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WAYS OF DEATH: ACCOUNTS OF TERROR FROM ANGOLAN REFUGEES IN NAMIBIA

Inge Brinkman

There was a person in Kuito [Kuanavale] called Vindindo. When he captures somebody, he cuts him/her up with an axe and drinks the blood. Like when they came and seized Nyavihoma [the mother of Vihoma], he killed her and drank the blood. Then he spat it out towards the sun: phaa! Those who lived in the bush told us about Vindindo. He chopped up people. He also died there in the bush. He was the one who killed the wife of Sakahiata [the father of Kahiatia]. And they also called him Salingimbu [the father of the axe].¹

During fieldwork carried out in 1996 and 1997 among Angolan refugees in Kaisosi and Kehemu, two locations east of Rundu (Kavango Region, Namibia), many of the people interviewed related accounts in which torture and mutilation formed a major theme. As I had not dared to ask directly about these delicate, intimate and painful issues, I was struck by the informants' initiative and their insistence on relating the events. It soon became clear that it was particularly civilians who stressed these atrocities, while many adult men, who had been actively involved in the fighting, were more concerned with explaining the technological aspects of warfare. Predominantly a victims' discourse, these accounts can give us insight into the ways in which suffering and terror are processed, a field of research hitherto much neglected by scholars of Angolan history.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES: TRUTH AND FEAR

Explanation is an important part of the historian's craft. Yet, in the early 1940s, Marc Bloch had already made it clear that merely looking for motives does not do justice to the important questions of causality (1989: 183). It is telling that in this passage Bloch refers to the climate of war in which he was writing. During my fieldwork, Angolan refugees in Kaisosi and Kehemu likewise stressed that the violence and suffering which they had experienced in wartime could not be explained in terms of rational motives. Time and again informants pointed out the absurdity of the war and its consequences. Instead of trying to explain the purpose of violence in a functionalist manner, they gave many

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¹ Interview 1, with a group of four women, held in Kaisosi on 1 August 1996. The woman quoted was born in 1969 by the river Luengue. She had lived in Namibia for quite some time, but went to visit Angola in 1991 and had to flee when violence flared up following the elections in 1992.

examples in which they emphasised the senseless and absurd character of what had happened. Not all of the Angolan war, however, was deemed to be absurd to the same degree. During the nationalist war before independence many horrible and meaningless things had happened, but at least the reason for the fighting had been clear: the Portuguese were to be ousted from the country. After independence 'black people started fighting black people'.² In the refugees' accounts the latter phase of the war in particular was depicted as absurd and cruel: not only were the reasons for the fighting increasingly obscure, but the way the military treated civilians no longer made sense. The unprecedented scale on which killing, torture and mutilation took place was deemed to be beyond comprehension.

The refugees' refusal to make sense of violence did not mean they were unwilling to tell about their experiences. There was, on the contrary, a strong wish to testify and to relate what had happened during the war. It was held that narrating the history of the refugees could help raise their marginal status and make their plight more widely understood in the Namibian context. Apart from this political argument, informants also underlined the importance of their accounts as a way of processing their experiences. Although they did not attempt to 'make sense' of the violence, the refugees moulded their experiences into accounts in order to interpret what had happened. During these testimonies the narrator was included in the audience—consistent with Richard Werbner's comments on the fieldwork he conducted after the counter-insurgency war in Zimbabwe:

But her questioning seemed to me to be addressed to herself at least as much as to others; it revealed an inner disquiet, an irresolvable doubt, and it conveyed the anxiety, perhaps the guilt, of a predicament she shared with other survivors of the catastrophe of *Gukurahundi*. It was the predicament of having to go on living as usual, taking things for granted once again, despite their experience of having had certain taken-for-granted truths of human existence called into question. [1991: 173]

Strong tension existed between the willingness to testify and fear. On the one hand refugees maintained that they had little to lose and much to gain by telling about their ordeals during the war. From a foreign guest, an outsider, they had least to fear and through me, it was hoped, their plight might reach new audiences. On the other hand, many initially saw me as a police informer and feared being taken to prison or, worse, to Angola, if they talked to me. Even when this anxiety was cleared up by my assistant (who was a friend or relative) my status remained ambiguous. Thus my unfamiliar presence both initiated their testimony and made it a burden. After the first few interviews it became clear that direct discussion, in the form of questions posed by me and

² Interview 2, with a woman born in Mavinga in 1959. The interview took place in Kaisosi, on 11 June 1996. Interview 3, with a woman born in 1930 in Kunjamba. The interview was held in Kehemu, on 19 June 1996.

translations for my benefit during the sessions, tipped the balance between fear and the will to testify definitively towards fear. Not only was I then silenced on certain topics (Adenaïke, 1996: xxxvi, referring to McCurdy, 1996) but as far as possible I was silenced as a whole. The tension eased as we stayed on and people learned about my family and background, but confidence remained an issue throughout the field-work. The interviews were kept as open as possible and the main role of my assistant shifted from that of translator to discussant.

The fear of being interviewed was related to the fear experienced during the war: eviction would move people into the UNITA-controlled south of Angola. Most—though not all—of the informants were MPLA supporters, and all of them hailed from a region (mostly Mavinga, Kuito Kuanavale and surroundings) where fighting between UNITA and MPLA had been intense. Perhaps the terrifying accounts of torture by UNITA soldiers were similarly connected with this complex of fears: a horrifying depiction of UNITA's practices might be useful as a justification for the refugees' exile in Namibia.

The accounts which focused on torture and mutilation revealed a striking recurrence of formulaic themes and were told in a standardised, narrative manner. Such standardisation can be connected with the ritualised and cultic manner in which acts of violence were perpetrated (Wilson, 1992: 527–82). Yet standardisation is also part of a process in which events are 'socially memorised': an interpretation which Malkki has attempted. 'Thus, acts of atrocity are not only enacted and perpetrated symbolically; they are also, after the fact, stylised or narratively constituted symbolically' (1995, 52–104, quotation on p. 95). The relationship between 'cultic violence' and 'patterned narratives' is closely linked with the issue of truth. In this article no attempt will be made to arrive at a historical interpretation of the periods referred to in the accounts from the refugees. The focus will be on the accounts themselves. What did informants choose to tell? In what ways did they narrate, structure and interpret the events which had occurred in their lives? In this sense it is immaterial to my interpretation whether or not the events described in these accounts actually took place. Perhaps it is not only impossible to know; perhaps the relationship between reality and fiction also constitutes what Taussig has called an 'epistemic murk'—terrifying myths, terrifying power and terrifying actions together forming a 'culture of terror' (1991: xiii, 121–2).

Yet, for the people interviewed, no such epistemic murk existed: truth and lies formed crystal-clear categories. A strong notion of absurdity did not preclude their extreme concern with questions of veracity. The more I insisted that the stories they were telling about the war could be of importance in themselves and need not necessarily relate to categories of truth and reality, the more informants would insist on the possibility of verification. They would not attempt to answer if they knew nothing about some theme we had raised and they were anxious to distinguish between what they had heard and what they

had seen. For them their function as witnesses to a gruesome war stood or fell by the reliability of their information (cf. White, 1990: 421).

