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Anti-relativist Nostalgias and the Absolutist Road

The Point of Departure

It is a typically hot, dusty and stuffy September afternoon in Luanda in 2013. Ruy is knocking at the door of the house of his friend, Maturino, a member of the Tokoist Church, in the northern section of the Palanca neighbourhood. This part of the neighbourhood, unlike the southern section, is composed of large streets in grid-like fashion and has an easy access to the main avenue that connects the city centre to the outskirts. At this very point, Ruy observes how the macadam on the ground that stemmed from that main road slowly disappears into a sandy terrain. In the rainy season, Ruy anticipates, transit will be impossible there, and residents will improvise 'bridges' with rocks, planks of wood and leftover scraps from abandoned cars in order to circulate.

Maturino and his family are taking a while to reply to his knock, so Ruy takes the opportunity to take a closer look next door, where there stands a small temple of the UCKG, the famous neo-Pentecostal movement of Brazilian origin that has made a significant impact in Angola since the 1990s. In previous visits to his friend's house, he had not paid too much attention to this church, until one particular late afternoon when, while sitting on the patio with the family, the conversation was baffled by the screaming pastor's deliverance, amplified with microphones, synthesizers, claps and moans. He wondered how the family could cope with this on a daily basis, but observing their reactions and matter-of-fact behaviour, he realized that they had somehow become



Figure 3.1 UCKG Church in Palanca, Luanda. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

habituated to it, and the ‘noise’ had become part of their quotidian acoustics.

Noise is, indeed, a significant part of the Palanca experience and thus of this part of ‘Pentecost’. If in the entrance of the neighbourhood we are still enveloped by the aggressive sound of the trucks, buses, cars and motorcycles making their way through the motorway honking, accelerating and braking, upon entering we are confronted with different

soundscapes: the acoustic ‘pollution’ of *kuduro* music or TV soap operas spilling from private *kubikos* (rented rooms), backyards, shops or bars; the improvised football games played in the streets by youngsters; and, finally, the sonorities that punctuate the streets at given schedules, emanating from church buildings or improvised worship spaces. On many occasions, these sounds are fascinating a cappella choir songs in Kikongo, Lingala or Portuguese languages. But oftentimes they are amplified, nervous and tympanum-wrecking shrieks of pastors’ sermons amidst processes of spiritual possession. It is not always easy to glance inside such spaces, but during worship services the events taking place indoors often pour out into the public streets, precisely through such acoustic envelopes, and through the attendants that constantly flow in and out of these church spaces.

The fact that this acoustic profusion became ‘normal’ for the Palancans was thus not surprising. In the Palanca, the UCKG is but one of the countless different churches that populate the neighbourhood – already often seen as a sort of spiritual beehive in Luanda, to the extent that it is hard to find a street in its interior without a church building. Thus, in this part of ‘Pentecost’, there is an ongoing struggle for visibility and audibility among the different congregations. For instance, just on the next corner down from Maturino’s house, Ruy sees a billboard from the Igreja Tabernáculo do Céu (Church of the Heavenly Tabernacle) announcing the ‘Day of the Glory’. Most of these buildings are in fact makeshift, unfinished constructions, relying on improvised paintings or billboards to make themselves noticed. Others refuse the publicity and remain anonymous to the untrained eye.

Walking through the Palanca and observing their architecture, we can detect different stories and processes of implantation. On the one hand, the bigger buildings usually represent the older establishment of ‘mainline’ churches in the neighbourhood (from Baptist to Catholic to prophetic/messianic). On the other, ‘modernized’ designs reveal the newer Pentecostal churches of Brazilian and Lusophone origin (UCKG, Maná) that have taken root, and more makeshift constructions are usually characteristic of the wave of Bakongo ‘holy spirit churches’ arriving from the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the recent waves of *regressados* (Angolan, Lingala-speaking Bakongo who lived in the DRC until recently). Some of them even operate in private homes, backyards and open spaces. These different structures cohabit in the Palanca grid alongside secular structures such as shops, bars and warehouses, usually in a peaceful fashion but also ‘spiked’ by the competition that emerges from the processes of pluralization. From this perspective, the Palanca is also filled with stories of secession and dispute between

different church allegiances, as well as accusations of witchcraft (as we saw in Chapter 1). The neighbourhood thus combines different levels of this materialization and expression of religious activity, which the gaze of residents and visitors (such as ethnographers) that enter the Palanca inevitably alights upon – a realization that is not obvious from outside the neighbourhood.

