

## WAR, WITCHES AND TRAITORS: CASES FROM THE MPLA'S EASTERN FRONT IN ANGOLA (1966–1975)\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Accusations, trials and executions of witches and sell-outs frequently occurred at the MPLA's Eastern Front in Angola (1966–75). These events do not fit the general self-portrayal of the MPLA as a socialist, secular movement that was supported by the Angolan population without recourse to force. The people interviewed, mostly rural civilians from south-east Angola who lived under MPLA control, suggested many links between treason and witchcraft, yet at the same time differentiated between these accusations. Witchcraft cases were often initiated by civilian families and the accused were mostly people who had a long-standing reputation of being a witch. While the MPLA leadership was often suspicious of the accusations of witchcraft, many civilians regarded the trials of witches as more legitimate than those of treason. Civilians held that the accusation of treason was often used by the guerrillas to get rid of political or personal rivals and/or to control the population. The accusations showed few patterns and cannot be interpreted as deliberate attempts to overcome structural forms of domination, of chiefs over followers, men over women or old over young.

**KEY WORDS:** Angola, independence, witchcraft.

IN the early literature about the relationship between political affairs and religious movements in Africa, there was a tendency to focus on the political implications of these movements and to neglect entirely their importance as religious movements.<sup>1</sup> The last decades have seen a reverse trend; by now, studies on politics and religion testify rather to a 'surinterprétation religieuse du politique'.<sup>2</sup> The secrecy and magical aspects of state power, the influence of religious specialists on politicians and the occult interpretations of political policies forwarded by African citizens have all featured

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical overview of this early literature, see Terence O. Ranger, 'Religious movements and politics in sub-Saharan Africa', *African Studies Review*, 29 (1986), 1–69.

<sup>2</sup> Marc-Eric Gruénais, Florent Mouanda Mbambi and Joseph Tonda, 'Messies, fétiches et lutte de pouvoirs entre les "grand hommes" du Congo démocratique', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 37 (1995), 163–93.

strongly in recent works.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the field of witchcraft studies, an important part of ongoing debates centres around the 'modernity' of witchcraft. Instead of the older view of witchcraft as a traditional remnant of rural Africa's past, the vigorous capacity of witchcraft beliefs to transform in new political contexts is stressed.<sup>4</sup> Much of this literature is, however, concerned with post-colonial relations between politics and witchcraft, and focuses on witchcraft in the context of kinship. Little attention has hitherto been given to the relations between nationalism and witchcraft.<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is the debate that has become crucial to an understanding of the historiography of the Zimbabwean liberation war.<sup>6</sup> This discussion on witchcraft during the Zimbabwean liberation war (1966–79) has been conducted since 1985 and authors from various disciplines have shared their views in the course of the debate. The issues raised in the Zimbabwean case may be instructive for other contexts in which African nationalist movements related to the realm of witchcraft and magic.

In the debate on witches and traitors during the war for independence in Zimbabwe, there is general agreement on the facts: during the war, some people were accused of witchcraft or treason, and on the basis of these accusations a number of people were executed. The interpretations of these events, however, are highly divergent. David Lan has maintained that the killing of witches by guerrillas was seen by the local population as the re-establishment of a moral order disrupted by colonialism. Through their witch-hunts, the guerrillas secured access to 'legitimate political authority'.<sup>7</sup> Other authors have criticized Lan for taking his structuralist interpretation too far and for making too much of the symbolic opposition of evil witches and 'sell-outs', versus legitimate spirit-mediums and guerrillas. Thus, Michael Bourdillon has contended that the 'need for unity' was probably more important than any religious symbols.<sup>8</sup> Richard Werbner, in contrast to Lan's notion of political legitimacy, has stressed the brutality

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Diane Ciekawy, 'Witchcraft in statecraft: five technologies of power in colonial and postcolonial coastal Kenya', *African Studies Review*, 41 (1998), 119–41; Rosalind Shaw, 'The politician and the diviner: divination and the consumption of power in Sierra Leone', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 26 (1996), 30–55.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Isak Niehaus with Eliazaar Mohlala and Kally Shokane, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (Cape Town and London, 2001); Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Post-colonial Africa* (Charlottesville and London, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Geschiere, *Modernity of Witchcraft*, 233 n. 39, referring to a review by Robert Buytenhuys of his work.

<sup>6</sup> Although some work has been published on the ANC and witchcraft, most of this literature refers to the post-apartheid period and the discussion is much less old. Isak A. Niehaus, 'The ANC's dilemma: the symbolic politics of three witch-hunts in the South African Lowveld, 1990–1995', *African Studies Review*, 41 (1998), 93–118; Adam Ashforth, 'Witchcraft, violence, and democracy in the new South Africa', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 150–2 (1998), 505–32.

<sup>7</sup> David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London, 1985), 167–70.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bourdillon, 'Guns and rain: taking structural analysis too far?' *Africa*, 57 (1987), 273.

and arbitrariness of the executions.<sup>9</sup> Norma Kriger has maintained that not only were the executions used by the guerrillas as a means of coercion, but also by various groups in Zimbabwean society to strengthen their position. Like Bourdillon, she interprets the trials more in terms of local disputes than as expressions of guerrillas' striving to attain nationalist goals.<sup>10</sup> These authors agree that witches and traitors during the war in Zimbabwe were often placed in one and the same category: 'the sorcerer and the sell-out were often equated in practice or were labels different people used for the same victim of suspicion'.<sup>11</sup> However, more recently, JoAnn McGregor has proposed a differentiation between witches and 'sell-outs', mainly on the grounds of legitimacy in that 'the legitimacy of killing witches was also the topic of moral debate at a normative level and in terms of military strategy in a way that the killing of sell-outs was not'. In an insightful article, she argues against Lan's analysis, stressing the traumatic character of the witch-killings. She also questions Kriger's interpretation, by focusing on the complex wartime interaction between guerrillas and civilians; in her view, the executions were specific to the war and cannot be seen only as a continuation of local struggles.<sup>12</sup>

No such debates are being conducted in Angolan history. In literature on Angola's liberation war, only limited attention is paid to the relations between leadership, guerrillas and civilians. Issues of coercion, legitimacy, treason and witchcraft have hitherto hardly been addressed. The present contribution focuses on the issue of witchcraft and treason accusations in south-east Angola in the period of the liberation war, which in this area started in 1966 when the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) opened its Eastern Front. The war for independence ended in 1974–5 with the coup in Portugal, the cease-fire and Angolan independence. The aim is to link the theme of witchcraft and treason to wider debates over coercion and consent, brutality and legitimacy in times of guerrilla warfare. Naturally, by focusing on internal struggles, accusations and executions in the 'MPLA's bush', this article excludes a number of important issues related to local notions of treason and witchcraft. For example, it does not deal with relations between war, witchcraft and magical potions, nor with accusations brought before the Portuguese, Portuguese chemical poisoning of fields, and executions in the MPLA's leadership circles based in Tanzania and Zambia. Some remarks will be made about witchcraft accusations before the war, but as evidence on witchcraft during the colonial period in south-east Angola is scant, it is difficult to come up with a conclusive interpretation. As in many African societies, witchcraft is a highly ambivalent concept in the communities of south-east Angola. In principle, the

<sup>9</sup> Richard Werbner, *Tears of the Dead: The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh, 1991), 150.

<sup>10</sup> Norma Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge, 1992), esp. 129–33, 179–206.

<sup>11</sup> Werbner, *Tears of the Dead*, 150; Lan, *Guns*, 170, also holds that the categories 'witch' and 'traitor' are often conflated.

<sup>12</sup> JoAnn McGregor, 'Containing violence: poisoning and guerrilla/civilian relations in memories of Zimbabwe's liberation war', in Kim Lacey Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff and Graham Dawson (eds.), *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives* (London and New York, 1999), 137 (quote), 131–59.

employment of witchcraft is evil. Yet, anybody with political power and/or economic success needs powers within the realm of witchcraft and, in these cases, occult powers may be a source of admiration. Furthermore, political leaders and religious specialists can only ward off the dangers of witchcraft if they themselves have access to such powers, and so they have a legitimate right to use them.<sup>13</sup> In an article which focuses on accusations of witchcraft, such ambivalence is likely to be obscured as only cases in which accusers felt that occult powers were used in an illegitimate way come to the fore. The perspective taken here differs from that of Jean-Michel Mabeko-Tali, who is to my knowledge the only scholar who has hitherto offered an interpretation of witchcraft and treason cases on the MPLA's Eastern Front. Focusing on the relations between MPLA guerrillas and leadership, he contends that northern commanders abused their powers and had guerrillas under their command executed on the accusation of treason or witchcraft. A civilian perspective, however, reveals that many accusations, especially those related to witchcraft, stemmed from the civilians under guerrilla control rather than from guerrilla leadership. Furthermore, the majority of the victims were civilians and not, as Mabeko-Tali suggests, guerrillas. While rank-and-file guerrillas may have stressed tensions with their leadership, local civilians emphasized an opposition between themselves and 'the MPLA' as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

During fieldwork among refugees from south-east Angola near Rundu, a small town in northern Namibia, in 1996, 1997 and 1999, repeated statements were made about trials and executions of witches and traitors. Most of these referred to trials in União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) after Angolan independence, converging with statements and analyses on this in the press and in literature about UNITA's internal policies.<sup>15</sup> Yet, many of the people with whom I spoke also made statements about trials and executions of witches and traitors before Angolan independence, saying that these were largely the doing of the MPLA. Such statements do not fit the general description of the MPLA as a socialist, secular movement and contradict formal MPLA documents on matters of tradition and religion.

