

OVERLAPPING IMPERIALISMS: COLONIAL AND NEOCOLONIAL LOGICS OF URBAN GOVERNANCE IN KILAMBA, ANGOLA

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Abstract

This article examines the urban project of Kilamba in Luanda, Angola, as a site where distinct imperial logics operate through development finance and urban governance. Rather than treating Portuguese colonial rule and China's contemporary engagement as separate historical phases, the study conceptualizes them as mutually reinforcing regimes of power coexisting within a single urban space. To capture this configuration, it advances the concept of "overlapping imperialisms," defined as a condition in which imperial forms of governance with distinct historical origins become institutionalized within the same national or urban context and produce layered effects of inclusion and exclusion. By situating urban space at the intersection of colonial governance and contemporary development finance, particularly oil-backed credit, this article contributes to debates in international relations on postcolonial governance, South-South cooperation, and the spatialization of global power. It argues that development-led urbanization can function as a mechanism through which imperial forms of governance persist and are reconfigured in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords

Overlapping imperialisms, colonial governance, China-Africa relations, oil-backed credit, urban space and power.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa o projeto urbano de Kilamba, em Luanda, Angola, como um local onde distintas lógicas imperiais operam através do financiamento ao desenvolvimento e da governação urbana. Em vez de tratar o domínio colonial português e o envolvimento contemporâneo da China como fases históricas separadas, o estudo conceitua-os como regimes de poder que se reforçam mutuamente e coexistem num único espaço urbano. Para captar esta configuração, o estudo propõe o conceito de «imperialismos sobrepostos», definido como uma condição em que formas imperiais de governação com origens históricas distintas se institucionalizam no mesmo contexto nacional ou urbano e produzem efeitos em camadas de inclusão e exclusão. Ao situar o espaço urbano na intersecção entre a governação colonial e o financiamento do desenvolvimento contemporâneo, em particular o crédito garantido pelo petróleo, este artigo contribui para os debates nas relações internacionais sobre a governação pós-colonial, a cooperação Sul-Sul e a espacialização do poder global. Defende que a urbanização impulsionada pelo desenvolvimento pode funcionar como um mecanismo através do qual as formas imperiais de governação persistem e são reconfiguradas em contextos pós-coloniais.



Palavras-chave

Overlapping imperialisms, colonial governance, China–Africa relations, oil-backed credit, urban space and power.

How to cite this article

Kim, Kyeri (2026). Overlapping Imperialisms: Colonial and Neocolonial Logics of Urban Governance in Kilamba, Angola. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. Thematic Dossier – Geopolitics of Anxiety: Ideology, Identity, and (Un)Bordering in Contemporary Europe and Asia, VOL. 17 Nº. 1, TD3, September 2026, pp. 132-154. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.DT0626.8>

Article submitted on December 31, 2025 and accepted on February 6, 2026.





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Introduction

Luanda, located on the Atlantic coast of southwestern Africa, is the capital of Angola and the country's political, economic, cultural, and administrative center. Since the sixteenth century, the city has undergone continuous urban growth accompanied by sustained population inflows, a process that accelerated markedly during and after the twenty-seven-year civil war following independence. However, Luanda's infrastructure and housing systems proved insufficient to accommodate this rapid transformation (Kim 2025b), resulting in chronic housing shortages, uneven distribution of infrastructure, and the proliferation of informal settlements.

In response to this urban crisis, the Angolan government launched the National Reconstruction Program (*Programa de Reconstrução Nacional*) in the early 2000s, aiming both to rebuild infrastructure destroyed during the civil war and to establish new engines of national economic growth. A central objective of this program was to render the state's commitment to reconstruction visible domestically and internationally while simultaneously constructing a renewed national image. To this end, the government actively pursued foreign capital and international partnerships, within which urban development emerged as a key instrument of the national reconstruction strategy (Tomás 2022: 183).

It was within this context that Kilamba emerged as a large-scale housing complex located approximately 30 kilometers outside Luanda's urban core. Conceived as part of a state-led policy, Kilamba was intended to alleviate overcrowding in central Luanda, resume infrastructure investment suspended during the war, and respond to growing urban housing demand. In 2011, the project was officially inaugurated by ex-President José Eduardo dos Santos and presented domestically and internationally as a flagship symbol of postwar reconstruction. Since then, Kilamba has been incorporated into the itineraries of visiting foreign and domestic dignitaries, where newly constructed buildings and orderly urban landscapes have been framed as tangible evidence of Angola's reconstruction achievements (Chronic 2015).

¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2024S1A5B5A16020542).



Kilamba thus came to be positioned as a representative space that visually materialized state narratives of a “New Angola” or a “New Luanda.” Promoted as a model of modernity, order, and a forward-looking national future achieved through the combination of foreign capital and technology, Kilamba emerged as one of the most conspicuous spatial manifestations of state-led development narratives, frequently framed in terms such as “the Dubai of Africa.” Its orderly high-rise housing blocks, systematically arranged road networks, well-maintained green spaces, covered bus stops, and rows of streetlights stand in sharp contrast to Luanda’s historic urban core, where remnants of Portuguese colonial urbanism coexist with the material traces of prolonged civil war (Cardoso 2016: 1–19; Pitcher & Moorman 2015: 123–130).

Large-scale urban development projects such as Kilamba in postcolonial Africa have typically been analyzed through the lenses of national reconstruction, development, or the expansion of global capital. While these approaches are useful for explaining the material transformations and policy outcomes produced by development, they offer limited insight into how urban space is historically constituted through shifting configurations of power and interaction. In particular, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to how colonial urban orders and postcolonial forms of external intervention intersect and operate together within urban space.

