

The Urban Space of Mafalala: Origin, Evolution, and Characterization

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Abstract: *In this article, I consider the origin and urban evolution of Mafalala. Mafalala's interaction with the colonial city generated synapses that fostered the creation of unique cultural environments from which emerged notable personalities of national artistic, sports and political importance. The material and immaterial heritage condensed in Mafalala is immense and encapsulates a considerable part of the history of Mozambique.*

Keywords: Mozambique; Maputo; Architecture; Urban studies

The Mafalala is probably Maputo's most famous neighborhood, an almost legendary urban space that tends to be associated with the emergence of Mozambican identity and is hence valued as an emblem of African political and cultural opposition to Portuguese colonial rule.¹ The creation of Mozambican literature as a national project is deeply rooted in the work of writers and poets such as José Craveirinha and Noémia de Sousa, who portray Mafalala as a

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prominent landscape of the new nation (Trigo 53-57). Several notable Mozambican artists, sports personalities, and politicians were born and raised there. Mafalala is nonetheless a relatively new neighborhood inhabited by descendants of migrants from the most diverse origins, who developed their particular forms of sociability and a multicultural landscape. This article presents the origins and evolution of this urban space by examining how the intersection of foreign economic interests, decisions by the local administration framed by colonial rule, and the needs of different migratory flows gave rise to an urban landscape and forms of cultural expression marked by hybridism and multiculturalism.

The Effective Occupation of Suburban Territories

With the development of the capital of Mozambique at the turn of the twentieth century, the first suburban zones began to mushroom with the arrival of communities not only from the areas surrounding the Bay of Maputo, but also from other cities and rural areas.² The primary causes of this phenomenon date back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century and include the Berlin Conference (1885); the discovery of the Transvaal gold mines (1886); the introduction of the hut tax (1892); the inauguration of the railway line to Pretoria (1895); the effective conquest by the Portuguese of the main chieftaincies south of the River Save, especially the Nguni and Tsonga (1895); and the transfer of the colonial capital from the Ilha de Moçambique to Lourenço Marques (1898).

In the early twentieth century, the effective occupation of European colonial territories in Africa was legitimated by a series of legal instruments that, in the Portuguese case, were concentrated in the Ministério da Marinha e Ultramar's 1901 "Regime para a concessão de terrenos no Ultramar." The decree served as a legal foundation and was subsequently adapted to the reality of each colony. The version for Mozambique, the "Regime provisório para a concessão de terrenos do Estado na província de Moçambique," was approved eight years later with the official purpose of controlling real estate speculation in the areas

² The Bay of Maputo was first known as *Baia da Lagoa*, which is the origin of the English "Delagoa Bay." The area was inhabited from as far back as the sixteenth century by the Mpfumo clan, according to the reports of the first European navigators (Lemos 8-10).

surrounding the Bay of Maputo, especially along the northern banks (Andrade, *Colonização* 20-21). The law effectively dictated the expropriation of almost all Tsonga Mpfumo lands. Their occupants were thus transformed from legitimate and ancestral landowners into illegal squatters. If they wished to continue living on and farming their land, they henceforth had to pay rent to estate owners, who were mostly non-African.

The beginning of the urban structure of the suburbs

The 1909 “Regime provisório” established the new boundaries of Maputo, decreeing that these should be drawn following a radius of 2017 meters with the center fixed at the crossroads of Avenida Pinheiro Chagas and Avenida Castilho (412). The radius structure was meant to serve as a defense against a possible resurgence of indigenous rebellions and to foster the development of the urban grid designated by the Araújo Plan of 1887, based on a beltway road (*circunvalação*) that linked the Governor’s Palace at Ponta Vermelha to the railway station.³

The document defined a zone of expansion for the city of one kilometer outside the beltway road; in other words, at a radius of three kilometers from the original center. Only from this point onwards could suburbs be established for a further two kilometers. In reality, the expansion zone was also intended to work as a zone of protection and separation in relation to the suburbs, accentuating the borderline between the suburbs and the “city of the whites” or *xilungúne*, as it was known among the Mpfumo Tsonga.⁴

The buffer zone would only be respected in the two indigenous neighborhoods planned by the municipality, located on the outer limit of three

³ In 1909, the memory of the attacks on the former military garrison was still strong, as recounted by Pélissier (311-40).