#### FORMAL MPLA DISCOURSE

In 1964, Zambia became independent and less than two years later, this country was being used as a base by Angolan liberation movements to start

<sup>13</sup> Geschiere, *Modernity of Witchcraft*, 1; Inge Brinkman, 'Ways of death: accounts of terror from Angolan refugees in Namibia', *Africa*, 70 (2000), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Michel Mabeko-Tali, "'Tribalisme", "régionalisme" et lutte de libération nationale: la question "tribale" et "ethnico-régionale" dans la dissidence au sein du MPLA dans l'Est angolais en 1969-1974', *Année Africaine* (1992-3), 463-86; *idem*, *O MPLA perante si próprio: dissidências e poder de estado (1962-1977) - Ensaio de História Política (vol. 1. 1962-1974)* (Luanda, 2001), 126-33.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Linda Heywood, 'Towards an understanding of modern political ideology in Africa: the case of the Ovimbundu of Angola,' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36 (1998), 139-67; Christine Messiant, 'Angola, les voies de l'ethnisation et de la décomposition', *Lusotopie*, 1 (1994), 170; Michael Wolfers and Jane Bergerol, *Angola in the Frontline* (London, 1983), 208.

guerrilla activities in the sparsely populated plains of east Angola. The MPLA had to import supplies from its headquarters in Tanzania, or from Lusaka, where the Zambian government let the movement operate with relative freedom. Many among the MPLA leadership were intellectuals from Luanda and its surroundings who had spent quite some time abroad. Although there had been some recruitment among migrant workers from the south-east resident in Zambia, a local support network in eastern Angola grew only slowly. The fighting parties tried to assemble as many people as they could, with whatever means. The MPLA was more successful than UNITA, and they took many people from their villages near water-courses to the 'bush', away from the rivers. Other villagers were captured by colonial forces and taken to 'town', i.e., the Portuguese concentrated settlements. The war meant an almost complete destruction of village life. It was very dangerous for civilians to continue living in decentralized, small-scale farming communities along the rivers, as the Portuguese took to indiscriminate bombing of all areas outside the concentrated settlements they had created, and the guerrillas suspected all those not under their control of collaborating with the Portuguese.

Most of the MPLA documents or statements made by the MPLA leadership paint a rosy picture of life in the bush. A number of problems are identified, such as transport, 'imperialist attacks' and the dearth of ammunition and supplies. It is stressed, however, that civilians under MPLA care received education, enjoyed health services and participated in MPLA's democratic structures. The documents and statements suggest that civilians stayed with the MPLA of their own free will. MPLA official literature is also highly secular, emphasizing that the movement was committed to a socialist, 'scientific' struggle. If statements about religion are made, the tone is usually negative. Thus a 'dual revolution' was envisaged in which, as Agostinho Neto, the MPLA's president, told Basil Davidson, 'We are trying to free and modernise our people by a dual revolution – against their traditional structures which can no longer serve them, and against colonial rule'.<sup>16</sup> 'Tradition' was conceived of as a problem.<sup>17</sup> It was 'the old world',<sup>18</sup> oppressive for women,<sup>19</sup> and filled with dictatorial chiefs installed by colonialism,<sup>20</sup> as well as 'foolish witchdoctors' with ineffective magic.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Statement made by Neto in 1970, quoted in Basil Davidson, *In the Eye of the Storm: Angola's People* (London, 1972), 279.

<sup>17</sup> 'La stratégie du terrorisme', *Jeune Afrique* (13 Jan. 1973), in *Facts and Reports (Press Cuttings on Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Portugal and Southern Africa)*, 3 (20 Jan. 1973), nr. 102.

<sup>18</sup> Interview 1, 2000: Lisbon, Jan. 2000, with a former MPLA cadre at the Eastern Front, born outside eastern Angola.

<sup>19</sup> 'Angola: women move forward', *Guardian* (3 May 1972), in *Facts and Reports*, 2 (24 June 1972), nr. 697.

<sup>20</sup> MPLA, *Angola: documentos do MPLA. 1<sup>o</sup> volume* (Lisbon, 1977), 159: 'A propósito da reconstrução nacional'; 'Angolan fighters gain ground', *Sunday News* (Tanzania, 24 Jan. 1971), in *Facts and Reports*, 2 (20 Mar. 1971), nr. 390. See also Bettina Decke, *A terra é nossa: koloniale Gesellschaft und Befreiungsbewegung in Angola* (Bonn, 1981), 225; Davidson, *In the Eye*, 312.

<sup>21</sup> Setta Likambuila, MPLA commander, quoted in Don Barnett and Roy Harvey, *The Revolution in Angola: MPLA, Life Histories and Documents* (Indianapolis and New York, 1972), 287; also *Angola in Arms* (4 Feb. 1969), 11.

The statements in MPLA documents do not reveal any violence employed in this internal revolution: explanation and education were the key concepts. According to Davidson, the MPLA in Angola, PAIGC in Guinea Bissau and FRELIMO in Mozambique were new, creative, ‘modernising movements’; this showed, amongst others, ‘in their patient grappling with the still potent force of magical belief; in their steady explanation of “modern” cause-and-effect’.<sup>22</sup> The MPLA sought to limit recourse to the supernatural by peaceful means. The most drastic punishment mentioned was the burning of medicine. As an MPLA commander at the Eastern Front explained, ‘At the CIR’s [Centro de Instrução Revolucionário (the MPLA’s educational services)] and in our political education we explain that those witchdoctors who use charms for treating sores or wounds or who can cure diseases are allowed to carry on their work, but those who use charms or other magic for punishing or killing others have been ordered to burn their medicine’.<sup>23</sup> Visitors to MPLA camps stressed the successes of this educational project. For example, an Italian journalist, visiting eastern Angola in 1968 and in 1971, reported, ‘I remember how strong the superstition was in one village we went to in 1968. They had to work very hard against it. We went there again this time – it was transformed. Today if you suggested that a witch doctor could cure your infected feet the people would say: “Are you crazy? You use streptomycin!”’<sup>24</sup>

Where it concerns traitors, the formal MPLA language is much harsher – it is made clear that treason must be ‘suppressed’ at all costs. Typically, a letter to the governor of Nova Lisboa left no doubt, ‘All those who, directly or indirectly, collaborate with PIDE [Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado (the Portuguese secret police)], shall be killed with a bullet in the neck’.<sup>25</sup> Barnett and Harvey mention several cases of traitors being hanged and MPLA radio and pamphlets regularly announced the execution of traitors.<sup>26</sup> In this context, it is obvious that the MPLA at the Eastern Front faced tremendous security problems. The Portuguese captured many guerrillas and civilians in the course of the war and, especially if the MPLA experienced losses, many people fled to Portuguese-held settlements of their own accord. The Portuguese secret police files are replete with reports of such people acting as guides and leading colonial troops to the MPLA camps in the bush. On top of this, the Portuguese frequently sent agents to MPLA camps to infiltrate guerrilla ranks. Such activities obviously posed a

<sup>22</sup> Basil Davidson, ‘The seed of Midwinter’, *New Statesman* (30 Oct. 1970), in *Facts and Reports*, 2 (28 Nov. 1970), nr. 53; also Decke, *A terra é nossa*, 113, 239; Eugenia Neto, ‘Prelude to victory’ (DIP [Departamento de Informação e Propaganda], Tanzania 1969) in the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Angola Comité, Historisch Archief Angola, 1961–76: doos 4.

<sup>23</sup> Setta Likambuila in Barnett and Harvey, *Revolution in Angola*, 287.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Angolan fighters gain ground’; also, Davidson, ‘The seed of Midwinter’. For more scepticism about the MPLA’s success in this respect, see: Roeland Kerbosch, *Angola met eigen ogen* (Utrecht and Antwerpen, 1971), 40, 48, 60.