In the narratives, however, there were frequent shifts in the use of personal pronouns and tenses, as if to stress that what had happened to them could have happened to anybody, at any time. Thus personal testimony was embedded in accounts of the experiences of acquaintances, friends and relatives, and these again were intertwined with general accounts of the history of the war or woven in with imaginary scenarios in which we as audience were invited to cast ourselves as victims. In theories and methods of oral history a distinction is often drawn between personal life histories and political myths. These distinctions of genre were not adhered to: personal history and political history were intertwined (cf. Ranger, 1988). Truth and reality were hence not conceived of as individual experiences: those interviewed told their personal histories as victims of a civil war, as refugees living under difficult circumstances. This wish to represent informed the process through which they remembered the terror, if not the torture, which had made them flee abroad and blurred the distinctions between personal, political and imaginary history in their testimonies. In a culture of terror the fear of what may happen to ourselves, based on what has happened to others, influences many decisions. The accounts make it clear that it was and still is impossible to live a normal life in the region the immigrants came from. The common themes and symbols show what normal life ought to be like and how it was disrupted. That is the subject of this article, not the perpetration of torture and mutilation as such.

The absurdity of the war caused much anger, much laughter and many tears during the interviews. It is noteworthy that anger or laughter generally accompanied accounts of torture, while people cried when remembering fear.³ Heightening the absurdity, and laughing when telling about senseless cruelty, perhaps enabled people to overcome the worst enemy, fear itself. But discussing fear itself, which constitutes the heart, the very essence, of a culture of terror, did not neutralise the force of the absurd. For me as researcher the possibility of using such strategies depended on distance: while I was amidst victims and perpetrators laughter remained a possibility which vanished upon my return to Europe. At such a distance, without the daily contact with people for whom incomprehensibility had become part of their lives, it became impossible for me to treat 'the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday' (Taussig, 1991: 134–5). Any activity for processing experiences of violence—be it discussion, interpretation or narration, be it laughter, anger or tears—is a way to resist the power of a culture of terror as these activities break through the impasse which fear

³ For example, interview 4, with a woman who told about torture laughingly but cried when she remembered how she had to sleep while a UNITA soldier guarded her with his rifle pointed at her. The interview took place on 21 July in Kaisosi. The interviewee is an elderly woman born in Mavinga.

causes (cf. Wilson, 1992). Therefore refugees stressed the incomprehensibility of the war, but at the same time they sought to explain its causes by narrating a history of violence. They attempted to understand the war, yet retained the notion of senselessness. Laughing and crying over their history, they combined, in their accounts, explanation and absurdity.

FROM THE WARS OF *KWATAKWATA* TO THE 'COUNTRY OF KNIVES'

When discussing history most informants related the war in Angola to the origins and development of colonialism. A rather formal narrative about national history would ensue in which betrayal by the first Portuguese visitors, the suffering during colonialism and the growing knowledge and activities of the nationalist party (the MPLA) formed recurrent topics (cf. Brinkman and Fleisch, forthcoming). The themes of nation-wide colonialism and anti-colonialism were thus combined into a single narrative: the first phase of the war, which in south-eastern Angola lasted approximately from 1966 to 1975 was seen as a reaction to a violent colonial system. Whereas the initiative to tell the more formal, national history was often taken by informants themselves, local history came up only when we asked questions about it. The answers to such questions were diverse and disjointed in the extreme. In contrast to the national history, no fixed body of local history seems to exist. Several factors may play a part in the fragmentation of local oral history. The decentralised nature of politics, religion and settlement in the region, the region's marginal position in the colonial economy and administration, and the immensely traumatic experience of the recent war may together form an explanation. Not only is the last factor the most important in the context of this article, it is also significant that the varied accounts of local history before the war were all in some sense related to what happened during the more recent war. Soon after Angolan independence in 1975,⁴ the parties which had been formed during the first phase of the war⁵ took to fighting each other and, supported by foreign powers, engaged in a lengthy and bloody civil war. This more recent phase of the war, after Angolan independence, forms a watershed in the accounts of the refugees (Hayes, 1994). The past before this phase of the war has become a very 'foreign country' indeed (Lowenthal, 1985), and any event before this violent era in the region's history is evaluated by comparison with the recent phase of the war. Such comparison invariably took the form of a contrast: local history before the war was always presented in opposition to history during the post-independence war. Thus while the violence of colonialism and that

⁴ In this context the word 'independence' can hardly be taken literally. It is here used to mark a number of changes in the political context of Angolan history which occurred with the country's so-called independence or decolonisation.

⁵ In the south-east these were the MPLA, UNITA and the Chipenda branch of FNLA. After Angolan independence most of the Chipenda soldiers were enrolled into the South African Defence Force (SADF).

of the pre-independence war in Angola were linked in a kind of continuum, the fragmented accounts of local history and the history of the recent phase of the war formed a dichotomy.

In accounts of the colonial past, violence constituted a formative element. Such accounts started by relating how the Portuguese ordered people to work for them and imposed heavy taxes. Unruly local leaders were thrown in the river and drowned.⁶ In the narratives it was explained how people in the villages (women as well as men) were rounded up and made to do forced labour. While road building was mostly reserved to women, men had to carry the new rulers from place to place in hammocks when they went on tour to register taxpayers. Although it was said that 'lazy' and 'disobedient' women would sometimes be beaten,⁷ male carriers bore the brunt of physical violence. In the narratives of colonialism the Portuguese were depicted as constantly hitting local men with the *mbalama*, a truncheon designed specially for beating people, even when they were doing their work properly.⁸ Women were said to have been taken without their consent and husbands who protested were punished with the *cinguali* (head fetter).⁹ The people who related these accounts sharply condemned such practices, but at the same time they mentioned material benefits of colonialism: new imports like clothes, blankets, pots, pans, etc., were much appreciated.¹⁰ The accounts stressed the suffering under colonialism as the source of popular support for the MPLA during the war of independence. Informants told how, during that war, the Portuguese continued their practice of beating, drowning and burning men, sometimes on the flimsiest of pretexts, sometimes for no apparent reason at all.¹¹ Fleeing civilians, including women and children, were sometimes killed, often in a gruesome manner. Many informants also attested to extremely violent practices within the MPLA camps. People

⁶ For example, interview 5, with a man born in Muiva (a place which could not be located on the map, near Kuito Kuanavale) in 1929. The interview took place in Kehemu on 4 July 1997. Interview 6, with two men born near Kuito Kuanavale in 1939 and 1941. The interview took place in Kayengona on 19 August 1997.

⁷ Interview 7, with a woman born in Mavinga in 1921. The interview took place in Kehemu on 30 June 1997.

⁸ For example, interview 8, with a woman over 50 years old, born by the river Namono. This interview took place on 21 June 1996 in Kehemu. Interview 9, with a woman born in Mavinga about fifty-five years ago. She was interviewed in Kaisosi on 26 August 1996. Interview 10, with a man born near Kuito Kuanavale in 1911 or 1919 (or later). This interview was held on 27 August 1996 in Kaisosi.

