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# *ANIOTO*: LEOPARD-MEN KILLINGS AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMISM IN NORTHEAST CONGO, *c.* 1890–1940*

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**Abstract**
In northeast Congo, from *c.* 1890–1940, ritually-empowered militias of Bali Leopard-men, or *anioto*, killed people on behalf of local leaders to secure access to land, resources, and people and to keep rivals and subjects in check. Belgian colonial authorities portrayed the actions of *anioto* as an irrational disturbance, ignoring their political relevance. The contextualized study of colonial-era conflicts based on court hearings, in association with anthropological, historical, and material sources, gives insight into emic perspectives. As militias controlled by different leaders, they reflected human adaptability in dealing with social ills, performed judicial functions, and provided therapeutic relief through violence. Originating in the precolonial era, *anioto* adapted to various strategic needs throughout history. A study of different manifestations of *anioto* reveals the creative and amalgamating nature of institutional dynamism in northeast Congo. Better knowledge of this institutional history, based on studying conflicts from the past, may enrich our deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflicts in the present.

**Key Words**
Congo, The Democratic Republic of the, South Sudan, Central Africa, decentralized societies, violence, health, rebellion, chieftancy.

In 1911, the governor of Orientale Province of Belgian Congo, Charles Delhaise, sent a complete '*anioto*' costume to the Congo Museum, now the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), in Tervuren, Belgium (Fig. 1). Delhaise reported that *anioto* dressed up as leopards and killed their victims at night, cutting the carotid artery with their iron claws and leaving leopard paw prints next to the bodies.[1] Delhaise's *mise-en-scène* photographs inspired the making of a sculpture, dressed with the objects. It has occupied a central place in the museum since 1915 (Fig. 2).[2] At that

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1 Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), Ethnography Department, Dossier C. Delhaise, no. 153.

2 RMCA, Museum Archives, Diverses, Communications between the Head of Ethnography Joseph Maes and Paul Wissaert, 1912–15.

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**Fig. 1.** *Anioto* ready to attack, *mise-en-scène*, Bali population, Congo. Photo by Charles Delhaise, 1909 © Royal Museum for Central Africa (RCMA), AP.0.1.6554.

time, administrators in the colony dismissed the reported killings as leopard attacks and local superstitions.[3]

In the late 1920s, a more coordinated and sustained administrative and legal attention culminated in several high-profile trials. The discourse developing in the 1920s and 1930s in colonial journals and fiction upheld a stereotype of leopard-men as evil, animal-like creatures threatening the colonial order, in line with the sculpture's iconography.[4] In reality, leopard-men never wore such costumes for killing, and often committed murders with knives instead of claws.[5] Yet, the image helped to legitimize the way the colonial administration dealt with leopard-men as a criminal 'secret society' or 'sect'. Although the trials revealed the complex nature and purposes of the killings, these data did not affect published reports. In the 1990s, critiques of demeaning leopard-men representations targeted colonial literature and the museum display, but did not question their historical foundations.[6] The leopard-men's reputation as being elusive continued, possibly facilitated by a postcolonial taboo on researching violence committed by the colonized, or by the widespread assumption that first-hand reports of the killings could not be retraced.

3 L. Libois, 'La lutte contre les *Aniotos*', *L'Illustration Congolaise*, 181 (1936), 6066–7, 6082.

4 P. Halen, 'Une figure coloniale de l'autre: l'homme-léopard', *Les Cahiers des Para-Littératures*, 2 (1988), 129–47; V. Van Bockhaven, 'Leopard-men of the Congo in literature and popular imagination', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, 46:1 (2009), 79–94.

5 This was confirmed by convicts' statements in judicial records and the analyses of traces on the objects at the RMCA in collaboration with the Belgian Federal Institute for Criminalistics and Criminology, funded by the King Baudouin Foundation, Oct. 2008–Jan. 2009.

6 Halen, 'Une figure', 129–47.

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**Fig. 2.** The leopard-man of Stanley Falls by Paul Wissaert, 1915. Plaster figure, decorated with ethnographic objects. RMCA A.371, photographer unknown; all rights reserved.

The main focus of this article is the Bali leopard-men, known as *anioto*, from whom the sculpture's costume originated, and who also appeared among neighbouring Ndaka and Budu. The Bali and their neighbours belonged to a population of Bantu speakers who had migrated from the north, pushed southward by the expanding Azande and Mangbetu populations. For comparative purposes, I look at a related leopard-man variety, named *vihokohoko*, occurring among the Bapakombe and Nande to the southeast. The Bapakombe were a small population located to the northwest of Beni on the verge of the rainforest. While the colonial administration considered them as the vanguards of the Nande in the latter's migration from the eastern Great Lakes region, the Bapakombe

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were culturally more related to western Bantu-speaking forest populations to their north, like the Bali and Ndaka.[7] Except for the Nande, these populations were organized as segmentary societies; their sociopolitical cohesion consisted in boys' initiation networks – called *mambela* among the Bali and Ndaka – and *lusomba* among the Bapakombe and Nande, which promoted collaboration between villages.[8]

Going against the dominant tendency to treat leopard-men killings as an outcome of the colonial context, I argue that leopard-men were ritually-empowered armed groups, rooted in precolonial traditions, which adapted to diverse political and socioeconomic circumstances throughout time. The article proceeds as follows. After discussing the study's main conceptual and methodological approach, a discussion of adjudicated cases from the colonial era will reveal leopard-men as a fluid phenomenon driven by human adaptability. Subsequently, different regional and temporal manifestations of leopard-men will be discussed, thereby looking at processes of institutional adaptation in a wider historical framework. Finally, similarities between leopard-men cases and contemporary armed groups will be assessed to demonstrate the importance of historical conflict research for the investigation of recent conflicts (and vice versa).

## APPROACHES TO LEOPARD-MEN

This article diverges from the usual method of comparison between regional varieties of leopard-men, which considers their activities as a function of the colonial context. Instead, a more profound regional contextualization is favoured, embedding leopard-men from Congo in local institutional networks. Since the colonial period, and predominantly in the 1950s, the tendency to adopt insights between studies of leopard-men varieties across Africa helped leopard-men to become a cross-colonial epistemological category, guiding colonial actions.[9] Present-day researchers are still tempted to compare between and adopt insights from regional leopard-men varieties, based on similarities in the modus operandi, motives, and the colonial backgrounds of the killings. In this way, similarities are favoured to the detriment of complex differences, due to the unequal knowledge of the killings, contexts, and timeframes. Additionally, the characterizations of leopard-men as a 'secret society' further determined the perception of the phenomenon in moral terms.

Across colonies the term 'secret societies' lumped together diverse institutions ranging from boys' initiations to African revivalist churches, which colonial governments often distrusted, since their secret or esoteric aspects escaped colonial control.[10] As a consequence, among the Bali and their neighbours, institutions such as boys' initiation networks suffered

7 R. M. Packard, 'The politics of ritual control among the Bashu of Eastern Zaire during the nineteenth century' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1976), 85; P. Schebesta, *Vollblutneger und Halbzwerge* (Salzburg, 1934), 129.

8 J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Wisconsin, 1990), 81.

9 P.-E. Joset, *Les sociétés secrètes des hommes-léopards en Afrique* (Paris, 1955), 28–31 ; B. Lindskog, *African Leopard-Men* (Uppsala, 1954).

10 E. De Jonghe, 'Formations récentes de sociétés secrètes au Congo Belge', *Africa*, 9:1 (1936), 56–63; D. H. Johnson, 'Criminal secrecy: the case of the Zande secret societies', *Past and Present*, 130:1 (1991), 170–200.

