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# The *machamba* is for life: navigating a precarious labour market in rural Mozambique

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The Future of Work(ers) Research Project explores how digital technologies are reshaping the world of work and the impact of these changes on inequality. It conceives of the development and application of digital technologies as a contested terrain. It is particularly interested in how collectives of workers are shaping which digital technologies are developed, how and to what end; and the economic and social policies that have been leveraged in response.

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## Abstract:

*There is significant debate about the class dynamics of agrarian change in Africa. In his seminal work,* Maidens, Meal, and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community*, Meillassoux (1981) [1975] predicted the cannibalisation of the peasantry with the growing dominance of capitalist relations in the countryside. Yet, nearly half a century on, evidence points to the continued relevance of the peasantry as a social, economic, and political construct. Drawing on the case of Mozambique – where two thirds of the economically active population still identify as* camponês *or peasant – this paper explores the contradictory meanings of the peasantry under contemporary capitalism. The first section traces the making of the proletarian-peasant in Southern Africa, critically engaging Meillassoux's seminal work on the 'domestic community'. The second explores the differentiated ways in which* camponeses *improvise a livelihood through the vignettes of a nearly landless labourer, a petty commodity producer and an emerging capitalist farmer. The third unpacks the significance of the* machamba *or field in navigating labour insecurity, focusing on the following dimensions of meaning: sustenance, autonomy, and social recognition. Ultimately, the paper concludes, the peasantry embodies a contradictory set of meanings which reflect processes of commodity production rather than a precapitalist past. While the cultivation of the* machamba *offers an autonomous source of livelihood, it is characterised by drudgery and insecurity; while it provides a reservation wage, it subsidises a system of accumulation based on widespread precarity; while it represents a victory against land dispossession, it can further entrench neoliberalism. Nevertheless, land struggles continue to be the primary driver of contentious politics in Mozambique.*

**Key words:** agrarian change, class formation, precarity, peasant, worker, livelihoods, Mozambique, Meillassoux.

In Mozambique, idioms abound about the social, economic, and political relevance of the peasantry. Unlike speculators, criminals, bureaucrats and researchers, *camponeses* or peasants are widely considered productive members of society. The food they cultivate is essential to sustaining the lives and livelihoods of both rural and urban dwellers, while the act of cultivation offers a bridge between the contemporary and ancestral worlds. Of course, rain-fed cultivation involves a great deal of risk. One bad harvest and you can lose everything, becoming poor forever. Indeed, few *camponeses* would wish the drudgery of manual cultivation on their children. Instead, they hope that their children can secure decent work and hire a wretched soul to cultivate their *machambas* or fields. Notably, the desire for wage-work is no more a rejection of the *machamba*, than the desire to retain access to land is a rejection of wage-work (Castel-Branco, 2021). After all, the *machamba* is for life, no one can take it away – well, with some notable exceptions.

Despite a gradual decline in the labour share in agriculture, the National Institute of Statistics estimates that two-thirds of the economically active population are *camponeses* (INE, 2019). While most *camponeses* live in rural areas, nearly a quarter of the economically active population in urban centres also identify as such. Notably, who constitutes a *camponês* is not entirely clear, for the term is used liberally to refer to landless labourers, petty commodity producers and emerging capitalist farmers. As Cramer et al. (2015) point out, the liberal use of *camponês* masks relations of exploitation and exclusion, for most *camponeses* struggle to subsist solely from their own production and readily engage in wage work. However, because policymakers overlook the extent of wage work, responses to rural poverty tend to ignore the critical role of labour and social protections, focusing instead on increasing agricultural productivity and improving access to markets, which generally benefit wealthier farmers (Oya & Pontara, 2015)

Nevertheless, the case of Mozambique challenges evolutionist narratives of capitalist development and highlights the importance of struggle in shaping the terms of commodification. Far from the remnants of a precapitalist past, today's peasantry is embedded within commodity relations, characterised by an extractive economy and a precarious labour market. Yet a moral economy of land persists, driven by contentious politics. Indeed, Mozambique's Land Law, adopted in 1997, established that land is the property of the state, which cannot be sold or mortgaged; that local communities have the right to use and derive benefit from the land; and that investors must secure full, free, and informed consent from communities before they can secure land concessions (Lei de Terra no 19 of 1997, Boletim da República, República de Moçambique ). Despite pressure by international financial institutions to privatise and collaterise land, the Mozambican government has – at least discursively – refused to do so, aware that widespread dispossession would trigger a political crisis. As President Nyusi recently

reaffirmed: "The Mozambican state will continue to own the land and other natural resources; all Mozambicans have the right of access to land; the rights acquired by families and local communities must always be protected" (Maolela, 2020).

