

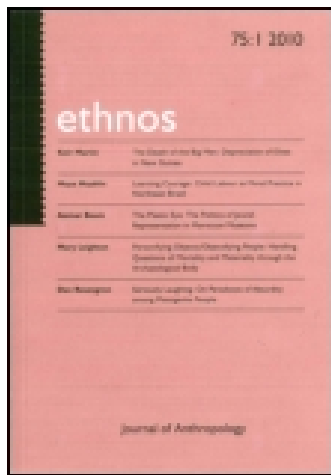
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# Time for Self-Sacrifice: Temporal Narratives, Politics and Ideals in African Prophetism

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**ABSTRACT** *In this article I propose an approach to sacrifice through notions of time, memory and expectation, moving away from classical formalist definitions that highlight the 'nature and function' of sacrifice, and into ideas of meaning and experience and their insertion in particular ideologies of time. I will argue that sacrifice entails particular temporalities, participating in political and experiential realms of memory and expectation. For this, I will invoke a particular regime of sacrifice: the notion of self-sacrifice, as it circulates among a prophetic and messianic Christian movement of Angolan origin, the Tokoist Church.*

**KEYWORDS** *Sacrifice and self-sacrifice, knowledge, temporality, prophetism, Angola*

In April 1970, Simão Toko, the founder and leader of an Angolan Christian prophetic movement, found himself, by decision of the Portuguese colonial regime, exiled in one of the mid-Atlantic Azores island. Angola was by then a Portuguese overseas province, and liberationist movements of upheaval were taking place in the northern parts of the territory. Suspicious of his allegedly subversive intentions, and knowledgeable of his public influence among the Angolans, the Portuguese authorities decided to remove him from the stage and impose a forced exile several thousand miles away from his homeland that would last over a decade. After seven years in this condition, he wrote a letter to his followers in Angola in the following terms:

(. . .) I work day and night, I do the domestic work all by myself, cooking, washing my clothes, ironing, taking care of the child and preparing her for school, do everything a woman does at home. I run to the field and grow some food there because life is

expensive and I live in the countryside, and the city is 25 km away. I am not allowed to visit other islands. If they let me go to the city sometimes it's because my older daughter is studying there and my poor wife is in the hospital. (...) I am not a free man like everyone else because I am a fake (*falso*). I am a useless man before all men. I am just waiting for God's final judgment where each one of us will present the good and the bad things we have done. (April 25, 1970)

Before and after this moment, and as a consequence of his leadership, Toko accumulated episodes of persecution, imprisonment, torture, exile and sickness throughout his life before passing away in 1984. A bright student in the Baptist missions where he grew up, he was being prepared to spend his life as a teacher in the missions. However, a series of spiritual events he experienced in his early 30s would produce a calling that made him abandon his predicted life and begin one of (painful) leadership. However, the church he founded, known as the 'Tokoist Church', is today one of the most successful and wealthy religious movements in Angola (Blanes 2014). Were he alive today, Toko would certainly be amazed with the great transformations that occurred within the now wealthy, multitudinous and media-savvy church, in which his figure has become heritagized and nationalized in postwar Angola 2014.

Toko's biography is therefore one of suffering, and in many ways reveals a similar pattern with other religious or political leaders who engage in self-sacrificial modes of existence, in order to promote the advancement of a given cause. However, what kinds of expectations are entailed within such self-sacrificial logics? What are the experiential and intellectual underpinnings behind sacrificial action? Can we understand any form or expression of sacrifice without attending to the temporalities (memories, expectations) invested in it? Such questions emerge in any speculation over the nature of sacrifice, commonly understood as an 'offering for a purpose'. We find countless examples of such narratives around us: the religious specialist that sacrifices cattle to the God he worships, hoping for a good year ahead; the religious leader who abdicates his individual well-being in favor of a collective advancement; the father who gives up his life to save that of his children in a disaster situation; the slave that is murdered to escort the high priest into the other world; etc. What is the common point between such diverse activities? All these examples contribute to an apparently fuzzy understanding of what sacrifice actually means. However, if classic approaches to sacrifice would explore the contractual bases behind such sacrificial actions, highlighting the material effects, in this article I will engage in a non-transactional conception of sacrifice that

binds knowledge, belief and temporalization: the utopian notion of 'ideal' (see Willerslev 2009), which often appears as its justification, and that I conceive as an ethical mode of knowledge and experience that is constructed through political notions of time, memory and expectation. From this perspective, sacrifice and self-sacrifice emerge here as ethical narratives that become politically agent.

With this suggestion, I deliberately move away from classical formalist definitions that highlight the function of sacrifice and into ideas of meaning and experience and their insertion in particular ideologies of time. As I will argue below, sacrifice, independently from its formal presentations, entails 'other sides', particular temporalities, and participates in political and experiential realms of memory and expectation – the 'matter' that remains from sacrificial configurations. For this, I will invoke a particular regime of sacrifice: the notion of self-sacrifice, as it circulates among prophetic and messianic Christian regimes. Commonly understood as a form of altruistic, self-denial behavior (for instance, Toko's waiting in exile for God's final judgment), it implicitly or explicitly entails a notion of ideal, which configures a moral political statement about the current state of things and a configuration of a righteous future. Here I take self-sacrifice as a political narrative that interprets and makes sense of specific human actions – martyrdom, selflessness, etc. – by temporalizing and providentializing them. This political narrative, in turn, often becomes inserted within regimes of knowledge that become in one way or the other agent.