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from criminalization despite being an essential basis of the sociopolitical organization of these segmentary societies.[11] The incorporation of these societies into the centripetal system of indirect rule was challenging, provoking social tensions and a higher incidence of leopard-men killings. The latter came to symbolize the rebellious and uncivilized nature of the populations, who thereby attracted less research compared to surrounding kingdoms.[12] This poor reputation of the region persisted as it brought forth repeated colonial and postcolonial insurgencies entailing ritually-inspired armed mobilization (for example, in *kitawala*, Simba, Mai-Mai). Instead of engaging with the comparative trend, I focus on the local embeddedness of leopard-men in segmentary societies, to remedy blind spots in the region's political history, and to better contextualize leopard-men conflicts, historically and culturally. The similarities with ritually-empowered militias in more recent history are a motivating factor for considering Congo leopard-men in this way, since they make one wonder to what extent past institutional dynamics set the scene for later political developments.[13]

In contemporary leopard-men studies, focusing on different geographical areas and timeframes, the dominant perception is that the killings arise from social tensions under colonialism due to changes in intergenerational, gender, and master-slave relations.[14] This is the case in David Pratten's study of human-leopard killings among the Annang in southern Nigeria in the 1940s. Pratten treats the killings as an outcome of multi-layered social cleavages revealing the 'fault-lines' of colonialism.[15] Characteristic of his approach is a reluctance to formulate clear hypotheses on the role of the killings in society, providing instead lengthy descriptions of the colonial context and of diverging hypotheses in the colonial investigations. Pratten leaves finding the link between the social cleavages and the murders up to the reader, an approach reviewers find both refreshing and disturbing.[16] The author's

11 D. Biebuyck, *Lega Culture: Art, Initiation, and Moral Philosophy among a Central African People* (Berkeley, 1973); W. De Mahieu, *Structures et symboles: les structures sociales du groupe Komo du Zaïre dans leur elaboration symbolique* (London, 1980).

12 RMCA, Ethnography Department, AIMO files (RMCA AIMO) EA/0/0/237, Hackars, s.d. 'Les Babali, Warumbi, Bakumu, Bayose et Babelu d'Avakubi', 1919; EA/0/0/238, Strubbe, 'Organisation des Babali, Ndaka, Mombo et Babeke', 1920; E. Schildkrout and C. A. Keim (eds.), *African Reflections: Art from North-Eastern Zaire* (Seattle, 1990), 37–9.

13 A. Mwaka Bwenge, 'Conflits, conflictualité et processus identitaires au Nord-Kivu: comprendre l'institutionnalisation des violences' (unpublished PhD thesis, Université de Kinshasa, 2010), 314–15; J. Verweijen and K. Vlassenroot, 'Armed mobilisation and the nexus of territory, identity, and authority: the contested territorial aspirations of the Banyamulenge in eastern DR Congo', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 33:2 (2015), 191–212.

14 C. J. Gray, 'Death of the Equatorial tradition? Of leopard men, canton chiefs and women healers', in C. J. Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, c. 1850–1940* (Rochester, 2002), 195–203; G. I. Nwaka, 'The "leopard" killings of southern Annang, Nigeria, 1943–48', *Africa*, 56:4 (1986), 417–40; D. Pratten, *The Man-Leopard Murders: History and Society in Colonial Nigeria* (Edinburgh, 2007); J. Rich, '"Leopard men", slaves, and social conflict in Libreville (Gabon), *c.* 1860–1879', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34:3 (2001), 619–38.

15 Pratten, *Man-Leopard Murders*, 25.

16 For instance, on the one hand Pratten refrains from interpreting the killings as anticolonial, implicitly building further on Nwaka, who claimed that Annang killings were not at all anticolonial in nature. See Nwaka, 'The "leopard" killings'. On the other hand, dissatisfactions with colonial jurisdiction feature prominently as a breeding ground for killings in Pratten's analysis. For reviews of Pratten's book, *The Man-Leopard Murders* (fn. 14), see K. Luongo, 'Book Review: David Pratten, *The Man-Leopard Murders: History and*

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reluctance to discuss the motives of the murders more closely renders them incidental to the social history described. The underlying problem may be a limited access to documents revealing the point of view of victims and perpetrators, which might have enabled the author to assess the role of the killings in society more concretely. The evidence from Belgian Congo shows first that judicial documents are crucial for retrieving the purposes of the killings and second that these purposes shifted between timeframes and transcended the colonial context.

Early Congolese records display a specific though indirect anticolonial character in the choice of victims, who were often cooks, interpreters, and soldiers accompanying European expeditions.[17] The political relevance of leopard-men in both anticolonial opposition and internecine wars was first highlighted by Allen Roberts, who dismisses colonial perceptions of the killings as irrational.[18] Jan Vansina briefly mentions the practice of *anioto* as one development in a spiral of institutional innovations, predating colonialism; he defines *anioto* as a kind of 'terrorist murder' commanded by village chiefs and as an efficient strategy to maintain control over land, people, and resources.[19] In sum, diverse occurrences of leopard-men killings invite one to consider them in a broader perspective, not necessarily as related to colonialism, but as entangled in local institutional networks and responsive to various situations.

The approach I take builds further on Vansina's consideration of leopard-men as part of a cascade of institutional innovations by introducing the concept of 'institutional dynamism'. This concept captures the process underpinning the appearance, spread, and adaptation of leopard-men to various circumstances. 'Institutional dynamism' involves borrowing titles, rites, beliefs, and medicines from neighbours and merging them with pre-existing ones. Past studies of sociopolitical institutions in this region often illustrated the result of 'institutional dynamism' implicitly.[20] If Vansina describes such processes from a macro-historical perspective, I want to illustrate this process in a bottom-up manner, starting with a micro-historical focus on leopard-men conflicts. In the over-arching theoretical approach, the concept of 'institutional dynamism' helps one to see institutions as temporary results of co-structuration in situations of culture contact: micro-historical events bring about macro-historical changes, giving rise to institutional networks stretching across space and time. Inherited scholarly categorizations that consider institutions as either political or religious, or as confined within ethnicities, can hence be disregarded. Additionally, the focus is on emic cultural logic of leopard-men, considering them as more than an outcome of the colonial context.

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*Society in Colonial Nigeria* (2007)', *African Studies Review*, 52:1 (2009), 173–4; J. Dibua, 'Book Review: David Pratten, *The Man-Leopard Murders: History and Society in Colonial Nigeria* (2007)', *The American Historical Review*, 114:4 (2009), 1201–2.

17 J. Czekanowski, *Forschungen im Nil-Kongo-Zwischengebiet: Ethnographie; Uele, Ituri, Nil-Länder* (Leipzig, 1924), 326; Libois, 'La lutte', 6066; P. Salmon, *Les carnets de campagne de Louis Leclercq*, Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles, III (Bruxelles, 1970), 28, 30.

18 A. Roberts, '"Like a roaring lion": Tabwa terrorism in the late nineteenth century', in D. Crummey (ed.), *Banditry: Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (London, 1986), 65–86.

19 Vansina, *Paths*, 175.

20 Biebuyck, *Lega*; De Mahieu, *Structures*.

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The cultural logic reflected in leopard-men activities resides on the common ground between leadership notions, on the one hand, and social therapeutics, on the other. Leadership requires an exceptional supernatural talent that can be used to the benefit or detriment of people. Like a leopard, a chief will viciously strike in hidden ways those challenging his authority. Leopard skin and teeth, given as tributes, figure prominently in chiefly dress as visual expressions of authority. Leopard spots refer to the ability to move between two worlds, of spirits and men, of the living and the dead, and evoke the occult and violent aspects of leadership. Powerful men are widely believed to transform into leopards or to control leopards to attack people.[21] Leopard-men killings need to be understood in connection with these leadership notions. This relates to social therapeutics. A leader's power is reflected in his ability to protect his people and to use violence to restore social ills, as entangled with a broader cultural 'quest for therapy'.[22] In the colonial context, the occurrence of waves of leopard-men killings can be interpreted as a manifestation of 'therapeutic insurgency' as recently discussed by Nancy Hunt.[23] In my view, such 'insurgencies' are variations of what John Janzen called 'collective therapies', which were important vectors of change in the political history of Central, East, and South Africa. Rooted in precolonial times, such therapies evolved around natural or ancestral charms called upon for protection and healing to safeguard community wellbeing, and to attack those who threatened it. The ritual authority emanating from collective therapies influenced politics, helping to consolidate or contest the authority of chiefs or colonial authorities and to exercise state functions in times of chaos. The quest for healing was innate to these collective therapies and an important booster for institutional dynamism, particularly in times of social crisis. Starting as volatile movements, institutionalization of collective therapies occurred differently in different social settings. The leaders were, for instance, absorbed in dualities of power with political leaders, as guardians of ritual power, but collective therapies also manifested themselves as counter-hegemonic, framed as subversive 'secret societies'.[24] Furthermore, violence could have a cleansing, therapeutic role in these movements as a means for the recovery and regeneration of society, as pointed out by Hunt and Eggers.[25] I will demonstrate that such therapeutics were at play in leopard-men killings.