This paper explores the contradictory meanings of the peasantry in Mozambique, drawing on statistical, archival, and ethnographic research conducted between 2016 and 2022. To capture the diversity of agrarian life in Mozambique, fieldwork took place in two contrasting regions: the semi-arid area of Inhassoro, which has a long history of migrant labour; and the fertile district of Ribaue, renowned for its agricultural productivity. The first section traces the making of the proletarian-peasant, critically engaging Meillassoux's (1981) seminal work on the "domestic community". The second explores the differentiated ways in which *camponeses* improvise a livelihood through three vignettes of a nearly landless labourer, a petty commodity producer and an emerging capitalist farmer. The third unpacks the significance of the *machamba* in navigating labour insecurity, focusing on the following three dimensions of meaning: sustenance, autonomy and social recognition. Ultimately, the paper concludes, Mozambique's peasantry embodies a set of contradictory meanings which reflect a contested history of capitalist development in Southern Africa.

## The making of the proletarian-peasant in Southern Africa

In *Maidens, Meal, and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community,* Meillassoux (1981) argued that Marx's theory of labour exploitation did not adequately capture the process of capitalist development under conditions of imperialism. Based on his analysis of emerging commodity relations in nineteenth century Europe, Marx (1867) predicted that the process of primitive accumulation would inevitably lead to the total dispossession of the peasantry. The landed gentry were able to take advantage of the shift to commodity production because they had accumulated the necessary capital through taxes to hire labour and invest in mechanisation, thereby increasing production and productivity. Poorer peasants, on the other hand, were far more vulnerable. All it took was one bad agricultural year to slide into debt and lose their lands. Dispossessed of the means of production, they had little choice but to sell their labour to an emerging rural bourgeoisie. This violent transformation of living labour into labour power was the basis of proletarianisation.

However, Meillassoux (1981) maintained that Marx did not adequately account for the ways in which imperialism continuously incorporated new lands and people into processes of accumulation. Rather than an initiatory factor, primitive accumulation was inherent to colonial capitalism, and the African proletarian-peasant its permanent fixture. In Africa, total dispossession was the exception rather than the norm, largely for functionalist

reasons. Colonial regimes preferred to preserve areas under communal land tenure, ruled indirectly by customary law, to offset the cost of reproduction onto the "domestic community": "…it is by preserving the domestic sector, which is producing subsistence goods, that imperialism realises and, further, perpetuates primitive accumulation" (Meillassoux, 1982: 97). During periods of labour scarcity, African men were compelled – through brute force, the imposition of taxes, the restriction on autonomous economic activities and control over labour mobility – into the capitalist economy; while during periods of labour surplus, they were thrust back into the "domestic community".

Meillassoux (1981) argued that the disarticulated process of accumulation under colonial capitalism had ultimately stunted the formation of a permanent working class. Whereas in Europe the reproduction of labour power was partially socialised through union provident funds, state social insurance schemes and other forms of public provisioning, in colonial Africa socialised institutions were slow to materialise, precisely because of the racist labour regime enforced by the colonial state. In Mozambique, the colonial labour regime was based on the political system of the *Indigenato*, which legally differentiated between the rights of so-called indigenous and non-indigenous. The Indigenous Labour Law established that "all indigenous of the overseas Portuguese provinces are subject to the moral and legal obligation to attempt to seek through work the means they lack, to subsist and to improve their social condition" (Lei do Trabalho Indígena nº DG 262, de 9 de Novembro de 1899). Only Africans who owned capital, cultivated cash crops for export, practised a recognised profession or could prove that they were wage-labourers were exempt from *chibalo* or forced labour.

Both public and private companies could requisition *chibalo* workers from the colonial administrator, who relied on a hierarchy of traditional leaders for labour recruitment. Private companies were required to pay a wage, but this generally amounted to little more than "cigarette money" for the *mussoco* or hut tax. Indeed, *chibalo* workers frequently ditched their deferred wages at the administrator's office to avoid re-recruitment (Chilundo, 2001). With diminishing options for free labour, those who could fled to the mines of the Rand in South Africa where wages were higher and paid more regularly (Penvenne, 1994). For the Portuguese colonial state, the emergence of a regional migrant labour system was a double-edged sword. While it attracted much needed foreign exchange from miners' deferred wages, it compounded the problem of labour scarcity (First, 1983). Nevertheless, the colonial state retained *chibalo* because it served to enforce a racialised labour regime, which protected the European working class and subsidised colonial capital. In exchange for granting the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association a monopoly on labour recruitment south of the River Save, state and capital were guaranteed traffic on the railway linking the Rand to Lourenço Marques (Katzenellenbogen, 1982).