The specific UCKG building that Ruy is looking at has not yet undergone the large-scale refurbishment that most other UCKG churches in the city have experienced. Instead of the currently prevailing gold and brown palette, this particular building still has the ‘traditional’ red, white and blue colours, which subliminally convey senses of urgency, brightness and passion. On their front wall, as many other churches in the neighbourhood often do, the local pastors have inscribed and publicized their programme of deliverance: ‘Here, we solve problems!’, ‘Urgent Help, at 6AM’, ‘Prayer of Faith and Miracles’, ‘Liberation Service’ etc. Presiding over the programme and the church is the motto ‘Jesus Christ is the Lord’.

Anyone familiar with Luanda would be used to the pervasiveness of these offers of ‘problem solving’ on behalf of the churches. Walking through the streets in the city centre, one’s view is flooded with posters, paintings, banners and flyers announcing healing and miracle sessions, evangelical crusades, gospel shows and the like. Many such imprints somehow aesthetically replicate the flashy acoustics and colourful hues of the church buildings. In one flyer from the UCKG that circulated in the city in late 2012, one could read this invitation: ‘Come to us to put an end to the problems in your life: sickness, misery, unemployment, bankruptcy, separation, domestic discussions, sorcery, ‘big eye’, etc.’ Considering the kind of biblical exegesis that is recurrent in such churches, one can imagine that these problems can be the kinds of ‘tribulations’ that are often invoked in church sermons and referred to in passages such as John 16 or Acts 14, where we learn that the tribulations are part of the road to the kingdom of glory.

We sense that this problem solving is a way of ordering, of establishing a particular path out of the seemingly chaotic experience of urban life in a city like Luanda. In other words, the UCKG, like most churches in ‘Pentecost’, performs and displays a diagnostic that establishes the road to salvation. It is a process of metaphorical mapping and temporal sequencing that produces an ordering effect in people’s lives. The certainty and conviction with which they produce this mapping and ordering, however, also seems to convey a moral absolutism of sorts, in which, at least rhetorically, there is little room for doubt and relativism. Slogans such as ‘Nothing is Impossible for God’, ‘Find Your Inner Self

in Order to Stand Out – 7 Days of Discovery’, ‘Center for the Chosen of Christ’ and ‘7000 reservations from God’ are invitations not just for specific events but are meant to steer one in a specific direction in both the city and in life. The UCKG model precludes other options; it is anti-pluralist. Current and prospective adherents are placed in a crossroads position, as if forced to choose between the path to salvation and the road to perdition.

Ruy’s friend Neves, a member of the Tokoist Church, exposed this ‘crossroads sensation’ when one afternoon they sat on a park bench and he shared his own spiritual trajectory and his story of involvement in a *mpeve ya nlongo* (Holy Spirit) movement in the 1990s. He recalled that moment in his life as a ‘traumatic’ experience: after escorting a friend who was seeking treatment for his illness to one such movement (the MEESA, *Missão Evangélica do Espírito Santo em Angola*), he ended up staying there himself for about a year and got involved in it in such a way that he had a ‘terrible time’ when he tried to leave it. For many months Neves felt a strong pressure on behalf of the church leader (a former disciple of the Congolese prophet Simon Kimbangu) to use his profession as a police officer to benefit the church in many ways. He also saw how his fellow members were constantly pushed into giving their wealth and possessions to the church. Then one day he realized that he was being manipulated and finally cut ties with the church. To this day he still avoids its known locations when he is circulating in Luanda. He described these places as being very closed, obscure and difficult to access, where members are usually interned in the church for treatment and delivery, leaving their own houses during the process. They provoke not just symbolic but also physical ruptures with pre-existing relationships and networks and propose new senses of ‘community’ through arguments of disconnection.