With regards to methodology, my approach to the sources derives from historians such as Stoler and Hunt highlighting the importance of documents reflecting how individuals attempt to shape their world on a micro-historical level, through a process of trial and error.[26] Secondary colonial journals and fiction demonstrating advanced stereotyping of leopard-men as anonymous, animal-like beings inform this article less directly, as a

21 W. MacGaffey, *Kongo Political Culture: The Conceptual Challenge of the Particular* (Bloomington, 2000), 144–7, 222.

22 J. M. Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa, Volume XXXIV* (Oakland, 1992), 4, 86.

23 N. R. Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Durham, 2015), 61–94.

24 Janzen, *Ngoma*.

25 N. Eggers, 'Mukombozi and the monganga: the violence of healing in the 1944 Kitawalist uprising', *Africa*, 85:3 (2015), 417–36; Hunt, *A Nervous State*, 61–94, 169–76.

26 Hunt, *A Nervous State*, 1–26; A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2010), 23.

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historical negative, or how not to understand leopard-men.[27] Instead the focus is on primary records in colonial archives usually produced by colonial personnel. At first it was unclear whether judicial documents providing emic perspectives were available at all, and if so, whether I could gain access, given the protection of judicial records by Belgian privacy law for 100 years. I first studied more accessible administrative and ethnographic reports in the General Government archives of Belgian Congo. Such documents only distantly reflect local voices, but they provided insights into how colonial agents used stereotypes, rumours, and thick description and balanced different hypotheses, which helped to better understand the colonial background.[28] Such records demonstrate, for instance, disagreements among colonial administrators in their implementation of intermediary rule trying to disentangle institutions that were historically entwined through processes of institutional dynamism. While often speculative these documents also contain firm bits of information such as names, dates, and locations that enabled me to outline several conflict clusters, identify the major chiefs and population groups, and situate them in space and time. These insights helped to retrace the corresponding judicial files.

Access to judicial files was gained by obtaining a special clearance.[29] The interrogations noted in question-and-answer format come close to primary statements, even if interpreters translated statements from Kibali into Swahili (Kingwana), which were then transcribed in French. The official logs reveal, for instance, how the accused attempt to deny their involvement until, under pressure from their interrogators or fellow-accused, they confess. The accused describe their motives and actions in quite a factual manner, not mentioning costumes or shapeshifting beliefs, which differs from how their modus operandi is presented in local rumours and in secondary reports. The testimonies of accused and witnesses stimulate a nuanced understanding of leopard-men killings in which violence is purposeful rather than random, even if victims are arbitrarily chosen. If the study of such idiosyncratic documents entails the risk of approaching history in an arbitrary and patchy manner, these sources do reflect proximity, human adaptability, and cultural logic, providing a glimpse into the arenas in which individuals and their support groups vied for power.[30] Contextualizing the conflict cases from these documents in a broader, diachronic perspective helps to demonstrate how leopard-men responded to diverse existential preoccupations over time. Such a contextualization also helps to hypothesize on leopard-men precedents in the precolonial era and to further explore the dialectic and amalgamating nature of institutional dynamism on a macro-historical level. Additional sources are the ethnographic objects supposedly used for the killings, and recent interviews with people from the region, which demonstrate that leopard-men are remembered differently and in some ways better than among academics and the Congolese diaspora.

27 Van Bockhaven, 'Leopard-men'.
28 Stoler, *Along*, 32.
29 Based on the informed opinion of the Belgian Federal Privacy Commission.
30 Hunt, *A Nervous State*, 1–26.

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## MICRO-HISTORIES OF CONFLICTS UNDER COLONIAL RULE

Records from leopard-men investigations and trials in the 1920s and 1930s give insight into what leopard-men were, how they were connected to other institutions, and how they adapted to colonial circumstances. After the first trial in 1920, the investigating officers still experienced difficulties in resolving the cases due to the secrecy and silence by those affected, which led to changes in approach and more trials around 1930.[31] Older cases were reopened and combined with new interrogations of witnesses and suspects, enabling investigators to establish links between old and recent conflicts.[32] Each of the conflict clusters elicited from these documents is very complex and different, and neither provides a straightforward illustration of the role of leopard-men. While the adjudicated cases represent only the tip of the iceberg, they provide unique documents for the study of leopard-men killings under colonialism. For pragmatic reasons, I will focus on one conflict cluster among the eastern Bali around 1930, referring to other cases for discussing general conflict patterns and dynamics. Bali and Ndaka chiefs lent out leopard-men gangs to their Budu neighbours. I will use court hearings of two specific conflicts in this cluster, initiated by chief Mbako and the notable Bangombe, to illustrate the role of leopard-men killings under colonialism.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT UNDER PRESSURE

Intermediary chieftaincy under colonial rule was commonly based on lineage leadership and granted to the eldest lineage of the first occupants of the land. However, in the segmentary societies discussed here hierarchies of lineage chiefs (*metundji*) never exceeded the village level and had become over-arched by the *mambela* initiation network. Each village had at least one *mambela* leader (*tata ka mambela*) who acknowledged a loose hierarchy based on the original pathways of spreading of *mambela* along villages. Within the village, the *tata ka mambela* entertained a duality of power with one or more *ishumu*, with the latter representing the lineages at the heart of the *mambela* organization. The *ishumu*'s position, based on ancestry, provided him with ritual authority.[33] The multi-layered authorities caused confusion among administrators about who represented supreme authority. Candidacies for indirect rule were complicated further by powerbrokers who had emerged from contacts with slave traders and colonizers, like the strawmen put to the fore by chiefs reluctant to deal with the colonizers themselves. Their descendants claimed leadership in later decades. Others descended from local slave-trading leaders preferred as intermediaries in the Congo Free State era.[34] The court cases discussed have to be seen against this light.

31 A. Marrevée, *De Schrik der Mobali* (Tervueren, 1922); J. M. Jadot, 'Notes sur les hommes panthères dans l'Equateur', *Revue Juridique du Congo Belge*, 6 (1928), 164–8.

32 A. Bouccin, 'Crimes et superstitions indigènes', *Bulletin des Juridictions Indigènes et du Droit Coutumier Congolais*, 4:8 (1936), 185–92; 4:9 (1936), 221–6; 4:10 (1936), 252–58.

33 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 192.

34 Czekanowski, *Forschungen*, 247; P. Massmann, *Bereitet Den Weg*, An Den Ufern Des Ituri, V (Aachen, 1920), 69–75; Schebesta, *Vollblutneger*, 64–6, 69–71.

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Mbako had been a *chef médaillé*, or chief appointed by the colonial government, but was deposed based on his suspected involvement in earlier killings. He was eventually convicted for sending leopard-men to the Budu chiefdom of Karume on request of his daughter's in-laws. Mbako's trial, culminating in a public hanging in 1935, garnered the most attention in colonial and missionary publications.[35] The court hearings shed light on the role of *mambela* leaders in the killings, but also show the erosion of their authority under colonial rule. Mbako declared the following in court:

> Q: We learn, Mbako, that *anioto* crimes are always the result of a decision taken by the *ishumu* united in council at the closure of the *mambela* initiation. Is this true?
> A: Yes, that is perfectly correct.
> Q: How were the crimes in the territory of Karume decided upon?
> A: Sengi, the father of Basibane, my daughter's husband, sent emissaries to me to state his resentment of the Babasane [Budu lineage] of Karume, who were behind the condemnation and imprisonment of my son-in-law. I, who am not *ishumu* and in fact only chief of the Bafwambanzo [Bali lineage] in the eyes of the whites, exposed the case to Bakeboi, one of the little *ishumu* of a fraction of the Bafwamagaü [Bali lineage]. I asked him to bring the matter before the council of the *mambela*, to request the intervention of the *anioto* of all the clans of the group obeying Dungba [Dungbele, *tata ka mambela*], our great chief who lives in the village … named 'Bomili'. Bakeboi, having obtained the agreement in principle from the other little *ishumu*, took action, and thus the ceremonies of the Maduali [the final phase of *mambela*] took place, followed by the reunion of *ishumu*, medio 1932. At this meeting the expedition culminating in the killings of the Budu of Karume was decided upon.
> Q: Did all the *ishumu* present agree?
> A: Yes, the agreement to avenge the harm done to Basibane by the people of Karume was unanimous.
> …
> Q: If, however, you had undertaken the avenging expedition on your own initiative, overruling the decision of the *mambela* council, what would have happened?
> A: At the next meeting of the *mambela* I would have had a big palaver. As I am a nobleman, I would have got off with a big fine to pay in kind.
> Q: And if one who disregards the decisions of the *mambela* is a mere mortal?
> A: Ah, then the *mambela* decides he has to die and the *ishumu* of his clan has to take care of it … He will search for him, wait for the right moment and kill him without any other trial.[36]

The aforementioned paramount *mambela* leader Dungbele sheds another light on the matter:

> Q: Before the arrival of the Europeans, who were the leaders among the Bali?
> A: We, the *tata ka mambela*, and the *ishumu* were the top men.
> Q: And nowadays in the eyes of the natives, are you the true chiefs, while those known as chiefs are in reality only the intermediaries of the *tata ka mambela* in the interactions with Europeans.
> A: Certainly.
> Q: So it's obvious that an important decision to introduce war to the Budu could not be taken without Mbako having received the prior agreement of the *ishumu*, the true customary leaders?