The emergence of a regional migrant labour system in Southern Africa transformed gender relations in areas under communal land tenure. Women became responsible for paying the *mussoco*, fulfilling the mandatory labour obligation to the chief – including *chibalo* labour on plantations and public works – and cultivating food to meet the household's reproductive needs. In addition, in regions under forced cropping regimes, women were obliged to cultivate cash crops for sale to concessionary companies at below market prices (Chilundo, 2001). Some migrant-sending households were able to hire seasonal wage-labour, resolving the problem of labour scarcity for some and exacerbating it for others. However, gradually, the socioeconomic basis of this hybrid system buckled, resulting in declining production and consumption. It was in this context that Meillassoux (1981) predicted the cannibalisation of the "domestic community" and the resurgence of slavery in a more sophisticated form in Southern Africa:

> A point will be reached when the return on domestic agriculture is too low, the cost of transport to centres of employment too high and the composition of the family unit too disproportionate in age and sex for it to remain the support for the reproduction of labour-power. An ever-widening fringe of the domestic economy, doomed to bankruptcy, survives only because of the effort and costly sacrifices of its men and women who have no other place in which to take refuge or live, while an ever-increasing proportion of workers drift out of reach of the domestic economy and lose the benefit of resources which it could offer them. (Meillassoux, 1981: 131)

For Meillassoux (1981), the "domestic community" and capitalist economy constituted separate, even if articulated, modes of production. Women engaged in biological, social, and generational work within the 'domestic community'; while men were incorporated within the capitalist economy through commodity production. However, this dualist approach reduced women's role to the realm of social reproduction, ignoring the myriad of ways in which they contributed directly to capital accumulation through commodified activities (Mackintosh, 1977). Furthermore, it failed to grasp how the organisation of production shaped the forms of social reproduction. In Mozambique, for instance, "traditional" forms of social security – the accumulation of livestock, bride wealth, and *xitiques* (rotating savings funds) – were the product of a migrant labour system which largely excluded African workers from institutionalised forms of social provisioning (O' Laughlin, 2000). Indeed, the colonial state rejected African workers' demands for incorporation into emerging provident funds on the basis that they did not need social security because they were migrant workers with "traditional" safety nets in rural areas and did not have contributory capacity due to their ultra-low wages (Capela, 1980).

Furthermore, Meillassoux (1981) was critiqued for his functionalism (Mackintosh, 1977), which overdetermined the power of colonialism. After all, the preservation of areas under communal land tenure were as much the product of African resistance as they were a strategy of colonial control. In Mozambique, it was only in the twentieth century that the undercapitalised colonial regime embarked on a "pacification" campaign to effectively

colonise the territory, per the terms of the Berlin conference. However, even after "pacification" was officially declared, colonial capitalism was fiercely resisted through a combination of evasion, feigned acquiescence, and direct confrontation (Chilundo, 2001). Furthermore, as areas under communal land tenure across Southern Africa faced a deepening crisis of reproduction, it was not entirely clear that they played a functional role for capital accumulation at all. Yet many survived as sites of counter-capitalist resistance, around the nexus of production and reproduction (Mafeje, 1981).

In 1975 – the same year that Meillassoux first published *Maidens, Meal, and Money* – Mozambique gained independence and the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO) came to power. The constitution envisioned the elimination of the structures of colonial and traditional oppression and exploitation, the strengthening of popular democracy, and the creation of the material and ideological basis for a socialist society (Decreto Lei no 16-75, de 13 de Fevereiro de 1975). In rural areas, colonial plantations were transformed into state farms, settler farms into popular *machambas* and shops into cooperatives. In addition, FRELIMO advanced a strategy of villagisation, relocating peasants to *aldeias comunais* (communal villages) under the guise of progress, but with the desire to erode the power of the customary (Bowen, 2000). Work was reframed as an act of militancy. Only by collectively increasing production and productivity, argued Mozambique's first president, Samora Machel, could the country cleanse itself of colonial ills, win the struggle against underdevelopment and secure its independence: "What we manufacture, the way we work, how we discuss and plan production, provides a window into our class consciousness. In our republic where power belongs to the worker-peasant alliance, production is an act of militancy" (Machel, 1985: 111).