To support this claim, I will discuss the case of African Christian propheticism, namely the above-mentioned Tokoist Church and the biography of its leader Simão Toko.<sup>1</sup> Toko (originally named Mayamona, or 'he who has seen', in kikongo) had studied in the Baptist missions of northern Angola, and, after migrating to Leopoldville (Belgian Congo), decided to emancipate from Western missionary Christianity after experiencing a series of spiritual and charismatic events that culminated on July 25, 1949, when the Holy Ghost descended upon him and his followers and they began to speak in tongues and prophesy (Grenfell 1998; Blanes 2009a, 2009b, 2011). The movement (and its leader in particular), which stood against missionary colonization and for Africa's spiritual salvation, was the object of political persecution for decades, especially after their deportation to Angola (in 1950), where they were to witness military uprising, the downfall of the Portuguese colonial regime and the subsequent installation of a Marxist-Leninist inspired MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) regime after independence (in 1975) – neither of which were favorable contexts for the development of a autochthonous prophetic movement (see

Blanes 2009a). Furthermore, after the prophet's death, the church began a conflictive process of succession, which remains unresolved to this day (Blanes 2014).<sup>2</sup> This, however, did not prevent them from enduring and becoming one of the most important Christian movements in contemporary Angola, with a powerful, pervasive role in the public sphere and a strong presence in the Angolan diaspora. This is therefore a religious movement where the memory of personal and collective sacrifice is combined with a current sensation of resilience, endurance, victory and providential confirmation.

During my research with the Tokoist Church, I soon became aware of how powerful and simultaneously profuse the sacrificial narratives I noted above became in the words of the people I spoke to. They were displayed in personal reflections as well as in prayers, hymns and sermonic rhetoric. This pushed me into thinking about how the notions of sacrifice and self-sacrifice respond to templates and genealogies in both emic and etic terms, observing what appeared as conflations between them. In what follows I will explore three such histories – prophetic, academic and Christian – in order to map the different self-sacrificial narratives involved in the Tokoist experience today. I will describe how, incorporating a particular biographical memory (Blanes 2011), prophetic movements such as the Tokoist church work with notions of sacrifice that are articulated through three inter-related intellectual stances, conjuring agency, historical consciousness and ideology: the constitution of a particular manifestation of religious leadership (the sacrificial messiahs) that combines local traditions and specific aspects of the Christian ethos; the handling and translation of Biblical theories of sacrifice and self-sacrifice into a particular stance; the historical constitution of an African Christian prophetic consciousness throughout the twentieth century, in particular in the Congo/Angola region, and its development into discourses of memory and eschatology mediated by senses of suffering and hope.

### **Sacrificial Messiahs in Africa**

Considering the political and religious transformations occurring in the continent at the time, it is not difficult to imagine late colonial Africa as a place where these Christian notions of millennialism, memory, suffering and sacrifice endured and circulated. Throughout the twentieth-century colonial enterprise, the continent was scenery for the development of several autochthon religious movements that, despite the contextual heterogeneity, shared a few common elements: the revision of European-originated Christian theory, the messianic structuration around the following of a prophet and leader and the protest

against given sociopolitical orders. As anthropologists like Georges Balandier duly noted, these movements associated sociopolitical resistance and combat with millennial eschatology to the extent that religious ideology influenced proto-nationalism and vice-versa (Balandier 1963 [1955]). Such was the case, among many others, of the prophetess Nontetha in southern Africa (Edgar & Sapire 2000), the revival of the Mbona cult in Malawi (Schoffeleers 1992) to, more recently, Alice Lakwena's Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda (Behrend 1999). In the Lower Congo region, where Tokoism is inscribed, a range of movements sprung in this period, inspired by the figure of a local prophet, Simon Kimbangu.<sup>3</sup> Kimbangu, born in 1887 in the small village of Nkamba in the then Congo Free State, was a young Baptist student who decided to emancipate and perform his own ministry, where, according to his disciples, Kimbangu cured the sick, raised the dead back to life and preached against oppression. His ministry lasted just a few months (from April to September 1921), but nevertheless created a large following, causing suspicion in the Belgian authorities, who later convicted him of sedition and sentenced him to life in jail (see, e.g. MacGaffey 1983; Sarró 2009; Mélice 2011). Despite the fact that the Kimbanguist church, as we know it today, was built in the subsequent decades by his wife (Marie Mwilu) and especially his son (Joseph Diangienda), Kimbangu's revision of missionary Christianity, associated with an anti-colonial discourse and simultaneously an anti-traditional stance, became a spiritual and political marker, especially in the decade that preceded Congolese independence. However, his 'sojourn' in jail for 30 years (before he passed away in 1951) also perpetuated an idea of physical suffering, spiritual resilience and martyrdom that made him, in the eyes of many, the ultimate example of an African and Christian martyr (Sarró 2009).

Interestingly, none of the references mentioned above highlight the sacrificial aspect of Kimbangu's (and other local prophets') life and religious ministry, possibly because they were concerned with the 'local sources' of religious leadership. Wyatt MacGaffey, for instance, looked at the 'Bakongo religious commissions' that composed the specific kind of prophetic leadership observed in the Lower Congo, through which Kimbangu could be better understood (1970). Similarly, Balandier also contextualized the 'Bakongo messianism' in the framework of wider movements in the Bantu world, but does identify the theological background upon which this specific following was developed – namely, the idea of Moses as a role model for a prophetic personality (1963 [1955]: 433) – and politically defined (through the notion of 'kingdom' – Balandier 1955). Neither, again, debate the problems of sacrifice and self-sacrifice.

