in Ronga language as *qhlandlati*, meaning 'charcoal from lightning bolt' - a word that most adult speakers still know but avoid due to its pejorative rudeness.

At the same time, the interaction between the sexual and the thermal codes clarifies another issue: due to their origin, twins are (like albinos) lightning bolts without rain. Unlike other babies, they never cease being hot, with all the associated consequences. Besides the dangers to themselves that derive from such

<sup>5</sup> Note that Luc de Heusch (1980) also explored, in other African contexts, the analogy between birth and cooking.

<sup>6</sup> All translations from Portuguese language are mine.

<sup>7</sup> I encountered two of them in an urban context, from people with school education: (1) a woman will give birth to twins if her *xará* (the deceased person whom she was named after) had twins; (2) giving birth to twins is hereditary. However, these new folk hypothesis avoid answering why twins exist in the first place and, on the other hand, actual cases of twins' births in successive generations are, on the contrary, currently seen as very exceptional and demanding some further explanation.

conditions, they propitiate dryness and infertility, social disharmony and even illness – which is, in some cases, sexually related, ascribed to an internal hot situation called *kuhisa* (which is a condition which all are affected by immediately after sexual intercourse). In short, they are socio-cosmic threats.

These are the general ideas concerning twins in southern Mozambique. Besides them, however, Junod mentions *en passant* a detail which shows that, more than a century ago, the characteristics ascribed to twins and other “land dryers” could already be extrapolated to other groups of threatening people, and be related to the disposal of their corpses (Junod 1996: 272). Indeed, it was said that it always rained when people gathered to catch the barbel fish in some lagoons, when the dry season made them muddy. This happened because, in the past, battles were fought near by and the corpses of the deceased enemies were thrown in the lagoon.

But why assume, so many years later, that the modern vanishing political prisoners had also been thrown into water, or buried in wet land?

### **3. Albinos and vanishing prisoners**

The missing link between twins and vanishing prisoners, both supposed to be buried in wet land, is in fact provided by albinos. Concerning the local belief about albinos’ vanishing, João Pina Cabral emphasised their interstitial status, neither “black” nor “white,” suggesting that they “do not die” because they are supposedly not buried (Cabral 2002). Such a refusal to connect them to the earth would mean a refusal of their belonging, in a society where belonging is primarily marked by the ‘black’/‘white’ racial divide.

We can indeed say that the current relevance of their ‘racial’ ambiguity is a self-evident aspect both of albinos’ situation and of people’s interest in the representations of them. But it is only a small part of these representations and, most probably, not the key to understanding them.

In a society like that of Mozambicans, where ‘race’ is believed to be a biological reality and not a socio-ideological construction, and where skin colour and detectable ‘race mixtures’ are the base for different behaviours towards people, one cannot ignore the identity and hierarchical issues raised by a ‘black’ person with ‘white’ skin. But we should not ignore, either, that the hierarchic relevance of skin colour is historically recent, and that current representations of albinos are far too complex to derive just from ‘race’ ambiguity – although they are able to represent it as well.

We should, for instance, remember that only in the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century the first emperor of Gaza, a huge state in southern and central Mozambique,<sup>8</sup> saw, in his own words, a “white-white” man (by contrast to the ‘white’ Luso-Indians who used to trade in the Mozambican hinterland). This man was only a guest taken to the royal *kraal*, and not at all somebody with hierarchic precedence over local population and authorities (Neves 1987). Of course, ‘white’ men were known long before, around the limited areas where they settled; but in most cases they did not play a dominant role, especially not in southern Mozambique. For instance, in 1833, the Governor of Lourenço Marques<sup>9</sup> was considered by the local king to be a lower chief who owed him tribute, and the reason he was killed in an attack on his fortress was insubordination (see Liesegang 1986a).

It is obvious that the social relevance of ‘whiteness’ during the major colonial times (1895-1975) and after is much more recent than the albinos’ abnormality. But it is also plausible that such relevance is much more recent than the social need to interpret and to explain albinos’ exception – an explanation which would be pertinent even amongst people who thought that all humans had brown skin.