However, rural households fled the *aldeias comunais*, dragged their feet on state farms and evaded cultivating popular *machambas*. Agricultural production plummeted, triggering food shortages, and creating the political basis for an insurgency against the state. As the war intensified, Agricom became the only link between farmers and the market, imposing unfavourable rates and compounding food insecurity (Cabrita, 2001). As in many post-colonial states such as Tanzania, the chief objectives of agricultural policy were to accumulate surplus and generate foreign exchange through agricultural exports to advance agrarian transformation based on state-led industrialisation (Shivji, 2008). This strategy hinged on the subordination of large-scale agriculture to global markets and the super-exploitation of the peasantry through the continued use of cheap labour, sowing the seeds of discontent (Bowen, 2000). Informed by a dualist conception of agrarian structures – with subsistence agriculture on one end and commercial agriculture on the other – many post-colonial African states struggled to meet their objectives (Tsikata, 2016).

Halfway through the 1980s, Mozambique embarked on the Economic Restructuring Programme (PRE), under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The PRE involved the liberalisation and deregulation of the economy, the reduction of public expenditure and the privatisation of public enterprises. However, many of the newly privatised firms – for example, the cashew industry – struggled to compete in globalised markets, leading to widespread bankruptcies and retrenchments (Castel-Branco & Cramer, 2003). Under pressure from an aspirant capitalist class, the government then moved to entice foreign investors, by offering multinational corporations access to land and natural resources, in exchange for shares, board seats and tenders. The expansion of the extractive economy accelerated the process of expropriation, while providing little by way of employment or improved access to social provisioning.

With neoliberal restructuring, Mozambique experienced sustained disinvestment from agriculture. Although two thirds of Mozambicans are *camponeses*, the agricultural sector only absorbs 5% of domestic investment (Castel-Branco, 2015) and per capita agricultural production has steadily declined. Mosca (2017) attributes the stagnation of Mozambique's agricultural sector to the lack of coherent, intersectoral public policies that prioritise food production and place *camponeses* at the centre of rural and economic development. While Mozambique has attracted some large investments – in the forestry sector, for example – many have resulted in large scale expropriation and an insignificant number of jobs. The expansion of the informal economy has enabled the diversification of livelihoods but its reliance on cheap imported goods has undermined local production. The result has been a deepening crisis of reproduction, characterised by rising poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

Although Mozambique has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the region, only 12% of the economically active population are salaried workers (INE, 2019). The National Institute of Statistics defines employment so broadly that even the most survivalist activities, identified as "unknown", count towards employment numbers. Given the patchy social security system – only approximately 10% of the population is effectively covered by either social assistance or social insurance (Castel-Branco & Sambo, 2020) – most cannot afford not to work for at least an hour a week, which is the international threshold for employment (ICLS, 2013). Therefore, Mozambique's unemployment rate remains deceivingly low. Indeed, there is an inverse relationship between unemployment and wellbeing, with unemployment rates highest among well-educated urban youth in the upper quintiles of the consumption distribution (INE, 2015).

The next section explores the differentiated ways in which *camponeses* improvise a livelihood through three vignettes of a (near) landless labourer, a petty commodity producer and an emerging capitalist farmer.

## Improvising a livelihood: Weathering the vagaries of the weather, the plagues, and the market

Although two-thirds of Mozambique's economically active population derive a livelihood primarily from manual agriculture, the countryside is not devoid of social differentiation. How *camponeses* fare hinges on various factors including environmental conditions, access to arable land, the structure of the household and availability of labour, their capacity to mobilise resources to invest in agricultural inputs and their ability to weather the vagaries of the weather, the plagues, and the market (Castel-Branco, 2021). On the one hand, rainfed agriculture has become increasingly risky with the intensification of droughts, floods, and cyclones due to climate change (INGC, 2009). On the other, the absence of agricultural marketing boards means that commodity prices fluctuate wildly and *camponeses* can never be sure of how much they will earn from the *machamba* at the end of the agricultural cycle. As Cramer et al. (2015) found, the cultivation of the *machamba* is generally insufficient to meet households' basic needs, and *camponeses* rely on alternative sources of sustenance, on and off the farm. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the contrasting districts of Inhassoro and Ribaue, this section explores how *camponeses* improvise a livelihood.