Obviously, not all churches are as extreme or invasive as the MEESA, but many can be equally absolutist in the way they present themselves. Ruy sensed this personally when he once tried to convince Neves to take him to one of these churches in the neighbourhood of Cazenga. With a nervous laugh, he replied, ‘I’m not sure if you want to do that. These places are dangerous!’ While Neves had arrived at this conclusion after what he considers to be a traumatic period in his life, in a certain sense, and retrospectively, he was able to find redemption through the experience, as if he needed to experience it, live through it, in order to conclude that his place, his home, was indeed in the Tokoist Church. Today he is one of the church’s active intellectuals, engaged in the study of its history and in the preservation of its memory. He found his path.



Figure 3.2 Poster of Evangelical Crusade in Luanda. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

The neighbourhood of Palanca is a place where multiple paths and itineraries are devised, as it is where many churches and movements are located. As part of what is traditionally depicted as the Luanda of the *musseques* (informally, slum neighbourhoods), the ‘disordered’, informal, chaotic, underprivileged part of town, these appeals and offers coming from ‘Pentecost’ become part of the everyday scenery, accommodated



Figure 3.3 Christian church under construction in Sapu, Luanda. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

within the social infrastructure. As we can tell in the multiple advertisements offering divine healing that populate the Palanca – e.g. ‘Jesus Christ Saves, Heals and Releases Those In Need’ – they respond to specific configurations of perceived disorder: the danger and insecurity associated with urban life in Luanda as well as the effects of sorcery. But the Palanca is also, first and foremost, a site associated with an intense spiritual activity – something equally connected to Bakongo ethnicity, predominant in this part of town. It is hard to find a street in the musseque that does not have a church or religious community. And even when one cannot see it, one will definitely hear it, punctuating several moments of the day with different prayer, healing or counselling sessions. Spirituality is thus part of the aesthetics of the landscape, competing with other significant manifestations and indexicalities, such as the famous *botequins* or eating and drinking spots (such as the *Zabá*), the nocturnal parties, the open-air markets, the endless *coiffeurs* etc.

Neves usually referred to the Palanca as a ‘religious supermarket’ of sorts, reinforcing this idea of a diversity and competition of Christian churches in this space, spurred by the Bakongo’s natural tendency towards both spirituality and commerce. He and Ruy and their friend Paracleto often circulated in the Palanca with a camera in hand, taking pictures of the facades of the endless ecclesiastical configurations and their aesthetic statements in the neighbourhoods. Most of these churches

remained, from this point of view, in a state of architectural incompleteness, retaining an unfinished state that although probably related to financial issues also reflected a sense of expectation, of the promise of a glorious future that is ‘in the making’.

During these photographic journeys, they attempted possible typologies of such institutions: from Catholic and mainline historical Protestant churches, such as the Baptist (IEBA) or Methodist churches, to prophetic/messianic movements, notably the Tokoist, Kimbanguist and (more recently) Bundu Dia Kongo churches. Since the 1990s, the religious landscape of Luanda (and the Palanca in particular) has become pluralized with the establishment of modern neo-Pentecostal movements of foreign origin – such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God or the Josafat Church (the Angolan version of the Maná Church) – and of Pentecostal churches of Angolan origin, such as the Igreja do Bom Deus or the Assembleia de Deus Pentecostal do Makulusso. Finally, over the last decade, a range of smaller movements that fall under the umbrella of *mpeve ya nlongo* or ‘Holy Spirit churches’ have become pervasive in the musseques and are often seen as makeshift, personalized initiatives on behalf of traditional healers reconverted into Christianity. This dimension of informality and spontaneity, expressed in the kind of constructions that house such movements, also imbues the *mpeve ya nlongo* with high levels of suspicion and accusation. In any case, the end result is an assemblage of highly diverse expressions and infrastructures in the neighbourhood, specialized in ‘solving problems’ of a wide variety that nevertheless all pertain to ‘Christendom’.

