Capitalist penetration in a colonial frontier: 
The case of the Angónia Plateau in central Mozambique.

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Abstract: Debates about the drivers of the development of capitalist relations of production in Southern Africa face the challenge of accounting for the most salient and idiosyncratic characteristics of the transition in Africa. Except for the extreme cases of settler colonies, the expansion of capitalism was largely exempt from the dispossession of land and the ensuing separation of direct producers from the means of production. However, in Portuguese colonies accumulation was premised on forced labour until the abolition of chibalo in the 1960s. This paper traces the case of the Angónia plateau in the Zambezi basin, where the colonial construction of a frontier aimed at controlling and extracting labour power, to show the implications of this type of incorporation for the subsequent development of agrarian relations.
1. Introduction

Spatial studies have energized debates about the significance of agrarian frontiers and borderlands in the processes of articulation to world markets and statebuilding in Africa. In the early literature borders, were conceived as spatial constraints imposed exogenously onto social realities by colonial authorities and therefore prone to conflict. In the past decade there has been a conceptual break with this tradition. Recent contributions have documented the myriad of livelihoods and opportunities created around the border and have theorized the way borderland dynamics feed back into processes of state-building. Borderlands are now presented as spaces of opportunity and dynamic creation of political identities (Sautter 1982; Asiwayu 1985; Nugent 1996, 2008; Roitman 2004; Hoehne and Feyissa 2013).

However, spatial effects created by borderlands and frontiers can provide an arena for the emergence of state power and economic orders, while at the same time being harnessed for resistance to such orders and a useful conduct for agency. Social relations of power around property and production reacted to, and shaped, the socio-political experience of the agrarian frontier in the Angónia Plateau on the Mozambique-Malawi historical borderland. The combination in Angónia of a historical border and an agrarian frontier transformed the region into an arena of struggles for the control of land and labour. This specific combination allowed for the active use of spatial relations by the state and emerging forms of capital as a way of cornering the population. Nevertheless, the population of Angónia also made use of spatial relations as a way of resisting and escaping attempts at such co-option.

This paper investigates the role of borderlands as constraint and alternatively as conduits for the broader historical process of commodification of subsistence from the late 19th century to the present. We reconstruct the specific cleavages formed in the contraposition of different agrarian regimes of land and labour (in Mozambique and neighbouring countries) in two different historical moments: first, the period of introduction of taxation and forced labour during the late 19th century addressed in section 1 and second, the tobacco boom experienced in Angónia in the aftermath of the Mozambican civil war which is described in section 2. It is argued that the formation of the agrarian regime in Angónia has been mediated by its borderland context in two different and complementary ways: socio-economic arbitrage and spatial cornering.

‘Arbitrage’ is a category used by Anderson and O’Dowd to describe the possibility of exploiting opportunistically different economic and juridical regimes that are in contact in borderlands (1999). Here arbitrage is used to account more broadly for the way social relations of production take advantage of, and take place in, the borderland. “Different forms of economic activity incorporate or use the fact of spatial inequality in order to maximise profit. This form of response to geographical unevenness will vary both between sectors, and within any given sector with changing conditions of production” (Massey 1979, quoted in Smith 1989).

The juridical cleavage of the borderland in Angónia has been incorporated as an element in the relations of production. As described in detail in the first section of the paper, instances of socio-economic borderland arbitrage were found for example in the attempt of the population of Angónia to avoid colonial taxation and forced labour by migrating to South Africa, Rhodesia and Nyasaland. During most of the colonial period, wages and employment opportunities in the neighbouring colonies and lack thereof in Mozambique pushed many of the respondents in our survey to seek seasonal work abroad, even if only to pay their taxes and be allowed to continue farming in Mozambique. The border arbitrage, although used to avoid taxes and forced labour in Mozambique, paradoxically reinforces the progressive integration of producers from Angónia into labour markets and therefore their integration into the cash economy. Similarly, in the current tobacco boom described in the second section, thousands of Malawian seasonal workers flow every year to Angónia to find jobs as agricultural labourers or to become tobacco tenants.
In doing so, they are seeking the wages in Meticais and the premium of the currency differential. The large contract farming scheme that sustains the tobacco boom can be described as an arbitrage economy by the leaf-buying multinational which takes advantage of the relative economic isolation of the Angónia hinterland as well as the legal and policy differences in Mozambique to avoid the more taxed and regulated Malawian tobacco regime.