Table 1 provides an overview of the various activities among *camponeses* in the areas under study. Cultivation, hunting and fishing are the primary sources of livelihood. Most *machambas* are no larger than two hectares, though households may have multiple *machambas* where they plant cash crops and food crops separately. Men tend to dominate cash crop production while women focus on food production for the household. However, as the vignettes will reveal, the organisation of production and gender division of labour varies by region and household.

The most common form of wage work is *biscates* or side hustles, which consist of short-term, informal employment contracts, negotiated under duress, and remunerated on a task-by-task basis. Because prospective workers have limited bargaining power, payment tends to be set well below the minimum wage – *"just enough to buy salt"* – or paid in kind. In-kind payments generally consist of sugar, salt, maize meal, dried fish and homebrew. The lowest-paid *biscate* is *ganho-ganho* or agricultural day labour. Other *biscates* include carrying water, washing clothes, making bricks and offloading trucks. Notably, activities are gendered, with men's work considered more specialised and thus deserving of more pay. Community volunteer work is a "*biscate* for people who are social". Volunteers may work for non-governmental organisations, international development agencies or state institutions, in exchange for a stipend. The length of the contract, type of payment and intensity of work varies widely. Because volunteers perform quasi-official tasks, their work is socially valued, in contrast to the menial labour of *biscates*.

**Table 1: Sources of sustenance among *camponeses* in Inhassoro and Ribaue**

| Type | Source of sustenance | Form of income |
|---|---|---|
| *Machamba*, hunting and fishing | Cultivation of food and cash crops<br>Fishing | Food for own consumption<br>Income from the sale at market |
| *Biscate* or side hustle | *Ganho-ganho*, carrying water, offloading trucks | Task-based wage and/or in-kind payment |
| Community volunteer work | Community health workers, literacy trainers, social protection representatives. | Task-based or monthly stipend |
| Own account | Production of homebrew<br>Construction of homes and latrines | Profit from the sale of products |
| Spiritual leaders | Traditional healers<br>Initiation counsellors | Offering, paid by the task |

Source: author's notes.

Many *camponeses* also engage in own-account activities. Within own-account work, there is significant differentiation, with women and children generally relegated to less lucrative activities such as the production of homebrew, while men are focused on the construction of homes and latrines. Other types of own-account work involve functions which bridge the earthly and ancestral worlds, including initiation counsellors and traditional healers. The income and power of own-account workers tends to vary widely, depending on who owns the means of production and how much autonomy they have over the labour process (Chen, 2012). These relations are often sharply gendered.

Of course, *camponeses* also engage in salaried employment on a seasonal or iterant basis. The decline of the formal migrant labour system, which recruited Mozambicans to the mines of the Rand, has reduced formal migration, but remittances from migrant work still constitute an important source of income (Farré, 2009). In addition, permanent salaried workers also cultivate *machambas* to subsidise their low wages. At approximately $70, public sector workers have the lowest sectoral minimum wage in Mozambique and paying others to work on the *machamba* allows them to meet their basic needs. The rest of this section explores the classed and gendered nature of livelihood strategies through three vignettes: a (near) landless *camponesa*, a petty commodity producer and an emerging capitalist farmer.

## Zaida, a (near) landless camponesa

Zaida is a single mother of six from the village of Temane in the district of Inhassoro. Inhassoro is a sparsely populated semi-arid area with a long history of migrant wage labour. The rainy season typically runs from October to March, but in recent years the rains have been so unpredictable that all that seems certain is the saying, "It doesn't rain, and when it rains, it's only to destroy." The village sits flush against the South African petrochemical giant

Sasol's gas processing facility. When Sasol began construction in the district of Inhassoro, villagers were promised jobs, services, and development in exchange for relocating their machambas – but these promises never came to fruition. In response to community protests, Sasol established a Community Liaison Forum to hire local workers. However, villagers maintain that it amounts to little more than a smokescreen: jobs are limited, short-term, low-paid and restricted to menial positions such as guards, gardeners, and domestic workers. Furthermore, villagers remain disconnected from the electricity and water grid. Disillusioned, villagers blame Sasol for the low and irregular rains: 'Before Sasol there was rain, now all we see is smoke.'