35 G. Henry, 'Hinrichtung der 9 Anyoto zu Wamba am 8. Mai 1934', *Das Reich des Herzens Jesu*, 1 (1934), 25–7; 2 (1934), 58–61; M. Migeon, 'Les hommes léopards', *Le Monde Coloniale Illustré*, 136 (1934), 190–1.

36 Belgian Foreign Office, Africa Archives (BFO AA), JUST/GG/3042 (5529) (case Mbako), Public hearing, Stanleyville, 11 Apr. 1933.

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A: What you say of *ishumu*'s being the true customary rulers is absolutely right, but in this case, I do not think Mbako consulted anyone.
Q: Before the arrival of the Europeans, Mbako could have introduced war without consulting the *ishumu* and the *tata ka mambela*?
A: No, before, it required the consent of the *ishumu* and the *tata ka mambela*.
Q: But then, did Mbako do right by not consulting with the *ishumu* for this last expedition?
A: No, and customarily it is highly blameworthy.[37]

Confronted with Dungbele, Mbako admitted he did not consult the *mambela* council, but only with a few notables. As Dungbele noted, the authority of the *tata ka mambela* and *ishumu* was eroding under colonial administration. Mbako challenged these authorities by pretending they were responsible for approving the killings, downplaying his own responsibility. In discussions about who was to be held responsible for the leopard-men killings, fingers were easily pointed in the direction of *mambela*. The colonial administration distrusted *mambela* for holding a strong moral grip over the population and evading colonial control, which made some administrators argue for the 'restoration' of *metundji* lineage chiefs for indirect rule.[38] Indirect rule had put customary chiefs in an awkward position in which they were civil servants forced to fulfil tasks contrary to the interest of their subjects, while their contenders capitalized on their challenges. This pushed them to equally use means such as leopard-men killings to hold on to their position and keep their rivals at bay.[39] Such dynamics appear in another trial, in a case in which the Budu nobleman Bangombe requested *anioto* from the Bali chief Mbako. Mbako referred him to another man named Mabiama, an *ishumu* of another Bali family. Bangombe declared the following in court:

Q: In 1928 you went to Mabiama [*ishumu*] to ask for *anioto*, because your subjects did not want you as a leader.
A: Chief Wangata being dead, I was summoned by a white state official together with the two children of Wangata. This European told me that, as the two sons of Wangata were too young, I had to exercise the tutelage and replace Wangata. Returning home, I reported this situation, but nobody in the village wanted me as chief, although my father Apanzaku had been such in the time of the 'Arabisés'.
Q: Why? Was your father a bad man or were the natives afraid of you?
A: The natives did not want me. At the time a white man named Bwana Ndeke [Josué Henry de la Lindi, who led military operations under the Congo Free State], had given my father a note stating that he was to be chief. When my father returned to the village, Wangata had him put in prison and took this note. When other Europeans came, they asked for the note given to him by Bwana Ndeke. My father had lost it. Since then my father was no longer a chief. Wangata wanted his son Naganea to be his successor, and the notables made this inscription in Wangata's libretto [record book] in order not to admit me as their leader.
Q: Who was the real chief of the region before the arrival of the Arabs?
A: It was Bala … the brother of Wangata.[40]

37 BFO AA JUST/GG/3042 (5529), Public hearing, Tribunal Uele, Wamba, 15 July 1933.
38 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 192.
39 BFO AA AIMO/13611, A. Bouccin, 'Rapport sur le chef Mabilanga des Babamba', 28 Oct. 1934.
40 BFO AA JUST/GG/3043 (5574) (case Bangombe), Public hearing, Kibali-Ituri, 26 Apr. 1934.

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Bangombe's reference to Josué Henry de la Lindi identifies him as a descendant of the first middlemen engaged in military expeditions and rubber tax collection in the Congo Free State. In the region discussed, Henry de la Lindi won battles by convincing local leaders of slave-trading communities to fight on his side. They continued to be favoured as intermediaries during the first decades of colonization as they spoke Swahili and were considered easier to work with.[41] The administration's changing preferences for intermediaries, combined with the investiture and destitution of chiefs on ill-informed, subjective grounds, upset historically-rooted power relations, fuelling pre-existing tensions. Men like Bangombe saw their descent as a pretext to make claims once again, but were disliked due to their family's collaborations with slave traders and colonizers. Bangombe himself, displeased with the unsupportive behaviour of the people from his village, sent in the leopard-men.

From the court hearings we can infer that leopard-men violence proliferated under colonialism and tended to escape the control of the *mambela* council. We learn it was not strictly used to oppose colonial rule, but more pragmatically, to put pressure on rivals, to circumvent control by keeping the killings secret, and to sow confusion among those investigating the killings. *Anioto*'s usefulness to remain in charge as best as possible under the given circumstances inspired its adoption by different powerbrokers. While such a process characterized institutional dynamism, it also caused cyclical retaliations manifesting themselves in a higher incidence of killings in the colonial era. This kind of proliferation of armed groups and violence in situations of social crisis, in which systems of governance are dysfunctional, reminds one of the proliferations of community militias in recent warfare.[42]

## THE GROWING NETWORK

Leopard-men killings were a strategy in armed conflict that could be used whenever a commotion occurred. Among the Bali, every important man had his own gang, but the approval of the *mambela* council was required to carry out killings. The reasons for conflicts are in line with notions of leadership. From oral tradition we learn that senior Bali clans first used *anioto* to monopolize access to land and resources, to control people and exact tribute from them.[43] Leopard-men killings were committed whenever a leader's authority and his privileges were under pressure, bringing about internecine conflicts and waves of leopard-men killings in the colonial era. Conflicts evolved around succession struggles and contests over land or revenue among those claiming to be the legitimate possessors of such rights whether as first-born representatives of a senior lineage or as first occupants of the land. Killings were used to discredit potential rivals and to discourage

41 P. Salmon, *La Révolte des Batetela de l'Expedition du Haut-Ituri (1897): Témoignages Inédits*, Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer, XXXXIV (Bruxelles, 1977); Czekanowski, *Forschungen*, 245–7.

42 J. Verweijen, *A Microcosm of Militarization: Conflict, Governance and Armed Mobilization in Uvira* (Research Report, Usalama Project, Rift Valley Institute, 2016); K. Vlassenroot, E. Mudinga, and K. Hoffmann, *Contesting Authority: Armed Rebellion and Military Fragmentation in Walikale and Kalehe, North and South Kivu* (Research Report, Usalama Project, Rift Valley Institute, 2016).

43 H. Kawaters, 'Reifezeremonien und Geheimbund bei den Babali-Negern vom Ituri', *Der Erdball*, 5 (1931), 461–2; Bouccin, 'Crimes', 253.

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people from collaborating with colonial authorities and report the killings. Another important factor in conflicts was wealth in people, or the ability to amass dependants for labour or for marriage exchanges to create social ties with other groups. Therefore, conflicts often arose over people lost in warfare, whose deaths were not appropriately compensated, but also over forced relocations for labour duties, unpaid bride prices, runaway wives, and control over their children. The fact that vengeance was taken for the imprisonment of Mbako's son-in-law is another example. The principle of wealth in people also accounts for the fact that leopard-men randomly targeted easy victims within a collectivity, such as children, and not specific individuals. Conflicts were usually of a collective nature, connected to leaders' responsibilities and privileges, even though the collective aspect tied in with individual ambitions or grudges. Attacks mostly targeted outsiders, but chiefs also used the terror of leopard-men against their own people to imprint their authority and punish them for not paying due respect, as in Bangombe's case.