⁴ Also known as “buffer zones,” these zones are similar to the buffers commonly used in the urban planning of South African colonial towns. The buffers served to separate the “native locations” from other somatic groups, primarily from Europeans. Fasil Demissie explains that it was “a system of boundaries” (*cordon sanitaire*) and was developed to “reinforce the separation of the European towns from the ‘native towns’” (3). In this way, buffer zones “were incorporated in the planning of colonial cities as part of a wider spatial strategy to ensure surveillance and control over the African populations” (Demissie 3). See also Frescura, “Deconstructing” and “The Spatial Geography.”

kilometers.⁵ To the northwest, in the areas of Chamanculo/Xipamanine and Zixaxa, and to the north, in Munhuana and Malhangalene, to which Mafalala belonged, settlements that progressively flourished there ignored the buffer regulations. While the estate owners of the buffer zone awaited the city's expansion, a large part of the African population, both autochthonous and immigrant, gradually clustered on the lands outside the conferential arch in a spontaneous, precarious, and, in light of the colonial law, illegal manner. The locations close to this area were those most desired by the inhabitants of the suburbs, since although this implied higher rents on land or housing, they had the advantage of being closer to their workplace in the *xilungúine*.

The geography of labor and the segmentation of the suburbs

The geographic aspects of labor are fundamental to grasp the dispersion and urban, cultural, social, and even political features of outskirts such as Mafalala (Mendes 451). This factor does not prove to be so important in the distribution of the Mpfumo chiefdoms; as inhabitants born in the area, their presence crossed all suburbs, even after the colonial usurpation of their lands (Penvenne, *Trabalhadores* 102-7). In contrast, inhabitants who were migrants from other regions tended to settle and concentrate in the areas closest to where they would find work (Rita-Ferreira, "Os africanos" 244). A higher percentage of a particular profession engendered sociocultural networks and synapses that would characterize each suburban zone.

Chamanculo and Xipamanine, for example, due to their proximity to the port, the railway line, and the road to Lydenburg, were generally the home of communities that supplied labor for the Transvaal mines as well as the port and railways. This was also the case for the tribes from the south of the River Save.⁶ The vast majority of these laborers, when in transit to the mines, stayed close

⁵ These were the indigenous neighborhoods of Xipamanine (1918 to 1921) and Munhuana (1938 to 1942). For more, see Câmara Municipal 48-49.

⁶ Many were known as *magaças*. Among other reasons, they emigrated to flee from the forced labor, locally known as *chibalo*, or simply to achieve a good *lobolo*, or bride price (Harries; Mungoi).

together or in the compounds of the recruiting agencies such as the WNLA, which, for logistical reasons, were located in the vicinity of the railway line.⁷

In Mafalala, the geographic and labor relations with the *xilunguine* were more eclectic. Although there were also those who worked in the South African mines, at the port and the railway, the proximity of commercial zones such as Alto Maé and residential and tourist areas such as Sommerschield and Polana attracted to Mafalala African communities more linked to the provision of services to merchants, residences, hotels, and restaurants (Sopa 34). The provision of services accounted for about half the urban labor force of the capital throughout a large part of the twentieth century (Penvenne, *Trabalhadores* 173). This allowed for a closer interaction between Africans and *xilunguine* colonial society, in contrast to the majority of the workers connected to mining, ports, and the railways, where African labor was marked by predominantly more distant relations with their employers. In the service sector, in general, relations with the lady or the master of the house, while similarly violent and asymmetric, enabled not only greater acculturation and assimilation to non-African cultures, but also a position of relative trustworthiness attributed by employers, which could extend to a special permission to move in the city after the compulsory curfew for indigenous people, giving these workers greater mobility in the *xilunguine* and the daily lives of its residents.