Throughout the 20th century, the spatial policing of movement linked to the functioning of international borderlands within the Southern African labour migration system is perhaps the most tangible expression of spatial relations as constitutive elements of the struggles for the mobilization of labour and the resistance against proletarianization. Arbitrage and gate-keeping are not simply livelihoods strategies to derive profit from the border, but are inscribed more generally in the longer making of borderland labour reserves and in the historical struggles for the mobilization of workers from Angónia and their attempts at resisting such proletarianization.

A second spatial mechanism at play is referred to here as the ‘spatial enclosure’: a type of arbitrage created by the cleavage not across the border, but between centre and periphery. Nugent and Asiwaju (1996) refer to the function of borders as means to corral social groups, while Nugent (2008), Goodhand (2008) and Anderson and O’Dowd (2010) refer to a ‘fishing net’ mechanism whereby borders let some people and commodities pass while preventing other from moving. Here it is proposed that ‘corralling’, ‘cornering’ or ‘fishing net’ could be used interchangeably to describe the way spatial relations were managed to block the mobility of social groups in a way that sustained colonial accumulation on the basis of the mobilization of a labourforce. Population and commodities from a borderland can be corralled by the coupling of a hard border and the historically constructed isolation from the centres of accumulation (e.g. transport and economic marginalization, the weaker presence of the state and institutions, the historical paucity of local employment). The idea here is that this effect is incorporated into the character of the relations of production. Examples of this in Angónia include the trade asymmetries, wage level differentials between centre and periphery, lower commodity prices to producers, the thinness of the local labour market and the resulting structural position of the inhabitants of this borderland.

As the two examples developed in the paper show, people from Angónia had fewer options in terms of income generation than agricultural producers in the integrated regions in Mozambique and were progressively forced to engage in periodic labour migration for low wages by pressures that workers coming from integrated regions did not experience. The jobs on offer for migrants were not sufficient for the full reproduction of the workers and their families, and producers from Angónia could not afford to migrate definitely out of Angónia, since the very reproduction of farming households increasingly depended on the availability of cash incomes and linkages to markets.

In more structural terms, the colonial formation of a labour reserve in Angónia was made possible by the enclosure effect: Angónia was a remote hinterland pocket of population attractive as a source of abundant and cheap migrant labour, but labour only remained comparatively cheap because Angónia had been historically constructed as a remote borderland which could not export other commodities. In the past two decades forms of ‘spatial enclosure’ near the border have allowed tobacco buyers to enforce a monopsony and prevent side selling in contract farming. A proportion of the producers are compelled to take tobacco contracts because there are few other cash crop alternatives. Unsurprisingly, the Tobacco Company now sources most of the tobacco produced in Mozambique from the Mozambique-Malawi borderland.

A detailed reconstruction of the spatial effects at play in these two different periods underscores the potential contribution of a disciplinary dialogue between political geography and agrarian studies.
2. The colonial formation of an agrarian frontier

The present-day population of the Angónia plateau descend from Achewa groups established under the larger umbrella of the Maravi Kingdom and from the Maseko Ngoni, one of several bands of Ngoni warriors that started a northward migration from Zululand in the early 19th century, reaching Angónia in the 1860s (Englund 2002, Newitt 1995).

Chichewa-speaking groups had settled in the 16th century along the tributaries of the middle Zambezi and were part of the Maravi Kingdom, which at its height extended from the Indian Ocean to the western shores of Lake Malawi. Throughout the 19th century and the Maravi kingdom was periodically subject to fierce attacks contesting its position in the coveted fertile lands around Lake Malawi (McCrank 2013, Newitt 1995).