Among the Bali, *anioto* skills were passed on from father to son, from maternal uncle to nephew. Marital relations through wife exchanges created a network via which *anioto* were requested from neighbours. Another basis for passing on *anioto* skills was an alliance created through the exchange of *mambela* initiates, a practice known as *samba*.[44] In Bali society the spreading of *anioto* had been going on for several generations and in the colonial era this society had become saturated with leopard-men-owning families. The cases discussed here demonstrate that Budu neighbours came to request leopard-men among the Bali based on pre-existing marital ties between families. Bangombe was, for instance, introduced to chief Mbako by his nephew, who married a relative of Mbako. Mbako referred him to Mabiama:[45]

> Q: How did you explain your visit to Mabiama [*ishumu*]?
> A: I brought him oil and fabrics and said I wanted him to 'introduce a war' in my home village. Mabiama replied: 'Fine, return, I will send my *anioto* later on, because if I do it upon your return, everybody will know that you ordered them.'
> Q: Initially, did you not ask Mabiama for a medicine [*dawa*] to kill people in your home village?
> A: Yes, I asked for a drug first, but Mabiama replied that he did not have any. That he had only *anioto*.
> Q: What did you do during your stay in the village of Mabiama?
> A: We stayed four days doing nothing. On the fifth day, the circumcisions were made, and the seventh we returned.
> Q: Who was circumcised? . . .
> A: Three children, two Bali and one Budu.
> . . .
> Q: Why did you use circumcision for this alliance, when the Bali do not know circumcision and their customary way of making an alliance is the exchange of blood?
> A: I never asked him [Mabiama]. The way of us Budu to conclude an alliance is to perform the circumcision of our children.

44 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 252–3.

45 Joset, *Les Sociétés*, 55–6, 65–70, 200–1; RMCA AIMO, Noirot, 'Notes pour l'organisation politique des territoires', 1930; Archives of Annales Aequatoria, Province Orientale, microfiche 19, Schockaert, 1933; RMCA AIMO, Noirot, 'Notes pour l'organisation politique des territoires', 1930.

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> …
> Q: … Why was your wife killed in the first place?
> A: I agreed with Mabiama that the *anioto* coming to my home had to kill one of my people first, to make people believe I was not responsible for summoning them.[46]

Rules were possibly stricter when Bali men lent leopard-men to outsiders. Budu neighbours, for instance, had to sacrifice a relative first.[47] Additionally, an alliance was formed through the joint circumcision of two Bali and one Budu boy at Mabiama's residence in analogy to the exchange of *mambela* initiates among the Bali. The social networks created in this way promoted collaboration between leopard-men owners over long distances. Leopard-men owners would send their gang, or act as intermediaries to request gangs from associates further away. Mbako played such an intermediary role in Bangombe's case. These gangs coming from another region committed the killings themselves, or trained subjects of the requesting person, who would from thereafter possess his own gang. The fact that gangs came from elsewhere and travelled discreetly, for example via forest trails instead of the principal roads, prevented them from being recognized, which complicated the investigations.[48] Among the eastern Bali, the intricate network of leopard-men owners inspired them to express mutual accusations whenever they were suspected, even among allies. This strategy worked quite well initially, but became obsolete as the colonial administration became better organized in investigating the killings.

To clarify how such networks operated, a sustained comparison with contemporary armed groups in the region may prove enlightening. In recent history, Mai-Mai groups and local defence forces are still predominantly village-based and engaged by local leaders to secure personal and communal interests within regional and national networks. Like in the past, many conflicts arise from succession struggles and claims on land and resources, which are interwoven with personal issues on the village level like love affairs, family disputes, and thefts. Within these conflicts, the ambiguous nature of customary chieftaincy characterized by a tension between chiefs' patrimonial privileges and their duties as civil servants, still plays a role. Nowadays customary authorities adopt similar strategies of harnessing armed forces to settle disputes and ward off threats to their authority.[49] Leopard-men killings were commonly used to discredit one's rival, for example by attacking his enemies and cast suspicion on him, or by attacking his subjects to demonstrate he was unable to keep his territory in check.[50] Despite the differences in governance contexts, traces of these rationalities can still be detected in contemporary northeastern DRC in the 'firefighter-pyromaniac strategies' used by political actors.[51]

46 BFO AA JUST/GG/3043 (5574) (case Bangombe), Public hearing, Kibali-Ituri, 26 Apr. 1934.
47 RMCA AIMO, A. Bouccin, 'Rapport sur les enquêtes *Anioto*', 1935.
48 RMCA AIMO, Defeld, 'Rapport sur les *Anioto*', 1917.
49 Verweijen, *A Microcosm*.
50 BFO AA AIMO/13611, Bouccin, 'Rapport sur le chef Mabilanga des Babamba', 28 Oct. 1934.
51 J. Verweijen, 'Pompier-pyromanocracy: Mbusa Nyamwisi and the DR Congo's inflammable post-settlement political order', in A. Thémner (ed.), *Warlord Democrats in Africa: Ex-Military Leaders and Electoral Politics* (London, 2017), 41–67.

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## THE RITUAL CONTEXT

The ritual embeddedness of armed groups is another continuity throughout history. Among the Bali, the *mambela* ceremony revealed the most courageous and compliant candidates to become *anioto*, a position that required an additional initiation.[52] The *anioto* initiation described by Mbako, which involves candidates having to attack a dummy made of wood or a bunch of leaves, resembles the final phase of *mambela* during which candidates have to conquer the spirit *maduali,* represented by a tree trunk covered in leaves.[53] The vow of secrecy was common to both ceremonies, instilling fear for those breaching the vow would be killed. The nature of this ritual context is clarified further in the testimony of Malamba, the capita or assistant village-chief of the village of Mabiama, the *ishumu* in Bangombe's case.

> Q: Who in fact has authority over the natives? You [chiefs appointed by the government] or the *tata ka mambela* [the leader of the *mambela*]?
> A: That is the *tata ka mambela*.
> Q: And the men whom Mabiama designated to participate in the expedition, could they refuse?
> A: No, they could not.
> Q: Are these designations made at random among the entire population?
> A: No, these designations are made in well-defined families in which *aniotism* is hereditary, just as the profession of sorcerer or blacksmith is hereditary.
> Q: Have you ever experienced cases where people designated to kill have refused and what happened?
> A: It has already happened a few times but then they are poisoned mysteriously on the instructions of the *ishumu* who are the subordinates of the *tata ka mambela*.
> Q: Can anyone become *anioto*?
> A: No, one must have the *bolosi*, the mysterious disposition to become one, which is hereditary.
> Q: Are these people known by everyone?
> A: No, the *ishumu* know them.[54]

The witness specifically points out Mabiama's role as an *ishumu*. While *anioto* basically was a hereditary function, all strong and courageous men could be identified by the *ishumu* to possess the *bolosi* or ritual predisposition and coerced into becoming leopard-men. Gang members stated that not possessing this *bolosi* was a reason for getting injured during an expedition. In Bantu languages the word *bolosi* (*bulogi*) refers to retaliatory magic or witchcraft that is socially approved if used by a leader.[55] The use of these spiritual techniques is in line with local notions of leadership evoked by leopard symbolism in which the supernatural power of a leader can be used to harm people in an occult, secretive way, for example, by means of poison or leopard-men killing. The leopard-men gangs consisted of

52 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 221–6; A. Moeller, *Les Grandes Lignes des Migrations des Bantous de la province Orientale du Congo Belge* (Bruxelles, 1936), 543–4.

53 BFO AA JUST/GG/3042 (5529), Public hearing, Wamba, 11 July 1933; RMCA AIMO, Brandt, De Leest, Bouccin, Tihon, Libois, and Bourghelle, 'Différentes études sur le *Mambela*', 1933.

54 BFO AA JUST/GG/3043 (5574), Public hearing, Wamba, 19 June 1934.

55 G. de Wit (ed.), *Compendium of Survey Reports, I: Bira-Huku group of Bantu*, Summer Institute of Linguistics, Eastern Zaire Group (Bunia, 1995); S. Heald, *Controlling Anger: the Sociology of Gisu Violence* (Manchester, 1989), 120.