The service sector came to foster the establishment of the Muslim communities of Mafalala, who worked in both trade and tourism. In the case of shop and canteen workers, relations of proximity (not only geographic but also religious) with the merchants of Alto Maé, who were primarily Muslim Indian traders known as *banyans*, led to the formation of Muslim communities from the Swahili coast in Mafalala.⁸ During this same period, the city's growth led to the appearance of various hotels that required specialized labor. Some was

⁷ According to Frescura ("The Spatial Geography" 68), the term "compound" derives from the Malay "kampong," meaning "village, group of buildings." Compounds were typically confined and insalubrious residential sites where the South African mining companies lodged their African miners. The model was adapted to Lourenço Marques by recruitment agencies, such as the *Witwatersrand Native Labor Association* [WNLA], which kept its workers there, some in transit to the Transvaal mines and others for the *chibalo* (forced labor) of Lourenço Marques (Penvenne, *Trabalhadores* 158).

⁸ For more on Lourenço Marques's *banyans*, see João Fonseca Amaral's poem, "Karamchand" (1950).

contracted in the Comoros Islands to work in the main hotels of the city, and settled in Mafalala, where they founded a Muslim community that became very influential.

The suburban structure and registration of land

The difference between the urban grid inside and outside the circumferential arch is already visible in the 1912 *Planta da Cidade de Lourenço Marques e Subúrbios*. Formally, the disparity resided, and still resides, in the pragmatism of the orthogonal grid proposed and partially implemented by the Araújo Plan, in blatant contrast to the irregularity of the real estate records and street layout outside the radial. The perimeters of the plots outside the circumferential arch, where the suburbs closest to the city were located, such as Mafalala, defined the suburban grid up to current times. This fact is illustrated in a Concession Deed for a plot of land in Mafalala, dating from 1911: “Comparing the perimeter of plot 187 and its adjacent land referred to in the deed with the evolution of the urban grid of the same zone, we find that the perimeters have remained practically unaltered up to the present day” (Silva 414). This is partly explained by the way most of the plots of the suburbs, inside the two- and three-kilometer arches, were progressively occupied. For the reasons mentioned above, the African populations gradually occupied each plot in an impulsive and provisional form, concentrating within these perimeters according to their specific urban motivations, disregarding the law established by the colonial administration, which turned a blind eye to the property and *laissez-faire* self-regulation of the suburbs (Mitchell xii-xiii).

This complacent but not innocent attitude contrasted with the legislative rigor that was relentlessly pursued in the so-called “formal” city, where the municipal services were more attentive and active in the enforcement and supervision of legislation aimed at ensuring that urban growth remained confined to the orthogonal grid.⁹ Indeed, this duality of legal criteria between the *xilunguine* and

⁹ The permissiveness of the municipal and land registry services regarding suburban property went back a long way, when this phenomenon was prevalent in the city. According to Andrade, “the first land act published in the Province is dated 21 August 1856 [which] was made with large brush-strokes and liberal” (*Relatórios* 76). This implies that it paid scant heed to regulating the property transactions of real estate

caniço contributed to the urban dichotomy bound by the circumferential arch; although on both sides of this border the design of the urban structure was defined by the same model, namely, the perimeters of the plots.¹⁰ Their geometric disparity, the way that their occupation occurred and whether it was regulated or not, and the socioeconomic and cultural discrepancies of their occupants marked the formal distinctions between the two spaces.

In suburbs such as Mafalala, the irregular geometry established by its division into plots was characterized by narrow streets defined by the perimeters of the plots. Communities that tended to be homogenous in sociocultural terms settled inside these plots. Each plot or group of plots aggregated communities that were sometimes very different from those adjacent. For example, a Ronga-speaking community from Inhambane with animist and Protestant patriarchal traditions might find itself living next to a plot inhabited by a Makhuwa-speaking, matriarchal, animist and Muslim community from the Ilha de Moçambique. In general, the interaction of the different communities only took place in the streets, using the lingua franca, Portuguese. Thus, the suburban mosaic of its many plots intermingled to create the sociocultural melting pot of Mafalala, whose comprehension requires the examination of some of the factors that led to the different communities settling in each plot.

Various factors of agglomeration in the urban space of Mafalala

As was the case in all the other Bay of Maputo suburbs, the residents of Mafalala were subjected to an informal system of rent payment to the owners of the land where they wished to settle. For this reason, they tended to group together according to employer or type of profession, landlord, place of origin, family relations, religion, and proximity to places where food and drinking water could be acquired, such as the canteens.