The matrilineal groups that made up the Maravi cluster expanded based on the introduction of maize agriculture and on their strategic location along trade routes for ivory and slaves extending from the Central African kingdoms to the Portuguese and Swahili traders in the Indian Ocean (Newitt 1995, Coelho 1993). As with other groups from the Maravi cluster, Chewa were predominantly organized around matrilineal segments composed by descendants of a common maternal ancestor, her daughters and unmarried sons and all their children and grandchildren. (Rita Ferreira 1966, Matos 1969, Blom 2002). The Chewa expanded through matrilineal segmentation and their settlement patterns combined high population density with low population concentration. (Rita-Ferreira 1966, Matos 1969).

Map 1. Present day Angónia district

(Source: the author)

Three macro-processes converged in Angónia plateau during the last decades of the 19th century. First, new terms for the recruitment and mobilization of labour emerged to compensate for the mid-century abolition of slavery in British and French colonies (East Africa had been the main source of the slave trade in the 19th century). Although traders found new ways of
smuggling slaves, other forms of compulsory work replaced slave work. Vail and White propose that introduction of a forced labour regime (once the slave trade was at least nominally banned in the region) became the main channel for colonial accumulation (1980). Second, capitalist mining and agriculture prospered in neighbouring Rhodesia and in the Transvaal. Demand for labour increased rapidly and local competition started to push wages up. Miners in the Rand opted to turn to migrant labour from Mozambique as way to contain the local labour force and lower their wages. By the end of the 1890s, half of the labour force used in the mines came from Mozambique. Migrant workers were banned from settling in their labour destinations and their employment conditions were purposively made precarious in order to create dependence. The resort to migrant labour was instrumental to the process of accumulation by disempowering local workers; a pliant labour force continuously affected by instability and poverty was created and the costs of reproduction of the labour force shifted onto their households (Vail and White 1980, Newitt 1995). Third, the presence of the Portuguese colonial state, which had been until then tenuous, was outsourced to private concessionaries with the creation of territorial concessions for tax collection, known as prazos.

3. Prazo concessions and the making of the colonial frontier in Tete

Until the 19th century, the colonial presence in Portuguese East Africa was still limited to strategic trading posts along the Indian Ocean coast and military garrisons along the Zambezi. The Portuguese crown did not have the means to sustain a more effective occupation of the colony (Isaacman and Isaacman 1991). The Angónia plateau was a remote imperial frontier. Its hinterland location meant that for most of the colonial period and despite the region’s fertility, commercial agriculture was unviable since transport routes to the urban and economic centres in Sofala and Quelimane were impracticable (Coelho 1991, Neves 1991).

The colonial administration response to its limited capacity to effectively occupy the Zambezi Valley was the creation of the prazo system, a regime of delegated territorial administration. Prazos were long-term emphyteutic land leases which gave leaseholders the right to carry tax collection on behalf of the state, in return for a percentage of the intake. In exchange, the leaseholder was in charge of occupying and developing the area, collecting poll taxes and paying an annuity equivalent to 50 per cent of the revenue. Prazo-holders had the right to receive taxes in the form of work, what would later become known as chibalo (Newitt 1993, 217).

A distinction was made between the prazos in the lower Zambezi, conceived of as areas of economic development, and the prazos of Tete, envisaged as areas of military expansion. Prazos in Tete were in the westerly frontier of the colony and were frequently invaded or abandoned for years at the time. They were a foothold for commercial penetration and military contention in the borderlands, but were not ready for more ambitious investment. Faced with the difficulty of persuading Portuguese settlers to take on these leases, it was a class of powerful and autonomous Afro-Portuguese private agents and their military entourage, the achikunda, who became leaseholders. The achikunda were slaves turned soldiers, armed by the prazo-holders to collect taxes and police the concession and its borders.
Achikunda would physically punish tax-evaders, suppress revolts and prevent people in the prazo from fleeing to other territories (Isaacman and Peterson 2003). Some of the prazos became equivalent to local tributary kingdoms and it became progressively more difficult for the colonial administration to control Afro-Portuguese prazo-holders. By the late 17th century Prazo Angónia was in the hands of the Pereiras, an Afro-Goan family sent to overpower Chewa groups. The Pereiras sealed military allegiances and waged war with local groups. They also profited from raiding for slaves within their prazos (Rita-Ferreira 1966, Blom 2002).