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family members and dependants of the ordering person. The ritual nature of the killings appears from the liminal character of the leopard-men group dwelling in the forest. On their expeditions, which were carried out under strict secrecy, they lived in the forest for weeks on end, in the vicinity of the villages they were supposed to strike. Mbako's gang members bore their initiation names while in the forest.[56] Imitated leopard paw marks and wounds in the neck were tokens of a ritual approach and were not intended simply to mimic leopard attacks and misguide the locals, as colonial administrators assumed. Threats were usually voiced before the killings, giving people a reasonable idea of who was behind them. The marks left on the crime scene symbolized the power of those behind the killings. Nowadays people still remember leopard-men as leopard-like people who took huge leaps from rooftops or trees to attack their victims.[57]

The liminal state of leopard-men residing in the forest, like later Simba and Mai-Mai militias, is perhaps best signified by the use of *dawa*, or magic charms or substances, consisting of diverse ingredients among which human remains were exceptionally potent. In Mbako's gang, the eyes of the victims were used to prepare *dawa*, which the gang members then rubbed into incisions in their skin to make them strong and invisible, or onto their weapons to render them more efficient.[58] Occasionally ritual consumption of the flesh occurred.[59] The word *dawa* more generally means 'cure' in Swahili. The distribution of *dawa* to heal, harm, and protect people also was the core business of collective therapies in the region, in which violence could have a therapeutic dimension in countering social ills. This healing dimension is equally instilled in the title of *ishumu*. The word *ishumu* derives from the Bantu-word – *kumu* designating an important person. The word underwent a semantic shift to 'healer, diviner, or medicine man' in eastern Bantu languages, the influence of which also appears in other *mambela* terms.[60] The *ishumu*'s role in recognizing and appropriating the *bolosi* of young men with the purpose of addressing wrongs reflects his judicial authority in the *mambela* council, deciding over life and death. Today, Mai-Mai combatants still state that *bolosi* is bad, but that they use it for good purposes.[61] The higher incidence of leopard-men killings under colonial rule can be perceived as a means to deal with the tensions caused by colonialism, more particularly the loss of control over ancestral lands, resources, and people, the disturbance of generational hierarchies and gender relations, and the colonial judicial system's failure to resolve conflicts.[62] Besides comparing leopard-men with later forms of armed mobilization such as Simba and Mai-Mai, who also used *dawa*, leopard-men killings are comparable to other, related

56 BFO AA JUST/GG/3042 (5529), Public hearing, Stanleyville, 7 Apr. 1933.

57 This came up in several interviews and informal conversations with people from the Bali and Budu regions, Kinshasa, Feb. 2012; Isiro, Apr. 2017.

58 BFO AA JUST/GG/3042 (5529), Public hearing, Stanleyville, 20 Apr. 1933 and Wamba, 8 July 1933.

59 BFO AA JUST/GG/3042 (5529), Public hearing, Wamba, 7 July 1933.

60 D. L. Schoenbrun, *The Historical Reconstruction of Great Lakes Bantu Cultural Vocabulary: Etymologies and Distributions* (Cologne, 1997), 203; D. Biebuyck, 'Nyanga circumcision masks and costumes', *African Arts*, 6:2 (1973), 20–92; D. Biebuyck, 'Mumbira: musical instrument of a Nyanga initiation', *African Arts*, 7:4 (1974), 42–96.

61 K. Hoffman, personal communication, Oct. 2017.

62 F. Bernault, 'Body, power and sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 47:2 (2006), 207–39.

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phenomena aimed at curing social ills, such as witchcraft accusations and ordeals elsewhere in Africa.[63]

Having discussed leopard-men conflicts in the colonial context, these will now be used to assess different spatio-temporal manifestations in view of institutional dynamism. First the colonial cases will be used to hypothesize on precedents of leopard-men in the precolonial era, assessing their relation to Vansina's spiral of innovation theory. Subsequently, the occurrence of leopard-men killings at the heart of a therapeutic insurgency will be treated. In the final section, relations between *anioto* and the *vihokohoko* variety of leopard-men of the Bapakombe in Beni are assessed in view of cultural borrowing across related boys' initiation complexes.

## PRECOLONIAL ROOTS OF *MAMBELA* AND *ANIOTO*

Tensions between neighbours in what was to become the historical centre of the Mangbetu kingdom (between the Middle Bomokandi and Nepoko Rivers; Fig. 3) forced populations to adapt to their competitive environment or disappear, causing a sequence of institutional innovations in northeast Congo from 1600 to 1800. One of the outcomes was the expansion of *mambela* from a village level to lines of villages, promoting collaboration and social cohesion on a larger scale. *Mambela* was one of the 'brotherhoods' characterizing the sociopolitical organization of segmentary societies in northeast Congo, developed out of initiation societies.[64] They differed from any kind of central government, as found in the emergent chiefdoms of their northern neighbours, the Azande and Mangbetu. A large number of the populations involved in this process migrated from the Middle Bomokandi-Nepoko region into the rainforest, including the Budu and the Ndaka, with whom the Bali claimed to have migrated southwards.

In oral traditions, the use of *anioto* in precolonial times is mentioned in relation to two events. One tradition states that the Bali, Budu, and Ndaka fled southwards along the Nepoko River and reunited in the Mbari mountains near Bomili to get away from the southern Mangbetu (Meje) who developed larger, centralised chiefdoms and a superior military force (see Fig. 3).[65] According to the second tradition, leopard-men attacks were first used much later by a few Bali clans to claim their monopoly over iron ore mines in the Mbari mountains, preceding their migration southward into the forest where they still lived in the 1930s.[66] Both traditions entail motives for leopard-men killings that still prevailed in colonial times: to defeat one's rivals and to claim and safeguard control over land and resources. The passing on of leopard-men skills is also linked to *mambela* initiations and marital alliances. *Anioto* thus likely originated

63 K. Hoffmann, 'Myths set in motion: the moral economy of Mai Mai governance', in A. Arjona et al. (eds.), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York, 2015), 166–9; J. Verweijen, 'The disconcerting popularity of popular in/justice in Fizi/Uvira, Eastern DR Congo', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 22:3 (2015), 335–9; P. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Virginia, 1997), 204–7.

64 Vansina, *Paths*, 173–5, 180–91.

65 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 185–92; RMCA AIMO EA/0/0/243, De Haen, 'Les Aniotos', 1922.

66 Kawaters, 'Reifezeremonien', 162.

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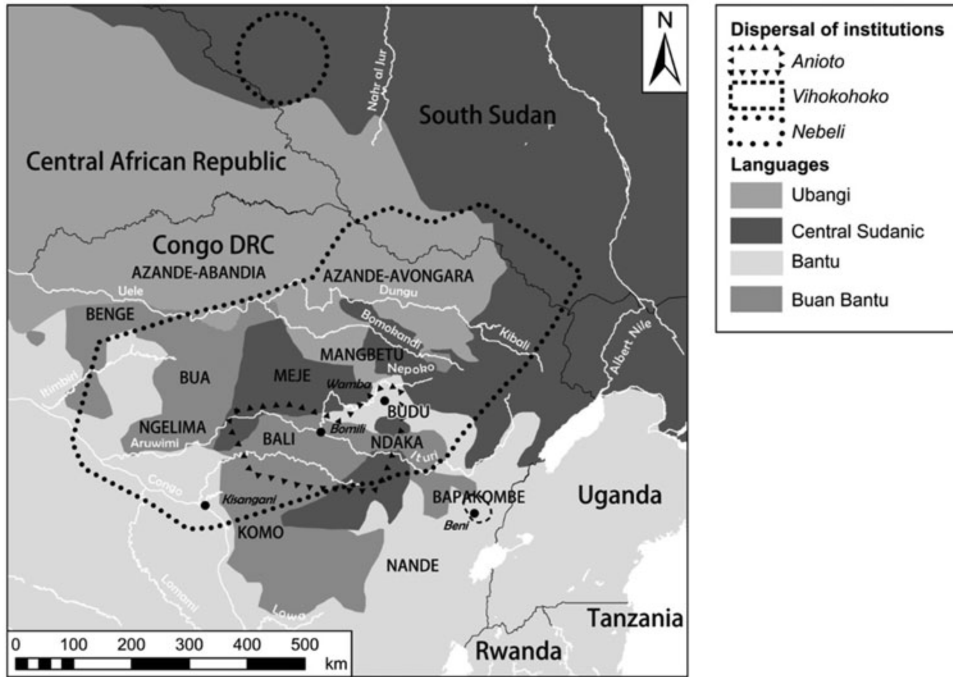


**Fig. 3.** The dispersal of *anioto* and *vihokohoko* in northeast Congo.

when the Bali had settlements along the Nepoko River, and developed in symbiosis with *mambela*.