⁹ Interview 11, in Kehemu, 23 July 1997, with a couple. The man was born in 1930 in Ndima; the woman's particulars are given under interview 3. Interview 12, with a woman born in Kuito Kuanavale in 1969, interviewed on 13 September 1997 in Kehemu.

¹⁰ For example, interview 10 and interview 13, with a woman born by the river Kuatir, about sixty years ago. Interviewed in Kehemu, 29 August 1996.

¹¹ Interview 14, with a woman born in 1964 in Mavinga. As a child she saw her grandfather being killed by the Portuguese. The interview in which she told about this took place in Kehemu on 13 July 1997. Interview 15, with a man born in Mavengue about forty-five years ago. During the war he escaped from a Portuguese camp, was caught and beaten up. This interview was held in Kehemu on 16 July 1997.

accused of treason or witchcraft were executed and all camp residents had to watch. Informants did not say much about MPLA violence towards its Portuguese enemies.¹²

These accounts of the colonial experience are full of references to violence and it was held that, during the war for independence, wanton violence became increasingly widespread. Yet, after independence, the violence was said to have reached unbearable proportions. 'In both wars people died, but the war that grew really big was the one between the MPLA and UNITA. The killing was big! Killing! Killing so many people!'¹³ In all the accounts there was a strong image of massive killing, omnipresent death and piles of corpses everywhere. It was perceived as a new development and contrasted with the period before the nationalist war began. In a number of respects the methods of warfare had changed radically. The scale of the war after independence was attributed partly to the use of automatic weaponry.¹⁴ Whereas in the past—so people said—spears, bows, arrows and a few muzzle-loaders (called *kalindundule*) could not result in a large number of casualties, the recent war had become one of arbitrary death. 'The bullet doesn't discriminate' is now a common expression.¹⁵ In the old days only some fighting men from the chief's residence would get killed, Now 'the war has even entered people's homes'.¹⁶

However, torture and mutilation, practices which are likewise represented as a new development, cannot be related to the advent of automatic weapons. Torture and mutilation are always perpetrated with weapons such as knives, sticks and axes. The torture, mutilation and massive killing are perceived as related and together form a type of warfare previously unknown in the area. This change in the nature of war is explained partly as a consequence of the length of the present conflict. In the past, it is held, a war would last a day, a few days, perhaps a year, but never, like the present one, an entire generation or more.¹⁷ The atmosphere in which warfare used to be conducted also

¹² Interview 16, with a woman born near Ninda in 1942. She had been an MPLA women's leader during the war. The interview was held in Kaisosi on 5 September 1996.

¹³ Interview 17, with an elderly woman, born in an unknown location in the Kuando-Kubango province. The interview was held in Kehemu on 14 June 1996.

¹⁴ Interviews 9, 16 and 18, with an elderly woman of more than 80 years, born in Namibia. She was interviewed in Kaisosi on 27 August 1996. Interview 19, with a man born in 1968 in Kuito Kuanavale. The interview took place in Kehemu, 16 June 1997.

¹⁵ For example, interview 5; interview 20, with a man born in Mavinga in 1929. The interview took place in Kehemu on 28 July 1996.

¹⁶ Interview 21, with the couple whose particulars are given under interview 11. This interview with them took place in Kehemu on 10 June 1996.

¹⁷ Interview 16; interview 22, with the woman whose particulars are given under interview 2. This interview was held in Kaisosi on 19 June 1997. Interview 23, with a group of people visiting our home in Vhungu-Vhungu. The interview took place on 27 June 1997. This part of the discussion was held with a man born in 1959, in Kuito Kuanavale. Interview 24, with the man whose particulars are given under interview 10. This interview with him took place on 12 September 1997. During interview 19 one of the attending men asked me about the wars in our country. The comment on my reply that the Second World War lasted five years in the Netherlands was 'See, you are lucky!'

differed from the way enemies fight nowadays. Once upon a time, battles would take the form of personal contest and both parties would boast of their prowess and fierceness in provoking the enemy, but all the same there would be room for other things than fighting:

They'd come to the fenced village in the evening and shout, 'Hey you! Sleep well! But we'll find you in the morning!' And the others would answer, 'You sleep well too! We'll be seeing you!' The next morning they would start fighting. They would fight and fight and fight. [*Dominga*. 'Why did they fight?'] I don't know. They would fight and fight. Until they shouted, 'Hey, you! Stop! Wait a minute. We want our lunch!' [Laughter.] Then after lunch they would go on fighting. When they'd finished they went home. [Interview 22]

This relaxed way of waging war contrasts starkly with the panicky and nervous state of today's soldiers, who shoot at the slightest movement and often have no personal contact with their enemies at all. The accounts of the recent war feature only conversations between soldiers and civilians, and these take the form of a top-down model, while in the exchange cited above both sides are on an equal footing.

The nature of the interaction between soldiers and civilians is felt to be the most important difference between past local warfare and the current situation in Angola. In the past, it is said, only a few men would be killed, while the women and children would be taken captive and employed as slaves. Although mention is made of strained Cokwe-Lucazi relations because of the slave raids, and in one interview it was admitted that on the death of a chief a slave followed him/her to the grave,¹⁸ in general a rosy picture of the treatment of slaves emerged. Newly acquired slaves were taken good care of: they were given food, became part of their master's family and often married in their new abode.¹⁹ In times of hunger, slavery could even be a way of saving women and children from starvation (interview 18). Sometimes slaves would just walk back home without more ado or their relatives would follow them and buy them back from their captors (interview 22). This image of past warfare and slave raids as 'fair' and 'reasonable' is directly opposed to that of the present war. 'That was in the past. Now fighting only means killing.'²⁰ In the old days people were treated as valuable, if only as chattels. Now they are tortured and killed, their mutilated bodies left unburied in the fields. People used to matter—both as slaves and as subjects. Now, be they civilians in war zones, captives in either army's camp, or refugees in Namibia, they are despised and discarded

¹⁸ Respectively, interview 25, with the man whose particulars are given under interview 19 and the man whose particulars are given under interview 23. This interview took place in Kehemu on 2 September 1996. Interview 26, also with the man of interview 19. This interview was held in Kehemu on 5 September 1996.

¹⁹ Interview 16, interview 22 and interview 27, with the man whose particulars are given under interview 10. This interview with him was held on 25 June 1997.

²⁰ Interview 22. Also interview 15 and interview 28, with the woman whose particulars are given under interview 8. This interview took place in Kehemu on 1 July 1997.

as worthless.²¹ As the wars of *kwatakwata* ('catch-catch'; Davidson, 1972: 121) have ended Angola has turned into a 'country of knives' (interview 16).

While the violence of colonialism and the war for liberation were treated as a continuum, informants contrasted past wars, which were meant to obtain slaves, with the present one, where the aim was to torture, kill and mutilate. This is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, because these same informants testify to the extensive use UNITA made of slaves. From the very start, it is said, UNITA employed captured women and children to carry their equipment. Women and young girls functioned as entertainers, food producers, cooks and sex slaves. Boys and young men were forced into the army.²² In contrast to the tales about the past, these forms of slavery are portrayed as extremely dehumanising for the captives: images of girls pounding endlessly and women dancing like chickens exemplify this aspect of the stories.²³ MPLA soldiers were said to carry their own equipment and later used motor transport (interview 14). The disregard of human life and bodies, and the widespread slaughter during the war, were associated more closely with UNITA than with the MPLA. This paradox stands unresolved in the accounts of the refugees.