<sup>25</sup> PIDE/DGS (Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, Portugal), Delegação de Angola (Del. A), Série: P.Inf, 11.15 E/1: ‘Propaganda do MPLA dentro da Província’, 172–3 (17 July 1967). The PIDE officially became the Direcção Geral de Segurança (DGS) in 1969, but continued to remain known as PIDE.

<sup>26</sup> Barnett and Harvey, *Revolution in Angola*, 175–6, 179–80.



threat to MPLA guerrillas and, if the guilt of such offences could be established, the accused were liable to be punished as traitors. Yet, the boundaries of what constituted 'treason' remain unclear. Apart from fairly straightforward forms of 'treason', MPLA documents also relate to problems of unity, 'where there is sectarianism, there is always also the immediate or distant presence of colonialists or imperialists ... The struggle will expel such divisive elements'.<sup>27</sup> Unity could apparently be threatened in many ways, including rumours, bad language<sup>28</sup> and 'liberalism', that might concern a refusal to do cleaning work, or the criticizing of fellow comrades behind their back.<sup>29</sup> From MPLA documents it does not become clear whether different forms of 'treason' were punished differently. What evidence there is, suggests that people threatening unity were first admonished and only if their behaviour did not improve would punishment consist of more severe measures.

#### IN THE BUSH

Statements made during interviews held with Angolan refugees in Rundu do not reflect the views presented in the MPLA documents. In contrast to formal MPLA statements, many informants, the majority of whom had been civilians during the war, referred to guerrilla coercion. They stated that they had been abducted from their villages and that the guerrillas had threatened to kill them if they attempted to go to town. These civilians referred to meetings and training in MPLA camps, but did not mention health or educational services. They told of extremely harsh and dangerous conditions in the bush. Many of them expressed sympathy with the MPLA's overall aims, but were very critical of the ways in which the guerrillas treated 'their people' and made it clear that they did not stay in the bush of their own free will. There was some understanding for the guerrillas' position, including acceptance that at times the guerrillas could not but use violence.<sup>30</sup> Yet, such understanding cannot be equated with approval and civilians felt that punishments often exceeded the setting of a necessary example. Their statements about trials and executions are borne out by interviews with men who had been local commanders during the Eastern Front, although the latter evaluate the events differently. The accounts are also confirmed by interviews with ex-guerrillas conducted in Luanda between 1988 and 1992 by Mabeko-Tali. Furthermore, references to such trials and executions can be found in documents from the PIDE (Portuguese Political Police) archives, including statements made by captives to the PIDE, and contemporary documents from the MPLA found by the police.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> MPLA, *Angola: documentos do MPLA. 1º volume* (Lisbon, 1977), 212: 'Mensagem radiodifundida pelo Angola combatente' (30 Mar. 1972).

<sup>28</sup> PIDE/DGS, Del. A, P.Inf, 110.00.30: 'MPLA', pasta 15, 154v. Handwritten notebook found in Salazar, 1968.

<sup>29</sup> MPLA, *Angola*, 109–10. 'Viva a disciplina revolucionária, abaixo o liberalismo!'

<sup>30</sup> Cf. David B. Moore, 'Democracy, violence, and identity in the Zimbabean war of national liberation: reflections from the realm of dissent', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 29 (1995), 375–402.

<sup>31</sup> Mabeko-Tali, "'Tribalismo'", 471; *idem*, *O MPLA*, 126–59.

Informants who had also lived in Angola after 1975 maintained that after independence, UNITA extensively abused trials and executions and that by comparison the MPLA was much fairer in disciplining people than UNITA later became. In many cases, the MPLA was said to admonish people and only to kill them if they did not show signs of repentance, whereas after independence, in UNITA areas, killing became entirely arbitrary. In 1966, however, when the war had just started, UNITA reportedly made very little impact in the south-east of Angola. At this stage of the war, the UNITA guerrillas had no means to move people and violence against civilians occurred only rarely.<sup>32</sup> The MPLA, the informants said, did move people by force, killed those who disobeyed them and abused accusations of treason to get rid of anybody whom they perceived to be a political opponent. It is difficult to verify the number of people killed during the trials held in the MPLA camps. Some informants said that they had witnessed 'many' executions, but found it hard to give exact numbers. Equally, captured documents in the PIDE files suggest that executions took place on a regular basis. For example, minutes of meetings held in Lunda in 1970 contain a warning against execution without trial, but frequently mention *fuzilamento* as one of the items.<sup>33</sup> A PIDE report summarizing statements made by Samente Tchangano, a farmer from Mavinga region, referred to seven women being killed on accusation of food poisoning and four men being executed on account of their attempt to escape, in one MPLA camp in the month of April 1969 alone.<sup>34</sup>

The number of executions was probably strongly dependent on the personality of local guerrilla leadership. Although instructions were to use the death sentence only sparingly,<sup>35</sup> in some camps a climate of violence and terror prevailed. Informants stressed that the number of executions had fluctuated over time. Initially, it was stated, anybody from town was killed by the guerrillas. One man, who climbed up from pioneer to guerrilla to become MPLA commander after independence, explained this development by the fact that initially most members of the MPLA had been strangers in the area, 'It was not their people, so when they happened to find them, they'd just kill them. But when we joined ourselves, who were born here, we did not kill them'. He said that after 1968, orders had come first to counsel captives from town and only after they escaped another time to kill

<sup>32</sup> Interview 21, 1999: Kehemu, 4 July 1999, with a man born by the Kuieio river in 1930. He, his wife (see interview 19, 1996 below) and their child had been taken from their village by MPLA guerrillas in 1966. Although UNITA reportedly boasted about their 'magic', maintaining that they had a fetish for killing people who would go to town and report to the authorities, a fetish to make and stop rain and a fetish to kill those who did not believe them: PIDE/DGS, SC (Serviços Centrais)-CI (Centro de Informação) (2), Proc. 6573: 'UNITA', vol 4, 193-4, statement by José Maria Maquina, about UNITA contacting his village Camaué (Bié), 7 Jan. 1972.

<sup>33</sup> PIDE/DGS, Del. A, P.Inf, 110.00.30: 'MPLA', pasta 19, 358-66.

<sup>34</sup> PIDE/DGS, Del. A, SS Fundo, NT 9089: 'Posto do Calai, MPLA: relatórios imediatos, 2 Apr. 1967-18 Dec. 1972', 272-3.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 276, letter from 'Kutolala kua Angola' to 'Vasco', 3 July 1968: 'On the people found in Mavinga, in case there are traitors among them, once discovered they must be detained and annihilated. If it concerns people previously of exemplary behaviour, they must be instructed politically and well guarded'.



them.<sup>36</sup> Yet, during the Giboia Revolt of 1969, 'the people' demanded a halt to executions without trial,<sup>37</sup> while 'Comrades Denjer and Zorro' were charged with investigating executions carried out in zone D in January 1970.<sup>38</sup>

After 1970, accusations of betrayal and the execution of traitors became evermore frequent. This was due to Portuguese military offensives, which made life in the bush increasingly unbearable. Plagued by hunger and often fleeing from one place to another in the bush, many civilians attempted to escape to Portuguese-held settlements. This was a risky undertaking. Any attempt to go to town, even out of sheer hunger or to visit relatives, could be classified as treason. The informants expressed their fears vividly: it was seen that even staying away for too long when fetching water,<sup>39</sup> receiving visitors,<sup>40</sup> 'saying bad things', like talking about town or mentioning salt or another product from town,<sup>41</sup> were seen as endangering unity and could result in an accusation of treason.

In literature on the MPLA, an atmosphere of suspicion, distrust and fear is associated with the events known as the 'Eastern Revolt'. After the heavy Portuguese offensive in 1972, tensions between its political and military leadership developed into an open conflict. Neto, the MPLA president, and Chipenda, who may have been more influential than Neto in the east,<sup>42</sup> accused each other of assassination plans. Chipenda maintained that under Neto's leadership, executions without trial had been occurring ever since 1967. Still, the rivals agreed on one thing, namely that the MPLA had been infiltrated and that measures were necessary to combat the problem of 'sell-outs' in their own ranks.<sup>43</sup> This resulted in a virtual 'state of emergency' in eastern Angola.<sup>44</sup> The Eastern Revolt led to a split. Chipenda and followers joined the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA), and the crisis in the MPLA leadership was felt up until independence. The open conflict

<sup>36</sup> Interview 4, 1999: Kehemu, 16 June 1999, with a man born in 1951, by the Namomo river. He became an MPLA guerrilla after being taken to the bush, together with all other people from his village.