Curiously enough, Henry Junod does not mention albinos explicitly in his very detailed book, *The Life of a South African Tribe*, when he deals with the indigenous’ “[i]deas concerning the different human races” (Junod 1996: 298-300). It seems that albinos were not, in those times, presented to him in terms of a ‘race’ issue. But I believe he does indeed talk about them, unknowingly, when he discusses the origin of the word *valungo* to designate ‘white men’ (Junod 1996: 298-300). Junod denies that its etymology comes from a Zulu verb meaning ‘to be fair’ and suggests instead the local word *valungwana*, which he translates as ‘inhabitants of the sky,’ speculating that such designation probably came from some forgotten mythologies about ‘white men.’ However, the ruling Portuguese<sup>10</sup> were believed to come from the sea, not from the sky, and twins were (and still are) referred to as ‘children of the sky.’

<sup>8</sup> Gaza was a 19<sup>th</sup> century state which occupied most of southern and central Mozambique, following the invasion of the region by a martial group of Zulu origin called the vaNguni, which had been pushed away from their previous territories by the conquest wars of king Shaka. Their defeat by the Portuguese, in 1895, marks the start of the effective colonial occupation of the Mozambican hinterland (see, for instance, Clarence-Smith 1990; Péliissier 1994; Liesegang 1986b; Vilhena 1996; Neves 1987). *Kraal* (‘corral’) was the local designation of the kings’ settlements, together with their courts and cattle.

<sup>9</sup> The present capital of the country, Maputo. In that time, it was just a presidium and a harbour, surrounded by some houses, trade posts and a palisade. The capital of Portuguese East Africa colonies was then further north on Mozambique Island.

<sup>10</sup> As I mentioned in note 3, the data in Junod’s book were collected during two periods: between 1889 and 1895 (before the defeat of the Gaza empire), and in 1907 (under effective Portuguese colonial domination). The examples presented in the mentioned sub-chapter show that the data came from 1907.



Although Junod never really decoded the meaning of this last celestial designation, it was clear in the information collected by Feliciano in the 1970s and I heard it myself some 30 years later. As I already mentioned, both twins and albinos are 'children of the sky' because, independent of their earthly conception, they gained their exceptional condition while being struck by a lightning bolt inside their mothers' uterus. Twins were split in two, but albinos did not; they only got burnt and, therefore, lost the colour of their skin.

However, both achieved, via this incident, a close and privileged relation to the sky and the heavenly phenomena. This is a relation which, as I also mentioned, is threatening to the social order and fecundity because, in the symbolic framework where it is integrated, they are simultaneously 'too hot' and 'a storm without rain.' Due to such characteristics, they carry the potential for disorder and illness, and to dry the sky and the land.

One of the consequences of twins' and albinos' common origin is that, if Junod was right about etymology, it is most probable that 'white men' were metaphorically named after the albinos (in a sense of 'pallid faces'), based on previous beliefs about them. Being so, albinos were originally the reference to classify the 'whites,' and not the opposite.<sup>11</sup>

But, more important to the issue at hand, albinos and twins are symbolically equivalent. Albinos are seen as incomplete twins that, even more than the latter, carry in themselves the destructive power of the lightning bolt, which was not even able to split them apart – and, due to this fact, they also carry greater threatening consequences to the society and the cosmos than twins do.

I suggest that it is because of this superlative threatening condition that albinos are not supposed to be buried in special places and under special circumstances (as happens to twins) but are not to be buried at all. This is why they are not supposed to die, but to vanish.

Of course, albinos do die and are buried. A few of their closest kin take care of this duty in secrecy, following the same proceedings which are prescribed for twins as well as hiding the grave location. In doing so, they protect both the cos-

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<sup>11</sup> If this was plausibly so in the past, the recent studies of Isak Niehaus (2002) amongst Shangaan-speaking descendants of Mozambican immigrants in South Africa also point in a different direction than 'race' liminality. According to him, situations of ontological heath rather refer to the issue of duality: twins are 'two in one'; stillborn and little children carry their 'aura' and their mother's one (like the later do); albino are both living persons and ancestors, since ancestors are white – apparently, because they lost their colour together with their materiality. Note that this albino duality (being both alive and dead since their birth) would be enough to support the belief that albinos just vanish, instead of dying. I think this is not contradictory with the interpretation I suggest in the next paragraphs. The belief in albinos vanishing seems rather to be a multivocal representation, with different potentially relevant meanings (including, probably, the one suggested by Cabral), which can be selected by individuals according to the rhetorical conjuncture.

mic safety and the community beliefs: <sup>12</sup> albinos keep on vanishing, because no one can claim to have attended the funeral of one of them.