In any case, Kimbangu's life left, in a sense, a blueprint in the region's political memory – that is extended to this day.<sup>4</sup> As Balandier (1963 [1955]) and MacGaffey (1983) describe, several different movements took up his example and continued the combination of spiritual renewal and political contestation. Such was the case, for instance, of the messianic *Église des Noirs*, led by Simon-Pierre Mpadi (1909–1950 approx.) – who emphasized Kimbangu as the liberator of Africa – André Matsoua's Amicalisme movement in the Middle Congo, several *Mpeve ya Nlongo* (Holy Spirit) churches in the Lower Congo and northern Angola, and particularly of Simão Gonçalves Toko, who was seen, in the scarce literature available on his movement, as an Angolan offshoot of the original Kimbanguist movement (e.g. Van Wing 1958: 608; Doutreloux 1965: 227; Barrett 1968: 27; Martin 1975: 100 and ff.).<sup>5</sup>

Toko's life, as I described elsewhere, is also remembered in many ways as a 'history of suffering' (Blanes 2009a, 2011, forthcoming). Soon after the descent of the Holy Ghost in July 1949, he and his followers were arrested by the Belgian authorities, in what is recalled today in the church as the 'first prisons' (*primeiras prisões*) of Simão Toko. This group was soon deported to the Angolan territory, where the Portuguese police sent them to forced labor camps and prisons dispersed throughout the colony, and suffered radical restrictions that prevented them from circulating freely and professing their faith. Many were imprisoned and tortured, and most were subject to measures of 'fixed residence' in several different labor camps throughout the country. During the upheaval that gave way to Angolan independence (1961–1974), Tokoists also suffered doubly, as they assumed a pacifist, non-confrontational position that earned recriminations from both the colonial establishment and the Angolan freedom fighters (Grenfell 1998). Several testimonies I collected from survivors of this period recall how they spent years living in the *matas* (forests), chased by both Portuguese military and Angolan rebel militias.

Toko himself was an object of particularly violent repression by the colonial authorities: after crossing the border in 1950, he was consecutively subject to periods of prison, forced labor and exile in several forced labor camps, before settling in the Namibe desert (1951–1963) and later in the remote Portuguese island of the Azores (1963–1974), where he was isolated and forbidden of regular contacts with his followers, extended family and friends. In post-independence Angola, he would once again be persecuted by the MPLA government and its leader Agostinho Neto, spending his last years of life in and out of prison or in hiding (the 'second prisons' of the leader), or constantly assaulted by the police authorities and internal affairs officers. Apart from several episodes



of physical aggression, Tokoist accounts also recall several murder attempts during these different 'trials and tribulations': from an attempt to throw him off a flying airplane (1963) to the removal, in Portugal, of his heart during a surgical intervention (1973) and the promise that he would be shot dead as soon as he entered Angolan territory after exile (1974).<sup>6</sup>

The different episodes of Toko's life – from his 'first' to his 'second' prisons – are today remembered in many and complex ways within the church. On the one hand, his biography has been built and reproduced in several productions, in laudatory books and documentaries which depict him as a reformist (Agostinho n.d.), a 'man of peace' (Kisela 2004), 'the African prophet' (Quibeta n.d.) or the messiah (Melo 2002); on the other hand, his life and works have been incorporated into the church liturgy, which sings his deeds (or songs composed by him) in the choirs, remembers his speeches in sermons and annually recalls and celebrates the different moments of his life, from the day of his birth on February 18 to the date of physical passing on New Year's Eve; also, in the way his life becomes a testimony in the hands of the believers who possess letters exchanged with him throughout his years of exile;<sup>7</sup> and finally, in the way his memory is disputed today by different, opposed sectors within the church that entered into conflict as soon as he passed away in 1984 (Blanes 2009a, 2011, forthcoming). In any case, these different 'methods' of memory converge in the recognition that Toko's life of martyrdom was somehow imbued with a purpose, that his self-sacrifice was not in vain. These different manifestations reveal a specific anxiety and expectation on behalf of those who absorb his legacy and try to 'survive his prophecy', i.e. struggle against the disappearance of the following once the founding prophet disappears as a physical person in the lives of his followers. From this perspective, the biographical language of self-sacrifice, its permanent invocation, becomes one of stabilization and justification, serving as a moral guide structured around an ideal of Christian righteousness.

From the previous statement, it becomes clear that this prophetic culture reveals an ideological and experiential binding between memory and self-sacrifice around the figure of the prophet/martyr. Not coincidentally, Tokoists often refer to each other as 'brother co-sufferer' (*irmão consofredor*). However, they do so with a sense of pride and dignity that reveals more than just pain and sadness, as if bodily acknowledging that the path of sacrifice and suffering has led them to a better place. 'Despite the conflicts and persecutions we have experienced, we are still here, alive', a young Tokoist told me recently in Luanda. I want to take this argument a bit further and suggest that more than an ideology of

memory, ideas of sacrifice also reveal a conceptualization of time (Koselleck 2002) that incorporates notions of history and expectations – or to borrow Koselleck's expression, builds 'historical prognoses' (2004: 58).

This becomes evident in one particular figure inside the Tokoist Church. In 1949, when the Holy Ghost descended upon Toko and his followers in Leopoldville, a charismatic attribution occurred: they all began speaking in tongues, foreseeing and prophesying (Cunha 1959; Grenfell 1998). This event was not only foundational – in that it became the pretext under which what was then a spontaneous movement became a church, under the reformist concept of 'remembrance' (Blanes 2009a; 2014) – but also implied a 'charismatic distribution' (Shils 1965), where several believers experienced and were granted divine gifts. This inaugurated a spiritualist modality within the Tokoist Church, where members known as *corpo vate* (literally, foreseeing body) would be possessed by the Holy Ghost or spirits of ancient prophets and, through the act of possession, receive and deliver particular information concerning the church, the world and the future.<sup>8</sup> This evolved historically into a tradition of spiritual work and knowledge, located and accumulated in the church's tabernacles, which simultaneously became the matter, the documentation of the remembrance, but also determined the modality of agency and 'political spirituality' (Marshall 2009) by which the church was guided. The *vates* therefore play a pivotal yet highly ambiguous role inside the church. On the one hand, they work on the basis of a particular expression of self-sacrifice, where the *vates* who are possessed temporarily lose consciousness and control of their body, and thus the spirits inhabit (*habitam*) them. This implies that those Tokoists who become *corpore vate* must ideally (and physically) learn to abdicate and let the spirits work in/through their body; the messages channeled through them are 'signed' by identified spirits, and then sanctioned and eventually disclosed by the collective leadership as an 'entity'. On the other hand, through this particular spiritual work they are responsible for a certain knowledge that is revealed and temporalized: it offers clarity of things past and future, and builds a 'Tokoist historiography' that offers the guidelines for the church's political and social action. From this perspective, they are not 'prophets' in the strict sense of the term, but instead 'temporal acknowledgers'. However, precisely because of this, the *vates* do not occupy 'political leadership' roles in the church, but remain in the spiritual domain. The fact that the *vates*, as 'foreseeing bodies', are 'silent prophets' who – unlike other, 'hustling prophets' (Werbner 2011) – are pushed into anonymity, in a way reveals a similar, dividual self-sacrificial logic to that of prophetic martyrdom: the sense of abdication and