In another way the contrast between past slavery and present torture and killing is paradoxical. A broad spectre of historical evidence points to extremely violent episodes during the slave era. Clarence-Smith (1979: 228–30) argues that, during slave raids organised from the Lozi area at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, killing, mutilation and violent treatment were no exception and that the captives often faced a difficult future under their new masters. Referring to an earlier period, the Hungarian traveller Ladislav Magyar describes a slave raid in terms of a massacre (1859: 272). Mortality rates among the captives were probably high: 'the area between the Lwena and Lungwebungu Rivers (the core Luvale area) was littered with corpses, skeletons and sunbleached bones' (Papstein, 1978: 244, referring to Harding, 1904: 211; see also Miller, 1988). Although informants from the Angolan highlands attested in the 1950s that in their society slaves (who were marched in by caravans first organised around 1900) were treated well, they also said that any of them who showed signs of fatigue

²¹ Examples: interview 24; interview 29, with a woman born in Kuito Kuanavale, twenty-eight years ago. She had been captured by UNITA and most of her family are dead, victims of UNITA violence. The interview was held in Kehemu on 2 September 1996.

²² Interview 30, with a woman born by the river Longa, about fifty-five years ago. The interview was held in Kehemu, 2 August 1996. She had spent a long time living in the bush under UNITA control. Interview 31, with a man born in Kuito Kuanavale in 1951. The interview was held in Kehemu on 3 September 1996. Interview 32, with the woman whose particulars are given under interview 29. This interview with her was held in Kehemu on 5 September 1996.

²³ Respectively, interview 33, with a young man whose date and place of birth are unknown to me. He had been a soldier in both the MPLA army and the UNITA army. He was interviewed in Kehemu on 16 June 1996 by my assistant while I was not present. Interview 31.

on the journey would be killed in the most gruesome manner (Schönberg-Lothholz, 1960: 118–19). A recent publication on Mbunda history based on oral sources gives examples of torture and mutilation: ‘Most of the Chokwe encountered in those areas [several stockades in the Kwitu and Kwandu valleys] and in the locality of the Kovongo valley were killed and their bodies thrown in rivers, burnt or beheaded and impaled on stakes . . . Mostly only the youthful and attractive Chokwe females were taken and spared as captives’ (Cheke Cultural Writers’ Association, 1994: 82).

These two paradoxes are not brought up to prove informants wrong: they are cited to highlight the remarkable character of the dichotomy between past and present warfare. While accounts of colonialism and anti-colonialism are moulded into histories within the same past, the present ‘culture of violence’ (Beinart, 1992: 456) or ‘culture of terror’ (Taussig, 1991: 3)—a description of the current situation in Angola with which the informants would agree—is presented as an entirely new phenomenon as against the limited (in scale, time and casualties) and ‘innocent’ (in the sense of being careful with prisoners and without resort to torture or mutilation) wars of the past. In academic studies of war and violence increasing attention has been paid to the ‘historical patterns of violence’ (Beinart, 1992: 456). Terror and torture may be related to ‘intricately construed, long-standing, unconscious cultural formations of meaning—modes of feeling—whose social network of tacit conventions and imagery lies in a symbolic world’ (Taussig, 1991: 9). In this case, however, such a historical approach to violence could not be supported from informants’ accounts. The post-independence era of war in Angola is represented as a period which bears no relation to past society and culture. The practices of killing, torture and mutilation during this phase of the war are seen as new and unprecedented. Why is the torture of today so terrible that it does not fit into concepts and ideas about the past? Why is the violence of this period, although processed by narrating its history, dissociated from local history? These questions, although in many respects unanswerable, can serve as a guide through the problem of torture and help us to gain more insight into the accounts of Angolan refugees in Rundu.

FORMS, GENDER AND AGE

Torture can take many forms. In many cases these forms are not arbitrary: they are often patterned, repetitive and connected with the acquisition of power. In this way practices of violence take on ritual dimensions (Wilson, 1992: 529–33). In the refugees’ accounts two broad forms of torture employed by the warring groups (especially UNITA) came to the fore. Although the Portuguese were sometimes said to have crucified people,²⁴ and in a number of stories other forms of torture, such as burning, drowning, beating, were mentioned, most

²⁴ Interview 34, with the man whose particulars are given under interview 6. This interview with him took place in Kehemu on 29 July 1996.

accounts concentrated on practices of insertion and severance. In the accounts of insertion it was either stated that UNITA (or, in two accounts, the MPLA²⁵ or, in one account, Bushmen employed by the Portuguese (interview 12)) impaled women and children on long sharp sticks or interviewees said that they or their acquaintances had seen people who had been impaled. These accounts of impalement focused on victims and witnesses: the perpetrators were not included, and, apart from ascribing the actions to one or more of the warring parties, the torturers remained anonymous. Although we have been warned not to create a simple opposition between female victims and male perpetrators (Beinart, 1992: 485), it was explicitly stated that women were not guilty of such atrocities (e.g. interview 2). It was maintained that women did not even fight: 'they only danced' (interview 29). In the case of forms of torture related to insertion, men were only once mentioned as victims.²⁶ In twelve interviews the victims were said to have been children: in these cases the sticks were always inserted through the anus, coming out at the mouth or the top of the head. Women were sometimes mentioned as victims: sometimes their bodies were completely pierced, sometimes nails or other sharp objects were pushed inside. In these accounts the objects were always inserted in the vagina (e.g. interviews 18, 29, 30). Apart from women and children being killed, their bodies were 'blocked' in various ways. Women's bodies were rendered infertile. In children, who must acquire strength through food, the metabolic system was blocked. (On 'blocking' see Taylor, 1992; on impalement cf. Malkki, 1995: 89–91.)

Christopher Taylor has interpreted Rwandan disease and healing practices with a dual model of 'blocked flow' and 'hemorrhagic flow' (Taylor, 1992: 13). Although his model draws upon material from a very different context, the reinterpretation he proposes of Rwandan pathology shows striking correspondence with practices of torture during the war in Angola. While insertion can be interpreted as 'blocked flow', the other basic form of torture, severance, can also be described as 'hemorrhagic flow'. In most cases the cutting concerned protruding parts of the body, but eyes and skin were also mentioned. Sometimes body parts were listed without specification, but more often the account would consist of a more elaborated narrative in which it was stated who killed whom and exactly how. As in the accounts of insertion, gender and age proved the most important criteria of differentiation. None of the informants told of children being cut, while men, almost absent from the accounts of insertion, were

²⁵ Interview 35, with a man born in Huambo in 1976. He was interviewed in Kaisosi, 26 August 1996. During the war he had lived in a UNITA area, but once he and some relatives were captured by the MPLA and taken to town. After a few days they escaped and went back to the bush. And interview 23; this part of the discussion was led by a 38 year old woman who, amidst six MPLA supporters, spoke about her experiences as a UNITA civilian.