This study addresses this gap by approaching Kilamba as a site where imperialism and neo-imperialism—distinct yet interrelated forms of imperial governance—intersect and overlap. Imperialism should not be understood as a legacy that disappeared with the formal end of colonial rule; rather, it has persisted through institutions of development, reconstruction, finance, and planned urbanization within the framework of neo-imperialism. Colonial imperialism and postcolonial neo-imperialism must therefore be analyzed as institutional frameworks that operate simultaneously within the same spatial context.

From this perspective, this article proposes the concept of “*overlapping imperialisms*,” defined as a condition in which imperial forms of power with different historical origins coexist within the same national and urban context and become institutionalized as modes of governance, producing layered effects of inclusion and exclusion. Through this conceptual lens, the article reinterprets the Kilamba urban project by asking, first, how imperialism and neo-imperialism persist within Kilamba’s urban space, and second, how distinct imperial logics are combined within a single urban project and with what implications for the production of urban space. To address these questions, the article adopts a comparative approach that examines imperialism and neo-imperialism within a shared analytical framework.

Imperialism, Neo-Imperialism and Overlapping Imperialisms

Imperialism

At the political and economic level, imperialism is structurally linked to a particular stage of capitalist development. The concentration of production and capital generates monopolies, while the dominance of finance capital significantly expands the export of



capital. Within this framework, classical theories of imperialism have understood it as a power system that emerges when advanced capitalist economies confront the limits of accumulation, thereby requiring external spaces, and when this requirement becomes institutionalized through political, economic, social, and cultural mechanisms (Lenin 1917). In this regard, imperial intervention by the state should be understood not simply as an expression of colonial ambition for territorial expansion, but as an attempt to create and extend international conditions favorable to capital accumulation (Brenner 2006).

In practice, imperialism has always operated through political and cultural ideologies that legitimize conquest alongside economic expansion. In Africa, racism and civilizing discourses functioned as key mechanisms that normalized external intervention (Campbell 2015). Imperialism should therefore be understood not merely as territorial occupation, but as a multi-layered logic of domination linking capital expansion, knowledge production, and spatial reorganization (Cooper 2005). This logic becomes durable through the institutionalization of legal and administrative frameworks that sustain control over external spaces.

Imperialism legitimized itself through epistemological hierarchies that framed non-Western societies as backward and correctable. This representation justified intervention under the rhetoric of civilization and development and cast domination as a moral responsibility (Liebersohn 2016). By defining in advance what counted as civilization and deficiency, imperial power established a hierarchy that preceded formal rule and determined who was entitled to govern and who was to be governed (Said 1977).

Over time, this imperial epistemology became embedded within concrete institutional mechanisms of rule. Colonial governance imposed differentiated constraints on citizenship, legal status, forced labor, freedom of movement, and access to resources. Colonized populations, above all, were administered through documentary practices and legal-administrative classification systems constructed by imperial power. While rights associated with citizenship were only partially extended to local populations, a wide range of obligations designed to facilitate exploitation were imposed upon them (Cooper 2005). In this sense, imperialism constitutes a complex power formation in which economic exploitation, political control, military coercion, and cultural-ideological legitimation operate in an interlocking manner, grounded in the reconfiguration of epistemological frameworks (Amin 2017).

Imperial power becomes routinized in everyday life through spatial organization. Space, as a social product, reflects and reproduces power relations. The ways in which power structures space shape social relations and institutional orders, condensing the operational principles of specific regimes (Lefebvre 1991). Consequently, imperial urbanization inscribes imperial orders and norms into the city itself. Through urban planning, administrative zoning, infrastructural connectivity, and regulated access to housing, urban space is transformed into an apparatus that continuously activates imperial governance.

Such imperial modes of spatial control do not disappear entirely in the postcolonial period. Rather, the institutions, spatial hierarchies, and political-economic orders constructed under imperial rule persist as organizing conditions of postcolonial societies.



Differential distributions of citizenship, the demarcation between legality and illegality, rules governing access to land and housing, and administrative systems represent reworked continuities of colonial logics rather than ruptures. While modern imperialism no longer operates primarily through direct domination, it continues to be invoked through indirect mechanisms such as development, reconstruction, and the establishment of new criteria of order and legality (Mbembe 2001; Stoler 2013). From this perspective, postcolonial urban space emerges as a crucial site where imperial logics of governance are reactivated in transformed forms. Imperial urban space thus constitutes a terrain in which imperial rationalities, far from being erased after the end of colonial rule, are reconfigured and continue to operate. These continuities are not accidental residues of colonial history but structural conditions that shape how postcolonial urban governance remains tethered to imperial rationalities.

Neo-Imperialism

Modern imperialism operated through forms of direct rule that combined overseas capital expansion with territorial domination, accompanied by the transfer of surplus value generated through production. Neo-imperialism, by contrast, refers to a system in which such forms of direct domination are weakened, while external intervention is structured through institutional mechanisms such as international finance, regulatory regimes, and global norms under conditions in which the formal sovereignty of the target state is maintained. One of the most significant distinctions between the two lies in the mode of extraction: under neo-imperialism, exploitation is reorganized into institutionalized forms—credit, debt, and financial contracts—that are largely detached from direct production processes. In this sense, neo-imperialism constitutes a transformed and abstracted continuation of the logic of modern imperialism, marking a shift from direct to indirect rule and from colonial administration to governance through international norms and institutional arrangements—a contemporary modality of imperial power (Yu 2020).