Additional evidence comes in the form of a series of monkey-hunting costumes identical to the leopard-men costumes collected in northeast Congo.[67] Most of these costumes are from Buan Bantu-speaking populations, from which the Bali split off during migrations (Bua, Lika, Ngelima, Benge, Komo), but also from other populations whom they encountered, such as the Azande. One of the costumes was collected together with a bow and arrows, as seen in the *mise-en-scène* photograph by its collector (Fig. 4), though the costumes were equally unpractical for hunting as for killing people. The combined occurrence of these costumes with iron claws among the Bali presents an additional clue regarding the origins of leopard-men as an institution. The Bali obtained the technology of working iron after separating from their Buan Bantu relatives. The vocabulary related to this skill hints at a different origin (southwest Sudan, presumably).[68]

The production of iron claws must have occurred on the Middle Nepoko when ties with the nearest Buan Bantu relatives had loosened; there, the Bali had good access to iron ore. This is supported by the tradition that a dominant Bali clan controlled the iron ore mines at Mbari and used *anioto* to maintain its hegemony and safeguard access to the

67 RMCA, Dossier Coclet-Henrotin, no. 213. There are several identical monkey-hunting costumes collected throughout the region in the 1970s at the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo (IMNC), Kinshasa.

68 M. A. MacMaster, 'Patterns of interaction: a comparative ethnolinguistic perspective on the Uele region of Zaïre ca. 500 B.C. to 1900 A.D' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, 1988), 115–21.

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**Fig. 4.** *Mise-en-scène* of an archer dressed for monkey hunting, Benge population, Congo. Photo by A. Hutereau, 1911–13 © Royal Museum for Central Africa AP.0.0.11078.

mines.[69] Many years later, numerous Bali still recounted having left Mbari because of *anioto* attacks.[70] Various cultural elements merged when the Bali resided at the Nepoko River, most likely in the Mbari mountains near Bomili, which remained an important centre of iron production in the following decades. This merging of cultural elements to constitute new institutions is a central feature of institutional dynamism, and common in this

69 Kawaters, 'Reifezeremonien', 461–2.
70 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 252–3.

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region. The symbiotic relationship between *anioto* and *mambela* was forged in such processes, as well as ties with other institutions.

Colonial functionaries' attempts to disentangle *mambela*, *anioto*, and *ishumu* demonstrate their failure to understand that they were historically interwoven. The link between *mambela* and *anioto* was much discussed to find out who should be held accountable for leopard-men killings. In the 1930s *mambela* initiations were made public in an attempt to stop the leopard-men killings.[71] It allowed Mbako to try to shift responsibility for the murders to the *mambela* leaders. According to one of the police investigators, the *mambela* leaders had usurped a pre-existing lineage-based hierarchy of family chiefs (*metundji*), leading him to the conclusion that *mambela* officials were not the legitimate leaders.[72] Confusion also arose over who was the true leader of *mambela*, the *tata ka mambela* or the *ishumu*. The public hearings reflect that the *mambela* leaders were assisted by the *ishumu*, possibly as a result of titled functions of disparate origins merging within *mambela*. The *ishumu* represented a hereditary lineage-based ritual authority with judicial power.[73] He underwent the *mambela* ordeals twice, and received an additional series of *mambela* scarifications on his shoulders and arms.[74] The *mambela* hierarchy was interwoven with authority based on lineage seniority represented by the *ishumu*.

Authorities are thus layered, and the merging of several institutional elements and titles was common practice in the maintenance of fields of power. Mbako, who circumvented the power of the *mambela* council, demonstrates that such relations could be challenged and realigned with new situations. These micro-historical instances of agility are the drivers of institutional dynamism. As reflected in oral traditions and in material and linguistic evidence, such processes joined together costumes and claws, and *anioto* and *mambela*, in the competition with neighbours at the Nepoko River.

## AMBODIMA: LEOPARD-MEN IN A THERAPEUTIC INSURGENCY

In 1916/17 a large wave of leopard-men killings sparked awareness among colonial administrators. This wave of killings occurred alongside the growth of a ritual dance known as *ambodima* or (*m*)*basa*, which provides us with an additional example of institutional dynamism. The spread of the dance was part of a new therapeutic movement adopted by the Bali from their northern neighbours in response to an existential crisis caused by forced rubber tax collection in 1907. The spread was characterized by the distribution of *dawa* and ritual drums, combined with the diffusion of *anioto* skills and the display of *mambela* objects, yet outside the context of the boys' initiation.[75]

People believed the *dawa* would protect them against the bullets of the Europeans by turning them into water. This gave them the courage to resist the forced collection of

71 RMCA AIMO EA/0/0/215, Winckelmans, 'La secte secrète *mambela* et les bandes *anioto*', 1933; Tihon, 'Lettre sur l'*anioto* et le *mambela*', 1934.

72 Bouccin, 'Crimes', 192.

73 Schebesta, *Vollblutneger*, 70.

74 Bernard, 'Une société secrète chez les Babali', *Congo*, 2:3 (1922), 349–53; RMCA AIMO EA/0/0/215, Winckelmans, 1933.

75 RMCA AIMO, A. Boucin, 'Note sur l'*ambodima*', 1933.

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rubber, which caused their grim living conditions, and to take up arms.[76] The dance, which reappeared under different names, remained responsible for the spread of leopard-men killings in the following decades. Around 1930, delegations consisting of *ambodima* leaders, *mambela* officials, and dancers travelled from village to village, using the sale of palm oil as a cover. They carried ritual drums, *mambela* instruments, and an *anioto* claw hidden in a pot of palm oil. The performance of the dance consisted of a public part, but only *mambela* members could attend the secluded second part, consisting of a nocturnal dance and a meal. The *ishumu* told women and children to return to their houses and then the *mambela* objects were displayed. According to Mbako, improvised chanting occurred, during which the names of future victims were cited. The *tata ka mambela* designated men to go on a killing expedition by tying lianas around their necks. In most villages, *mambela* leaders were also the leaders of the dance. But apparently *ambodima* created new ties among villages, independent of those of *mambela*, and gang borrowing also occurred along these new networks. As the administration relocated villages alongside new roads, the gangs travelled discreetly via abandoned village trails. Denunciators were reportedly killed.[77]

*Ambodima* was derived from the widely spread collective therapy *nebeli,* which was held responsible for rubber tax strikes and rebellions in the whole of northeast Congo around 1907.[78] In the 1930s, northern Bali chiefs involved in leopard-men killings, like Mbako, were still *nebeli* members.[79] *Nebeli* demonstrates how widely such a collective therapy could reach, adapting to various sociopolitical contexts in northeast Congo and South Sudan. In the 1850s, Mangbetu kings adopted it as a war charm from the people they subjected. *Nebeli*'s success in winning battles made it spread to neighbouring populations, and the use of *dawa* expanded to protecting initiates from harm and guaranteeing success.[80] Among the Azande in Congo and South Sudan, *nebeli* was one of many collective therapies by which people sought protection against the arbitrariness of Azande rulers, and the threats of the slave trade and colonization.[81] *Nebeli* medicine also occurred as a therapeutic influence at the heart of the boys' initiation *libeli* among the Lokele.[82] The example of *nebeli* shows that collective therapies spread across centralized and segmentary political systems alike, incorporating them in larger networks of cultural borrowing, even if centralized courts like those of Mangbetu and Azande tried to control such processes. While the Mangbetu rulers willingly adopted *nebeli* as a war charm, the Azande rulers more reluctantly accepted it after vigorous attempts to repress it proved unsuccessful.[83] Evans-

76 A. M. Delathuy, *Missie en Staat in Oud-Kongo: 1880–1914* (Berchem, 1994), 271–6.

77 RMCA AIMO, A. Bouccin, 'Note sur l'*ambodima*', 1933; Defeld, 'Rapport' (1917); BFO AA AIMO 13611, A. Bouccin, 'Rapport sur le chef Nembunzi des Bebengu (1934); A. Bouccin, 'Rapport sur le chef Kabakaba des Bekeni' (1934); A. Bouccin, 'Les Babali (suite)', *Congo*, 1:1 (1936), 26–41; 2:5 (1936), 685–712; Joset, *Les Sociétés*, 70–5, 225, 228.

78 RMCA AIMO, A. Bouccin, 'Note sur l'*ambodima*', 1933; Czekanowski, *Forschungen*, 264–7; Delathuy, *Missie*, 271.

79 BFO AA JUST/GG/3042 (5529), Public hearing, Wamba, 10 July 1933.

80 C. A. Keim, 'Precolonial Mangbetu rule: political and economic factors in nineteenth-century Mangbetu history (northeast Zaire)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1981), 90–2.

81 E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (*Oxford, 1937), 511–16.

82 N. R. Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, 1999), 27–116.

83 Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft,* 511–16; C.-R. Lagae, *Les Azande ou Niam-Niam* (1926), 123.