Zaida's husband is a construction worker in Johannesburg, so she tends to her three *machambas* alone. The clearing and tilling usually take place in September and October, and planting in November, after the third heavy rains. Newly cleared fields are planted with maize, followed in the second year by beans and cassava, and in the third by peanuts. After germination comes the work of weeding, which continues until harvest, between April and August depending on the crop. For Zaida, labour scarcity is the principal constraint. Back when her husband was a mineworker, she could afford to hire *ganho-ganho* during peak periods of the agricultural cycle. However, when her husband switched to construction, remittances became increasingly irregular and she herself was forced to take up *ganho-ganho* work. The drought of 2016 was an especially bleak time. That cycle, she only produced 540 kilograms of *nhemba* beans, 360 kilograms of peanuts, sorghum, and a few bushels of cassava – hardly enough to fill the household's silo, let alone to save for seed and sell.

Ultimately, Zaida was forced to turn to "men of money" for loans. Her first port of call was Uncle Manuel, a former mineworker turned *nyanga* or healer, with an extensive fleet of taxis that link Inhassoro to Johannesburg. Cultivating patronage relationships with "men of money" is key to weathering the vagaries of the weather, the plagues, and the market – but it comes at a considerable cost. On the one hand, interest rates are exorbitant: if repaid in cash, they hover at 25%, if repaid through debt labour, they can be as high as 100%. On the other, the period of high labour demand coincides with the agricultural cycle's most labour-intensive period. Therefore, Zaida must choose between earning immediate income through *ganho-ganho*, at extremely low wages, and making a long-term investment in her *machambas*. Indeed, during the drought of 2016, Uncle Manuel had no work for Zaida precisely because the rains had yet to come. Instead, he loaned her money, to be repaid through debt labour later. When the rains returned, Uncle Manuel called her back. Fearful of souring their relationship, she prioritised his *machambas* over hers, which only cemented her household's dependence on *ganho-ganho*.

## Rosalina and Roberto, petty commodity producers

Rosalina and Roberto are *camponeses* in the town of Riani, in the district of Ribáuè. The district of Ribáuè is a densely populated region. With fertile soils, cool temperatures, above-average rainfall and numerous *ndambos* or natural depressions, it is considered the nation's agricultural powerhouse. "You can plant anything, and it will grow," insist wide-eyed officials, eager to attract foreign investors. The rainy season typically runs from November to April, though here too, the rains have become increasingly irregular with climate change. The district is renowned for cassava, maize, horticulture, sorghum, beans, sesame, soy, and sweet potatoes – as well as several non-food cash crops, including cotton and tobacco.

Rosalina never imagined that she would become a *camponesa*, but her dreams were cut short by the civil war: "I always dreamt that I would grow up to become a teacher, to live well and be classy. Yet here I am today, cultivating.'" As *vientes* or non-natives to the area, Rosalina and Roberto must borrow or rent land from *originários* or natives. Although the Land Law states that all local communities have the right to use and derive benefit from the land (Lei de Terra), not all *camponeses* are recognised as legitimate claimants. Despite these challenges, Rosalina and Roberto have been able to secure four *machambas*: one for cassava which they rent for Mts200 from the former caretaker of a colonial tobacco plantation turned owner of the land; one for sorghum, maize and boer beans in her ancestral home thirty kilometres away; one for rice, onions, horticulture and bananas in the *baixas* for which they pay a premium price of Mts3000; and a small *machamba* near their home, where they plant peanuts, beans, chillies, mangos, guavas and pumpkin. However, their claim on the *machambas* remains precarious and vulnerable to expropriation amidst rampant land speculation: "This thing of prohibiting lands, it's recent…It's a problem of money, of development."

The couple cultivate their *machambas* together, which is unusual. In the district of Ribáuè, women tend to focus on food crops, while men oversee the production of cash crops. However, how production is organised is the outcome of what Sen (1987) dubs intra-household "cooperative conflicts" – even if men ultimately make the final decision about what to sell, when to sell it and at what price. Rosalina and Roberto's chief challenge is the volatility of market prices. In 2016/17, they decided to plant the boer bean rather than tobacco, due to its record prices. However, the boer bean's only export market is India and that year, India had a bumper crop and imposed import quotas. In the absence of a functional marketing board to guarantee prices, the boer bean's price plummeted from Mts40 a kilogram to Mts2.5 a kilogram overnight. Furious, some *camponeses* set their fields alight, while others

simply let their crop rot unharvested. Rosalina and Roberto produced approximately 1080 kilograms of boer beans and expected to earn Mts50,000 but made only Mts2,500 at the end of the agricultural cycle.