Similarly, patterns of world dependency in postcolonial Africa have been reconfigured through increasingly discreet and institutionalized pathways. From the late nineteenth century to the Second World War, colonial imperialism—centered on Europe and combining infrastructure construction such as railways, ports, and mines with formal territorial control—was dominant (Rodney 2018; Zack-Williams 2013). After the war, the center of imperial power shifted toward the United States, giving rise to what has been described as “imperialism without colonies.” From the 1980s onward, the gradual institutionalization of structural adjustment programs marked a new phase in which national policy autonomy and development strategies became subordinated to external financial regimes (Harvey 2017; Zack-Williams 2013). Since the 1990s, the rise of China has introduced a new variable into this configuration, transforming Africa into a field of multipolar competition. China came to be perceived as an alternative partner to Western conditional aid and normative pressure; at the same time, however, it has faced criticism for generating new forms of neocolonial dependency through loans and development projects. Across these transformations, core mechanisms of neo-imperialism have



included market dependency, profit extraction by multinational corporations, and institutional devices such as asymmetrical economic partnership agreements (Tull 2006; Zack-Williams 2013).

Among these mechanisms, the discourse of developmentalism has played a particularly significant role in materializing neo-imperialism in Africa. Developmentalism has emerged as a central technology of power that enables neo-imperialism to operate through indirect forms of governance. Although development is also an internal process of capitalist expansion, it has increasingly taken shape as a policy framework institutionalized through international cooperation, aid, and reconstruction programs. Development thus appears to function as a neutral instrument aimed at “improving” or “enhancing” social conditions; in practice, however, it operates as a normative framework that pre-organizes the political and economic conditions necessary for capital accumulation while legitimizing external intervention (Li 2007; Veltmeyer 2020).

During the Cold War, development was mobilized as a means of anchoring postcolonial states within Western capitalist trajectories of progress. In the subsequent neoliberal phase, it functioned through structural adjustment, market liberalization, and fiscal discipline, thereby limiting national policy choices and inducing social restructuring. In this process, aid and development cooperation became inseparable from the geopolitical and strategic interests of donor states. In this way, development provided an institutional conduit through which external power could intervene without resorting to direct domination or military coercion. Development thus operates as an indirect and structural modality of neo-imperialism (Latham 2011; Veltmeyer 2020). This perspective makes it possible to analyze postcolonial urban development and reconstruction not merely as state-led modernization processes, but as sites in which neo-imperial logics of governance are actively at work. What distinguishes this configuration as neo-imperial is that the authority shaping urban life is displaced outward, embedding external standards and financial structures into the internal organization of postcolonial space.

Overlapping Imperialisms: A Conceptual Synthesis

Kilamba has most often been analyzed within a framework that emphasizes the postwar expansion of a Chinese-style development model in Angola. Such approaches, however, suffer from two major limitations. First, they tend to overlook how the logics of governance and spatial order produced under Portuguese colonial imperialism continue to be reactivated in the postcolonial period. Second, by treating China’s intervention as the linear arrival of a new external actor, they fail to capture the more complex condition in which different imperial logics operate simultaneously within the same national, urban, and project-specific context (Kim 2025c).

Accordingly, this study reconceptualizes Kilamba not as a post-imperial space, but as a site in which multiple forms of imperial governance coexist in overlapping ways. The central analytical shift lies in moving beyond a periodized distinction that separates Portuguese colonial imperialism and Chinese neo-imperialism into discrete historical phases and instead focusing on how different forms of imperial power operate



concurrently within a single urban development project. To capture this configuration, the study advances the concept of “overlapping imperialisms.” Overlapping imperialisms refers to a condition in which imperial forms of governance with distinct historical origins and modes of power coexist within the same national or urban space, become institutionalized as modes of governance, and, through this process, produce layered effects of inclusion and exclusion. This concept does not simply identify imperialism in terms of continuity or legacy; rather, it serves as a conceptual device for analyzing how the normative and spatial logics of colonial imperialism and the financialized developmental logics of neo-imperialism operate simultaneously within specific institutions and projects, producing new configurations of governance and power.

To empirically analyze overlapping imperialisms, this study structures Chapters III and IV around a comparative framework that treats imperialism and neo-imperialism not as temporally separated stages, but as coexisting modes of power within a shared analytical field. Methodologically, the analysis organizes the operation of imperial power in urban space into three interrelated dimensions: epistemological, institutional, and political, each centered on a distinct mechanism of power. First, at the epistemological level, imperial power defines what constitutes a problem and what forms of intervention are legitimate through justificatory ideologies such as the civilizing mission and developmentalism, conceptualized here as Ideological Regimes of Legitimation. Second, at the institutional level, these epistemologies materialize through the Institutionalization of Spatial Politics, whereby legal frameworks, administrative systems, urban planning, and classificatory criteria are deployed to organize urban space and populations. Third, these processes culminate at the political level in Regimes of Citizenship, through which access to the city and the conditions under which particular forms of life are recognized as “normal” or legitimate citizenship are reconfigured. This threefold analytical structure reveals core mechanisms through which imperial power operates across imperial discourse, the politics of urban space, and the production of citizenship in the city of Luanda. This framework therefore does not merely describe continuity between imperial forms, but provides an analytical tool for identifying how multiple regimes of power become layered within concrete urban institutions.

Imperial Urban Formation and Structure

Ideological Regimes of Legitimation: The Civilizing Mission

Kilamba is one of the large-scale housing projects that came to symbolize Angola’s postwar reconstruction in the postcolonial period. Yet the formation and spatial organization of Kilamba bear the clear imprint of Portuguese imperial logics of governance that were already established during the historical construction of Luanda. In 1576, Portugal entered what is now Angola by establishing a foothold on Ilha de Cabo—also known as Ilha de Luanda—and founded the city under the name São Paulo de Assunção de Loanda (Kim 2021: 62). Luanda soon emerged as a central hub of the Atlantic slave trade and became a strategic site through which Portuguese colonial rule was organized and rendered visible in urban space. Modeled after Lisbon, Luanda was planned as a Western-style city, spatially divided along social hierarchies and infused



with imperial ideology through its urban form (Kim 2025b: 70–72). As a result, Luanda came to be recognized as one of the oldest continuously urbanized cities in sub-Saharan Africa and as a paradigmatic case of Portuguese colonial urbanization (Jenkins et al. 2002: 139). The foundational principles of this colonial urban planning did not disappear with decolonization but persisted in reconfigured forms in the postcolonial period.