²⁶ Interview 36, with three women who said they were born in Namibia. One woman was about 70 years old, one about 50 and the youngest was born in 1973. They were interviewed in Kehemu on 30 July 1996.

mentioned as victims of cutting. However, the accounts most frequently concerned women. If no distinction was drawn between men and women the account would usually concentrate on the cutting off of limbs. Where the part of the body was specified, it was usually the penis or the ears in the case of men, whilst in that of women it was the breasts that were cut off. We discussed the reasons for this patterned killing with a man who had tried to continue living as a farmer during the war in an area often raided by both UNITA and MPLA troops:

Rebecca. For instance, they would cut the men's hands off so that they wouldn't be able to hold a gun?

Informant. Yes, not hold a gun. As for the women, they would cut off their breasts. Now suppose she gave birth, then how to breast-feed the child? Nothing, she cannot breast-feed now. The children are known to be the future. They are impaled on a stick, so that they die. And for us, it is because we can no longer hear. And if you can't hear, then, for instance you have to shout out loudly where you are. [Interview 15]

As in the accounts of insertion, the perpetrators were always men. One difference between insertion and severance accounts, however, was that the tales of severance revealed much more about the perpetrators and their relation to the victims. Often the exchange of words between perpetrator and victim was quoted in direct speech and only in a few accounts did the perpetrator(s) remain anonymous. Usually the man's name was mentioned. It might be his real one (Vindindo, in one interview Kambinda) but more often it was a war name. The war name might be Nkongo (interview 21) or Nkongolo,²⁷ but in nearly every account the man was called either Satan or Salingimbu.²⁸ Some informants maintained that every side had its Samangimbu/Satan: he was active in the MPLA, UNITA, SADF and the Portuguese army.²⁹ Yet nearly all the accounts of torture focused on the UNITA Samangimbu/Satan.³⁰ This may be due to the fact that most informants supported the MPLA and to their fear of expulsion from Namibian territory.

²⁷ Interview 37, with the woman whose particulars are given under interview 14. This interview with her was held in Kehemu on 29 July 1996.

²⁸ For the latter name two forms are used, namely Salingimbu and Samangimbu. The prefix *li-* is an augmentative of the stem *-ngimbu* (*lingimbu*, large axe); *ma-* is the plural of this (*mangimbu*, large axes) but also refers to 'axehood' in a generic sense.

²⁹ Interview 15; interview 27; interview 38, with a group of people. The main speaker was a man born in 1964 in Kuito Kuanavale. He came to visit the people mentioned under interview 23, who were all present and contributed to the interview. The interview was held in Kehemu on 20 June 1997.

³⁰ Three brief accounts told of Samangimbu activities in the MPLA (interviews 19, 21 and 38), and in them it was made clear that he acted out of need (as a punishment, or to finish off people who could not walk and so constituted a danger to MPLA forces in the guerrilla war); the acquisition of magical power was not stressed. The SADF and Portuguese Samangimbu were only mentioned (see previous note). On UNITA's Samangimbu more than ten accounts, of varying length, were related.

The heightened attention paid to the perpetrators is perhaps because it was only in stories of severance that ritual aspects of torture and mutilation were stressed: the perpetrators would attempt to acquire power through their deeds. Yet it was not so much the practice specifically of mutilation as the drinking of their victims' blood that could give this power. In most accounts it was stated clearly that the perpetrator drank the blood of his victim, and some added that he spat it out towards the sun. A number of informants maintained that 'all soldiers did this' (e.g. interview 15) but often the accounts focused on it as a speciality of Satan and Samangimbu. Taylor's interpretation ignores this element: he merely mentions that people who are practising witchcraft cause an excessive flow of blood. That they drink it is not enlarged upon (1992: 13).

The use of the body as food or drink often accompanies accounts of severance. In many such accounts the victims were forced to cook and eat parts of their own or their spouse's body (e.g. interviews 14, 30, 36). Not all these accounts were connected with severance. One account related how an unsuspecting mother ate from a pot to which soldiers had added the brains of her child. The death of the child was not enlarged upon. The account focused on the disruption of the relation between mother and child. This was a frequent element in the stories. Pregnant women would have their womb cut open and the foetus would be thrown away. Although a number of such accounts focused on MPLA's violent activities, again most related war crimes committed by UNITA troops.³¹

Such disruption of relations took other forms as well. A husband might be forced to deny his wife and say, 'This is a good thing. UNITA is a good movement!' while watching soldiers rape her (e.g. interviews 31, 36, 38). Close relatives might be forced to have sex in front of the entire village (e.g. interview 30), parents to kill their own children or vice versa (e.g. interviews 12, 30). The accounts contained many references to perverted sexuality. Apart from obvious examples such as rape, forced marriage and incest, there were also stories of male and female corpses being placed on top of each other (interviews 29, 36), a UNITA women's camp where any man who entered would be raped (interview 29) and the very frequent theme of UNITA 'Moroccans', elite troops lured with 'empty promises' into giving up their manhood (e.g. interviews 29, 31, 37, 38).

WITCHES, TRAITORS AND TOWNSPEOPLE

Samangimbu and other agents of torture always operated in or from the bush. They would often, however, seek out townspeople as their

³¹ Of such atrocities by MPLA soldiers two UNITA supporters gave accounts: interview 35 (about the unsuspecting mother) and interview 23 (see n. 25). Of UNITA misbehaviour towards pregnant women and unborn babies more than ten examples were given, among them interviews 1, 16 and 30. See also Wilson (1992: 327) and Malkki (1995: 91, 93).

victims. The opposition between town and countryside has a long history in Angola and was intensified during the recent war, when agricultural activity and farm life were made impossible by the warring factions. Supply routes were often impassable and many townspeople were penniless, so they took to clearing nearby land to cultivate. Apart from the ever-present risk of treading on a land mine, these urban farmers were in constant fear of encountering UNITA soldiers in the fields (cf. Brinkman, 1998). In numerous accounts informants would relate how civilians from town would suddenly find themselves surrounded by soldiers and be ordered to 'shit' salt, soap, rice, tins, oil, condensed milk and even tarmac—all products associated with town life. Thus the difference between town and bush came to be directly connected with the forms of torture employed. The victims were accused of preferring a town life of luxury while leaving UNITA soldiers and civilians to suffer in the bush. As the victims begged for mercy, Samangimbu or Satan would cut off parts of their bodies with a blunt axe. Only in a few accounts would victims be sent back to town with a message for the MPLA army command.³² In others the victims were forced to eat bits of themselves or their spouse before they were killed. Usually no witness would be left alive to tell the tale, as happened in Mozambique: often it was explicitly stated that everyone was killed. If there was a survivor it would be unintentional (interviews 29, 36, 39). The purpose of the torture and mutilation, however, was the same: 'to instil a paralysing and incapacitating fear' (Wilson, 1992: 533). Informants were sharply aware of this purpose. 'They do it to frighten people. If they found you, they would scare you so much that you would get goosepimples all over' (interview 30).