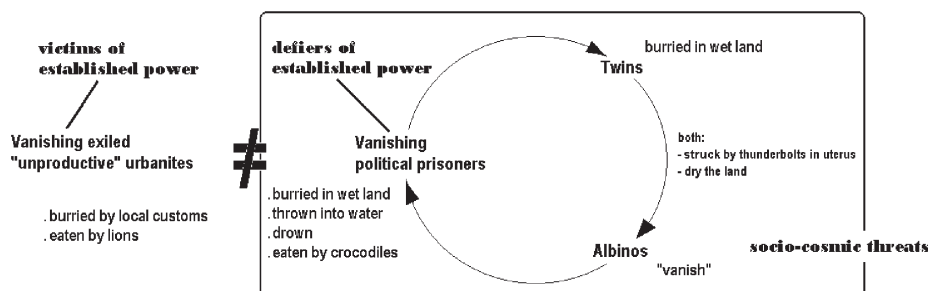


Image 2. Symbolic relations between, twins, albinos, prisoners and 'unproductives.'

Many political prisoners, both before and after independence, had also vanished from their communities and were no longer seen by the people who knew them. Most of them indeed died, although some just settled in the regions where they were imprisoned when their detention came to an end. Also, many guerrilla fighters from the anti-colonial movement (Frelimo – Mozambique Liberation Front) were killed by Portuguese troops or political intelligence police (PIDE/DGS – see note 2) after their capture and interrogation.

I already recounted a tale about what happened to some of the vanished anti-colonial partisans: their clandestine burial by PIDE/DGS, just beside the river water, near the present Matola cemetery. I use the word 'tale' because, in fact, there is no evidence that such things ever happened in that place, and it would be a strange choice to bury people in secrecy.

Dalila Mateus (2004) provides another story about the hiding of partisans' corpses in wet places. She heard in Tofinho Beach, near the town of Inhambane, that PIDE/DGS used to throw the corpses of the people they killed into the sea so they would be eaten by sharks. This local information is another significant tale because there are no man-eating sharks in that area. Also, the beach suf-

<sup>12</sup> Also in neighbouring Tanzania, albinos are not supposed to die. But, paradoxically, parts of their bodies are sought for purposes of sorcery for personal enrichment, because personal enrichment is seen as something that dries up all the wealth around the person. For that reason, and because the location of their graves is unknown, at least 19 albinos were killed in order to be mutilated post mortem, during 2007 (Gettleman 2008). Also in Mozambique, the most powerful amulets and magical treatments to obtain and keep wealth and power require parts of human bodies, but, as far as I know, not specifically from albinos. However, this might change soon, due to events in Tanzania and to the usually fast transnational interchange of magical techniques in the region. The data on albinos' burial proceedings were provided by a personal communication of Danúbio Lihaha (2005).

ferred much erosion in the last decades, so what seems very easy to do nowadays would have been very difficult to do some 35 or 45 years ago.

Nevertheless, I heard, on the same beach, a variation of that story, now pointing to several big natural holes in the rocks that lead to underwater caverns. In this version, the analogy with the burial of twins is even more direct, since although the corpses were sent into the water, they were simultaneously thrown inside the earth.