Matrilineal segmentation, maize and dependable rainfall extended the Chewa footprint as the prazo system introduced colonial presence in Angónia. However, in the late 19th century Chewa villages in the prazo succumbed to the Ngoni invasions. Although the Chichewa-speaking population vastly outnumbered the newcomers, the Ngoni had a highly centralized organization around chieftaincies and a military vocation honed in battles and raids that had sustained them on their way north. Furthermore, the colonial administration had been incapable of containing their advance, to the extent that the Ngoni managed to occupy 28 of the 46 prazos of Tete, seriously compromising the foundations of the colonial project (Isaacman and Peterson 2003). The matrilineal segmentation had allowed the Chewa territorial expansion but had not created a politically unified and centralized state capable of repelling the Ngoni.

Ngoni migrations swept through Central Southern Africa as a consequence of the displacement of military groups as the effect of internecine disputes among the Zulu. The Ngoni migrations led to the formation of Gaza Empire south of the Save River and the Ndebele Nation in Southern Rhodesia. Other groups broke away and proceeded further north to Tanganyika; Northern Rhodesia, and Lake Malawi (Newitt 1995). Sometime after 1865, the Maseko Ngoni subgroup settled around Mount Domwe in Angónia. In their northward migration the Ngoni developed as a ‘snowball state’ around groups of specialised warriors that took male and female captives and incorporated them into the group. In consequence, there was limited ethnic uniformity to migrant Ngoni (Newitt 1995, 355). The Ngoni advanced on Chewa villages and imposed their more centralized forms of government. However, their patrilineal kin and virilocal residence came into contradiction with the practices of matrilineal Chewa around which they had settled and within which they hoped to marry (Blom 2002). Fewer in number and needing to transform their military might - advantageous for migration and invasion - into sedentary reproductive
capacity, the Ngoni became progressively assimilated into the conquered Chewa. The integration of Chewa and Ngoni was the result of a military invasion, but in the long run resulted in an uneven amalgamation that did not mobilize divisive autochthony identities. Englund notes that Chewa villages that came under Ngoni political control experienced the process more as a change of allegiances than as a social revolution (2002, 41).

4. Prazo Angónia after the invasion

A new regulation of the prazo system introduced in 1890 ruled that prazos in Tete, which were not yet pacified, would only be leased for a maximum of ten years. In this case, prazo-holders would be obliged to pacify the territory and would have the prerogative of collecting the newly introduced mussoco, the colonial poll taxes (Neves 1991, Vail and White 1980, Newitt 1995, Coelho 1991). While the 1890 reform of prazos was intended to attract individual Portuguese lease-holders, the decision resulted in the extension of tenders to privately-owned foreign companies. Foreign-owned chartered companies were set up to raise finance in Metropolitan financial centres to invest overseas and subsequently they became the dominant holders of prazo concessions in Central Mozambique (Coelho 1991, Vail and White 1980).

Territorial concessions to chartered companies became extensive in Portuguese East Africa. At its peak, the majority of the territory was leased under charter. The companies exerted enormous power in the administration of the concessions, as well as benefitting from lax control by the state. In 1907, 126 out of 134 prazos in Tete were granted to the Zambesia Company, including Prazo Angónia and neighbouring Prazo Macanga, which together concentrated 69 per cent of the prazo population in Tete (Coelho 1991, Tornimbeni 2000).

The Zambesia Company did not have the means to exploit prazo Angónia and proceeded to sub-lease it to a private entrepreneur, Raphael Bivar. Attempts by Bivar to develop commercial agricultural were unsuccessful. Bivar was also reluctant to accept tax payments in kind because transport and commercialization were impossible. The lack of transport connection to central Mozambique made Angónia into a remote frontier. It also placed its inhabitants in a different spatial configuration vis-à-vis other people in Mozambique. People in Angónia were far away from jobs and unable to engage in cash cropping. In 1911 on a visit to Prazo Angónia, a colonial inspector lamented that ‘no one uses Portuguese coinage’, ‘roads there are not worth discussing’ and ‘there is no commercial agriculture in the whole prazo’. The report ends on a sombre note: ‘I have hereby proved that government here is a fiction.’ (Aragão e Mello 1911, 453).