The exact timing of the soldiers' appearance in the fields was an important point in the accounts. It was often stressed that the civilians had harvested enough and were about to leave (e.g. interviews 30, 36). The exact site also mattered a great deal to the victims' relatives. Often they did not dare go and retrieve the bodies, and many victims had to be left unburied in the fields. Thus ritual killing precluded other ritual activities like burial, and forced people to leave corpses in places where contact with death constitutes a grave danger. 'We never bury a body where food is grown, where there is cassava.'³³ Women's larger share in agricultural tasks probably explains their greater vulnerability to Salingimbu/Satan. It was also stated that bullets were reserved for men. 'And he [Salingimbu] said, "I will not waste my bullets, especially on women I will not. I will keep the bullets for the war, not for you civilians"' (interview 12). Salingimbu/Satan did not even want to use a gun for these acts: he preferred an axe of the sort normally used only in agriculture—in a number of accounts he took it from one of the

³² Interviews 1, 29, 38, 39, with the man born in 1941 of interview 6. This interview took place on 31 July 1996 in Kehemu.

³³ Quotation: interview 19. Other examples: interviews 18 and 30. Maier (1996: 13) mentions fictive mourning ceremonies.

victims.³⁴ During the war many farmers had fled to town to escape from the increasingly intense fighting. Disrupting agriculture was not enough for UNITA: it attempted to exclude townspeople from farming by killing them for transgressing the imaginary boundary between town and bush, and for wanting to resume the once fruitful link between town, country and bush. They perverted farming tools by turning them into instruments of torture and polluted the soil with the corpses of their victims.

Besides killing townspeople he did not know but assumed to belong to the rival party, Salingimbu was also an agent of torture and mutilation in the execution of witches and traitors within a party's own ranks. As the armies did not have the capacity 'to fight two wars' (interview 16), they eliminated all 'rotten potatoes',³⁵ people seen as a threat to stability in the civilian communities. When the MPLA was still operating in the bush it made such 'witches' or 'traitors' dig their own grave and then executed them (interviews 4, 16, 27, 30, 31, 37). UNITA usually burned them at the stake (interviews 8, 29, 30, 31, 37). In both factions Samangimbu/Satan would sometimes come before the execution, cut the victim with his axe and spit the blood out towards the sun (e.g. interviews 30, 37). It was said that initially only real witches and traitors were executed. Later, false accusations sharply increased the number of those convicted—leading to the MPLA's decision to put a stop to the practice (interview 27). UNITA is said to be burning witches still. Both victims and executioners were mentioned in these accounts, but the emphasis was on the witnesses: all civilians who belonged to the party had to come and watch. They had to 'look happy', sing songs in praise of the party, and not even relatives or friends of the victim were allowed to cry (interviews 8, 29, 37).

Although these accounts focus on 'violence as spectacle' (Beinart, 1992: 456) without expanding on the aspects of mutilation and torture, informants' assessment of these witchcraft trials reveals something about the problem of torture. The informants' anger was not directed at the executions as such; most agreed that the threat witches and traitors posed was too great to be left unpunished. Yet informants expressed outrage at the later abuse of these trials. Innocent people were killed merely because they had personal enemies or did not comply exactly with the absurd rules UNITA imposed. Anyone who expressed concern

³⁴ The different axes have special names. *Ngimbu* is translated as 'axe for clearing the bush' (Heintze, 1988: 73), although it is shown in a drawing of a hunter (*ibid.*, 67) and *tschimbu tschia tschimbuja* is translated as 'war axe' (Heintze, 1995: 164). A war axe is *vukama* in Mbunda (Cheke Cultural Writers' Association, 1994: 71). Pearson gives *mutaka* (war axe, knife or axe for beheading), *cimbuya*, *cinkuembe* (ornamental war axe) as Lucazi terms for war axes (1970: 30, 36, 241; 1973: 23). There is also a word used only by women which is the equivalent of *ngimbu*, namely *njaviti*, but it was not used during the interviews, and it is not clear from Pearson's dictionary whether the word *ngimbu* is used only by men or whether it is a general term for a farming axe (Pearson, 1970: 268).

³⁵ Interview 37; interview 40, with a woman born thirty-eight years ago by the river Sobi who has lived mostly in Kuito Kuanavale. The interview took place on 27 July 1996, in Kehemu.

about their material well-being, mentioned the harshness of life in the bush or complained about the lack of salt, soap, blankets, food, clothes, planks for burial, etc., risked being accused of treason or witchcraft and subsequently executed. The MPLA's decision to stop the trials when suspicions of abuse arose was acclaimed by most informants and contrasted with the increasing corruption of the trials staged by UNITA. It was held that the leadership of UNITA not only knew about the abuse but participated in it. Thus Savimbi had his medicine-woman killed after she had provided him with powerful potions to protect him and make him invincible (interviews 29, 31, 38). Worse still, Savimbi became a witch himself: he sacrificed one or more relatives to become his *vandumba va vantu*.³⁶

Esther Goody (1991: 86) explains that in Gonja (Ghana) men boasted of being witches. She maintains that *In diesen Gesellschaften ist der Gebrauch mystischer aggressiver Fähigkeiten durch Männer ein Beweis für politische Autorität*, 'In these societies [Tiv, Gonja] men's exercise of mystical aggressive powers is proof of political authority.' John Thornton points out that Kongo political philosophy consisted of a precarious balance between absolute royal power and rule by consent: leaders had a right to kill if it was in the common interest (1993: 181–214). Linda Heywood (1998: 151) interprets support for Savimbi in the light of the continuing importance of the region's political traditions: 'core political beliefs, that rulers' power was based on their control of spiritual and secular forces, the notion of centralised and decentralised power, and the concept of misuse of power through witchcraft'. It may be hard to establish whether or not such a dual political philosophy also exists or existed in the far more decentralised communities of south-eastern Angola. Mbunda songs in which leaders are hailed as 'alternating between anger and kindness' indeed point in a similar direction (Cheke Cultural Writers' Association, 1994: 36). Informants' agreement that in wartime leaders had a duty to protect society against witchcraft and to take care of their own safety through mystical means, and to that end may have had to resort to harsh measures, likewise underscores the double-sided nature of leadership.

Satan/Salingimbu's role in this acquisition of magical power could have been justified: he was not a witch, as his deeds did not spring from individual jealousy. Instead he operated within a chain of command, a characteristic more reminiscent of Luise White's interpretation of vampires (1993: 41) than of witches. Like witches, Samangimbu and Satan cause an excessive flow of blood and gain power through drinking it. Yet they acted within the realm of UNITA *wette* (many informants used the Afrikaans word for laws, rules) and in that sense the torture and mutilation the UNITA soldiers inflicted were authorised. A

³⁶ In interview 37 his wife and children; in interview 10 his wife and mother-in-law; in interview 32 his parents; in interview 16 a foetus. A *ndumba ya muntu* (lion of a person) is a ghost, which a witch needs as a helper. In order to become a witch, a person must thus kill somebody, usually a relative.

number of informants explained that sometimes individual commanders attempted to act against the rules and some soldiers tried to run away rather than take part. The UNITA system of torture and mutilation overstepped the bounds: it was used not in the public interest but as an expression of collective jealousy of townspeople and/or to eliminate anyone who mentioned UNITA's limited ability to look after its civilians. Samangimbu/Satan's deeds were assessed by these informants, mostly MPLA supporters, as an expression of this destructive jealousy and its unbridled, violent outcome. Savimbi himself likewise used his powers not to protect his followers but merely for personal gain. It is again difficult to establish whether or not political leaders in south-eastern Angola were expected to ensure rain, fertility and good harvests. Some evidence would support chiefly intervention in this respect, other statements point to a more decentralised responsibility, with farmers performing their own rituals (McCulloch, 1951: 73, 79). Yet an outright attack on farmers and the clear intention of preventing agricultural activity were an affront to any civilian expectations of what the relation between leaders and led should entail. Informants thus accused Savimbi of witchcraft and his movement of satanism. Just as UNITA supporters hailed Savimbi's acts as a justified attempt to keep his movement free of unlicensed witchcraft, so his opponents claimed that Savimbi used his powers only for selfish ends (cf. Heywood, 1998: 149; Clarence-Smith, 1979: 227; Thornton, 1993: 194-5).