## Abel, commercial farmer

Abel is a commercial farmer who established a farming colony in a mountainous region of formerly virgin forest on the foothills of Monte Namicunha. Located 55 kilometres away from Riani, the trip takes more than a day by bicycle. He discovered this site by tracking illegal loggers. "The only place where there are no *machambas*, no owners of the land, is up in the mountains," he explained, "where you must fight with elephants, monkeys and rats." One day, illegal loggers made a pitstop in Riani and Abel could tell from the size of the logs in their truck that they were coming from an area of virgin forest. Abel befriended the driver, and when they returned to the logging area, he hitched a ride. Once he identified the location, he got permission from the chief to section it into plots and establish a farming colony.

In the upland regions, Abel grows maize, cassava, and sorghum. In the *baixas,* he built an improvised dam and irrigation system and cultivates lettuce, onions, tomatoes, butter beans, sugar cane, and bananas. With his pension from the armed forces, he hires *ganho-ganho* or day labourers. During the peak period of the agricultural cycle, Abel and his wife live in the colony, which today houses approximately sixty households. Renowned for its productivity, the area attracts agricultural marketing agents from as far afield as Malawi, circumventing the problem of how to transport produce to market. The expansion of rainfed agriculture into previously forested areas – often in tandem with illegal logging – has increased deforestation and estimates suggest that the entire province will be transformed into *machambas* within the decade (MITADER, 2018).

These three vignettes of a (near) landless camponesa, a petty commodity producer and a commercial farmer offer insights into the classed and gendered nature of livelihood strategies among *camponeses* in Mozambique. Although many *camponeses* readily engage in wage labour, these three vignettes suggest that there is not as much wage work taking place as Cramer et al. (2015) imagine; and that state support for small-scale agriculture is not just a concern for wealthier farmers, but also for (near) landless *camponeses* and petty commodity producers. Nevertheless, Zaida – a (near) landless camponesa – was sceptical of initiatives such as agricultural cooperatives and associations because they are dominated by politically connected male farmers who draw on cooperative structures for individual accumulation. Zaida was part of a fish-farming association on the banks of the Govuro river which collapsed because of poor management, corruption and land conflicts. Today twenty-one cracked concrete tanks, each the size of a large swimming pool, lie empty along the riverbank. The water pumps have long been stolen, and the

remnants of the pumping system sabotaged. Zaida refuses to join another association: "To work in an association is to work for free. It's preferable to cultivate individually or get a job."

## "The *machamba* is for life": the meaning of *camponês*

In Mozambique, the cultivation of the *machamba* is considered one of the most meaningful activities, particularly in agriculturally productive regions like Ribáuè. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear that "the machamba is for life". But it is equally common to hear the self-deprecating assertion that 'I am just a *camponês'*. This section explores the contradictory meanings of *camponês* in contemporary Mozambique. There are three criteria which *camponeses* readily use to evaluate the meaningfulness of activities: sustenance or the ability for an activity to meet their reproductive needs; autonomy or the power to define what activity to undertake, how to undertake it and for whom; and social recognition (Castel-Branco, 2021).

*Machamba* cultivation provides an important source of sustenance, even for those in formal employment. In a good year, the harvest can fill stomachs and silos, with plenty more to sell and share. Therefore, access to land enables people to navigate a precarious labour market, effectively providing a reservation wage for at least part of the year. While Meillassoux (1981) argued that access to land was used to keep wages down under colonial capitalism, the opposite could also be true in the postcolonial period. Indeed, in Mozambique, political elites, commercial farmers, and plantation managers readily lament the "lack of a culture of work" and availability of labour among Mozambicans, due to competing sources of sustenance. Having said that, most *camponeses* hope that their children will find a more stable source of income.

In terms of autonomy, *machamba* cultivation ranks very highly. Of course, *camponeses* cannot control all aspects of the labour process: the rains and plagues "depend on the whims of God", access to land on ancestral ties, and the price of cash crops on international commodity markets. Nevertheless, they can decide what to plant, when to plant it, how to cultivate and who to sell it to. Rosalina and Roberto, for instance, prioritised food crops over tobacco because the tobacco price was too low: "If you produce too little or if they don't like the quality, you can end up owing the company. My bones are tired of that. The important crops are maize, sorghum, cassava. Rice is a hobby because it does not fill the stomach." In contrast to the colonial period, no one can force *camponeses* to plant a particular crop, to cultivate their fields at a particular time or place, or to sell the produce to a particular marketing agent. While *camponeses* are subjected to economic coercion, they do have some space for manoeuvre.

*Machamba* cultivation also ranks highly in terms of social recognition because it is regarded as a productive activity that not only sustains the household but society. Furthermore, it offers a connection to an ancestral past.