The first factor of settlement is fundamental to gain a more encompassing understanding of the cultural and ethnic polarization that occurred in the capital's

speculators, which were made with the connivance, if not corruption, of certain civil servants of the colonial administration.

¹⁰ *Canico* is a term commonly used to describe the suburbs of cities such as Lourenço Marques (Maputo) and Beira. It is a traditional African construction material of vegetable origin, long used for the building of local houses.

outskirts at the turn of the twentieth century. Normally the men came first to the city in search of better living conditions.¹¹ If they did not know anyone, they would try to find employment and live in whatever affordable accommodation could be found as close as possible to the workplace, paying rent to the landlord of the plot of land who, in some cases, was also their employer. Once the immigrant's conditions were stabilized, he would call his family and acquaintances from his former community to join him. Those recently arrived would settle inside the perimeter of the plot of the same landlord to whom they would also begin to pay rent. In this way, each plot of registered land in the city's periphery would operate as a host cell, with a culturally familiar atmosphere, whose nucleus would progressively swell with incoming communities from the same place of origin, usually through family, clan, or religious connections.

The link to a particular religion or variant of this religion generated magnetic forces that, in some way, also determined the choice of where to settle by those recently arrived. In this regard, the presence of Protestant churches in the territories around the Bay of Maputo were very strong since the last quarter of the nineteenth century due to the influence of the Anglo-Boer colonies of the hinterland (Sundkler and Steed 482-85).¹² Their inclusive attitude and proximity to the tribes south of the River Save rendered them trustworthy in the eyes of many Africans.¹³ However, the Portuguese colonial administration harbored mistrust of them. Although places of worship were preferentially close to their migratory communities, such as those of Chamanculo and Xipanmanine, the sphere of influence of these missions and churches extended to other outlying neighborhoods, such as Mafalala.

The predominance of Swahili communities from the Indian Ocean, especially from the Ilha de Moçambique, and the proximity to the *banyan* traders

¹¹ For more on this phenomenon, see Cossa.

¹² For a useful survey of the main Protestant churches in Lourenço Marques up to the 1960s, see Rita-Ferreira "Os africanos" 453-56.

¹³ Especially the Tsonga (of the Bay of Maputo), BiTonga and Chopi (Inhambane), and Nguni (Gaza), who, apart from their linguistic similarities, were the main providers of migratory manpower for the Transvaal mines, where the Protestant churches were very active in defending the miners' rights (Sundkler and Steed 329-426). According to Harries, these churches were responsible, during the colonial period, for the higher literacy and politicization of the peoples south of the River Save, thus contributing to the germination of Mozambican nationalism (229).

of Alto Maé gave Islam a solid presence in Mafalala. In general, the Muslim communities of Mafalala were bound together in discretely closed male brotherhoods that extended certain social protections to their co-religionists, thus shaping settlement in the vicinity (Rita-Ferreira, “Os africanos” 457).

A similar arrangement operated in the relationship between the suburban communities and the canteens. This type of outlying trading post was one of the hallmarks of colonial capitalism that most interfered in the daily life of those under colonial domination, with a stronger incidence on urban settlements. The deterioration of the rural livelihoods of Africans and their consequent urbanization made them increasingly dependent on this form of trade. The rapid economic development of the colonial cities in the late nineteenth century generated an urban proletariat of Africans whose meager wages soon made them vulnerable to colonial capitalist consumerism (Thompson 111). The Indo-British were the first to exploit this commercial niche, establishing themselves close to the mines and settlements from where the African miner originated, tempting them with products ranging from essential goods such as food and drinking water to the most superfluous and nefarious such as alcohol and prostitution (Penvenne, “We Are All Portuguese!” 265).¹⁴

In an overcrowded space with widespread shortages of food (due to the lack of land on which to produce it) and basic infrastructure such as drinking water and sanitation, the existence of the canteens became indispensable for the survival of the periphery’s inhabitants. Keenly aware of this dependence, the canteen owners became preponderant actors in the suburban colonial hierarchy, in general having gained an ambiguous and asymmetrical relationship with their African customers. Due to the insecurity of their employment, the customers were forced to resort to informal credit extended by the canteen owners, reinforcing the dependence of the Africans on the canteens, and thus influencing their settlement in plots close to them. Up to independence, the urban canteens