<sup>37</sup> Serviços de Centralização e Coordenação de Informações de Angola, Torre do Tombo, box 253, 'MPLA-Situação interna 1973', 52, 50: open letter by Daniel Chipenda; Mabeko-Tali, "'Tribalismo'", 474–9.

<sup>38</sup> PIDE/DGS, Del. A, SS Fundo, NT 9084: 'Subdelegação de Serpa Pinto, MPLA, relatórios imediatos, 12 Dec. 1968–17 Feb. 1972', 79.

<sup>39</sup> Interview 11, 1999: Kehemu, 22 June 1999, with two women, born near Kunjam-ba. One was born around 1940, the other between 1935 and 1940. Both had been taken to the bush by MPLA, but also spent time in Portuguese settlements.

<sup>40</sup> Interview 23, 1997: Kaisosi, 18 Aug. 1997, with a woman of about 65 years old, born near Kuito Kuanavale. She had witnessed executions of traitors and witches in MPLA before independence and in UNITA after independence.

<sup>41</sup> Interview 11, 1999: Interview 19, 1996: Kehemu, 19 June 1996, with a woman, born in 1950 by the Kuieio river. She, her husband (see Interview 21, 1999) and their child had been taken from their village by MPLA guerrillas in 1966.

<sup>42</sup> Kerbosch, *Angola met eigen ogen*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> 'Chipenda repudiates agreement', *Daily News* (Tanzania, 30 Oct. 1974), in *Facts and Reports*, 4 (23 Nov. 1974), nr. 2157; John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare (1962–1976)* (Cambridge and London, 1978), 201–4, 405 n. 185.

<sup>44</sup> 'Le complot contre le MPLA', *Afrique-Asie* (20 Aug. 1973), in *Facts and Reports*, 3 (1 Sept. 1973), nr. 1151.

between Chipenda and Neto after 1973 also drew international attention and called for an explanation. It is probable, however, that the atmosphere of terror had already been in existence for much longer. During the field-work it was stated that many 'traitors' were executed in the beginning, when the MPLA sought to coerce people into staying in the bush with them. After a period of relative calm, the executions became more frequent again as the guerrillas feared that too many civilians would flee to town, where they would be safe from the increasing Portuguese bombardments. Reports from foreign visitors also indicate that a climate of suspicion had been in existence for much longer and had frequently resulted in internal violence. Perhaps the Giboia Revolt of 1969, in which at least 200 (some stated 800) guerrillas left their camps and marched to Zambia to complain about abuses and executions by the leadership in the Eastern zone, led to a temporary lull in the executions.<sup>45</sup> While the frequency may have varied, executions of traitors and witches at the Eastern Front took place throughout the war.

Most informants related the execution of so-called 'traitors' to guerrilla coercion and even if they felt that the guerrillas were correct in their suspicions, they abhorred hearing about the executions. In one case, a woman heard the news of her relatives' death from yet another relative who had managed to flee from an MPLA camp:

*Woman:* We can add that when the MPLA were in the bush, there were our brothers-in-law Tololi and Fulai and their wives Niamuila and Teresa. They said: 'We have our people in town. Here we are suffering. Let us go to town. So that we may find some clothes, and may eat well. The suffering has become too much'. But there was a child that had heard them and it said: 'Those people were making plans, saying that at night they want to run away to town'.

*Interviewer:* In MPLA?

*Woman:* In MPLA, yes. And our brothers-in-law said: 'Let us run off to town'.

*Older woman:* But they were reported.

*Woman:* Yes, they were reported indeed. So they got up in the very early morning, during the night they came out. They came out and they told the women: 'The MPLA are asleep now; let's run off and go to town'. Then they caught them. And said: 'Oh, so you wanted to go to town because of suffering'. They said: 'What? We were not doing anything like that. Who told you that?' They said: 'This child heard you talking'. So that is what happened to those four people, but when the fifth person – who was nearby – heard it, s/he escaped stealthily, s/he ran off. The four people whom they had captured were told to dig pits. They started digging, a pit, digging.

*Interviewer:* Who was digging?

*Woman:* The men. Tololi and Fulai, both of them were digging a pit. The women were standing aside. Many, many people were standing around the pit. They dug and dug, a large, large pit. Then they said: 'Come and greet your families'. They shook hands, shook hands, shook hands. Then one of them was put in the pit and shot; another: ready, shot; another: ready, shot; another ready, shot. The

<sup>45</sup> Winter Lemba, *Marching with the Fighters of the MPLA* (Dar es Salaam, 1970), 5, suggests that cases occurred of people being shot for not having a proper *Guia de Marcha* (travel pass). Kerbosch, *Angola met eigen ogen*, 54, tells of Dutch visitors, who dared to criticize an MPLA camp leader, being intimidated; Mabeko-Tali, "'Tribalisme'", 474–9.

relatives were crying. They said: 'Why are you crying?' Do you also wish to enter? You must not cry, otherwise you will enter. There must be no crying. Be happy! And say: 'Comrade, you are doing well!'

*Interviewer:* Did the MPLA do that?

*Woman:* Yes, the MPLA. They said: 'Smile. Just smile!' And those who went to town, they said: 'They are killing two women and two men'. They said: 'Direct us to the place'. The white people ...

*Interviewer:* The fifth person who had escaped told them?

*Woman:* Yes, s/he had escaped. The white people were led there and told: 'Right there is their base'. They started shooting: *tututututu!* Some people died, others ran off! And many stayed as they were [with the MPLA].<sup>46</sup>

#### WITCHES AND FEAR

The execution of witches, according to the informants, followed a very similar pattern. The punishment meted out by the guerrillas was severe. The changing history of witchcraft punishment in this area shows that execution had been the exception rather than the rule. Witchcraft accusations had always been regulated by compensation or exile, and only towards the end of the nineteenth century did it briefly become a capital offence.<sup>47</sup> During the colonial period, the punishment became less severe again as the killing of witches was forbidden.<sup>48</sup> The MPLA guerrillas reintroduced the execution of witches, in most cases by firing-squad. This form of punishment was regarded as extreme and witnessing the executions filled the spectators with terror and fear:

*Woman:* Witches, as I said in the beginning, were present. When the soldiers of MPLA came, they refused them, saying, 'They are rotten potatoes, which we will remove. We will kill witches. We came here for the Portuguese. It can't happen that the Portuguese will kill you and the witches are also pulling. It will not happen here. Only witches would be left'. The sell-outs and the ones with familiars, they did not want.

*Interviewer:* Suppose one person was a witch or was criticizing MPLA, would you go and report such a person to the MPLA leaders?

*Woman:* Yes, we would report. It happened like this. They went there and reported. After this person had been reported, they would assemble all the people to the assembly house for a meeting. It would be full! They would ask: 'This person has done this thing, do you all want us to kill him/her or do you want that we do not kill him/her?' Then those without any fear at all would stand up and the crowd would raise their hands and say: 'No, we do not want him/her to die'. Then they would talk with him/her. But if you wanted, you would say: 'Kill here and now'. A carbine would appear and before you knew it, they would have hit and pierced his/her ears.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 17, 1997: Kaisosi, 21 July 1997, with two women, one of some 55 years old, the other around 70, both born in Mavinga. Both had been in the bush with MPLA, and had also lived in a Portuguese settlement.

<sup>47</sup> Achim von Oppen, *Terms of Trade and Terms of Trust: The History and Contexts of Pre-colonial Market Production around the Upper Zambezi and Kasai* (Münster and Hamburg, 1997), 339–40.

<sup>48</sup> Carlos Estermann, 'O que é um feiticeiro', in Carlos Estermann, *Etnografia de Angola (Sudoeste e centro)* (Lisbon, 1983), 347.

*Man*: If they captured a witch, or 2, 3 or 4 of them, they would not always been shot with a gun. They would give him/her a spade and an axe. They will go and s/he will have to dig a pit.

*Woman*: A pit.

*Man*: S/He would dig, dig, dig and dig. When it was enough, they would bury him/her. They did not shoot; s/he would have to dig a pit him/herself.

*Woman*: Like what they did to Salumai. They captured him themselves and dug a pit. Then they assembled the relatives of Salumai. Then they called him and told Salumai, they said: 'Enter the pit, so that we may shoot you'. They fired three times at him. The cartridges hit him, but he did not die. They said: 'A witch. It is your witchcraft. It is not us, but your relatives who reported you'. They took a gun and: Phew! Like that. The bullets hit his body.

*Man* [simultaneously]: But he did not die. Such a person can't be killed.