Portuguese imperialism was materially inscribed in Luanda through architecture, street names, and systems of administrative nomenclature. These elements formed part of a broader European mode of urban design and functioned as a key means through which the imperial logic of the *missão civilizadora*—the civilizing mission—was enacted and made visible in Africa. The civilizing mission constituted a central justificatory ideology through which imperial domination was represented not as coercion or exploitation, but as the fulfillment of historical progress and moral responsibility. Within this framework, colonized societies were defined as “uncivilized,” while European civilization was posited as a universal standard to be emulated and ultimately achieved. Imperial intervention was thus reframed as education, reform, protection, and development, enabling imperial power to position itself not as an agent of violence but as a mediator of civilization. In this sense, the civilizing mission functioned as an ideological apparatus that allowed imperial rule to be sustained through the rhetoric of universal values and human progress, even as military and political domination continued (Pomeranz 2005).

Assimilationist (*assimilação*) policy operated as a concrete extension of the civilizing mission within the colonial city. Through institutional mechanisms, it promoted the use of Portuguese as the official language, the imposition of Catholic order, Portuguese architectural styles, and European modes of everyday life. Through these processes, Luanda became a site in which the social and cultural identity of the Portuguese empire was projected, internalized, and enacted in practice (Kim 2025d: 562; Pinto & Jerónimo 2015: 2–15). In this regard, Luanda’s colonial urban landscape constitutes the spatial organization and visual reproduction of an imperial worldview premised on Western civilizational superiority. The civilizing mission and its concrete implementation through assimilationist policy thus operated as key ideological regimes of imperial legitimation. The hierarchical structures produced through these spatial practices, centered on the colonial city, were not fully dismantled after decolonization and continue to shape the postcolonial urban order.

Institutionalization of Imperial Spatial Politics: Legal and Administrative Classification

The urban structure of Luanda was shaped through a dual spatial division between *cidade alta* (meaning the upper city) and *cidade baixa* (meaning the lower city), a model characteristic of Portuguese colonial urban planning. This configuration reflected the functional differentiation and hierarchical ordering of space under colonial rule. *Cidade baixa*, located in the low-lying coastal zone, concentrated ports, administrative institutions, commercial facilities, and residential areas for European settlers, serving as the material center of colonial governance and economic activity. By contrast, *cidade alta*, situated on higher ground, was organized around military defensive functions and



religious institutions and functioned as a residential space for select elites, embodying colonial authority and symbolic power. This dual structure appeared repeatedly across Portuguese colonial cities. Derived from Lisbon's urban principles and transplanted into the colonial context, it demonstrates that urban planning functioned as a central instrument for organizing imperial governance (Milheiro 2020: 397–409). Such spatial ordering reflects the operation of a strongly Eurocentric spatial ideology, in which Portuguese colonial authorities regarded metropolitan urban forms as universal and ideal models and applied them uncritically to colonial settings.

Portuguese imperialism further fragmented Luanda's urban space through systematic differentiation along social and racial hierarchies. As colonial rule intensified, urban zoning increasingly followed distinctions based on skin color and class. The city center was planned as a modern, institutionalized space reserved for Europeans and colonial elites, while local populations were deliberately excluded and marginalized within the urban fabric (Braz & Raposo 2021: 46–49). This spatial segmentation extended beyond the physical separation of residential areas and was institutionalized through legal and administrative classifications of urban residents. Based on documented legal status, access to movement and urban space was differentially regulated. A representative example was the *Estatuto do Indigenato*, which legally distinguished between the *indígena* (indigenous) and the *civilizado* or *assimilado*. As a result, everyday rights related to education, employment, and licensing became contingent upon legal status, and social hierarchies were formally codified. Furthermore, the ID card, *bilhete de identidade*, was selectively issued and functioned as a decisive marker certifying one's status as "civilized" within the colonial order (Neto 1997: 348).

These imperial status regimes were enacted in everyday urban governance. Introduced in 1928, the *caderneta indígena* was a document that recorded taxation, labor obligations, residential status, and legal identity. Individuals who failed to carry this document or possessed incomplete records were subject to administrative sanctions and restrictions on movement, effectively limiting local residents' access to the urban core (Nascimento 2013: 108; Roque 2009: 47, 227). Such spatial segmentation embedded a hierarchical binary between ruling and subjugated populations into the material foundations of the city. Consequently, Luanda's colonial urban center—where infrastructure was concentrated—became a space in which entry and residence were selectively permitted through documented legality. In contrast, peripheral areas were designated as "illegal" spaces, a classification that colonial discourse itself equated with disorder and rendered subject to governance. In this sense, Luanda's urban segmentation crystallized as an institutional mechanism that inscribed racial and class hierarchies into space and differentially allocated rights of access, mobility, and residence.

As Luanda's population expanded rapidly and processes of urban expansion and modernization accelerated, colonial authorities restructured the city by demolishing residential areas inhabited by local populations in the urban core and gradually displacing them toward the periphery. Those excluded from the center began to settle in agriculturally based informal settlements located on the city's margins, known as Musseque (sometimes rendered locally as *Musseke*). Musseque represents both the



cumulative outcome of long-standing political, social, and economic inequalities in Luanda and a spatial condensation of colonial domination and subsequent forms of political and economic marginalization. Structurally contrasted with the institutionalized zones of the urban core, Musseque renders the fragmented nature of Luanda's urbanization particularly visible (Kim 2025a: 254).