production of a certain expectation. However, unlike the charismatic leadership, *vate* careers are not heroicized and publicized.

The memory of suffering that circulates and is perpetuated within the church is deeply connected to a sense of victory provoked by both a sense of resistance and survival, as well as a confirmation of divine providence. In my conversations with Tokoists in Luanda, discussing the church's institutional history, we were often amazed with the consideration that, despite all the suffering and strife, the church is still able to endure and thrive to this day. There is therefore a currency of ideas of sacrifice, resilience and providence that is significant.

However, contrary to the idea discussed by Koselleck (invoking Lorenz von Stein) of certainty of a future too distant and/or abstract to be held accountable as accurate or inaccurate,<sup>9</sup> Tokoists have, as I will explain below, updated prophecy through a language of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, and have collapsed the future into the present by proclaiming the fulfillment of the millennial forecast.

### **Sacrifice from Function to Temporal Knowledge**

By temporalizing sacrifice and self-sacrifice, what I am attempting in this text is a conceptual shift from its original understanding toward a political, narrative one. In a way, this is a reaction to the anthropological literature, where sacrifice emerges a polythetic and therefore ambiguous term. As the editors rightly claim in the introduction to this volume, sacrifice is in many ways an illusory concept. It has an array of meanings embedded in it: offering, ritual, oblation, libation, consecration, etc. Maurice Bloch also states that there are so many ideologies and manifestations attached to the idea of sacrifice that they render an attempt of its definition useless (1992: 25). Here I explore a correlated term with a more restricted meaning, that of self-sacrifice, commonly understood as the 'giving up of one's own interests or wishes in order to help others or to advance a cause' – and therefore not a religious act *per se*, but nevertheless a very important concept in many Christian cultures such as those that I invoke here. This requires, in any case, an exercise of conceptual distinction.

Most sacrifice theories in anthropology and philosophy have traditionally focused on its contractual, eventual (ritualized) and symbolic character or function (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1954; Lienhardt 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1962; Firth 1963; Hubert and Mauss 1964 (1898); Douglas 1966, 1999a; Turner 1968; Girard 1977 (1972); de Heusch 1985; Obeyesekere 2005 – see also Carter 2003; McClymond 2008), concerned more with what sacrifice is, does and symbolizes (the 'nature and function') as an act of offering and perhaps less with its political significance, value and how it is conveyed in the experience of those who

invoke it. From this perspective, sacrifice was often perceived in terms of an action, a practice, a rite. The notions of offering and oblation were, so to speak, representations of the attempts to contractualize or control religious experience in regards to human–divine relationships – or, from a girardian point of view, human–human relationships, addressing the violent nature of society (Girard 1977 [1972]). Most of these perspectives incorporated an epistemological concern for symbolic, representational dimensions of ritual action.

More recent approaches, however, have complexified these ideas. Maurice Bloch, for instance, has seen sacrifice as a ‘socially determinant’ ritual, in the process of creation of authority and order among the Merina in Madagascar (1986). He has also discussed the conceptual constitution of sacrifice as an anthropological category (1992). Similarly, Michael Lambek has described how, in the neighboring Malagasy setting of Mayotte, sacrifice appears as ‘a source of power and a means to differentiate, specify, or center identity’ (2002: 8), opening the scope of analysis to issues of *longue-durée* identity constitution. Jonathan Parry, in turn, has recently explained how ideologies and languages of sacrifice transform yet persist in modern India through rituals of animal offering, revealing particular ideologies of the nation state (2008). More recently, José Mapril has connected sacrificial rituals to problems of mobility and space, in order to explore how they become expressions of moral discourses within South Asian migrant routes (2009). These approaches, however, despite alerting to the symbolically significant character of sacrifice, remain faithful to the classic, ritual-centered interpretations that use social events or acts (‘rituals’) as heuristic frameworks.

The self-sacrificial narratives that I highlighted so far reveal that sacrifice is as much an act or an event as it is a form of knowing and acknowledging or remembering (Cole 2001) and a moral discourse (Strenski 2003). It can be recognized and located in certain liturgies, ritual prescriptions, etc., but also in certain narratives and historiographical constructions, such as biographies and life histories that, as noted elsewhere (Blanes 2011), identify forms of sacrifice and advancement through processes of trajectorialization of life histories. Recognizing the communicational character of sacrifice as proposed by Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1898]; see Bloch 1992: 27 and ff.), I argue that in certain religious contexts, ideologies of sacrifice and self-sacrifice are embedded in ways of believing and knowing that may or may not converge into liturgized, ceremonial practices. They can emerge even in quotidian acts such as preparing food (Detienne & Vernant 1989), which become political in the process. Not denying the logics of power and violence involved in

sacrifice, they do become, contrary to what Girard suggests,<sup>10</sup> part of a process of understanding and interpreting, of producing coherence for religious ideology and experience. From this point of view, Jennifer Cole has brilliantly explored sacrifice as an ‘art of memory’ or the implication of sacrificial ritual in the social processes of remembering and forgetting in postcolonial Madagascar. Within this framework, she sees sacrifice as a form of illumination and an interpretive filter through which local history is understood and reconfigured (2001: 171). Thus, the processes of sacrificial ritualization appear as idioms that offer templates for specific forms of collective acknowledgement and imagination (cf. Anderson 1983; Kapferer 2004). Below I will follow this approach, and consider it in the light of theories of self-sacrifice.