¹⁴ Also known as *coolies*, these were people of Indian origin from the British colonies of India, who were forcibly contracted to work in the plantations of Natal in the mid-eighteenth century and, having finished their contracts, stayed there opening shops and canteens (known, among others, as *Kafirs* and/or *Banyans shops*) all over the Colony of the Cape, Transvaal, Rhodesia, and other Anglo-Saxon colonies. With the implementation of trade restrictions by the English colonial administration at the turn of the century, many entered into Mozambique (Zamparoni 301).

were dominated by Europeans and, to a lesser extent, Asians, and they are a recurring theme in Mozambican literature which has consistently portrayed them as *loci* for colonial violence (Craveirinha 130; Knopfli 37; Paixão 181).¹⁵ The canteens were also intercultural melting pots in their own way, places that disseminated, among other things, new musical styles such as the *marrabenta*.¹⁶

Besides the factors discussed above, there were certainly others that influenced the settlement and growth of African communities in Mafalala, such as its proximity to the few public fountains located on the outskirts of the colonial city.¹⁷ All these factors somehow affected Mafalala's urban structure and the way people of different origins and cultures organized themselves empirically in spaces unprepared to receive them. The inhabitants of the colonial periphery were forced to react to the constraints described above, especially the colonial. They effectively built another city, with its own specific dynamics, generating new sociocultural synapses from which an important part of the cultural and political identity of the country derives.

This "other city" was the urban scenery from which emerged the proto-nationalist voices that railed against Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique. In this context, Mafalala performs a special role because of its wide sociocultural spectrum. Inside the neighborhood, it was possible for its inhabitants to interact with almost every African culture present in Mozambique's territory, as well as with the various forms of oppression imposed on them by the colonial regime. This situation, as well as the fact that a large part of the neighborhood's labor force worked deep inside the *xilungúne*, turned Mafalala into a privileged place for the creation and diffusion of Mozambican nationalism.

By examining the origins and the evolution of Mafalala, we see how uniquely colonial structures gave rise to the recognized cultural birthplace of the Mozambican nation. In particular, we come to appreciate the oppressive

¹⁵ Many suburban *canteens* in Lourenço Marques, especially those run by Europeans, became hotspots of violence in the turbulent months of September and October 1974. For more on this topic, see Saavedra; Rita-Ferreira "Moçambique post-25 de Abril"; and Machava.

¹⁶ On this issue and with greater focus on Mafalala, see Laranjeira and Sopa.

¹⁷ The scarcity of public fountains in the suburbs favored the lucrative fresh water economy, which was dominated by the canteen owners who often enough sabotaged the public taps to boost their business (Rita-Ferreira, "Os africanos" 435-37; Zamparoni 218, 320).

structures that the Portuguese imposed on the local population's exploration and control of land. Portuguese power, however, could not prevent unprivileged sectors of the population from developing their own forms of conviviality and culture at the margins of the colonial city. By adjusting itself to the colonial order while developing innovative forms of cultural expression and resistance, this subaltern population was crucial, probably without being aware of it, for the inception and dissemination of ideals of freedom and emancipation. Portuguese plans to create Portuguese cities overseas failed; however, as the case of Lourenço Marques/Maputo discloses, it was in the outskirts of those colonial urban projects that new sociocultural landscapes emerged and led to political independence.

After independence, some of the urban problems of Mafalala were addressed by the new government, especially those related to infrastructure, such as the rain water drainage. But the civil war along with a lack of funds and technical human resources slowly counteracted government efforts to renovate Mafalala's urban space. These factors resulted in a rapid degradation of the *bairro's* living conditions. Forty years have passed since the revolutionary period of the mid-seventies. Now Mafalala seems to be frozen in time, while the memories of its sociocultural and political legacy are slowly disappearing from national consciousness. The present real estate crunch caused by Maputo's economic expansion is now threatening to invade and destroy Mafalala's material and immaterial heritage. Only by continued research on the *bairro's* history can we make the public aware of the importance of its legacy to present and future generations.

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