The term Musseque derives from *Kimbundu*, the language of the Mbundu people, and is composed of *mu*(place) and *seke*(sand), generally referring to red soil or unpaved land (Kim 2025b: 76–77). The term thus evokes residential environments characterized by the absence of paved roads and basic infrastructure. In this sense, Musseque signifies urban spaces where fundamental services—such as roads, water supply, sanitation, and electricity—are scarce or entirely absent. These areas stand in sharp contrast to the paved and institutionalized cement city, referred to as *cidade de cimento* (meaning cement city, Jenkins et al. 2002: 142), or the asphalt city, *cidade de asfalto* (meaning asphalt city, Viegas 2016: 598) (Kim 2025b: 72–80).

Musseque expanded organically outside the frameworks of colonial urban planning and administrative management. Although these settlements absorbed the labor force essential to the growth and maintenance of the colonial city, they were systematically excluded from infrastructural investment and public service provision. As a result, residents' livelihoods and social networks were destabilized, and both physical and social disconnection from the urban core rendered everyday life increasingly precarious (Braz & Raposo 2021: 47–50; Kim 2025b: 72–76).

Moreover, each phase of urban development subjected Musseque to repeated forced evictions on the grounds that it constituted an "unplanned space." Residents were displaced to peripheral highlands or areas with even poorer infrastructure, where new Musseque settlements emerged, thereby facilitating the continued spatial expansion of Luanda (Kim 2025b: 75–80). These displacements were enacted through coercive means integral to the realization of imperial urban order. In this respect, the formation of Musseque demonstrates that spatial politics in the colonial city functioned not merely as physical separation or a housing issue, but as an institutional mechanism that hierarchically organized populations through the articulation of legal status, administrative classification, and differentiated access to urban space.

Imperial Citizenship: Legality-Based Regimes of Citizenship

Kilamba was conceived as part of former President José Eduardo dos Santos's strategy to implement the pledge of constructing one million housing units, first announced in 2008 in the lead-up to the 2012 elections (Kimari & Ernstson 2023: 1876). The name "Kilamba" itself was drawn from the Kimbundu name of Agostinho Neto, Angola's first president and a central symbol of the anti-colonial liberation struggle. This act of naming suggests that the project was envisioned as a space symbolizing anti-imperial nation-building and the formation of a postcolonial national identity rooted in Neto's legacy (Chronic 2015).



In practice, however, the actual process of constructing Kilamba and organizing its urban space unfolded less as an embodiment of anti-imperial national identity than as a reproduction of preexisting state-led imperial urban development logics. Low-income populations and informal settlers—long excluded from the urban core since the colonial period—were once again marginalized in the planning process, and Kilamba functioned as a selectively developed space centered on particular social strata and external capital. This demonstrates that, rather than overcoming imperial spatial orders, the postcolonial state has reproduced and intensified them in transformed forms.

Above all, throughout its development Kilamba operated as a mechanism for restructuring citizenship by selectively regulating access to urban space and residential eligibility. This process was justified through political rhetoric centered on “national reconstruction” and “modern urbanization,” which legitimized the demolition of existing settlements, the displacement of residents, and the redefinition of conditions for housing access. In Luanda’s broader reconstruction and housing development trajectory, informal settlements such as Musseque were repeatedly targeted for demolition under the pretext of improving urban aesthetics and promoting “orderly urbanization,” resulting in the relocation of large numbers of residents to resettlement sites on the distant periphery (Braz & Raposo 2021: 45–47; Gastrow 2018: 2–3). These practices of eviction and displacement persisted into the postcolonial period, reproducing hierarchical spatial relations between the urban core and the periphery, and were reiterated during the development of Kilamba.

Spatial exclusion surrounding Kilamba was further legitimized at the legal and institutional level. Land acquisition for large-scale housing construction, the allocation of housing units, and the definition of residential eligibility all operated on the basis of formal legal registration and documented ownership, systematically excluding modes of urban life grounded in informal residence and long-term occupation. Under the Land Law enacted in 2004 (*Lei de Terras, Lei n.º 9/04*), unregistered land was defined as state property, and informal documents such as purchase receipts or certificates of occupation were denied legal recognition (Nielsen 2007: 12–15). This legal regime rendered traditional occupation and long-term residence institutionally vulnerable and reclassified many Musseque residents as “illegal occupants” (ibid: 33–34). In practice, SONIP (*Sonangol Imobiliária e Propriedades*), the state-owned real estate company responsible for the management and allocation of housing units in Kilamba, evicted numerous households on the grounds that their documentation was incomplete. These measures effectively deprived residents of housing rights through appeals to formal legality (Kajibanga 2023: 43–46). Taken together, these processes demonstrate that postcolonial housing policy in Luanda, much like its colonial predecessor, has relied on formal legal order as a central instrument for selectively regulating and controlling access to urban space.

Consequently, large-scale state-led housing projects such as Kilamba failed to function as viable housing alternatives for displaced residents. Many evictees lost their homes without adequate legal compensation, while the pricing structures and eligibility criteria of newly constructed housing units structurally excluded low-income and informally housed populations (Buire 2014: 302–304; Croese 2016: 90–92). Contrary to official



discourses of “housing rights” and “inclusive reconstruction,” Kilamba ultimately emerged as a selectively accessible residential space primarily occupied by middle-class households or those with political and economic connections (Gastrow 2020: 512–515).

This mode of spatial organization exhibits clear structural continuity with colonial governance logics in Luanda, where urban space was organized through distinctions between “orderly citizens” and populations designated for management and control. In this sense, Kilamba is less a product of a fully dismantled imperial spatial order than a revealing case in which imperial regimes of citizenship persist in transformed forms within postcolonial development practices.