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Pritchard wrote that among the Azande of South Sudan new 'extra-kin' associations such as *nebeli* were responses to an existential crisis connected to the breakdown of traditions under the slave trade and European rule.[84]

*Nebeli* can clearly be perceived as a collective therapy that grew in response to the quest for healing, equally provoking insurgencies, in line with Janzen's characterization. Institutional dynamism is reflected in the spread of *nebeli* in both segmentary and centralized societies, and in its regional manifestation as *ambodima* incorporating pre-existing and new institutional features. In the context of *ambodima*, leopard-men violence remedied social disruption, analogous to the violence used in the context of the *kitawala* movement among the Komo to restore social imbalance.[85] If therapeutic insurgencies like *ambodima* – incorporating *anioto* killings – clearly vented anticolonial sentiments, they cannot be treated simply as a function of the colonial context since they are a manifestation of collective therapies with deeper cultural foundations. While these phenomena were important to deal with the difficulties induced by colonialism, they transcend the colonial context as their reason for existing.

## VIHOKOHOKO: LEOPARD-MEN CASES IN BENI

The comparison of leopard-men killings among the Bali with those among the Bapakombe and Nande of Beni, known as *vihokohoko*, can help to reveal further institutional networks and dynamism, fleshing out a political history as yet only known from a bird's eye perspective. The *anioto* trials of the Bali helped to finally attract the authorities' attention to a wave of killings in the Beni region in 1933–4, where earlier killings had been ignored. This led to the military occupation of the area. The Bapakombe minority inhabiting the forest northwest of Beni was accused of terrorizing their Nande neighbours, who were favoured by the colonial administration and held privileged positions. Ethnic favouring, which is not at play in the Bali cases, was an important catalyst to *vihokohoko* conflicts. In previous decades, ethnic opposition between the Bapakombe and Nande had grown, climaxing in the early 1930s. The Bapakombe homeland had been progressively incorporated into territorial units with the Nande, with leadership handed over to chiefs from principal Nande clan factions (or their clients). Furthermore, the Nande chiefs of Beni had been involved as intermediaries in slave trading and subsequently the Belgian colonization, more particularly the aforementioned Henry de la Lindi. Over several generations, these developments inspired what the colonial administration called a 'conspiracy' of the Bapakombe against the Nande. The latter were perceived as victims of Bapakombe leopard-men terror, but this was a one-sided perception. For decades, several Nande chiefs had sent their men to be initiated as leopard-men among the Bapakombe and similarly used them in conflicts, but the colonial administration developed a selective amnesia for the Nande involvement in the killings.[86]

84 Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*, 511–16.

85 Eggers, 'Mukombozi', 417–36.

86 BFO AA, Communications about the military occupation of the Beni territory, 1934; Bergmans, *Les Wanande, I: L'Histoire des Baswaga* (Butembo, 1970); RMCA AIMO, Joset, 'Historique du territoire de

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While no police or court records were found of the *vihokohoko* killings in Beni, the data collected suffices to make a broad comparison. Beni leopard-men were a very similar, if not the same, institution as leopard-men among the Bali. The Bapakombe supposedly adopted leopard-men from the Bali via their common neighbours (the Ndaka and a subgroup of the Budu-Mbo).[87] The original use of *vihokohoko* as a strategy is highlighted in the founding traditions of Bapakombe clans who first settled in the forest northwest of Beni. Leopard-men killings served to expand Bapakombe influence over populations who settled with them and to extort wives and food tributes.[88] Leaders of these founding clans passed on their *vihokohoko* skills to others, and in the colonial era one of these clans still was the dominant provider (Batangi Bapakombe). The spread of *vihokohoko* was also connected to the regular boys' initiation ceremony named *lusumba,* similar to *anioto*'s link with *mambela*.[89] Like the Bali, the Bapakombe were a segmentary population whose boys' initiation network was the basis for their sociopolitical organization and who used leopard-men killing against neighbours in a similar way.

The Bapakombe's boys' initiation *lusumba* belonged to the same institutional network as *mambela*.[90] In both *mambela* and *lusumba*, the blindfolded initiates learnt that a bird spirit performed the scarification (*mambela*) or circumcision (*lusumba*) on their body. The aural qualities of these spirit birds were represented by horns or whistles blown during the cutting. Some very rare and artistically interesting horns from this region are kept in museum collections.[91] Interestingly, most Bali ascribed the origin of *mambela* to their southeastern neighbours, the Ndaka and Budu (Mbo) who had obtained it from the Komo.[92] The 'bird initiation complex' entails traces of an innovative impulse coming from Eastern Bantu speaking populations originally from the Great Lakes region, via the Komo and stretching as far as the Bali. This influence is apparent in *lusumba* and *mambela* rituals, terminology, and objects.[93] This is the exact opposite of the itinerary that must have taken the leopard-men institution to the Bapakombe in Beni. Since the 'bird initiation complex' comprised both the Bali and Bapakombe boys' initiation networks, and leopard-men activities existed in symbiosis with both networks, the spread of leopard-men killings southwards appears as a part of the cultural exchanges across these networks. If several boys' initiation complexes succeeded one another in the nineteenth century, such processes were ongoing in the colonial period, as exemplified by the replacement of *mambela* with *lusumba* due to the repression of the former among the Bali in the 1930s.[94]

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Beni', 1939, 19, 74, 77; Joset, 'Les Sociétés', 22–6, 31–2, 37–41, 46–9, 50–1, 53–4; L. Packard, *The Politics*, 168, 222–6.

87 RMCA AIMO EA/0/0/194, F. Absil, 'Note au sujet de l'aniotisme à Beni', 1934; Bouccin, 'Crimes', 223–4.

88 Bergmans, *Les Wanande*, 92–4; Joset, *Les Sociétés*, 30–2.

89 Joset, *Les Sociétés*, 32–4; Mwaka, 'Conflits', 314–5.

90 Biebuyck, 'Mumbira'; Moeller, *Les Grandes Lignes*, 552.

91 L. Brandt, 'Note sur le *Mambela* des Babali', *Congo*, 1:3 (1923), 344–8; Joset, *Les Sociétés*, 32–4.

92 RMCA AIMO, Bouccin, 1933; Bouccin, 'Crimes', 223–4.

93 Vansina, *Paths*, 186; Biebuyck, 'Nyanga', 20–92; Biebuyck, 'Mumbira'.

94 RMCA AIMO, Bouccin, 1933.

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## CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the importance of studying leopard-men in northeast Congo as a form of armed mobilization rooted in local traditions that adapted to diverse contexts. The concept of institutional dynamism helps to overcome previous categorizations of leopard-men that impaired our understanding of them. This concept fits into a processual-network approach in which leopard-men straddle different cultural complexes, timeframes, and governance contexts, and act according to emic principles on the intersection between power and healing. After assessing leopard-men in view of institutional dynamism, it makes more sense that Mai-Mai groups from Beni claimed to continue the legacy of leopard-men during the First Congo Wars, while also counting former Simbas among their leaders.[95] The larger question asked at the beginning of this article returns: to what extent did institutional networks and processes of institutional dynamism set the scene for later political developments? Throughout the article, I have pointed out similarities between leopard-men cases and present-day armed groups. These appear in the causes for conflicts, the strategies used, and the village-based networks within which they operated. The strongest parallels can be perceived in the reoccurrence of ritually-empowered militias, and in their use of *dawa*, but also in the institutional dynamism that shapes them by merging traditional and new – foreign – elements. This principle of merging also occurs in the influence of Watch Tower on *kitawala* and of communist ideology on the Simba.[96] In the present the same cultural foundations continue to matter in the constitution of power, in the mobilization of people, and in the legitimation of their actions, including violence. The study of larger-scale therapeutic insurgencies such as *kitawala* and Simba is already gaining momentum, but many earlier phenomena such as leopard-men, *ambodima*, and *nebeli* remain buried in colonial records. A sustained diachronic comparison requires better historical knowledge of these diverse institutions, the dynamics that produced them, and the networks such processes brought about. As in the past, contemporary community-based militias continue to be framed as 'rebellious'. Considering them as the reinventions of local political traditions, however, may provide a more appropriate analytical pathway.

95 Mwaka, 'Conflits', 214–15; Verweijen, *A Microcosm*.

96 Eggers, 'Mukombozi'; R. Gaise (ed.), *La Rébellion de 1964 en RDC Congo – cinquante ans après* (Paris, 2015).

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