*Woman*: But he did not die. Another one: Phew! Like that. Phew. The fourth time, however, they aimed right there at his ear. Then he fell into the pit, *ndundundu*. All of us, we were standing at the pit. The story of killing your neighbour, be it a traitor, be it a witch, even a child of this height [indicates] would not be absent. Firstly all would be told: 'Stand there'. No crying, no crying. If you cried, like: 'Oh mother', if it was your uncle or your father, you might also go where he was. Yes. They'd say: 'You can stay together'. When the MPLA entered [the country], be it your brother, your uncle or your father: you knew: 'This is my uncle, this one is my brother', but to all you would say: 'Good morning comrade, good morning'. 'Good afternoon, comrade'. That was it. You could not say: 'Hey brother'. No. It wasn't like that. No.<sup>49</sup>

Despite many similarities with the descriptions of treason trials, the accounts of the executions of witches differ in two important respects. First, it is stressed that it was not easy for the guerrillas to execute witches, for the powers a witch possessed might well exceed those of a firearm. Moreover, although there is no doubt that witnessing the executions was a terrible thing, the powers of a witch may have been equally terrible. Many civilians greatly feared the powers of witches and felt that with their executions the deaths of many innocent people could be prevented.

The fear of witches' powers is related to a second difference in the accounts told about witchcraft and treason during the Eastern Front. While the accusation of treason often came from guerrillas themselves, the witchcraft cases were often brought before guerrillas by civilians. The accounts mostly tell of families in which disease and death occurred to an unexpected extent, after which a fellow civilian with a reputation for witchcraft was reported to the guerrillas. During the colonial era, witchcraft had been on the increase as accusations were forbidden under Portuguese law. In the beginning of the colonial epoch, colonial officials had little means to carry out colonial policies. Over time, however, the Portuguese measures against witchcraft accusations and witchdoctors were enforced ever more vigorously. Many people felt that these actions left witchcraft unpunished and so

<sup>49</sup> Interview 50, 1996: Kaisosi, 5 Sept. 1996, with a woman born in the early 1950s in the border area between Ninda and Sikongo (Zambia). She became an MPLA activist while in the bush. A male relative of hers joined the interview and gave some comments.

contributed to its growth.<sup>50</sup> Even though colonial legislation could be evaded in marginal areas such as Angola's south-eastern districts, the measures were important in that the vast arena of conflict that witchcraft constituted fell outside the channels of legal recourse and could only be dealt with clandestinely. The strongly developed sense of individualism and individual property had already marked out the region for poisoning and witchcraft long before colonialism: people carefully guarded what was their own and jealously looked at what others possessed.<sup>51</sup> In a context of increasing differences in wealth, rising bride-prices and increasing generational conflict, suspicions of witchcraft did not diminish during the colonial epoch.<sup>52</sup> The trials in the MPLA offered a chance to attempt to solve this problem which had been difficult to redress under colonial rule. Most of the accused people were well-known witches and had a long-standing reputation of being a witch.

While civilians suspected guerrillas of using accusations of treason to get rid of any political opponents, guerrillas were more suspicious of witchcraft claims. A local commander maintained that the execution of witches had to be stopped, because guerrillas no longer accepted civilians' claims:

*Man:* The civilians came and told us: 'Did you see this person? S/He has familiars. S/He has killed this one. Of course you do not know him/her, otherwise you would have killed him/her'. In the beginning it happened like that. Then it was enough. If they told us to kill, if they told us to kill, we did not accept. We would tell such people: 'Those familiars, where are they? Their familiars. Do you see them? No. So?' We would tell them to go and kill the person themselves, 'I will not kill him/her too'.<sup>53</sup>

For many civilians, there was no doubt that there were witches who destroyed other people. Yet, to accuse a person of witchcraft was no light matter and involved serious risks. This also held true for accusations of treason but to a lesser extent, as guerrillas were far more ready to believe such allegations. Before the war, at least a number of anti-witchcraft movements concentrated on administering counter-medicine rather than on the identification of witches.<sup>54</sup> If witches were identified, this was done by impersonal means, such as by poison ordeal during a trial<sup>55</sup> or by witchdoctors using a divination basket.<sup>56</sup> A witch could also be pointed out by anonymous

<sup>50</sup> In Barnett and Harvey, *Revolution in Angola*, 95–6, a man tells of Portuguese measures against witchdoctors in 1952. <sup>51</sup> Von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 244–6.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, 1985), 96.

<sup>53</sup> Interview 7, 1997: Kaisosi, 25 June 1997, with an elderly man, born by the Civeu river. After training in the Portuguese army, he was captured by the MPLA and became a guerrilla. He joined the Chipenda forces during the Eastern Revolt, but retired from the army after these entered the South African Defence Forces.

<sup>54</sup> Luiz Alfredo Keiling, *Quarenta anos de Africa* (Braga, 1934), 53; Mario Milheiros, 'Os Ganguelas: breve estudo dos povos e da sua região', *Mensário Administrativo*, 28 (1947), 33–4.

<sup>55</sup> C. M. N. White, 'Witchcraft, divination and magic among the Balovale tribes', *Africa*, 18 (1948), 90–1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 86–90; M. L. Rodrigues de Areia, *Les symboles divinatoires: analyse socio-culturelle d'une technique de divination des Cokwe de l'Angola* (Coimbra, 1985), 31.

masked dancers,<sup>57</sup> by the corpse of the bewitched person<sup>58</sup> or by a bird.<sup>59</sup> During the war, however, healers or diviners were only rarely engaged to prove or disprove civilians' accusations of witchcraft.<sup>60</sup> In the majority of cases, accusations were made by civilians, whereupon guerrilla leaders would investigate the matter. They would do this by hearing more civilians and guerrillas. After the investigations had been concluded, the civilian community and the guerrillas would be gathered and asked to decide on the form of punishment. If the investigations showed that the accusations were false, the accuser stood a chance of being executed. It goes without saying that in this system, a strong backing within the community and among the guerrillas was a prerequisite. Only people with ties to the guerrillas could hope for their claims to be found admissible, and only people with support in their community could hope that their claims would be buttressed during the investigations. Of course, relations within the community had always been an aspect of witchcraft accusation. Yet, the changes during the war, specifically the personalization of the accusations in the MPLA camps, the death penalty and the risk of backfiring, rendered this aspect of witchcraft accusation much stronger.<sup>61</sup>

#### RELATIONS

In MPLA official parlance, witchcraft and treason belong to entirely different realms. As we have seen, witchcraft was deemed a traditional problem, which had to be resolved through education, while treason was a serious threat liable for the death penalty. During the interviews for this article, many links between witchcraft and treason were suggested. The offences were not simply equated as some authors have indicated for the Zimbabwean context, and a number of differences between witchcraft and treason trials are already discussed above. Furthermore, informants distinguished between witchcraft, slander and reporting to the Portuguese in town, and used different words for these various crimes.<sup>62</sup> Despite these differences, informants often drew parallels between executions of witches and traitors. In the initial phase of the war, many of the leaders were young men, who came from outside the region, had spent most of their life in exile and did not know much about the cultural dynamics of the region in which they were operating.<sup>63</sup> Their dismissal of 'religion' may in a number of cases be explained by training and education in communist countries, but

<sup>57</sup> Maria Emília Castro e Almeida, 'Do Atlântico ao sudeste de Angola', *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, 72 (1954), 16.

<sup>58</sup> Keiling, *Quarenta anos*, 46, 47; Milheiros, 'Os Ganguelas', 32.

<sup>59</sup> August P. Bierfert, *25 Jahre bei den Wadiriku am Okavango* (Hünfeld, 1938), 29.

<sup>60</sup> During the fieldwork only one informant said that healers/diviners were consulted by the MPLA to prove or disprove accusations: Interview 14, 1997: Kaisosi, 16 July 1997, with a man, born in Ciume, who works as a healer. At the time of this interview he was about forty years old. Healers/diviners were of importance in the realm of war 'medicine' and divination.

<sup>61</sup> Geschiere suggests that accusations could backfire as accusers were people who had the ability to see witches and this was proof of their highly developed witchcraft tendency, *Modernity of Witchcraft*, 46–7.

<sup>62</sup> *Cingungu*: for 'traitor', *cilози*: for witch.