Neo-Imperial Urban Reconfiguration and Its Operations

Ideological Regimes of Legitimation under Neo-Imperialism: Developmentalism

Following the end of the civil war in 2002, postwar reconstruction in Angola assumed critical importance in rebuilding infrastructure destroyed over twenty-seven years of conflict. In particular, the reconstruction of Luanda was treated not only as a technical task of recovery but also as a political project aimed at reorganizing the state and consolidating the governing party’s legitimacy. In practice, Angola’s postwar reconstruction was pursued through a strategy in which the state rapidly mobilized public investment and distributed resources to key support bases, thereby managing political competition (Croese 2017: 80). Within this context, housing provision and urban development extended beyond the domain of social welfare policy and emerged as prominent arenas in which state power could be rendered visible as political “achievement.” In other words, urban development functioned not merely as an economic policy instrument but as a governing technology through which the state sought to integrate society and reorder spatial and social relations.

Against this backdrop, Kilamba was conceived as a flagship project of the postwar, state-led housing program and, following its official inauguration by the president, operated as a space in which Angola’s reconstruction achievements were visually displayed (Croese 2017: 94; Gastrow 2020: 509). The construction of Kilamba through state intervention was thus directly articulated with developmentalism and entangled with external capital. The resulting neo-imperial interventions by external actors reconfigured urban space and everyday norms according to externally defined standards.

Developmentalism operates as a knowledge–power nexus that defines local societies in terms of “lack” and legitimizes external intervention through the rhetoric of improvement (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994). Rather than neutral policy, it functions as a normative system that reduces political conflict to technical management and enables imperial power to operate without direct rule (Adalet 2025). Developmentalism thus operates not simply as policy, but as a form of external authority that reorganizes urban life according to standards produced outside the local political field.



Neo-imperial developmentalism materialized concretely in Kilamba's urban form. Constructed in a peripheral zone spatially detached from Luanda's existing urban core, Kilamba functioned as a space that structurally weakened everyday mobility and access to the city for urban residents. This reduction in accessibility was justified as a "rational choice" grounded in developmental rationality. Rather than prioritizing gradual integration with existing urban structures or acknowledging locally embedded spatial practices, developmental discourse reimagines peripheral zones—often characterized by lower land costs and looser regulatory constraints—as "undeveloped" and "potential" spaces of growth. Through this logic, developmentalism has repeatedly produced patterns of peripheralization and spatial fragmentation across African metropolises. These outcomes stem from the abstraction of urban space into functions and forms, relegating social and historical connections to secondary concerns. Leapfrog development, in this regard, is legitimized as an efficient pathway capable of delivering visible results within a short time frame (Lall et al. 2017: 64–70). In Angola, the rapid construction of externally driven urban projects through Chinese capital and technology followed planning logics and developmental criteria defined from outside, largely disregarding existing physical and social linkages.

Moreover, Kilamba transplanted a standardized urban model organized according to predefined development benchmarks and administrative efficiency, rather than reflecting local residents' aspirations, everyday practices, or historically constituted spatial sensibilities. The standardized housing typologies in Kilamba—typically composed of two to four bedrooms—were designed according to institutional assumptions that treated the nuclear family as the ideal residential unit, overlooking local family arrangements in which extended and multi-generational households are common (Kimari & Ernstson 2023: 1878–1880). These housing models resulted in the spatial internalization of a particular vision of citizenship and family norms. Such outcomes reflect a top-down mode of urban planning rooted in developmental discourse, one that systematically excludes residents' lived experiences and spatial practices (Escobar 1995: 3–11; Ziai 2013: 123–126). The case of Kilamba is particularly significant in demonstrating how large-scale housing construction enabled by Chinese capital and technology contributes to the legitimation and systematization of a developmentalist urban model as a transferable and replicable form of development (Dittgen & Chungu 2019: 645–648).

In this way, externally formulated spatial layouts and housing typologies penetrate multiple layers of urban life, implicitly defining particular ways of living and forms of citizenship as "normal" and "progressive." Urban spatial organization thus fixes specific social practices and power relations into the material form of the city, rendering them internalized and taken for granted. By organizing urban space according to externally normalized lifestyles and citizenship models, developmentalism marginalizes alternative communal imaginaries and ways of life (Lefebvre 1991; Purcell 2002: 99–104). As a result, community-based imaginaries and alternative possibilities embedded in urban space are excluded, while standardized, top-down pathways of urbanization are presented as the singular route to development. Through this process, neo-imperial governance produces its effects without overt coercion or formal institutional domination,



instead reproducing developmental discourse as a legitimate order that reshapes urban space and everyday life and embeds neo-imperial ideology within routine practices.

Institutionalization of Neo-Imperial Spatial Politics: Oil-Backed Credit

Following the end of the civil war, Angola's reconstruction agenda presupposed the mobilization of large-scale capital. However, Western aid and loan mechanisms imposed conditions that the Angolan government found difficult to meet in the immediate postwar context. International financial institutions and major donor countries required prior compliance with standards related to fiscal transparency, macroeconomic management, and institutional reform, thereby constraining access to reconstruction finance. In particular, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s *Staff-Monitored Program* (SMP) functioned as a surveillance mechanism that evaluated the implementation of institutional reforms as a prerequisite for financial assistance. Such programs required the Angolan government to demonstrate tangible progress in fiscal transparency, macroeconomic governance, and public financial reform before accessing external funds, thereby imposing substantively and procedurally demanding conditions (Tan-Mullins et al. 2010: 868–869). For a postwar government that prioritized speed and visibility in national reconstruction, this conditional mode of access constituted a significant political and administrative burden. As a result, Western aid channels remained formally available yet practically difficult to utilize.

Moreover, access to Western financing was further constrained by changes in Angola's macroeconomic status. Rising state revenues from oil exports gradually moved Angola out of the low-income country category, thereby weakening its institutional eligibility for concessional development finance. In practice, Angola's income level exceeding the threshold for *International Development Association* (IDA) eligibility, combined with low levels of institutional trust, made it difficult to secure stable long-term financing through Western financial institutions (World Bank 2007: 1–13). Consequently, the Angolan government actively sought alternative financial mechanisms characterized by fewer preconditions and faster disbursement.