There is still another current story of partisans' deaths and corpse disposal. It is said that, while transporting political prisoners by helicopter to Lourenço Marques (now Maputo), PIDE/DGS and Portuguese troops used to throw them into the sea, faraway from the coast. While this might have happened occasionally, reliable reports from previous members of the Portuguese military, also horrifying, tell a significantly different story. Some military commanders and PIDE/DGS officials indeed used to throw guerrilla fighters out of helicopters when they believed they could not get more information from them; but this was done over the ground, and the victims' corpses were left unburied. One of the officers even used to shout sarcastically, in those occasions: "You say the land is yours, go get it!"<sup>13</sup>

So, in what seems to be a reinterpretation of actual practices which did not involve water, the folk accounts of the disposal of the corpses from vanished independence partisans systematically place them in wet environments. These accounts can follow a direct analogy to twins' burials or they can even go a bit further (placing the corpses inside the water, instead of only wet soil), just as albinos 'go a bit further' than twins in the threat they represent and in the constraints imposed on their deaths.

This symbolic connection between vanishing prisoners, twins and albinos continues after independence. Chronologically, the first case mentioned to me by common people concerns a rebellion of previous guerrilla fighters shortly after independence. According to these accounts, the rebels lost and were taken as prisoners to Xefina Island, near the shore in Maputo Bay, where they were fusiladed and thrown into the sea. The first part of this account is a well-known fact, but I could not get any confirmation of the corpses' disposal.

The island was subsequently the location of a 're-education camp,' for people whom the regime considered 'committed to colonialism,' 'reactionary' or ideologically heterodox. As to what happened during this phase, it is *vox populi* that the prisoners who died there were also thrown into the water. However, a man who was a prisoner in that camp denied the veracity of the story in a conversation with me, calling it a 'myth.'

<sup>13</sup> Personal communications of two Portuguese conscripts and one professional soldier who witnessed this proceeding, and wanted to remain anonymous.

Several other 're-education camps' have been subsequently built, mostly in the hinterland and far away from Maputo. About those, I heard several stories, told by people who never had been there, stating that the graves of dead prisoners were dug in the river banks. Although many camps were indeed built close to rivers, due to water supply necessities, I never heard any confirmation of such burial proceedings from somebody who had actually been there. Four people who were prisoners in three such camps told me that they never saw that happen, and that river banks were used, in the camps were they had been imprisoned, to cultivate crops.

Folk stories do exist, also, of people who tried to escape from 're-education camps' but did not succeed in returning home because they vanished on their way home. I heard six of those stories, and they all have a similar *leit-motif*: the fugitive died trying to cross a river, where he drowned or was eaten by crocodiles – the hinterland's prototype of the water predator.

So, in the case of the political prisoners who disappeared during the post-independence period, the folk stories systematically show them – as it happens with vanishing anti-colonial fighters – dying in the water, being eaten by water predators, or being buried in wet land or in the water itself. And this happens, as well, independently of the factual knowledge of actual events.

The later characteristic reinforces the symbolic significance of such stories. But what is the meaning of the equivalence between vanishing prisoners, twins and albinos which is dramatically emphasised by these stories?

If we would take in consideration only this data, it would seem that the old beliefs about twins and albinos were used to discuss disappeared political prisoners in order to stress the fact that they had vanished. However, there was another conspicuous group of people who were also arrested, taken away from their communities and families, and detained in faraway lands from which many of them never came back. Yet these beliefs are not used to describe their situation.

#### 4. Subversives and victims

In May, 1983, while informing the country of the results of the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of Frelimo, the President, Samora Machel, announced that one of the decisions was to "clear the towns of tramps, delinquents, prostitutes and all those who do not work" (Honwana 1984: 3). In the words of Gita Honwana,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Do not confuse with the anthropologist Alcinda Honwana, who is not quoted in this article.

In this manner was started the grandiose operation for production, against hunger and unemployment, against marginality and criminality, for the dignity of Mozambican Man; an operation which is an integral part of the economic battle we fight today; an operation which is being a school where also the Justice, through its Tribunals and through the action of its Judges, went to learn a lesson of legality. (Honwana 1984: 3)

To the common population, however, it was difficult to recognise, under such glorious rhetoric, the actual events that were taking place. What they remember and talk about are constant round-ups and roadblocks imposed by the police and the official militias near the bus stops and in residential areas. People without their ID or work card in their pockets were taken away to Niassa before their families had the chance to intervene. Unmarried mothers were deported as prostitutes and the unemployed people were treated as criminals by a state which owned the economy but was unable to provide them jobs. They recalled the humiliation, the pain, the helplessness and sorrow. In the end, people remember and stress the separated and destroyed families, the forced labour, the relatives vanished forever, the abuse of power over ordinary people, without any positive results at all. Many also denounced others to the authorities in order to carry out personal revenge.