Indeed, it is not unusual to hear elaborate stories that connect linages to ancestors' arrival on the land. "There was a snake living in a spring with boiling water, beating drums," the chief of Temane described the arrival of his ancestors; "When they began to cultivate, the snake disappeared, and the beating stopped." Having said that, cultivating the *machamba* also involves hard, physical, dirty labour – and young men in particular, are increasingly reluctant to embrace the hoe. Gérsio is a high school graduate in Inhassoro. While he revers the *machamba*, he has no intention of tilling the soil under the scorching sun. Instead, he hopes that his girlfriend will become a committed *camponesa*: "If I have a choice between a woman who works in the office or a woman who works in the *machamba* I will pick the woman who works in the *machamba* because she is productive". His girlfriend Nubia, however, has dreams of becoming an investigative journalist but would consider hiring *ganho-ganho* to perform her "traditional" role by proxy. Ultimately, the *machamba* is venerated by all but despised by those who cannot escape the drudgery of manual cultivation.

Notably, the desire for wage work does not reflect a rejection of the *machamba*, any more so than the desire for a *machamba* reflects a rejection of wage work. In a context where the majority have not been entirely dispossessed of the means of production, unemployed identities are intertwined with aspirational notions of legitimate and illegitimate, desirable and undesirable, meaningful and alienating work. These are shaped both by a contradictory history of state practice, and the material needs of agrarian life and personhood. Legitimate forms of work include both commodified and uncommodified, formal and informal activities, on and off the farm. It is no surprise therefore, that land struggles are the primary driver of contentious politics in Mozambique (Monjane & Bruna, 2020).

## Conclusion

Mozambique poses a conundrum for evolutionist narratives of capitalist development. Despite a declining labour share in agriculture, most of the population still identify as *camponeses*. A closer look at national statistics suggests that the prevalence of *camponeses* reflects the absence of alternative sources of income rather than a thriving agricultural sector. Only 12% of Mozambique's economically active population is engaged in salaried employment and an even smaller proportion has access to social protection, and although agriculture contributes to nearly a quarter of gross domestic product, per capita agricultural production has steadily declined. The expansion of the extractive economy has accelerated processes of expropriation, and although Mozambique has a progressive land law, land conflicts have become central to contentious politics in Mozambique.

To deflect from the failures of a resource-driven development model, the political elite has sought to refashion *camponeses* into micro-entrepreneurs. The high school course Notions of Entrepreneurship, for instance, seeks to reorient young women and men towards the *machamba*. According to a high school principal in Ribaue, "The idea behind the programme is to instil in the student's mind that they need to produce. Instead of waiting for other opportunities to arise, they must use the hoe to produce what they need to consume. Because employment is not for everyone." Whereas in the colonial period a "culture of work" referred to one's willingness to labour under conditions of hyper-exploitation, today it reflects the ability to weather unemployment as an aspiring micro-entrepreneur.

However, *camponeses* receive very limited state support. As Byres (2004) argues, land redistribution without adequate state investment amounts to little more than a neoliberal strategy to preserve the dominant structure of accumulation. Under these conditions, young people are reluctant to embrace the hoe, even as they revere the *machamba*. Ultimately, I conclude that the contradictory meanings of the peasantry in contemporary Mozambique reflect processes of commodity production rather than a precapitalist past. While the cultivation of the *machamba* offers an autonomous source of livelihood, it is characterised by drudgery and insecurity; while it provides a reservation wage, it subsidises a system of accumulation based on widespread precarity; while it represents a victory against land dispossession, it can further entrench neoliberalism.

Mozambique has a powerful albeit contradictory peasant movement, led by the National Union of Peasants (UNAC), with a membership of 150 000 small- and medium-scale farmers, organised in more than 5000 associations and cooperatives across the country. The objectives of the associations and cooperatives range from securing access to land which belongs to the state, to accessing agricultural inputs and credit, to improving their bargaining position vis-à-vis agricultural marketers. Some member organisations have welcomed the entry of multinational corporations, with hopes that agroindustry will open new opportunities for business, while others have fought against the expropriation of land in the name of the industrial development of the countryside. Despite the diversity of demands – which reflect a diverse social basis – UNAC has steered cleared of debates around the extension of labour and social protections. Meanwhile, trade unions affiliated with the Organisation of Mozambican Workers have centred on workers in large plantations. It remains to be seen what the implications of this representation gap will be for emancipatory politics in the long run.

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