It was within this context that *oil-backed credit* (oil-backed loans)—the core mechanism of China–Angola cooperation—emerged (Alves 2013: 100–105; Kiala 2010: 314–316). In November 2003, Angola signed a framework agreement with China, which was formally approved in October 2004. On this basis, China constructed a credit structure through the *China Exim Bank* and the *China International Fund* (CIF) that guaranteed loan repayment through long-term crude oil supply. This arrangement enabled the rapid mobilization of reconstruction funds without the institutional reform conditions required by Western financial institutions. At the same time, however, Angola's core national asset, oil, became structurally tied to China through financial and diplomatic contractual relations (Cardoso 2016: 11–12).

This oil-based financial mechanism functioned as a central organizing principle of urban development itself. In this sense, large-scale postwar housing projects such as Kilamba constitute outcomes of oil-based urbanization, or *petro-urbanism*, produced through oil-



backed credit(Rapanyane 2021: 103–104). Under this model, Chinese credit was first extended on the basis of repayment guarantees secured through oil exports, followed by the execution of construction by Chinese state-owned or quasi-state-owned enterprises such as *China International Trust Investment Corporation*(CITIC). Subsequently, the Angolan government intervened through policy instruments—including allocation mechanisms, pricing adjustments, and subsidy schemes—to complete urban space and regulate access to and occupation of newly developed areas. Within this sequence, urban development was not autonomously determined by market logics or local demand but was preconfigured through a chain of mechanisms linking oil exports, financial contracts, construction execution, and state intervention. In this way, oil-backed credit operated as a form of spatial power that structurally pre-determined the timing, scale, layout, and conditions of access to urban space, functioning as an institutional mechanism that organized the city as an object of governance(Cardoso 2016: 11–15).

For such finance-based spatial power to be realized in material urban form, corresponding institutional power structures within the state were indispensable. In Luanda, spatial power was concretized through a centralized governance structure centered on the presidency. Neo-imperial spatial intervention should therefore be understood not as the unilateral penetration of external capital, but as a governing effect produced through the articulation of external finance with domestic structures of concentrated political power. In Angola, major reconstruction and housing projects—including Kilamba—were initiated as state-led development programs placed under the direct authority of presidential power. During its initial construction phase, the Kilamba project was supervised by the *Gabinete de Reconstrução Nacional*(GRN), a presidential agency responsible for overseeing national reconstruction. Established in 2004, the GRN functioned as a key institution that applied Chinese loans to reconstruction projects while managing funds and supervising construction(Corkin 2013: 7–8; Kajibanga 2023: 6–7, 18–19). Although formally an administrative body, the GRN operated in close alignment with the Presidency, particularly the *Casa Militar*. As a result, major reconstruction and housing projects in Luanda bypassed conventional government ministries and were placed under the direct control of presidential authority, with urban development proceeding through the combined operation of financial mechanisms and centralized political power(ibid: 19–20).

Kilamba offers the clearest illustration of how oil-backed credit organizes urban space in practice. Construction of Kilamba was undertaken by the Chinese state-owned enterprise CITIC. The project was developed as a large-scale planned city accommodating approximately 20,000 households and conceived as a “complete urban space” encompassing residential complexes, commercial districts, and public facilities. Completed over a period of roughly three years, Kilamba represents the outcome of a development process in which Chinese credit, construction by Chinese firms, and state-led allocation and price-control policies were tightly integrated(Cardoso 2016: 11–15; Kimari & Ernstson 2023: 1876–1878). This mode of development preconfigured the conditions of urban formation and spatial arrangement without requiring explicit coercion or direct intervention by China. In this respect, Kilamba constitutes a paradigmatic case



in which neo-imperial urban intervention is materially embedded in urban space through oil-backed credit.

Neo-Imperial Citizenship: Consumption-Based Regimes of Citizenship

Although Kilamba was officially presented as a state-led public housing model intended for low-income populations, in practice it functioned as a highly selective residential space, diverging sharply from policy discourses emphasizing inclusive urban development. Housing prices, eligibility requirements, and administrative procedures were structured around criteria that were difficult for the urban poor and informal settlers to meet. As a result, effective access to housing in Kilamba was largely limited to middle-class households with stable incomes and connections to administrative or political networks, including civil servants (Gastrow 2020: 509–516; Kimari & Ernstson 2023: 1878–1880). In this configuration, access to housing was not grounded in social need or housing as a right, but conditioned upon purchasing power and administrative eligibility. This demonstrates that state-led housing policy reconstituted housing not as a universal citizenship right but as a conditional form of access. Such conditionality laid the groundwork for Kilamba's consolidation as a space that reproduces elite-centered social differentiation and exclusion.

Kilamba's location constituted a key spatial condition reinforcing its fixation as a residential space for particular social groups. Developed as a new urban area on Luanda's periphery and spatially detached from the existing urban core, Kilamba was administratively incorporated into the newly established municipality of Belas following the 2011 territorial reorganization. This locational choice structurally weakened everyday connections with the city center, while inadequate public transportation infrastructure continually intensified residents' mobility burdens. Empirical studies indicate that approximately 45 percent of Kilamba residents spend at least two hours commuting to work, and proposals to improve public transport connectivity have been discussed only belatedly and have failed to function as effective alternatives (Croese 2016: 19–20).

As a result, although Kilamba was designed as a perfect city equipped with residential, commercial, and public facilities, it functioned in practice as a spatially isolated enclave disconnected from Luanda's existing urban system. Kilamba thus emerged as a new centrality characterized by weak functional integration with the city's transportation, commercial, and employment networks, effectively operating as a self-contained residential zone. This spatial isolation has defined Kilamba as a suburbanized space primarily accessible to middle-class residents possessing stable incomes and reliable means of mobility, while simultaneously generating tensions with the socio-economic structure of the existing urban core (Buire 2014: 291–299).