In parallel with the changes to the operation of prazo Angónia, the colonial administration also introduced changes to the forced labour regime during the final years of the century. With Portugal emerging from depression in 1895, then Royal Commissioner for Mozambique António Enes and, later, the Governor General Mouzinho de Albuquerque believed that in order to develop the colonies it was necessary to act more proactively to attract investors. It was expected that by stabilizing the labour supply and lowering the costs of recruitment, low wage-costs would increase the commercial appeal of the colony.

A series of reforms after 1896 increased the mussoco fees by 50 per cent and the new labour code of 1899 extended compulsory work –chibalo- from prazo inhabitants to all able-bodied ‘native’ males in the colonies, with the exception of those who had enough capital or a profession and those cultivating cash-crops or working for the administration. In 1909 it was estimated that a man in Angónia had to work for a whole month to pay his and his wife’s

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1 The direct road from Tete to Angónia was only finalized in 1973.
mussoco. Alternatively, he could make a round trip to Tete as bearer as long as the employer secured back load (Secretaria 1909).

In this way, colonial accumulation was constructed around the complementarity of forced labour and taxation. Faced with the difficulty of extracting value from independent peasantries with access to land, the introduction of poll taxes created pressure for the population to find sources of monetary income. Forced labour then became the main mechanism channelling the payment of taxes. After a few decades of operation the role of taxes would be transformed. While originally they were introduced to force the peasantry to sell their labour force in exchange for cash to pay taxes, once the system was fully developed, the population became dependent on cash income and taxation helped guarantee that people remained within the wage labour circuit. During the 20th century wages would be carefully calibrated to ensure that people had to work for progressively longer periods and the working time necessary to pay mussoco increased from around 3 weeks per year at the time the regulations were introduced to 4 months when they were abolished in 1962 (Newitt 1995, Head 1980).

The territory of colonial Mozambique contained few areas of high population density and this made Prazo Angónia unique and coveted, but there was no way of employing this potential labour force locally. When agro-processing flourished in the Lower Zambezi valley, the forced labour system adapted to provide it with cheap migrant labour by rounding-up labour pools with censuses and taxes and restricting the movement of the population with pass regulations. Squadrons of sipaios would comb the prazos looking for deserters and snatching all those unable to pay mussoco (Newitt 1995). According to Aragão e Mello, abuses were ripe in tax collection in Angónia. People were charged for children and émigrés and those that could not pay mussoco would be regularly beaten by the sipaios. ‘Natives in Angónia are poor and miserable. Their only ambition is to pay their mussoco and then to be left in peace’ (1911, 140). In conjunction with forced labour, the prazo system in central Mozambique had the effect of suppressing wages: throughout the period weekly wages in central Mozambique were estimated to be between 25 and 90 per cent lower than in Southern Mozambique (Neves 1991; Vail and White 1980, 134). This amounted to a border enclosure, since people had few options other than labour migration, while at the same time the state attempted to curtail their mobility and the possibility of finding better wages that those offered within Mozambique.

Forced labour was justified by the administration on civilizing, moral and economic grounds. The state became progressively more efficient at mobilizing labour on the basis of coercion and violence. Older men interviewed in Angónia who had been recruited for chibalo recall being hand-cuffed in the journey from their villages during impressment.

Local administrations delegated to chiefs and paramount chiefs, making them personally responsible for meeting given recruitment quotas and controlling clandestine migration. Chiefs were coerced into cooperation at the cost of losing their position. This co-option of local authorities for the forced recruitment effort was indicative of the growing power of the colonial state in the periphery. At least two of the seven chieftaincies in Angónia were granted by the Portuguese to sipaios that were neither Chewa nor Ngoni, in recognition of their services in the pacification campaign (CEA 1983, Blom 2002). The local Nyakwawa (headman) would receive requests from the administration about the men each village had to send and would proceed with their capture (Elders in Central Angónia, Interview). Nyakwawas were also in charge of collecting mussoco, following guidance from the local administration (Elder in North Angónia, Interview).