MEDICINE AND MADNESS

In many political traditions of south-eastern and central Angola the power that leaders needed in order to ensure stability and well-being of the communities they ruled could be acquired and sustained by using parts of the human body. Thus the brains and penises of former Ngonjelu leaders were used to obtain 'wisdom' (Heintze, 1995: 221, 222), Luvale leaders ensured fertility through a bracelet made of human nerves and male genitalia (Papstein, 1978: 137), and a foetus protected Ovimbundu rulers from injury (Magyar, 1859: 316). There exist references to leaders consuming parts of the human body. Ovimbundu chiefs ritually 'ate' their predecessor (Heywood, 1998: 154) and one Mbunda chief was nicknamed *Katota kalya Vwongo*, 'Katota the Brain Eater' (Cheke Cultural Writers' Association, 1994: 102). Everyone who spoke of soldiers mutilating bodies and then drinking the blood emphasised that it made them fearless and gave them physical strength. The soldiers lost all sense of pity, compassion or mercy (*ngozi*)³⁷ they had harboured about killing. Impaling people or even slashing them did

³⁷ In many languages of Central and Southern Africa *ngozi* denotes an 'aggrieved spirit' (Schmidt, 1997). In the languages of south-eastern Angola the concept *ngozi* is reserved for 'mercy, pity, compassion'. For a spirit, including an aggrieved one, the word *cimbembesi* is normally used. It is unlikely that the words are related.

not in itself produce such an effect: power came from the eating or drinking. Hence the consumption of lizards and small insects could produce a similar effect of pitilessness (interview 30; cf. White, 1997: 325–38).

The acquisition of powers through the consumption of fluids or parts of the body was, however, strongly associated with madness and loss of self control. Thus in discussing power and medicine the question of drinking and spitting blood was brought up. 'That is not medicine. Only mad people do that!'³⁸ Many soldiers became obsessed with killing. Like addicts they could feel good only when doing it. Some could not even be shown a red cloth because it would send them straight into a frenzy of murder.³⁹ The spirits of the victims could start troubling the torturer and cause illnesses of various kinds (headaches, swollen bodies, etc.: interviews 31, 37, 42). Hence the loss of *ngozi* entailed grave risks, which could not always be treated. Traditional healers as well as churches sometimes assisted in healing such soldiers; in both cases proper burial of the victims was seen as the first prerequisite in the process of healing.⁴⁰ Yet only a few healers were able to cure those who had gone mad in this way (interview 43) and many of the madmen remained untreated and became ordinary criminals (interview 31). Mercilessness was represented as the force underlying both power and madness. Yet it was stressed that the increase in power was the result of drinking blood, while madness was caused by the troubled spirits.

People who already possessed a certain amount of power could stand some loss of *ngozi*, but many soldiers who mutilated their victims in order to acquire magical strength were unable to control the powers they had unleashed and went mad. The suggestion that if only Dos Santos had behaved like Savimbi the war would have been over already (interview 1) again underscores the importance of leaders showing disinterested toughness for the benefit of their followers. Dos Santos was felt to have too much *ngozi* for a President, but Savimbi certainly had too little. The way Savimbi allowed widespread madness to develop by integrating into the UNITA code of military conduct the acquisition of power and the loss of *ngozi* through the mutilation of civilians and drinking their blood was condemned by the informants. Most of the informants were MPLA civilians, but the soldiers and the few UNITA supporters I spoke to agreed on this point. The madness which could follow such loss of control did exist before the war: one of the entries in Pearson's dictionary (compiled in 1969 but its material gathered

³⁸ Interview 41, with the man whose particulars are given under interview 19, the man whose particulars are given under interview 23 and the woman of interview 12. This interview with them was held in Kehemu on 3 August 1996. Also interview 29.

³⁹ Interview 31; interview 42, with the woman of interview 2. This interview was held in Kaisosi on 27 June 1996.

⁴⁰ Interview 42 and interview 43, with a male healer born in Chiume (Moxiko), about 40 years of age. The interview took place on 16 July 1997 while he was visiting his fellow healer, the woman of interview 16. Cf. Schmidt (1997: 302–3).

earlier) reads, '*Nkongo*: human blood drunk by man (supposed to make him mad), *nkungu*' (Pearson, 1970: 272–3, 1977: 30). The rainbow, called *nkongolo*, one of the names used of the soldier who cuts people up, is said to chase people and suck their blood. Only by cutting down a rubber tree or by knocking axes together can it be diverted (interview 27). Such references make it clear that in this way practices of torture and mutilation or accounts of them (or both) do relate to 'historical patterns of violence'. Vampires and madmen have doubtless always existed; the new character of the violence during the post-decolonisation war centres on issues of agency and scale.

CONCLUSION

This article ends with a number of possible answers to the question of the posited modernity of killing, torture and mutilation in accounts of the post-independence phase of the Angolan civil war. The question functioned more as an interpretative framework which helped to relate different aspects of torture to each other than as gateway to a single answer or solution. In the victims' accounts the ritualised forms of torture and mutilation centred on practices of insertion and severance. Informants associated the latter practice in particular with the acquisition of power. By drinking the blood of their victims soldiers quelled their fear and lost their mercy. One figure, usually called Salingimbu or Satan, stands out in the tales victims told. He acts as an agent in killing townspeople who have to till the surrounding fields and executes witches and traitors who threaten the party from within. Some references are made to such a figure at work in MPLA circles, but mostly the accounts depict Salingimbu/Satan as a UNITA soldier. The informants, most of them MPLA supporters, expressed grave concern over the ways in which UNITA used force. Although violence constituted an important element in accounts of the colonial period and the war for independence, the violence which occurred after independence was seen as a wholly new development, contrasting sharply with all that had gone before.