A second consideration, a consequence of the first, is that the idea and invocation of sacrifice, regardless of the heuristic models that frame it, has an inherent temporal aspect attached to it. Namely, the idea of ‘expectation’ and its experiential and political implications, which I have inserted here under the ethical notion of ‘ideal’. From this particular perspective, my proposal does not depart significantly from the previous reflections on the nature and function of sacrifice, inasmuch they all presuppose, in a way, an involvement of a certain idea of expectation and reward – or, as Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1898]) had suggested, the ‘benefit’ of the sacrificial act (10). If a religious specialist participates in a particular sacrificial offering, it is because he devises and expects something out of it. If a Nuer prophet sacrifices a wild cucumber instead of an ox, it is on the basis of a purposeful action (Evans-Pritchard 1954; see also Kurimoto 1992). However, my argument here does not just invoke the economic immediacy of consequence (the logic of investment and return), but instead wider political and experiential processes of temporal acknowledgement – not just as an art of memory, but also and extensively as an ‘art of time’. From this perspective, Parry, for instance, had also suggested a focus on particular narratives of modernity attached to the sacrificial logics of the *bali dan* ritual (2008). Michael Lambek’s ritual analysis of Sakalava cattle sacrifice also invokes a constant ‘bearing’ of the past. Thus, there is an underlying common assumption that sacrifice is a form of human agency, an expression of a particular intentionality that incorporates senses, philosophies and ideologies of time. Such is also the case, I believe, of self-sacrifice, which necessarily entails an expectation of collective progression or ‘advancement of a cause’. Regardless of its particular ritual or religious implications, self-sacrifice participates in theories of time; or, as Michael Lambek would put it, it poses an idea of ‘beginning’ (2007). In his discussion of Sakalava mythopraxis, Lambek

sees sacrifice as a narrative instantiation of the past into the present through particular images or ideas that respond to certain questions: how did things 'begin'? What does it mean 'to begin'? etc. (2007: 21). There is, as the editors of this volume also propose, a poetic, generative element in sacrifice. Similarly, I suggest that narratives and biographical profusions of self-sacrifice respond to similar questions, offering temporal acknowledgements and simultaneously explanatory templates. They operate upon the 'matter that is left', on top of what remains from an act of (self-) sacrificial configuration—an action, an event, a history.

This becomes evident in Christian prophetic cultures such as the Tokoist movement, where theories of self-sacrifice are inscribed in languages, ideologies and 'methods of memory' (Blanes 2011) in the process of 'making sacred' (consecrating). Prophets such as Simão Toko, after a life of 'advancement of a cause' (spiritual reformation, collective and individual liberation, the restoration of social justice, etc.), experience an ad hoc (usually post mortem) charismatic social attribution by which they become 'martyrs' inserted within a millennial and messianic temporalization.<sup>11</sup> Toko, from this perspective, became the *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998), an object of simultaneous ostracization and sacralization. However, similar processes can be found in the literature concerning African prophetism and messianism, and emerged in the late colonial period, in which autochthonous movements led by charismatic figures struggled for political and spiritual liberation amidst messianic proclamations of societal change. Their individual persecution by colonial authorities, as a consequence of their publicized leadership, was also the matter upon which 'prophetic biographies' were construed, conveyed and historicized (see Blanes 2011, forthcoming). In such cases, Simon Kimbangu, Simon-Pierre Mpadi, André Matswa, Simão Gonçalves Toko, etc., 'become holy' through social processes that recognize them as martyrs amidst their lives of physical suffering and 'giving up on oneself', but they also serve, through a sacrificial reasoning, as temporal markers and producers (or initiators) of expectation and hope, under the emic rationale that self-sacrifice entails an idealistic providentiality, a future consequence for their movements of following – i.e. the final victory of faith over conflict, violence, evil. In the case discussed here, the deconstruction of Belgian and Portuguese colonial regimes was the historical backdrop against which these processes occurred; however, as I will attempt to demonstrate below, the sacrificial template has remained and is revealed as highly operative in postcolonial times.

This last paragraph has two underlying assumptions: that there is a link between memory and expectation that, through the self-sacrificial narrative, is conceptualized into a theory of time, which is framed in terms of messianic and millennial ideologies that respond to specific historical contexts; and that these theories of time become part of a local knowledge that responds to situations of conflict and dispute. Within this framework, sacrifice and self-sacrifice appear as markers and illuminations of both intellectual and ideological processes of temporalization and contextualization.

### **Lambs of God: Leadership and the Christianity of (Self-) Sacrifice**

Sacrifice is an inherent aspect of Christianity. One could safely affirm that it was historical and ideologically construed over sacrificial acts – be they the countless narratives of animal or human sacrifice in the Old Testament (as seen in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, for instance, see Douglas 1999a), the Eucharist (Douglas 1999b) or the crucifixion of Christ in the Calvary. And certainly, as Maurice Bloch noted, the intellectual conceptions of sacrifice throughout history have been mainly inspired by the powerful images stemmed from the Judeo-Christian complex (1992: 28 and ff.; see also Detienne & Vernant 1989).<sup>12</sup> Of these examples, perhaps the most poignant is that of Jesus Christ's sacrifice in the Calvary, as the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrificial offering 'to take away the sin of the world' (John 1: 29). From this perspective, the notion of self-sacrifice, as an 'individual abandonment' in favor of a collective cause, appears very close to that of martyrdom, and becomes in many ways pervasive within and without Christian cultures.