When we go back in time and look at this reality from the state's point of view, in the official magazine *Justiça Popular*, both the apologetic *compte rendu* of the People's Judges (Honwana 1984) and the verdicts and appeals published as examples of jurisprudence (TPCM 1984) are consistent with the present descriptions.

No law was written on the subject of Operation Production but, only in Maputo, 38 verification posts were created straight away, holding the status of People's Courts but, unlike them, also the power to sentence the accused to prison or deportation to 'production centres' or 're-education camps.' In the first weeks, the round-ups and arrests were so numerous that every appointed People's Judge often had to work 48 hours in a row, deciding non-stop the fate of hundreds of people (Image 3). With the accumulation of accused people, the Police forces started to send them directly to the 'evacuation centres' – where they were sent to Niassa. Later on, 'sorting groups' were created in the verification posts, and only the 'doubtful cases' were presented to the People's Judges. Also, an appeal mechanism was eventually implemented, in this case mostly involving judges with some actual juridical knowledge.



Image 3. A mother's trial, during Operation Production (photo *Justiça Popular*).

Many unfair decisions are reported in the magazine, even according to the draconian criteria of Operation Production. In suburban areas, peasants were deported because, obviously, they did not have any 'working card' from an employing company. The same happened to several employed workers, because many companies did not update their staff registers (Honwana 1984). Amongst academics and other prominent professions, there were even cases of people who were suddenly dismissed from their jobs and, arriving home, found police officers at the door, waiting to deport them as 'unproductive.'<sup>15</sup> Other professions, like traditional healers and diviners, were not recognised as such by the state and, therefore, practising these arts became a reason for deportation – which also happened to handymen (TPCM 1984: 40).

The appeal criteria were often quite surprising. For instance, one of the jurisprudence examples is the confirmation of deportation to Niassa of an immigrant worker who was waiting in Maputo for the renewal of his passport because he did not have a Swazi work card - which did not exist. He did not, as the political police told him to make his inscription as someone who was looking for a job – because he was not, since he worked abroad (TPCM 1984: 41).

In fact, to appeal could worsen one's situation. The parents of a young woman asked for her return from a 'working camp' near Maputo, because she was not

<sup>15</sup> Unlike the other examples I mention, I knew those last cases (which correspond to the punishment of personal and/or politic enmities not founded upon legal grounds under other accusations) from personal communications, and not from the articles of the magazine *Justiça Popular*.

'unproductive' according to the last guide-lines transmitted to the 'verification posts.' But the Appeals Judge decided that, since she was the unmarried mother of two children "faced with the total indifference of her parents," she was a "woman of bad behaviour" and should be judged again under that charge, and not as "unproductive" (TPCM 1984: 41). In this new situation, she was probably sent to Niassa.

The most arbitrary situations concerned women and the accusation of prostitution. After six months of summary trials and deportations, a People's Judge timidly suggested that it was maybe time "to define clearly prostitution and to identify its punishment, according to our reality" (Honwana 1984: 9), while he mentions the case of a woman charged for prostitution because she put an end to a long unmarried cohabitation and, while living back with her parents, started dating another man before the 'local structures'<sup>16</sup> ratified her previous separation. One of the appeal verdicts had to stress that "a woman is not a prostitute just because she lived maritally with a Portuguese man," before independence (TPCM 1984: 42). Stephanie Urdang (1989) heard, in a study trip through the deportation camps, systematic complaints of women who claimed to be there because they dated the 'wrong men' or did not accept becoming lovers or concubines of the 'right one,' i.e., some member of their neighbourhoods' local structures.