The informants may be right: the scale of the torture and mutilation may be unprecedented. Although violence, torture and mutilation occurred in the pre-colonial and colonial past, the adoption of such practices after decolonisation was so widespread that it could be conceived only in contrast to what had happened before. Yet this emphasis on scale not only refers to sheer numbers; it is related to the issue of agency. It was the informants' belief that UNITA required too many soldiers to engage in forms of killing that unleashed powers they could not control. This gave rise to unusually large numbers of troubled spirits of innocent victims and an unacceptable number of madmen hard to heal. A vicious circle ensued. As the number of soldiers who had lost all *ngozi* grew, so the number of wanton killings and troubled spirits grew as well. Although 'madness' thus became part of UNITA's military machine, informants did not classify its leadership, including Samangimbu/Satan, as 'mad'. Their criticism of the UNITA leadership

focused on the unacceptably low level of *ngozi*. UNITA's aim was not to attract new followers, nor even to protect and look after the followers it already had. UNITA civilians who complained about this might face execution. People UNITA troops came across were treated not as prospective supporters but, regardless of age or gender, as enemies. Instead of 'loving people' and seeing them as a source of wealth and power, UNITA did not even consider them worth a bullet and treated human life with contempt.

Savimbi's use of force was not meant to increase the welfare of the people he led but was geared to personal gain and individual power. He did not even attempt to ensure good harvests and prevent hunger. Instead UNITA put a stop to all agricultural activity and prevented townspeople from working their fields. Fertility in general was threatened by UNITA's activities. In the victims' accounts the destruction of reproductive functions is stressed. Many examples were cited: the murder of women and children, the assaults on pregnant women, the mutilation of genitalia and breasts and the castration of 'Moroccan' elite troops. Likewise the magical powers Savimbi acquired through his atrocities were not employed to ensure a degree of protection and/or prosperity for his followers: he sought merely to protect himself. The fear that Angola will become a country without people relates to the absurdity of such shortsighted selfishness. 'Whom will they rule?'⁴¹

Perhaps such complete disregard of humanity has been known in the past. Perhaps the illegitimate use of force always seems something new. Situating certain practices outside history marks them as unacceptable. A violent era must be detached from 'normal' history and 'normal' society. Victims of wanton violence may be the most ardent proponents of a 'new barbarism' theory, but only in a literal sense. The 'new barbarism' theory, as expounded by Robert Kaplan, with its emphasis on cultural, demographic and environmental determinism, fails to match the explanations the informants put forward. Yet nor do their accounts coincide with a more utilitarian approach which seeks to rationalise violence (Richards, 1996: xiii–xxvii). Instead the accounts stress the new and absurd character of the violence. Magic, charms and potions, associated by Paul Richards with superstition, savagery and primitive barbarity (1996: xx, xxvii), do not necessarily belong to this realm of the absurd. Categories of the 'unnatural and weird' may change in time and differ between cultures (White, 1993: 38). Some authors (James, 1995: 4; Wilson, 1992: 533; Richards, 1996: xvi) have interpreted the victims' stress on the incomprehensibility of violence only as a consequence of a culture of violence, but this incomprehensibility may also serve to resist a culture of violence. To be sure, in order to be effective a culture of terror must defy all rules of logic: the

⁴¹ Interview 44, with the man of interview 5 and his wife, born near Mavinga, about seventy years ago. The interview took place on 29 August 1996.

disabling, traumatic fear underlying cultures of terror is created partly by the impossibility of making sense of the violence (Wilson, 1992: 533; Richards, 1996: xvi; Taussig, 1991: 127–35). It therefore has to be disconnected from history and society. On the other hand, if torture and mutilation are no longer deemed ‘unsettling’ (Richards, 1996: xvi), a way out of a culture of terror is hard to find. If a culture of terror is to be resisted effectively, victims must retain the notion of absurdity while at the same time ‘processing’ their history. Angolan refugees in Rundu attempted exactly that. Combining an interpretation of their history with a notion of the absurd, they sought ‘to draw apart the veil of the heart of darkness without either succumbing to its hallucinatory quality or losing that quality’ (Taussig, 1992: 127–35, quotation on p. 134). This combination in their stories enabled the informants to express their anger at what happened after Angolan independence. Their experience makes it clear that spreading mortal fear should be classified as a criminal act. If farmers are too scared to enter their fields, followers fear execution on the slightest pretext, or on none at all, and warring factions allow their troops to turn into rampaging madmen; the terror they inflict becomes so disruptive of life and livelihood that normal history and society are interrupted.

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A NOTE ON FIELDWORK

Fieldwork was undertaken between February and October 1996 and between June and October 1997. The first months of 1996 were used for archival and literary research as well as language acquisition. Between June and October, in both years, interviews were conducted in Kehemu and Kaisosi, two locations east of Rundu town. Both are known for the high number of Angolan immigrants. With the aid of two female assistants from the area, about eighty people were interviewed who were nearly all friends or relatives of the assistants. Nearly all were born in Kuando-Kubango province in Angola. About 60 per cent of the interviewees were women. Most of them maintained themselves by farming and had had no opportunity to go to school. Only a few interviews were conducted without an audience; mostly they took place in the open air and a fluctuating number of people were present.

Sometimes the latter would add their comments and discuss various topics with the main informant. About thirty people were interviewed more than once. Nearly all the interviews were conducted in Lucazi, Nkangala or another dialect within the Ngangela group and put on tape; later the assistants transcribed and translated the cassettes. Again I want to stress that the views expressed in this article are entirely my responsibility and can in no way be used against any other person.

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ABSTRACT

In their accounts of the war in Angola, refugees from south-eastern Angola who now live in Rundu (Namibia) draw a distinction between warfare in the past and the events that happened in their region of origin after Angolan independence in 1975. Although they process their experiences through recounting history, these refugees maintain that the incidence of torture, mutilation and massive killing after 1975 has no precedent in the area's history and forms an entirely new development. This article investigates the reasons for this posited modernity of killing, torture and mutilation. The placement of the recent events outside local history is shown to represent an expression of outrage, anger and indignation at the army's treatment of the civilian population during the recent phase of the war. The outrage not only concerns the scale of the killing, torture and mutilation but is also linked with the issue of agency. The informants accuse UNITA army leaders in particular of wanton disregard for the lives and livelihood of their followers. They furthermore maintain that UNITA ordered ordinary soldiers to take part in killings which released powers the soldiers were unable to handle.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans leurs témoignages sur la guerre en Angola, les réfugiés du Sud-Est de l'Angola qui vivent aujourd'hui à Rundu (Namibie) mettent en contraste les guerres du passé et les événements survenus dans leur région d'origine après l'indépendance de l'Angola en 1975. Bien qu'ils fassent référence à l'histoire lorsqu'ils relatent leurs expériences, ces réfugiés soutiennent que les actes de torture, de mutilation et de massacre après 1975 sont sans précédent dans l'histoire de la région et constituent un phénomène entièrement nouveau. Cet article examine les raisons de la modernité des meurtres, tortures et mutilations qui est avancée. Le fait de placer les événements récents en dehors de l'histoire semble représenter une expression d'indignation et de colère face à la manière dont l'armée a traité la population civile au cours de la phase récente de la guerre. Cette indignation ne concerne pas seulement l'ampleur des meurtres, tortures et mutilations, elle est aussi liée à l'action menée. Les informateurs accusent les responsables militaires de l'UNITA en particulier de ne faire aucun cas de la vie et des moyens d'existence de leurs partisans. Ils soutiennent par ailleurs que l'UNITA a ordonné à de simples soldats de participer aux massacres, leur donnant ainsi des pouvoirs qu'ils étaient incapables de maîtriser.