Thus, Christian prophetic martyrdom resonates in many ways with a girardian 'scapegoat', in the sense that its ethos is marked by a 'process of victimization' (1977 [1972]) and concomitantly by a sense of self-sacrifice that culminates in death.<sup>13</sup> A happy-go-lucky, well-doing prophet that passed away peacefully in his sleep is not likely to be found in the *Annales* of Christianity. Conversely, it is precisely in the victimization and associated suffering that a prophetic ethos comes about. Like Jesus Christ, prophetic leaders, often deemed as marginals, criminals and crazy visionaries, persist, resist, endure and finally (often after their death) become paradigmatic of some form of spiritual and religious worldview.<sup>14</sup>

From this perspective, prophetic biographies often reflect examples of selflessness and self-sacrifice, whereby the prophet abdicates his 'normal life' and 'chooses' to become a leader, conscious of the hardships implied in the decision. We find these narratives typically in hagiographies and biographies of saints,

church founders, persecuted clergymen, etc. – from saint Stephen, stoned to death for his faith and support of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, to many protagonists in John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563), or to Mormon founder Joseph Smith Jr, just to name a few examples.

What interests me here is the way these lives of leadership become idioms, i.e. narrativized, collectivized into local or institutional histories and memories – in such ways that martyrdom and memory become entrenched (Castelli 2004) through particular processes of intellectual production and literary transformation (Douglas 1999a) and into particular (providentialist) ideologies of faith. In other words, the way prophetic lives become 'mythologized' (Middleton 1999) and 'heroicized' (Mary 2005) in collective memory stances, such as stories (Castelli 2004) that may either produce orthodoxy or heterodoxy/innovation. Diachronically speaking, the lives of leaders become present (or absent – Engelke 2007) through the exercises of memory that make them endure through time, and their experiences of suffering offer meaning and self-understanding to that of their followers (Boyarin 1999). This often happens, as in the case of the Tokoist church, many decades after the disappearance of the prophet founder, and is often an object of contention and dispute in ways that surpass his original intentions and envisioning (Blanes 2011; see below). From this perspective, Toko's life, as that of other prophets such as Simon Kimbangu, also experiences processes of ad hoc 'analogic operations', by which there is an establishment of a biographical 'copy' from Jesus Christ's own trajectory into that of such contemporary leaders (Sarró 2009). There is therefore an identification of prophetic and spiritual lives that performs a 'justification' and explains a particular 'beginning' (Lambek 2007): Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for us; and so has our prophet – and so should we.<sup>15</sup>

In consequence, one such ideology, frequently invoked in Tokoist sermons, is that of providence, or divine providence, which offers determinations, instruments to understand and evoke martyrdom and simultaneously explain the experience of faith. Such is the case of the well-known 'test' of God to Abraham (Genesis 22), as was recently invoked by a Tokoist preacher in a sermon conducted in Lisbon, in order to explain to the listeners the importance of faith and trust in order to obtain certainty regarding the future (field notes, November 2010). As per this preacher, '(...) we often despair, but he who has total faith in God will be victorious; we must trust God and be firm against the battles that are before us'.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, providence, as a belief in divine determination, becomes part of a millennial ideological complex (Hunt 2001) that conjures hope, expectation, visions and theories of the world.



What we observe often in Christian movements is how that sense of providentiality is incorporated into moral and ethical dimensions of the believers' lives – what Robbins (2001) termed as 'everyday millenarianism', for instance, affecting and determining their postures and behaviors in everyday social life. Here I argue that it is in the exercise in translation that occurs between ideology and everyday practice, between social experience and models of time (Robbins 2001: 527; de Boeck 2005), that self-sacrificial narratives become agent. By casually calling each other brother co-sufferer, the Tokoists are performing, even if symbolically or momentarily, an invocation of narratives that reminds them of their common history of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, whilst simultaneously invoking an ethics and an ideal. However, they are also referring to historical contingency, aligning their spiritual history with that of the wider political context of postcolonial Angola, marked by decades of civil war between the two major parties (MPLA and UNITA - National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). The contemporary Tokoist narratives of self-sacrifice I will describe below also coincide with the armistice (in 2002), exponential economic growth and religious proliferation in the country (Blanes 2014). From this perspective, the theological templates described above also respond to the social context through processes of mutual alignment.

### **Self-Sacrifice and Tokoist Time**

In 2009, Xavier, one of the elder members of the Tokoist church in Lisbon, where I did a significant part of my fieldwork, passed away. I was struck and saddened when I heard the news, since he had been one of the most welcoming members in the church since my arrival, and would always spend some of his time chatting with me after the services. However, as it was the first time this happened during my fieldwork, I was also struck by the way the people at the church reacted to this event: they showed no sign of sadness, no exterior manifestation of grief. 'These are things that happen. He has done his job, and will now live a better life', one believer told me. Thus, the deceased is not mourned but celebrated and honored with all-night choir singing.

A similar reasoning could be found in Bishop Nunes, current leader of one of the branches of the church:

For us Christians, Jesus Christ died and resuscitated. From that moment on, men stopped fearing death, stopped thinking that when someone dies, he completely disappears. We the Tokoists have won this hope in the resurrection of Christ. (...) This is how Tokoist Christians manifest their joy for someone who has fought a

good fight in his life, as Paul, in his letter to Timothy, chapter four, verse seven: I have fought the good fight, finished the race and kept my faith. (...) When Tokoists feel that one of their kin has had a brilliant role, and know he has gone to meet the Lord, he has not been lost, it is with this hope that we manifest our joy. (Interview *O País*, November 10, 2009; my translation)

For Tokoists, therefore, death is 'revealing' (de Boeck 2005), as it implies a reward after a life of sacrifice, after keeping with the contract with God, because they do not believe that life ends after the physical passing of men and women. Therefore crying and sorrow become useless, as they obstruct the expectations of the Tokoist ethos. This attitude toward death helps us contextualize how the life and the passing of the founding prophet are incorporated in the Tokoist religious experience and self-understanding. The memory of suffering that is so present in the church is, as I explained previously, conjured with the certainty that it was part of a divine providential timeline.