Consequently, Kilamba became a space that was effectively inaccessible to low-income populations whose livelihoods depend on core-based economic activities, informal economies, and dense everyday social networks. Residential life in Kilamba presupposes a level of income sufficient to absorb prolonged commuting costs, stable employment, and the consumption capacity necessary to sustain daily life outside the urban core. These locational and economic conditions transformed housing access in Kilamba from a



citizenship right into a selectable option contingent upon a particular lifestyle and economic capacity. In this sense, Kilamba was configured as a space that privileges specific social groups while failing to account for urban livelihoods shaped by informal income structures, core-oriented mobility patterns, and dense social ties. Residents excluded from this space were pushed further outward, and Kilamba became consolidated as an “island-like” residential enclave functionally segmented from Luanda’s broader urban structure. This spatial configuration demonstrates how access to the city can be selectively regulated on the basis of lifestyle norms and economic conditions.

Such modes of urbanization convert access to housing from a universal citizenship right into a conditional status differentiated according to consumption capacity and market access. This process illustrates how developmentalist spatial restructuring operates in conjunction with neoliberal logics of accumulation, resonating with the mechanism of “*accumulation by dispossession*,” whereby contemporary capitalism seeks new pathways of accumulation through the appropriation of communal resources and rights—such as land, housing, and public assets—when it confronts limits to accumulation through production (Harvey 2017: 73–79). The forced displacement, dismantling of communities, and legally justified land appropriation observed in Kilamba reveal how these accumulation mechanisms persist in transformed forms in the postcolonial period, building upon the legacies of imperial dispossession. As a result, citizenship is no longer constituted primarily as a matter of rights but is reconfigured as a regulated and conditional status predicated on specific housing forms and consumption capacity. In this respect, Kilamba stands as a revealing case that condenses how citizenship is spatially selected and recalibrated within neo-imperial urban orders.

Conclusion

This study has sought to demonstrate that the urban space of Kilamba constitutes a site in which distinct imperial modes of governance operate in overlapping and mutually reinforcing ways. Rather than treating Portuguese colonial urban order and China’s neo-imperial developmental intervention as separate or sequential phases, the analysis approached them as coexisting regimes of power operating simultaneously within a single urban project. Through this lens, the study has shown that Kilamba is not a space in which imperialism has been overcome, but one in which imperial logics persist and are reconfigured in transformed forms. The two imperial rationalities operate in a complementary manner. Colonial legal and spatial hierarchies provided the groundwork for neo-imperial development, while finance and developmentalism re-legitimized these structures. Kilamba thus selects “qualified citizens” through legality and market access, transforming rather than eliminating imperial exclusion.

Viewed through the analytical categories proposed in this study, imperialism and neo-imperialism—despite their distinct historical contexts and operative mechanisms—share structural affinities in the ways they reorganize urban space and local life. At the level of ideological legitimation, colonial imperialism constructed local societies as inefficient and backward, framing them as objects to be improved through civilization and development. Neo-imperial developmentalism, by contrast, represents local lives and social relations



as immature or irrational, positioning them as targets for correction through external capital, technology, and administrative rationality. Although articulated through different vocabularies, both discourses converge functionally in their negation of locally grounded ways of life and their imposition of externally defined norms and lifestyles as universal standards. Kilamba therefore reveals that postcolonial urban modernity is not a break from empire but a reconfiguration of imperial power through new institutional forms.

At the level of spatial politics, imperialism organized urban space hierarchically through law, administration, and racialized and social classifications. Neo-imperialism, by contrast, restructures space through financial contracts, development projects, and loan arrangements that appear economic or technical in nature. Yet despite this shift in instruments, the core governing logic persists: urban space is reduced to an abstract object of management, and specific orders and conditions of access are institutionally inscribed. Kilamba exemplifies how neo-imperial spatial politics become institutionalized through the languages of finance and development rather than through overt political domination.

Finally, at the level of citizenship, imperial rule selected urban residents on the basis of legality, discipline, and order, positioning those excluded as populations to be managed or controlled. Under neo-imperial urban regimes, these criteria are reconfigured into ostensibly technical and economic conditions such as consumption capacity, market access, and lifestyle compatibility. While this transformation appears neutral and depoliticized, it continues to reproduce exclusion by selectively regulating access to urban space. Citizenship is thus no longer constituted as a universal right, but as a conditional status predicated upon specific housing forms and consumption capabilities.

Through this analysis, the study has proposed overlapping imperialisms as a theoretical and methodological framework. This concept neither reduces imperialism to a static legacy of the past nor isolates neo-imperialism as an entirely novel phenomenon. Instead, overlapping imperialisms offers an analytical lens for examining how state-led development, dependence on external finance, and spatial exclusion repeatedly intersect in postcolonial African cities beyond the case of Kilamba. By advancing this framework, the study contributes a conceptual bridge linking imperial studies, urban studies, and African studies, and provides a grounded approach for understanding postcolonial cities as spaces in which imperial logics continue to be reworked rather than erased.

While this article has focused on Kilamba as a specific urban project in Luanda, it does not claim that the configuration observed here is representative of all postcolonial urban developments in Africa. Rather, Kilamba is approached as an analytically strategic site through which the concept of overlapping imperialisms can be examined in a concrete and empirically grounded manner. The framework proposed here is therefore intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, offering a lens for comparative inquiry into how multiple imperial logics may intersect in other postcolonial urban contexts. Its significance lies in showing that postcolonial cities cannot be understood outside the overlapping infrastructures of past and present imperial power. Recognizing these overlapping structures is essential for any critical understanding of contemporary urban governance in postcolonial contexts.



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