The introduction of the labour code significantly increased the number of labourers recruited and the overall availability of low-cost forced labour. However, it also resulted in forms of resistance such as avoidance, relocation and emigration to neighbouring colonies, absenteeism and desertion in the plantations, and instances of overt insurrection, such as the Bárue rebellion
in 1917, which, paradoxically, was suppressed with the assistance of Ngoni mercenaries (Newitt 1995).

There is consensus that there existed a strong link between forced labour and clandestine labour migration to Rhodesia, the Transvaal and Nyasaland, but there is some disagreement as to the causal direction of this relationship. Newitt argues that widespread clandestine migration and the higher wages that workers could get in Rhodesia and particularly in the Rand mines meant that local employers would not have been able to compete in the open market and retain workers within Mozambique (1995, 501). In this interpretation, labour migration would have caused the prolongation of the forced labour regime in colonial Mozambique as the only way to secure a supply of labour for the emerging domestic economy. Opposing this perspective, Tornimbeni claims that labour migration was in fact the reaction of the population to the abuses of forced labour conscription and taxation and evidence of the capacity of labourers to outwit the system (2000, 334-5). O’Laughlin takes this view further, proposing that both forced labour and resistance to it, in the form of migration to the British colonies, reinforced the commodification of livelihoods and a historically contingent process of proletarianization that would take different forms in different regions of Mozambique but that as a whole would prove irreversible (2002).

Forced labour had aggregate social effects beyond those experienced by individual and households that fell to impressment. The coexistence of forced labour alongside free labour created conditions for the exploitation of the peasantry at different levels: “Forced labour functioned within free labour and commodity markets, depressing overall wages for manual labour and prices for peasant produce. Labour and agricultural commodity markets were also intertwined since rural men moved back and forth between wage-labour (forced or free) and cash-cropping (forced or free)” (O’Laughlin 2002, 518). Households that managed to successfully combine male periodic migration and food and cash crop production on their land, accumulated and laid the foundations for expanded production. Households which were labour deficient or lacked access to a steady source of cash income progressively lost out (CEA 1983).

Angónia, a large but remote population pocket was articulated to the colonial economy by the early introduction of taxes and force labour. The border helped the state restrain the population’s mobility, but also gave people opportunities for evasion. These ambiguities of spatial effects combined with the effects of commodification and population density shaped Angónia’s agrarian structure. As the next sections shows, this spatial formation continues to have consequences nowadays.

5. Present vestiges of the agrarian frontier: tobacco farming in the post-war period

The first section discussed the particularities of the incorporation of the Angónia plateau into commodity relations starting from the late 19th century and the way its historical construction as an internal frontier shaped its development into a labour reserve. In this section, we return to Angónia in the first decades of the 21st century and examine how its historical incorporation as a frontier weighs on its current agrarian relations.

The period under examination begins in the final years of the Mozambican Civil War (1977-1992) as Frelimo is abandoning the socialist model and laying the foundations for the liberalization of agriculture and the privatization of state farms, which took place as the end of the war approaching. In districts with high rates of forced displacement like Angónia, it was only after the population had begun to return that the consequences of the retreat of the state from intervention in agricultural production were felt in full.

Due to liberalization, during the immediate post-war years systems of state support for inputs and marketing in agriculture had been suspended. However, private suppliers and
intermediaries were not yet in operation. In order to unblock agricultural production it was deemed necessary to offer incentives for the provision of credit and inputs. In Mozambique as in many other countries in the region the solution put forward was the interlocking of inputs and output markets, i.e. allowing buyers and processors to advance the inputs to the producers and to use the future harvested output as collateral. Debt repayment is secured against the purchase of the produce (Poulton et al. 2004). A particularity of cotton and tobacco in Mozambique was the widespread combination of interlocking markets in contract farming schemes. Contract farming is midway between spot-markets and full vertical coordination. Direct growers are bound by a contractual arrangement with export and processing agribusiness to produce a specified volume of product according to certain quality standards (Little and Watts 1994, Grosh 1994, UNCTAD 2009).