<sup>63</sup> Interview 1, 2000.



already in 1948 a Zambian administrator had argued that many 'latinized Angolans' did not believe in witchcraft.<sup>64</sup> Some of the incoming guerrillas may not even have known that they had entered an area reputed as having much witchcraft and anti-witchcraft.<sup>65</sup> Richard Werbner's remark that different groups may have used different accusations for one person may also be valid for a number of accusations at the Eastern Front. Thus, a MPLA cadre knew of a case where the formal verdict read 'treason', while everybody whispered 'fetishism, witchcraft'.<sup>66</sup> During interviews, it was stated that the MPLA called upon civilians to report people whom they suspected of treason. It is probable that for many commanders in the area, this call upon civilians had not been intended to include witchcraft cases. However, civilians, and perhaps also rank-and-file guerrillas, confronted guerrilla leaders with demands to end witchcraft. For such leaders, the requests may have posed considerable dilemmas; as already explained, many commanders regarded the claims with disbelief and suspicion. There may also have been some leaders, especially among the few born locally, who believed the elimination of witches to be part of the MPLA's responsibility. Thus a letter captured in 1968 in Cunzúmbia camp (probably at the river Kunjumbia, a tributary of the Lomba), showed commander Cikuambi writing to commander Adson Mafuta in shaky Portuguese, with the word witch indicated in the vernacular as *chilozi*:

17 December 1967. Dest[ination]: [sector] B.

C[omrade]/political activist Adson Mafuta.

In the first place I wish you good health and happiness. Here I am faring a bit better. We are all in good health. I would like to have a mission there at the river Cuziz[i] we encountered an enemy (witch). I send a letter to you political activist. Comrade it is necessary in our party of MPLA that I would like to be <sup>??</sup> a (witch). I have here killed an enemy (witch). One were killed the rest is left for you to kill. She is called Nhalicumbi in the village Namumbamba at the Cuziz[i] river. So this is the objective of our popular movement for the liberation of Angola (MPLA).

Signed leader Dilai Chicuambi

Chiguambi.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> White, 'Witchcraft, divination and magic', 81–2.

<sup>65</sup> Interview 1, 2000; for neighbouring areas on the area's extreme reputation in witchcraft, see Manfred Förg, 'Tod und begräbnis bei den Vambunza am Okavango', *Journal of the SWA Scientific Society*, 22 (1967/8), 62 (in Kavango); Fritz and Willem Jaspert, *Die Völkerstämme Mittel-Angolas* (Frankfurt am Main, 1930), 56 (in central Angola); Marthe Kuntz, 'Les rites occultes et la sorcellerie sur le haut-Zambèse', *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 2 (1932), 130 (in upper Zambezi); for anti-witchcraft: S. Thikusho, 'Hoe Hambukushu Kavango ondek het' (Typescript, National Archives of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia), 6–7 (in Kavango); Wilfrid D. Hambly, *The Ovimbundu of Angola* (Chicago Anthropological Series 21, 1934), 273 (in central Angola). Angolan refugees are also reputed for having witchcraft tendencies: see Interview 5, 1996, Windhoek, 9 May 1996, untaped interview with a man in his thirties, born in south-east Angola; Interview 22, 1996: Kaisosi, 27 July 1996, with a woman born in 1959 in Mavinga (in Namibia); Anita Spring, 'Women and men as refugees: differential assimilation of Angolan refugees in Zambia', *Disasters*, 3 (1979), 425 (in Zambia).

<sup>66</sup> Interview 1, 2000.

<sup>67</sup> PIDE/DGS, Del. A, SS Fundo, NT 9084: 'Posto Cuito Cuanavale, MPLA: relatórios imediatos, 2 Nov. 1967–10 Nov. 1973, 30 Sept. 1974', 501 (where the

In such cases, witchcraft and treason may have become closely linked. Even if commanders held an entirely secular notion of unity and treason, in the way that Bourdillon has suggested for Zimbabwe, this does not diminish the interpretation of civilians and rank-and-file in the area where they operated. In the critique of David Lan's interpretation of witchcraft and treason as moral evil, some authors have proposed a secular notion of treason. Perhaps, for some guerrilla leaders, 'killing proven sell-outs after they had ignored a warning to discontinue' may have been no more than a 'a necessary wartime act'.<sup>68</sup> For others, however, treason may have constituted as much a moral problem as witchcraft. Much research has been done on the concept of witchcraft in various African cultures, but treason, slander or theft have been assumed to mean what they mean in Europe and intellectual histories of such notions are hitherto lacking.<sup>69</sup> In a number of African contexts, protection of witches by the colonial state led to a close identification of witchcraft and treason.<sup>70</sup> It is unclear from the sources how far this was the case in south-east Angola, but a number of links can be pointed out on a more conceptual level. Thus, the notion of treason does not solely belong to the realm of war or of struggle against colonialism, but also to the realm of family oral traditions, initiation secrets, the guarding of medicine and other assets of knowledge to be guarded with care. To gather knowledge and to use it for wicked ends was one important feature of a witch. Like witches, traitors posed an internal threat to the community, much in the vein of Heike Behrend's usage of the notion 'internal enemy'.<sup>71</sup> The various words used to indicate treason suggest that it is related to maligning,<sup>72</sup> while in earlier times 'dying a treacherous death' and witchcraft were also used synonymously.<sup>73</sup>

During the war, people living in MPLA camps in the bush often suffered extreme deprivation in which there was an acute and universal shortage of everything. People displaying property were not trusted by the guerrillas and were thought to have been in contact with the Portuguese, 'People felt jealous if they saw somebody with possessions. If the soldiers found them, they'd think, "They went to town"'.<sup>74</sup> Material success may also be explained by access to witchcraft, as people with many familiars were seen as having control over much labour and having the means to deal with rivals

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transcription and translation of the document are unclear, this is indicated with a double question mark); see also PIDE/DGS, Del. A, P.Inf, 110.00.30: 'MPLA', pasta 19, 366, where one of the captured documents from Lunda in 1970 states that the president (*presidente de acção* of Sector iii) is a witch. <sup>68</sup> McGregor, 'Containing violence', 137.

<sup>69</sup> Both exception and rule mainly stem from anthropologists: Suzette Heald, 'Witches and thieves: deviant motivations in Gisu society', in Suzette Heald, *Manhood and Morality: Sex, Violence and Ritual in Gisu Society* (London and New York, 1999), 73–89.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Stadler, 'Witches and witch-hunters: witchcraft, generational relations and the life cycle in a lowveld village', *African Studies*, 55 (1996), 106–7 (on South Africa); Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda, 1986–97* (Oxford, 1999), 118 (on Uganda). <sup>71</sup> Behrend, *Alice Lakwena*, 97–8.

<sup>72</sup> Emil Pearson, *Ngangela-English Dictionary* (Cuernavaca, 1970), 388.

<sup>73</sup> Keiling, *Quarenta anos*, 53.

<sup>74</sup> Interview 53, 1996: Kaisosi, 13 Sept. 1996, particulars, see woman of Interview 50, 1996.

in business.<sup>75</sup> An individual convicted of having been in liaison with the Portuguese may thus have been regarded as a witch by the local populace. In a song that the assembled civilian community had to sing when standing around the grave of a convicted person, various notions of witchcraft and treason were combined:

We do not want the traitor, we will meet him/her at the graveyard.  
 Yes my, oh yes, MPLA we thank you. Yes my, oh yes, bringing us comrades.  
 The one with familiars is not sought for, we will meet him/her at the graveyard.  
 Yes my, oh yes, MPLA we thank you. Yes my, oh yes, bringing us comrades.  
 We do not want the witch, we will meet him/her at the graveyard.  
 The one going with familiars is not sought for, we will meet him/her at the graveyard.  
 Yes my, oh yes, MPLA we thank you. Yes my, oh yes, bringing us comrades.  
 We do not want the one with the witch-gun, we will meet him/her at the graveyard.  
 The one fighting with his fellow beings is not sought for, we will meet him/her at the graveyard.  
 Yes my, oh yes, MPLA we thank you. Yes my, oh yes, bringing us comrades.<sup>76</sup>

#### PATTERNS?

These song-lines lead back to the issue of legitimacy and coercion, which in discussion of witch-hunts often stands unresolved. For example, Niehaus maintains that ANC Comrades in South Africa sought 'support among villagers' by acting against witches, yet 'haphazard methods of witch-finding and brutal forms of punishment eroded their legitimacy among adults'. Although he explains that 'it would be inappropriate to view witch-hunts as rituals that bolster and legitimate, or challenge and delegitimate, a single centre of power', his article discusses many dilemmas, but not this one.<sup>77</sup> In Kriger's book as well, executions of witches in Zimbabwe are at once interpreted as signs of guerrilla coercion and as civilians' attempts to extend their power.<sup>78</sup> She uses the concept 'struggles within the struggle' to indicate the ways in which disadvantaged groups such as women, young people and followers attempted to bolster their position *vis-à-vis* men, the elderly and chiefs during the war. She goes so far as to call this 'an internal social and political revolution'.<sup>79</sup> Her interpretation has been criticized by McGregor, who has pointed out that 'the alignments

<sup>75</sup> Although material success may have many causes: apart from diligence, it may also be the consequence of winning over *limumi*, a forest ogre which has to be fought and won, after which the winner is granted a wish. This remark is important also with respect to the cause of death: death is far from exclusively attributed to witchcraft. Many forms of power exist which may cause death or at least these used to exist: the emphasis on witchcraft as an explanation seems a recent development.