What happened to these thousands of people, so-called 'unproductives,' delinquents, or prostitutes? Initially, there were indeed some work camps in which they were placed in order to perform hard labour, and there was space left in the 're-education camps.' Soon, all these places were overcrowded and the state could not organise new ones, so people were just left far away from their homes. First, in villages; later (as it happened to a recently deceased icon of the Xipamaine neighbourhood, a man who returned from Niassa by walking thousands of miles), they were left in the middle of the bush, in a province where lions were very common. In the end, most deportees were never provided with transportation back to their towns. So, if they or their families could not arrange it, they died there or still live in the regions where the state left them. To their families and their original neighbours, they vanished.

Curiously enough, neither the common people nor the sympathetic international observers (Urdang 1989) ever pointed out the obvious similitude between the early colonialists' justifications for forced labour (Ennes 1946) and the speech which legitimised Operation Production, or the parallel between this and the

<sup>16</sup> In a mono-party situation which merged the state and the ruling Frelimo Party, this expression was used to the appointed local Secretaries, to the 'Driving Groups' [*Grupos Dinamizadores*] and to the local leadership of Frelimo 'base organizations,' like the women's and youth ones. 'Structures' eventually became the common peoples' designation for the state or Frelimo officers and leaders.

Pass Law and Bantustan policy of the South-African Apartheid government. In the 1980s, all they both pointed out was the huge number of people who were treated unjustly even accordingly to the Operation Production principles. Only later, people say, these principles were seen as an abuse in themselves, but without raising local historical analogies – although some previous officers with whom I managed to talk about this subject justified the Operation via another historical analogy, namely the limitations to the circulation and urban settlement of people inside the USSR.

Even so, deportees are seen, in general terms and in most individual cases, as ordinary people who simply became victims of an abusive utilization of political power. In the end, Operation Production endured as a collectively traumatic event, which only the subsequent horrors of the civil war<sup>17</sup> allowed to minimize in people's memories.

While asking people from different areas of Maputo what happened to those deportees who never came back, I never received an answer which mentioned water, wet soil or even crocodiles. In more than 30 interviews or informal conversations on this subject, there is also a common *leit motif* in what people said; but it is very different from the case of vanishing political prisoners. According to such stories, those people kept on living in Niassa, or they were eaten by lions, or they died of some other cause and were buried according to the local custom there.

Southern Mozambican people do not really know the characteristics of the Niassa funerary custom they mention, but they assume it would be in regular soil. Such an end is, nevertheless, seen as a reason for sorrow, because they expect the ritual to be different from their own and, therefore, strange to the dead deportees. It is also sad because the spirit of the deceased will stay there alone, without the company of his/her dead and living relatives.

I must underline that this recurrent account of corpses' disposal is most significant since, as Feliciano (1998) already stressed, when a stranger dies in your homeland you should bury that person in wet soil, 'just in case.' Local people can see that the deceased is not an albino, but they can never know if (s)he is a twin, or the mother of someone who 'dries the land.' To assume that the people from Niassa did not take this usual precaution towards strangers who, after all, were in a stigmatised position is, therefore, a strong statement (although probably not a conscious one) that they should not do it. It is, indeed, a claim that deportees did not deserve to be buried like threatening twins.

<sup>17</sup> Soon after independence, in 1975, the 'white' minority governments of Rhodesia and South Africa started supporting armed opposition groups operating in Mozambique whose actions eventually evolved into a large-scale and bloody civil war that only ended in 1992. About its horrors, see, for instance, Geffray (1991), Hall & Young (1997) and Granjo (2006).



The public accounts of the man from Xipamanine I mentioned some pages ago are doubly significant, because they were both statements of his personal experience and the reconfiguration of such experience in the light of audience expectations. While he crossed the country by foot, he also had to wade through rivers, in order to avoid possible road blocks on the bridges. Those river crossings and the concomitant danger of crocodiles were impressive moments of his narrations, but he never ascribed the death of other deportees to crocodiles, although he often stressed their killing by lions and everybody's terror at the possibility of dying that way.