Interlocking markets require strong enforcement mechanisms to prevent side selling, that is, to ensure that producers sell to the trading agent that advanced the inputs, rather than to opportunistic buyers, who are in a position to offer better prices for the harvest, as they do not need to recoup the cost of inputs. This can lead to high rates of defaulting among producers (Grosh 1994). In Mozambique, side selling was prevented with the formulation of a regulation for the tobacco sector which created regional concessions in which only one operator was authorized to provide credit and buy produce.

During the first two decades of expansion of tobacco, national output grew steadily from the 3,000 tonnes per year of the 1900s to a 2007 peak of 73,000 tonnes. By the time tobacco exports decisively took off around 2000, some 120,000 farmers were growing tobacco in 8 of the 11 provinces of Mozambique for one of the 8 concessionaries. A nation-wide monopsony emerged giving uncontested control over Mozambican tobacco farming to the world’s largest tobacco trader. Corporate concentration became a distinctive feature of the Mozambican tobacco sector. Furthermore, tobacco agriculture, which had been more evenly distributed in different provinces of central and northern Mozambique, became concentrated in Tete and Niassa. Together these two provinces accounted for 66 per cent of the land cultivated in tobacco in 2003 but by 2011 this had grown to 89 percent. Angónia is the main tobacco-producing district in Mozambique.

To understand the operation of spatial mechanisms it is useful to compare the trajectories of tobacco farmers in other provinces. Farmers from Manica province, for example, started abandoning tobacco in the mid-2000s. Until then, Manica had been the third largest producing province in Mozambique. The area cultivated in tobacco fell from 10,359 ha by 2004 to less than 2,012 ha by 2011. The literature on Manica has focussed on the poor performance of a group of some 50 white Zimbabwean tobacco farmers that settled in the province in the early 2000s, as well as on unrealistic production goals and lack of the state support for the 9,000 Mozambican tobacco farmers in the province (Smart and Hanlon 2008, Hammar 2010). However, the arguments put forward do not explain why under similar circumstances, tobacco has instead prospered in Angónia and other border districts of Tete and Niassa.

Spatial integration to markets for commodities and labour play an important role: Farmers in the central districts of Manica are integrated in an array of market networks trading in the large urban markets of Chimoio and Beira. These farmers find outlets for different cash crops, both in and out of contract relations. In Manica there is more competition between sectors for agricultural labour, which is likely to tighten the labour market and push for higher agricultural wages. Under the institutional arrangement in place for tobacco in Mozambique, the viability of producers is critically dependent on their capacity to control their labour costs. The main difference between farmers from Manica and farmers in Tete and Niassa is therefore spatially constructed: the latter experience the constraints of producing in a hinterland with poor
transport infrastructure, less developed intermediary services and fewer alternative sources of finance.

Furthermore, in the face of fewer options, farmers in the hinterland may be willing to grow tobacco in spite of lower margins because the pressure can be in part shifted onto the labour force (land-poor Malawian migrants). In the relative absence of other large sectors competing for agricultural labour, it is likely that wages can be depressed in Tete and Niassa in a fashion that would be unviable in Manica.

In this, Manica is far from an isolated example: agribusiness commonly relocates to economically isolated regions to engage with farmers with less bargaining power (Massey 1995). Cases of such relocation have been reported by Williams and Karen (1985 cited in Watts 1994) in vegetable outgrower schemes in peri-urban areas of Kenya and in dairy contract farming schemes run by Nestlé in the proximity of urban markets in Mexico (Clapp 1988). In both cases, the proximity to the market and the availability of other buyers led to side selling or to a high rate of farmer turnover. In response, the companies decided to relocate production to more isolated regions in which commodity markets were less developed, forcing growers to accept less favourable conditions. This was the case in borderland districts such as Angónia during the expansion of tobacco agriculture.

The structural drivers of the expansion of tobacco contract farming in Mozambique included among other agricultural liberalization and its impact on upstream provision and downstream trading and the process of social differentiation among producers in the region, which made a labour force available. Wilson claimed that contract farming works well in areas in which farmers are undercapitalized, since financial dependence gives agribusiness considerable power over producers (1986).