<sup>76</sup> This version: Interview 4, 1999. <sup>77</sup> Niehaus, 'ANC's dilemma', 95, 96.

<sup>78</sup> Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, esp. 129–33, 179–206.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* esp. 129–33, 179–206; Norma Kriger, 'The Zimbabwean war of liberation: struggles within the struggle', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14 (1988), 304–22 (quote: 319).

and structures set up to deal with witch-hunting were often far more complex than sociological oppositions allow'.<sup>80</sup>

Kruger's argument is important as it points to the violence and coercion used towards civilians during the war, but which did not render these civilians as powerless pawns and victims; indeed, they continued to aspire to, and to act upon, political and social goals. Yet, also during the Eastern Front in Angola, accusations seem far less patterned than Kriger has suggested for Zimbabwe. Of course, the guerrillas were mostly young men, and their leaders, especially in the beginning, came from outside the region. The fact that these men carried through trials and sentenced people to death constituted a major change. Previously such jurisdiction had been a privilege of male village elders. Indeed, some people evaluated the guerrillas' power as a threat to the elderly. Most of the witchcraft examples certainly concerned elderly men. This may, however, have been due to the fact that elderly men, especially those with political power, were most likely to become powerful witches. There is no evidence that this was the consequence of an attempt by the young to resist a 'structurally disadvantaged position'.<sup>81</sup> That the accusations stemmed more often from civilian families than from the guerrillas constituted evidence to the contrary. Furthermore, the accusation of treason, more often initiated by the guerrillas themselves, could be laid against anybody, and the examples given during interviews show no particular target group.

The same applies to the realm of relations between chiefs and commoners. Chiefs had a precarious position during the war. During colonial conquest, chiefs not submitting to Portuguese authority had been removed and were replaced by more pliant candidates. These were given 'a hat and a gun', as it was said commonly, and ordered to collect taxes and provide people for forced labour.<sup>82</sup> The MPLA leadership, as we have seen, were in general suspicious of traditional authority and tended to see chiefs as reactionary collaborators. In interviews, Neto was said to have personally ordered all chiefs to be killed.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, it seems that the MPLA were forced to rely on local political hierarchies. Their village committees, for example, included no members from former slave families and consisted entirely of people of the chiefly houses.<sup>84</sup> Chiefs or village leaders were sometimes reported to the guerrillas and accused of treason or witchcraft. These accusations, however, did not take the form of commoners aiming to limit chiefly power. Mostly, they involved jealousies and rivalries between families of equal rank or within one family. If accusations were more often issued against chiefs or village leaders, this was because they were held responsible for the actions of people under their control, or because of their stronger tendency to become involved in witchcraft. Those with political power were generally thought to have access to great magical powers, for

<sup>80</sup> McGregor, 'Containing violence', 136.

<sup>81</sup> Kriger, 'Zimbabwean war of liberation', 319.

<sup>82</sup> Interview 16, 1999: Kehemu, 28 June 1999, with a man, born in 1929, near the Lomba salt-pan. He and his family spent considerable time in the bush with MPLA before moving to Zambia in 1974.

<sup>83</sup> Interview 22, 1997: Kaisosi, 18 Aug. 1997, particulars, see Interview 7, 1997, above.

<sup>84</sup> Interview 16, 1999.

good or for evil. 'The heart of the chief is as full of witchcraft and quarrels as the body of the porcupine is full of quills', a local proverb says.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, when Angolan refugees entered Zambia during the war, nearly all Angolan chiefs were reported to the authorities by Zambian villagers. For fear of witchcraft, the villagers preferred that all chiefs be sent to refugee camps.<sup>86</sup>

Most of the examples given during interviews revolved around the relations between men and women. There are indications that, as in Zimbabwe, some women took the opportunity and reported violent husbands to the guerrillas. As wife-beating was thought to bring disunity, some of the guerrilla leaders felt such charges admissible.<sup>87</sup> There were also cases mentioned of women who started an affair with one of the guerrillas and, in order to get rid of their husbands, maintained that they had been to town.<sup>88</sup> Despite the MPLA's advocacy of gender equality, however, it does not seem that women were given much chance to diminish male control over them through the guerrillas. In the two references in writing on witchcraft accusations, conflict over bride-price was at stake. In south-east Angola, bride-prices had always been extremely low, while divorce and extra-marital relations occurred relatively frequently. In a north-south direction, bride-prices rose steadily during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and took the form of cash payments instead of labour.<sup>89</sup> As the value of bride-prices increased, and divorce rates remained high, the potential for serious conflict between families grew, often resulting in witchcraft accusations. The war, with its many displacements and risks, further enhanced this potential. The MPLA guerrillas did not have an income, unlike young men before them who had gone to the mines. Some fathers saw this as reason to 'grant a respite for the bride-price in MPLA – until Independence'.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, other families insisted on payment, leading to conflict with the guerrillas.<sup>91</sup> In one case, guerrillas suspected villagers of using witchcraft against them to prevent courtship with their daughters without any prospect of bride-price payment.<sup>92</sup> In another, the long absence of her guerrilla

<sup>85</sup> Milheiros, 'Os Ganguelas', 67–8; *vandumba va vantú* (witches' familiars) have been defined as the 'guard' of the chief, see Gerhard Kubik, 'Die Institution mukanda und assoziierte Einrichtungen bei den Vambwela/Vakangela und verwandten Ethnien in Südostangola' (Ph.D. thesis, Wien, 1971), 496.

<sup>86</sup> Spring, 'Women and men', 426.

<sup>87</sup> Interview 19, 1996.

<sup>88</sup> Interview 22, 1997; Interview 20, 1996: Kehemu, 21 June 1996, with a woman between fifty and sixty years old by the Namomo river. She was taken by MPLA guerrillas at the beginning of the war.

<sup>89</sup> Von Oppen, *Terms of Trade*, 266–9; Emil Pearson, *People of the Aurora* (Seal Beach, 1977), 58. Although von Oppen maintains that the increase occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this may have mainly concerned the northern and western part of his study area. Travelling near the border with Namibia in 1947, Schönfelder maintained that presents did not absolve a man from carrying out 'bride labour' for his family in law ('South-east Angola: country, population, recruiting possibilities' [Typescript, Kroondal 1947, in Scientific Society, Windhoek, Namibia], 14–15).

<sup>90</sup> 'Start for a new fatherland', *Der Spiegel* (8 Feb. 1971), translated in *Facts and Reports*, 9 (6 Mar. 1971), nr. 349.

<sup>91</sup> 'Angolan fighters gain ground'; see also: Pepetela, *Ngunga's Adventures: A Story of Angola* (London, 1980).

<sup>92</sup> Barnett and Harvey, *Revolution in Angola*, 286–7.

husband had led a woman to re-marry. As enmity between the second husband and the parents of the first husband rose, the second husband charged his opponents with witchcraft.<sup>93</sup> During interviews the bride-price was not mentioned. Yet, in the interviews as well, most of the examples given concerned male rivals for control over women rather than a female struggle against male privileges. Husbands accused guerrillas of taking advantage of their position, and of seducing married women.<sup>94</sup> Frequently, fights over girl-friends occurred, and in some cases trials were used by men to hit at rivals in love affairs.<sup>95</sup> One woman asserted that these conflicts were getting out of hand and that this formed a reason to stop the executions: too many men were dying because of women.<sup>96</sup>

The accusations, trials and executions were profoundly political affairs. Relations within the community as well as with the guerrillas were important in order to bolster or repudiate accusations. Cases occurred in which civilians used the guerrillas for their own purposes and accused personal rivals of treason or witchcraft. Yet, such struggles were hardly patterned in such a way that they could be interpreted as an attempt to resist current patterns of domination. If accusations came from the civilians, in most cases the concerned families of equal rank and the issue revolved around personal conflicts. Some of these conflicts stemmed from long before the war, while others developed in the war context. This would apply not only to accusations coming from civilians; guerrillas also attempted to settle old scores or new rivalries by means of false accusations. The guerrilla leadership was aware of the fact that accusations of treason were used sometimes out of spite or revenge.<sup>97</sup> At least in some cases, guerrilla leaders themselves used execution as a means to further their own interests.<sup>98</sup> Apart from the indiscriminate killing of people suspected of going to town, such false accusations by the guerrillas and their leadership also became a source of abhorrence for many civilians.

#### CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Many civilians felt that the trials became more fearsome than the actual powers of witches or the threats posed by traitors. According to them, the negative aspects of the trials had increased to an intolerable extent, through abuse, coercion, threats to the spectators and the risk of backfiring. The executions formed one of the reasons for people to leave the country. As a man who left in 1968 for Zambia expressed it:

*Mpande*: How do you think things differed between MPLA and UNITA?

*Man*: Mhm. The good things?

*Mpande*: Yes. And the bad things.

*Man*: Also the bad things ... We never stayed for a long time with the UNITA. With the MPLA we stayed for a long time, so we saw all the bad things they did. They are the ones who made us go to Zambia. If you are married, they would call

<sup>93</sup> Davidson, *In the Eye*, 29–30. <sup>94</sup> Interview 20, 1996; Interview 21, 1999.

<sup>95</sup> Interview 22, 1997.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Davidson, *In the Eye*, 29–30; there are hints that civilians also attempted to use reporting to the Portuguese in this manner: *Facts and Reports*, 2 (15 May 1971), nr. 614; Interview 50, 1996. <sup>98</sup> Mabeko-Tali, “‘Tribalisme’”; *idem*, *O MPLA*, 130.



all the women and gather them, and they would stay together, and they would dance. They would capture this person and say [starts singing]: 'We do not want the traitor, we will meet him/her at the graveyard. [his wife joins in] The one from town we do not want, we will meet him/her at the graveyard. Yes my, oh yes, MPLA we thank you [the man alone again]'. If they saw somebody from town, they'd say: 'This is a traitor'. They would take the person and kill him/her. Then if they saw a very old person, they'd say: 'This is a witch'. They would kill them, saying: 'They are traitors'. So then we held a secret meeting, asking ourselves: 'Do we want this? These people, did they come to help us, or did they come to kill us? A person who stays in town and then runs off and tells them: "My o my, I made it to this place". They should accept him/her. And an old person, suppose s/he had killed a person, then they could say: "You have killed a person". But if s/he had not killed a person, then they should not aim at that person. But if they see old people, they say: "This is a witch", and they kill him/her. Truly they have come to kill us. What shall we do? The way we are staying now in the bush is not good, let us go to town'. 'But if we go to town and the whites see us, they will kill us. And also the MPLA, if they find us setting out to town, they will kill us as well. So what can we do? What can we do to leave the MPLA, and not be killed?' 'Let us not go to town. Let us escape and go to Zambia'. So then we escaped and left the MPLA. And we went to Zambia.<sup>99</sup>

Most people declared that witchcraft trials stopped after some years as the guerrilla leaders no longer accepted the claims and the risks of retaliation for civilian accusers became too high. The MPLA leadership ordered the executions to stop, they said: 'Enough! Don't kill the civilians. All the people will be finished. People are already dying in the war, you should not also kill them. That was the message from Lusaka, from the leaders'.<sup>100</sup> After this, a relative calm ensued, but after some time the executions of alleged traitors, on the basis of accusations from the guerrillas, increased again. As explained above, the guerrillas had to enforce ever more drastic measures in attempting to keep civilians under their control and prevent them from fleeing.

There is evidence that upon independence in 1975, anti-witchcraft trials were held again in some parts of the south-east at the instigation of civilians. In the view of a missionary in Namibia, the rivalry between MPLA, FNLA and UNITA in south-east Angola resulted in a bid to win public approval. A UNITA enquiry into people's wishes rendered the following outcome: freedom to deal with witches in order to purify the land, the interdiction of mixed racial marriages as the Portuguese left these women and their children behind without any means, the expulsion of all Bushmen and the extermination of all Mbarakwengo (Kxoe) as they had been engaged in Portuguese service.<sup>101</sup> MPLA leaders at first attempted to avoid participating in the ensuing witch-hunt, but had to give in to demands stemming from both civilians and rank-and-file guerrillas. Like other parties, this document states that the MPLA used torture to extract

<sup>99</sup> Interview 21, 1999 (this group asked the MPLA's permission to sell wax in Zambia, which they received. They never returned to Angola). <sup>100</sup> Interview 53, 1996.

<sup>101</sup> Bushmen had an extremely bad reputation for their collaboration with the Portuguese and calls for revenge were frequently made: Gerhard Kubik, 'Das Khoisan-Erbe im Süden von Angola', *Wiener ethnohistorische Blätter* (Sonderdruck), 27 (1984), 147.

confessions, and it gives an example of a summary execution with an axe of an alleged witch.<sup>102</sup>

After independence, the informants stated, the MPLA chased UNITA from town and they became the 'town people'. The MPLA came to be associated with 'modernity' and witchcraft trials and executions stopped. In UNITA, the executions of witches and traitors were said to have become increasingly arbitrary after independence. It is not easy to know of developments in dealings with witches and traitors in areas ruled by the MPLA after independence. There certainly are indications that kangaroo courts against accused 'traitors' continued. In general, however, these were no longer followed by public executions, as the elimination of people who posed a threat to unity instead took the form of 'disappearance'. It seems that, also after independence, the accusations of 'treason' took a top-down model, while witchcraft accusations stemmed more often from ordinary civilians. It is apparent that witchcraft did not decrease after independence.<sup>103</sup> According to a woman who grew up in a MPLA-controlled area after independence, the MPLA has left this part of jurisdiction in the hands of the public. Yet, she also stressed the importance of having relations with the military, stating that people without any contacts with soldiers have very few means to confront witches.<sup>104</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

This article has sought to argue that witchcraft and treason trials at the Eastern Front of MPLA showed both differences and similarities. It suggests that perspective should become a key consideration in any discussion of the trials. As in Zimbabwe, there were cases in which different groups used different labels to describe the same accused person. While in formal MPLA discourse, treason and witchcraft were not connected in any way, people from south-east Angola may have linked these concepts in various ways. Guerrilla leaders in the area tended to regard civilian claims about witchcraft with suspicion and not all of them believed in the powers of witchcraft. For such commanders, executing witches caused a considerable dilemma. It is unclear whether witch-hunts evoked any moral debate in the higher echelons of MPLA leadership. Given the poor communication, leaders in Dar es Salaam and even Lusaka did not always know what was happening in the MPLA camps in eastern Angola.

For most civilians in south-east Angola, witches formed a real threat and, although execution was deemed an extreme measure, punishment of established witches was seen as necessary. While accusations of witchcraft stemmed more often from civilian families, accusations of treason could be issued by anybody, and many cases were initiated by guerrillas or their

<sup>102</sup> Maria Fisch, 'Hexenjagd im Krisengebiet von Südostangola (Auszug)' (Unpublished typescript based on notes from Father B. Hartmann, RK Mission Sambyu, Kavango, 1975), by courtesy of Maria Fisch.

<sup>103</sup> Inge Tvedten, *Angola: Struggle for Peace and Reconstruction* (Boulder CO, 1997), 131, 132; Henrique Abranches, *Reflexões sobre cultura nacional* (Lisbon, 1980), esp. 62–102.

<sup>104</sup> Interview 2, 2000: Lisbon, January 2000, with an Angolan woman who had lived in MPLA, held territory after independence.

leaders. It was made clear during interviews that not all claims were genuine, for some civilians and some guerrillas used reporting to get rid of personal rivals and enemies. In many cases, these accusations revolved around relations between men and women, turning on such things as marriage, adultery and love-affairs. Nonetheless, the accusations showed few patterns and cannot be interpreted as an attempt to overcome structural forms of domination in society. In this respect, the present contribution supports the critique that has been made of Kriger's work on the war in Zimbabwe and, as in McGregor's article, proposes agency in each individual case rather than sociological categories as a key to an understanding of the accusations. Yet, at the same time, the present interpretation partly reverses the point made in McGregor's article about the difference between witchcraft and treason during the Zimbabwean war for liberation.

Civilians who had witnessed executions remembered the trials with terror as they had been forced to watch the killings and feared becoming suspect themselves in the eyes of the MPLA guerrillas. Those who had not witnessed the trials themselves, but were told about the executions, mostly also expressed fear and repulsion. In general, civilians evaluated most of the trials as guerrilla coercion to keep civilians under MPLA control or as false accusations to get rid of any political or personal opponents. They did not evaluate the trials as 'a necessary wartime act' as some guerrillas may have done, but were deeply concerned about the criteria used to establish 'treason'. For them, killing proven witches constituted a more legitimate action than the execution of those trying to escape to the Portuguese settlements. As in Zimbabwe, virtually every case evoked intense debate about the genuineness of the accusation, the severity of the punishment and the way in which the trial was conducted. Yet, while guerrilla leaders may have been more concerned about how to marry the execution of witches with their party's socialist, secular programme, for civilians the focus of moral debate was on the issue of treason.