So, in complete opposition to the disappeared political prisoners (see Image 2), the vanishing deportees of Operation Production – who were also arrested and sent away by the State, under stigmatising accusations and conditions – are systematically represented as being buried in dry soil or being eaten by land predators, even if we can expect some of them had actually drown or been eaten by crocodiles.

In a rhetoric and conceptual context where the political prisoners are equated with twins/albinos, the vanished deportees are, in this way, vehemently presented as non-twins/albinos. One of the consequences of this observation is that the image attached to the disappeared political prisoners cannot be, thus, just an affirmation of their vanishing. A second consequence is that we need to clarify the meanings ascribed to the differences between both groups of vanishing people, in order to understand the meaning of that image.

## **5. A folk theory of political power**

Since I already mentioned that the deportees of Operation Production are seen as innocent victims of political power, it would be tempting to conversely attach to the political prisoners the label of guilty. This would however be a simplistic assumption. On the one hand, it would be simplistic because two very different groups of vanishing political prisoners are merged, in people's accounts, in the same equating of twins and albinos: the heroes who died for independence (which was soon presented as synonymous to the socialist revolution); and the people who, under stigmatising charges, were accused of plotting against independence, the Mozambican people and the revolution. Secondly, it would be simplistic, because it is well known that to be arrested as political prisoner did not necessarily derive from a censurable and guilty act. This is immediate in the case of the anti-colonial partisans. Most people will also agree that after independence, together with 'real' pro-colonialists, counter-revolutionaries or the ideo-

logically heterodox, many prisoners were arrested just because they complained louder about issues which also displeased their neighbours and colleagues, or because they took the 'wrong' attitudes at the wrong moments, even if they were right in doing so – as in the case we can follow in this pungent account of a previous political prisoner:

By then, I was not at all a counter-revolutionary. I was happy with the independence and I took it as it was, even in the things I didn't like.

For instance: if days of voluntary work were needed, why should I spend them with a hoe, cutting grass or making holes in the ground? I'm a mechanic, for God's sake! I didn't know how to use a hoe and most of the people around me didn't know how to do anything else. I think I would be much more useful doing my job, for free, on that day. Nevertheless, I never complained about such things. I didn't like it, but I did always my best and I accepted it – the same way I accepted the rule of Frelimo, who brought us the independence.

But I was sent to the re-education camp as counter-revolutionary and saboteur! It was like this: an important piece of a machine got broken, and the director of the factory ordered me to make a new one. I told him this could not be done, that we needed to import it. I explained to him that we didn't have the right steel and tools and, if we would try to substitute it with some hand-made piece, other parts of the machine would collapse. "The director didn't know anything about mechanics or industry. He was just a "devoted comrade from the armed struggle,"<sup>18</sup> so I was arrested as saboteur. Eventually, it happened as I said it would. In fact, he was the real saboteur. But it was me who spent years in a re-education camp" (Anon. 2008).

So, the common people's differentiation between deportees and political prisoners does not arise from the acts that they did (or did not) perform or from the guilt attached to those concrete acts, but from their position towards the established power (as it is evaluated by the authorities) and from the public evaluation of that position.

In other words, the object of people's evaluation, in this game of identification and differentiation, is not the guilt or innocence of concrete actors; but what is licit or illicit in the person's relationship with the established power, and in the way that power is performed.

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<sup>18</sup> The Mozambican independence, in 1975, was preceded and shortly followed by an almost general exodus of people with European or Asiatic origin (Rita-Ferreira 1988). Since the access to school education and decision posts was highly race-based in the Portuguese colony, this created a dramatic shortage of qualified personnel in most areas and activities of the independent country. Therefore, voluntarism and political curricula were, often, the only criteria available for the appointments to leading posts in economic or administrative institutions. The source of this transcription is an interview held in 2008, with a previous political prisoner who wishes to remain anonymous.

As I mentioned before, twins and albinos have another pertinent characteristic, in the southern Mozambique socio-cultural context, besides the vanishing of the latter and their common cosmic origin: they are both socio-cosmic threats, who jeopardise the order of the world's reproduction, in its natural and social aspects.

Since vanishing is common to the deportees and to the political prisoners, the issue that is stressed in the stories about their corpses' disposal is, indeed, the threatening character which is ascribed, or not, to each one of them (see Image 2).