Perhaps nowhere is this sensation more evident than in the case of Bishop Nunes, current leader of one of the most significant branches of the Tokoist church. As I briefly mentioned above, after Simão Toko passed away in 1984, the church experienced years of internal strife, where different sectors claimed legitimacy in the process of succession. What started initially as a discussion regarding bureaucratic and financial issues soon became a confrontation between different groups regarding, among other things, issues of authority and leadership. On one side stood the Direcção Central, one of the main branches that represented the central leadership structure installed by Simão Toko when the church was officially established in 1974. On the other side stood several seceded groups that contested the legitimacy of the self-proclaimed officialist branch, claiming that they were misinterpreting the leader's original message (Blanes 2009a). This provoked a strong, violent division inside the movement, which culminated in the establishment of three different 'Tokoist churches' officially recognized by the Angolan government in 1992, and a clear sense that the movement was witnessing its own downfall and was not able to 'survive the prophecy' (Viegas 1999, 2007; Blanes 2009a).

The process of institutional and societal disruption lasted roughly until the year 2000, when a young *vate* called Afonso Nunes, a stranger to the church leaderships, appeared in Luanda claiming not only that he had been visited by Simão Toko's spirit and given a message to deliver to the church, but also that he had been 'incorporated', 'coated' (*revestido*) by it, thus becoming his personification on earth in a 'second coming'. Nunes thus claimed that he was no

longer Afonso, and that Simão Toko had returned to earth to continue his reformist endeavor through him.

From this perspective, Nunes' claims were obviously an answer to a particular situation of political strife, and were gradually accepted by a vast majority of Tokoists. However, his endeavor also exceeds that of the mere physical enactment, and has produced a renewed sense within the Tokoist ethos, offering a new interpretation of the prophetic memory of Simão Toko. Undoubtedly a charismatic man, Nunes worked in the development of the church among three guidelines: a movement of reunification, through the establishment of conversations between the different sectors and through the construction of a holy temple in Luanda, where a central tabernacle would be restored;<sup>17</sup> a movement of remembrance, incorporating a 'biographical extension' of Simão Toko's life (Blanes 2009a, 2011); and a movement of expansion, by promoting a charismatic, universalizing approach to the church's doctrine, enhancing its growth outside of Angola and Africa.

When I met him for the first time in 2007, he explained how the process of bodily abdication occurred: in his youth, he began to be possessed, and was taken to a hospital for internment. When he was about to be confined, he began to prophesy, and his family realized that he had been spiritually touched. Soon enough, he became a *vate*. Some time later, he began to have sleep visions of Simão Toko, who instructed him on a mission; but Nunes resisted, and ran away. Eventually, he gave in, and his life changed: Nunes was no more, and Toko 'spiritually coated' his body, performing a biographical extension after 16 years in heaven (see Blanes 2010, 2011, 2014).

This return of Toko into Nunes is revealing: on the one hand, it describes the process of sacrificing the self performed by Nunes, who after many hesitations decided to offer his body to the spirit of Toko; on the other, Toko's 'second self-sacrifice', in wanting to return to earth to fulfill his mission, to finish what he had started after he realized the failure.<sup>18</sup> To describe the process of 'spiritual coating' and 'personification' (as it is also described in the church), Nunes invoked a Biblical passage: 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 20). However, this invocation of the 'ultimate sacrifice' (Christ's crucifixion) also gave way, through the process of personification, to a major ideological transformation in the Tokoist church: the proclamation of the Millennium of Christ, that in turn initiated a new calendarization for the Tokoists (this year being not 2013, but 0013). In a speech given in the church of Lisbon remembering an encounter a

young Simão Toko had with God in 1935,<sup>19</sup> this Millennium of Christ was explained to the listeners:

From the creation of the world of Adam until Noah, 2000 years have passed; from Noah to the birth of Jesus Christ, 2000 years have passed; from the birth of Jesus Christ until his return in the year 2000 to restore and rise the tabernacle of David (that was in ruins), 2000 years have passed and today we are in the Millennium of Christ. (Lisbon, April 11, 2009)

Therefore, the Millennium of Christ, the return of the messiah to restore the tabernacle, drew a spiritual calendar that aligns Toko's return into Nunes' body with biblical history and with Tokoist prophetic history, suggesting a newfound paracletization of the agents of personification (Toko and Nunes) through the reformed narrative of self-sacrifice. This narrative and ideology not only recovers and reproduces particular (prophetic) memories, but also recasts senses of temporality by offering epistemological frameworks to overcome conflictual religious experiences – as was the case of post-1984 for the Tokoists – and produces the 'other side' of memory and suffering: expectation and hope. Self-sacrifice, from this perspective, not only produces memory, but also recasts it into different meanings and sense of time (see Cole 2001: 221).

Nunes' proposal was, from many points of view, quite successful: on the one hand, he performed a partial reunification of the church, producing a discourse of personification and biographical extension that proved convincing to a large section of Tokoists in Angola.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, being himself a *vate* in his town of birth (Negage, in northern Angola), he was able to doubly invoke the particular regime of self-sacrifice that is meaningful for the Tokoists: that of the *vates* charismatic possession<sup>21</sup> and that of Toko's life of martyrdom.

## Conclusion

For many Tokoists, ideas of sacrifice and self-sacrifice conjure several temporal aspects: from the 'poiesis of history' (Lambek 2002: 49 and following) that offers them the possibility to 'realize history' (Lambek 2002: 49) to a culture of expectation that is mediated by an ideology of divine providence. This, I suggest, is deeply rooted in the figure of their prophet and leader, Simão Toko, who became himself an ultimate example of self-sacrifice through his biography of suffering and martyrdom.

