

Violent Becomings: State Formation, Sociality, and Power in Mozambique. *Bjørn Enge Bertelsen*. New York: Berghahn, 2016. 360 pp.

JON SCHUBERT

University of Geneva

Although Mozambique has widely been held up as a paragon of postwar recovery since the end of its civil war in 1992 and as a donor darling for most of the ensuing reconstruction period, the country has also witnessed recurring outbursts of violence—from bread riots to episodes of lynching in peri-urban neighborhoods to the resurgence of armed opposition to the Frelimo government by the opposition party Renamo since 2013. Based on years of fieldwork in the urban-rural continuum between the (anonymized) village of Honde and Chimoio, the capital of the central Manica Province, Bjørn Enge Bertelsen lays out a systematic, careful interpretation of these events as part of a long history of “violent becomings” of the Mozambican state. The author forcefully argues against statecentric and institution-based notions of the state, letting emerge instead a historically and ethnographically grounded, nontotalizing image of the state as perpetually becoming, unfolding, and challenged.

To advance this argument, Bertelsen finds analytical purchase in the Deleuze-Guattarian metaphor of the rhizome, which is antagonistic to “arborescent structures of state ordering” (21). He bases this analysis on a meticulous examination of the “traditional field”—not to be taken as a static, reified, or institutional domain but, rather, as an “unruly and contested entity of potentialities” (18). This [field is](#) fundamentally uncapturable by state actors who seek to co-opt, incorporate, or defuse its potentiality. [Instead, it](#) allows villagers and city dwellers alike the opportunity to

challenge these efforts at ordering by the formation of “lines of flight” (62) and fleeting, often violently contested assemblages.

Bertelsen articulates this argument in seven empirically rich chapters, each tackling in turn central categories by which social anthropology has sought to approach the state: violence, territory, spirit, body, sovereignty, economy, and law. To this reviewer, the chapters on violence, sovereignty, and law stand out. The first reads the bush war between Renamo rebels and the Frelimo government as both deterritorializing the Mozambican state and reinscribing society and the landscape with meaning, with both parties manifesting rhizomic traits of a “war machine” (38) and arborescent tendencies of state structuring, thus appearing as distorted mirror images of each other.

The chapter on sovereignty reveals the ways in which the state seeks to defuse the unruly potential of the traditional field by reordering it into organized civil society. This tendency to co-opt civil society into manageable associations recognizable to the state is not unique to Mozambique but widespread across dominant-party regimes, especially formerly socialist regimes. In his description of the state-sanctioned Association for Traditional Medicine in Mozambique, Bertelsen moves from controversies about witchcraft accusations and the agency of nefarious spirits, *uroi*, to truth ordeals to imaginaries about the power and body of the president (as a king figure), thereby revealing lines of flight that challenge the state’s “creation of striated spaces and arborescent hierarchies of subjects” (189).

The law chapter follows cases of popular, summary justice in some of Chimoio’s peri-urban *bairros*. Bertelsen develops a vigorous critique of the legal pluralism literature as well as a convincing rebuttal of Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s reading of Mozambique as a heterogeneous state, arguing instead for a reading of the

overlapping, competing, and shifting formations of power within the postcolonial state as “multiple sovereignties” (257). The conclusion restates his key argument: that the traditional stands in tension to processes of state formation, tensions that often are discharged in unforeseeable, violent processes and that should help us conceive of the state as **incomplete**—as always contested and evaded by social forces and dynamics, especially from the domain of the traditional.

True to this conceptual inspiration, Bertelsen’s writing is dense and effervescent, and eclectic in its analytical reference points, especially in the chapters on healing and funeral **rituals**. It is also studded with a great number of very precise vernacular terms in chiTewe for specific spirits, entities, and rituals, which made this reader turn more than once to the comprehensive glossary. Such authorial and editorial choices notwithstanding, this is a rich book, ambitious in its arguments, sweeping in its scope, and offering the kind of comprehensive, painstaking ethnographic observation, description, and analysis of rituals that one rarely encounters anymore. This speaks to the author’s evident familiarity with and deep knowledge of the place and the people he’s worked with, as well as the lasting relationships of trust he has built up over the years. **This** book provides a wealth of new and often fascinating empirical material on the history and social life of a largely underexplored region of Mozambique. More than **that, it offers** thought-provoking conceptual impetus to a readership interested in recent anthropological debates on state formation, power, and violence in postcolonial Africa.