Liberalization led to a reconfiguration of the power balance between agribusiness, the state and the farmers that included international tobacco traders obtaining generous conditions for their operation and farmers that – in the absence of investment, infrastructure and support – lack alternatives in agriculture or in other sectors. The regime that emerged in tobacco agriculture was far from liberal. The state created concessions in which competition was suppressed on behalf of agribusiness capital and to the detriment of farmers in the hinterland who entered the arrangement with no space to bargain for better prices.

The contract farming scheme encapsulates a transformation of the role of the state in agriculture. While at least at the discursive level structural adjustment promised to contain state intervention, which was seen as distorting the market with price controls and marketing boards, the creation of geographically concentrated monopsony concessions meant, in reality, the contrary. The concessions exist by virtue of a political decision of the state. Furthermore, the state intervenes directly in enforcing the concessions, not least because it polices an international border that marks the perimeter of the concession. In this respect, the costs of enforcing the concession fall on border authorities rather than on the concession’s operator. This is a contradictory aspect of the neo-liberal ideology that demands the absence of the state but requires the selective intervention of the state to support particular interests.

Unlike plantations and estates, contract farming in Mozambique is operated by separate household units. With no unified site of labour, contract farming results in the atomization of production. Political organization and collective action become more difficult, both for producers and for their hired labour (Wilson 1986). The transformation of direct employees into contract farmers implies an alignment of the interests of the farmers with those of the company. Farmers become effective intermediaries to merchant capital for labour recruitment and labour disciplining (Little and Watt 1994).
Tobacco grows at different latitudes, and there is no location specific advantage for tropical producers. Since it is a crop that demands considerable manual labour in its production, tobacco from less developed agricultural sectors can compete with mechanized agricultural sector in global markets based on its lower wage levels and use of unpaid household labour (Poulton et al. 2007, FAO 2003). Farmers in Angónia were attracted into signing farming contracts despite heightened risks and power asymmetries because this was their only chance of engaging in high-value export agriculture and because they could boost their final earnings by squeezing an underclass of migrant and casual labourers. The rapid expansion of tobacco farming in Angónia owes much to the availability of migrant seasonal labour from neighbouring Malawi. Here too, it is the interaction of two different agrarian regimes either side of the international border what allows Mozambican tobacco farmers to mobilize cheap migrant labour. In this sense, contract farming contributed to advancing the commodification of labour relations, as these farmers became hirers of casual and seasonal labour.

The durability of threshed tobacco allows the product to sustain long transport and storage times. This has led some scholars to claim that non-perishable crops are better suited to southern African logistics networks, burdened by poor infrastructure. Furthermore, the comparatively higher value per bulk allows tobacco exporters to operate profitably despite long distances to the ports (Minot 2007, Poulton 2007). Agricultural districts in Tete and Niassa have the longest distances to port and both have specialized in tobacco, one of the few crops for which their hinterland location does not put them at a disadvantage compared to other agricultural districts in Mozambique.

Border and frontier effects feature prominently in the contemporary development of tobacco production in Angónia. The transition from migrant labourers to tobacco farmers has taken place across an international border. In the colonial period, for example, this meant that farmers would seek employment abroad and use remittances to fuel domestic agriculture. Similarly, tobacco trading companies today use distance, isolation and international border to enforce their geographical concessions, while tobacco farmers use the arbitrage of wage differentials to recruit Malawian migrants in tobacco farming. Tobacco concessions in Mozambique are essentially politically constructed spaces with no market competition. These geographic concessions are not only a way of restricting competition among agribusiness, but notably also a way of restricting the options available for the growers, a point highlighted by Little and Watts (1994) and reiterated by Oya (2012).

6. Conclusion

Space in Angónia has been shaped by the struggles around the organization of production. In the early colonial period, spatial control was exerted by restricting the movement of the population and creating a private territorial concession in a region beyond the geographic reach of the colonial administration. In the 20th century, forced labour and migration separated the spheres of production (the destinations of labour migration) and the spheres of reproduction and households were forced to internalize the costs of reproducing the labour force (O’Laughlin 2013, 178). In the post-war period, agricultural intensification operated based on spatial relations formed during the colonial period. This paper discussed the way the historical creation of a hinterland labour reserve in Angónia weighted on the productive dynamics and labour relations during the post-war tobacco boom.
References