However, as I described in the previous section, self-sacrificial logics do not end in the invocation of the prophetic biography. Today, in postcolonial,

independent Angola, we observe different modalities and innovations that have rendered the Tokoist movement as a 'victorious history', one where the original self-sacrifice was justified and providentially confirmed. The theological speculation set forth by Nunes inaugurated a 'new millennium' narrative that was both historically contingent (coinciding with the end in 2002 of the decade-long war that divided the country) and biblically incorporated, through the different providentialist narratives invoked.

As a form of knowledge and ideology, sacrifice does have the same kind of poetic quality – in its etymological sense of poiesis or an action that transforms the world – that Michael Lambek identified in Sakalava spirit possession: a creative production of history (2002: 50), but also of expectation, of ideologies of hope. These processes of transformation and creativity are precisely what makes sacrifice an 'art of temporality' that creates intellectual distinction and interpretive dispositions. From this perspective, Nunes' endeavor simultaneously represents a recourse to a particular Tokoist moral discourse of self-sacrifice and a form of innovation that shows how that same sacrifice can become both act and thought, idea and matter. From this perspective, what becomes agent is the 'other side' of sacrifice, its remnants in the form of intellectual configurations and ethical dispositions. Here, self-sacrifice is justified by a notion of 'ideal', inasmuch as it encapsulates temporal expectations, moral and political stances, and everyday ethical behavior.

### Notes

1. I have been conducting research with this church in Angola and Portugal since 2007, studying its diasporic ramifications. More recently, I have been focusing on issues of leadership, charisma, memory and prophetic knowledge. This research was made possible through the generous grants offered by the FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology) in Portugal, and the NORFACE international consortium, for several research projects I participated in. I would like to thank Maya Mayblin and Magnus Course, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their comments and critique.
2. In this process, several different groups within the church structure became estranged and claimed the legitimacy of their leadership. See below in text.
3. The genealogy of this prophetism, however, is often located in the eighteenth-century prophetess, Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita, who claimed to be possessed by St Anthony and argued that Jesus was black, before being condemned to death by burning at the stake (Thornton 1998). Kimpa Vita is often invoked by the Kimbanguists, who claim a lineage between both prophets (Sarró 2009).
4. In 2010, amidst the celebration of the DR Congo's 50th anniversary of independence, Kimbangu was officially recognized as a national hero, after the historical recognition that the Kimbanguist church kept close ties with the Mobutu regime (see Sarró 2009).

5. This 'forgotten history' is also seen within the church as part of the 'memory of suffering' of the church (see Blanes 2009a, 2011).
6. All this took a toll in Toko's personal life too. His wife Rosa Toko fell ill with a psychiatric disorder and his daughters and nephew left the church.
7. During his years of exile, Toko exchanged thousands of letters with his followers; in a process described elsewhere as of 'remote leadership' (Blanes 2009a, 2010), Toko used those letters to devise and construct the church as institution, indoctrinate his followers and solve internal disputes. It is in this context that Toko writes the letter we read at the beginning of this article.
8. This spiritual possession by prophetic personalities of biblical times (Abraham, Daniel, Ezekiel and others) began in fact in 1950, when Toko was sojourning in a *colonato* (forced labor camp) in the Vale do Loge, and requested God that the ancient prophets aid him in his task of reforming Christianity.
9. Here I am also thinking about the idea of prophetic confirmation, or how prophecy must constantly be updated in order to be 'confirmed' (see Festinger *et al.* 1956, Tumminia 2005 for a debate). There is always a process of 'updating' involved in prophetic knowledge (Sarró 2009).
10. Breaking away from Hubert and Mauss's 'formalist' approach, Girard noted that sacrificial processes rely on a certain degree of misunderstanding provoked by the theological constructions, in order to justify victimhood and address internal conflict (Girard 1977 [1972]: 7 and ff.).
11. The gospel of Jesus Christ is obviously a necessary template in many such movements. A similar argument could be invoked concerning Muhammad within Islamic movements.
12. As is discussed by the editors of this issue, there is in fact something very 'Christian' about the historically informed category of sacrifice. I too recognize this, and attempt to unfold this relationship throughout this text.
13. However, there are theological distinctions that separate Christ's self-sacrifice, seen as the 'ultimate', conscious sacrifice, from other narratives of scapegoating in the Bible.
14. I am obviously aware that these notions of sacrifice, martyrdom and victimhood are not exclusive to Christianity or to religion *per se*. I am however restricting my analysis to this particular context. I am assuming the notion of martyrdom as a 'consequence' of an individual act of self-sacrifice, but also as an after-the-fact collective identification of self-sacrifice.
15. I am not suggesting, however, that there is a full identification of such prophets with Jesus Christ; rather, I propose, following Sarró (personal communication), that there is a process of 'mutual explanation' between both biographies in the ways they are remembered in the respective movements of following.
16. This trust in God, as the preacher would explain, had entailed a sense of self-sacrifice: '(...) as light of the world and salt of the earth, we must be the first ones to set the example to the world, we must fertilize this world, set the first steps'.
17. The temple was finally inaugurated in August 2012, becoming one of the largest Christian temples in the African continent.
18. One of the most striking narrative depictions attached to Toko's biography refers to his last days, where it is told that he was constantly crying, acknowledging that his

- followers were not spiritually prepared to pursue, complete his work of remembrance (Kisela 2004; Blanes 2011; 2014).
19. This date is contested by other Tokoist groups that oppose this branch, who claim that the event took place in 1950.
  20. Obviously, this means that there are still many Tokoists who do not accept Nunes and do not recognize Toko in him. His branch, however, has indeed become the largest and most visible expression of Tokoism in Angola and also in the Angolan diaspora.
  21. This recourse was also not exempt from contention, as many leaders and *vates* I met criticized the 'spiritual innovation' proposed by Nunes' idea of personification, divergent from the idea of inhabitation.

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