This being so, the simultaneous symbolic equivalence of vanishing political prisoners and twins/albinos, on the one hand, and their differentiation from vanishing deportees of Operation Production, on the other hand, expresses a concept – or should we say a theory – of political power relations that holds interesting parallels to the suggestions of Harry West (2008) about northern Mozambique.

Being heroes of independence or people seen as opposing it, being people who were guilty or people who were simply considered subversive by the established power, no matter when or where, political prisoners threaten the global society, and not only those who occupy power. Regular people who just happened to become victims of power abuse are not social threats; on the contrary, they are worthy of special public concern and consideration.<sup>19</sup>

In more general terms, according to this folk political theory, once an established power is recognised as such, it is illicit and socially threatening to jeopardise it, and those who do it become threatening social abnormalities. To jeopardise it is to jeopardise not only the powerful, but also the global social order and balance. Meanwhile (as strong as the previous statement), it is also illicit, for a legitimate and established power, to take unfair decisions about the people under its responsibility, instead of taking care of their basic welfare, as it should.

Obviously, these abstract statements do not mean that common people dislike those who oppose what they consider to be unfair regimes, or that they refuse to mobilise against such established powers. Otherwise, neither the national liberation struggle nor the post-independence civil war could endure as long as it did. These principles are shared guidelines that, like every social rule, can be manipulated, negotiated or subverted according to actual conditions, without compromising their existence as general desirable rules.

Nevertheless, the resilient social representations of twins and albinos were, thus, manipulated in order to critically express a subtly balanced vision of power, which can be very misleading if we focus our attention only on one of its poles. All we will be able to see, in this case, will be a demanding and dependent

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<sup>19</sup> It would be interesting to check what kind of corpses' disposal was ascribed to the people who died while performing forced labour during colonial regime, but I could not find any references to that subject.

attitude, or (looking to the opposite pole) a resigned and almost automatic submission to power.

Take in its whole, however, what we see is a local “social contract” (Rousseau 1974) which, in fact, is similar to many reports of ‘traditional’ concepts of power in sub-Saharan Africa: <sup>20</sup> An established power can be considered legitimate for several different reasons (in this context, genealogy, conquest, revolutionary legitimacy or democratic elections); but the social recognition of the power’s legitimacy, even if unquestioned, does not mean that all its decisions and practices are legitimate, even if they are performed within its established competence. The public recognition of power legitimacy imposes, on the powerful, responsibilities towards the protection and welfare of the people they rule. If the established power fails to fulfil such responsibilities – or disrespects them – in its concrete actions, those actions are illegitimate, even if the power itself is not.

Therefore, to focus on only one of the poles of this “social contract” has broader consequences than a mere scientific or interpretative mistake. It can also restrict the ability to understand current political dynamics.

After 80 years of effective colonial domination and 35 years of independence with the same ruling Party, which did not face explicit resistance in changing from a socialist paradigm to a neo-liberal policy, it is quite understandable that Mozambican rulers focused on the ‘pole’ of people’s resignation and submission to power. This is why, I believe, the local political elites were so surprised by the violent riots against rising prices in early February 2008 (Granjo 2008b), and claimed that there was an external ‘invisible hand’ behind them.

But, if it seems clear now, from the data and interpretations I presented, that the old representations of twins and albinos were selected to systematically express a folk vision of power and to classify, according to it, recent actors of the political performance, there is nothing ‘natural’ about that choice. That selection, instead of the use of some locally common language to talk about power, for instance sorcery (Niehaus 2001; West 2009), is exceptional and surprising.

This is probably rooted in the disturbing act of vanishing, which is common to both contexts and seems to have offered, to albinos and twins, an unsuspected pertinence to symbolise current political issues.

Their selection for that purpose reveals, however, another important point: it shows how relevant the representations of and beliefs about twins and albinos still are in contemporary urban Mozambique.

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<sup>20</sup> Besides the vast scientific bibliography on this subject, see, for instance, the fascinating South-African novel *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (Jordan 2004).

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