Initially, one would feel tempted to see this setting, teeming with plurality, within a capitalist argument: is this a ‘religious supermarket’, as Neves had suggested? That is, at least, what surfaces in the kind of negative narratives that the local media offers pertaining to such movements in the Palanca, as schemes that exploit the local residents through ‘faith marketing’ and ‘a strong competition for believers and their money’ (*Rede Angola*, 6 March 2015). However, Neves’ own narrative, while describing the movement’s attempts at exploitation, does not seem to replicate the common-sense idea of the believer as a victim and the pastor as a money seeker. So Ruy took the opportunity of asking his Luandan friends about this.

Talking about Order

One of Ruy’ interlocutors, Maturino, once referred to this conundrum as a problem of ‘consciousness’. For him, the growth and success of

these churches in neighbourhoods such as the Palanca could not be disconnected from their ultimate alterity, sorcery (or *ndoki*, in kikongo). The increasing recognition of *ndoki* as a 'problem' in the Angolan public sphere, with several news pieces recurrently mushrooming in the local media, is also concomitant to the above-mentioned proliferation of Christian churches in the musseques that devise and offer strategies to combat it. Collecting these different narratives, one could say that in Luanda there is a collective construction of sorcery as a 'social problem', effected by either the Catholic Church or the secular state.

In one such example, in early 2008 several news pieces circulated in the local media concerning how members of a Catholic congregation rescued several children in the Palanca who had been beaten and abandoned by their parents, accused of sorcery. One of the Catholic nuns involved in the rescue, Sister Rita, declared to the local media that what underlay such phenomena was 'social disorder and extreme poverty, and the main victims are the children' (*Radio Ecclesia*, 30 January 2008). The reasoning behind this public framing is that *ndoki* does not exist and is either the source or outcome of a disordered mentality that conflicts with the project of a 'modern', 'advanced' Angola promoted by the official authorities. However, this narrative contrasts with the one that emerges from 'Pentecost' itself, in which witchcraft not only exists but is an agent, playing its role in the spiritual combat that affects people's lives. In fact, it does not seem possible to disconnect 'Pentecost' from witchcraft, as it pervades church theology, organization etc. as well as individual believers' own life experiences and conversion testimonies.

For many Bakongo in the Palanca, this combat appears in the process of emergence of an 'urban Bakongo experience' in Luanda, largely motivated by the decade-long conflict that affected the country from the 1960s, which provoked processes of displacement, disruption and separation in the different clanic and lineage systems. A good friend of Ruy from Luanda, Father Gabriele Bortolami, once argued in this respect that this process of urbanization deeply affected Bakongo 'tradition' – both as an idea or symbol and as a pragmatics of social and domestic organization – and pushed the Bakongo into finding ways to adapt. This process involved particular cases of conflict solving but also more overarching mechanisms of 'ordering', of finding a narrative and praxis that would somehow address the consequent conflictuality and help people make sense of things. In several interviews with local Bakongo elders at the União das Tradições Kongo (UTK, Union of Kongo Traditions), Ruy had lengthy discussions about how several aspects of Bakongo tradition – from marriage customs to ritual and domestic organization – had suffered a process of adaptation in the city, often amidst conflictive

episodes and events. Here, *ndoki* often appeared as a central element, for as a system of knowledge transmitted within the *kanda* or lineage it is understood among the Bakongo as an ancestral property connected to the 'spirit' of things and places. It is a wisdom that addresses and solves problems of livelihood but can also create them if intentionally misused. If all this produced straightforward mechanisms of mapping and ordering in the rural areas – the sacred bush, the forbidden lake, the magical hill etc. – the same cannot be said in the urban setting, where spatial connections are constantly shifting and where problems of plurality, competition and conflict inevitably emerge. Thus, mirrored against other social and political mechanisms of ordering (state, public space, other belief systems etc.), *ndoki* progressively becomes a 'problem'. It is simultaneously disrupted and disruptive.

When he was referring to 'consciousness', Maturino was in fact talking about sensations of destabilization of tradition and the opening up of a space of plural possibilities, to which Christian churches were decisive contributors. Thus, from Maturino's perspective, if we want to 'understand churches', we should first and foremost have to understand how they approach sorcery and 'solve it' with deliverance.

For a long time, the Catholics and the Baptists denied the existence of sorcery. Other movements, in turn, facilitate and promote sorcery by 'curing' it [*kelo*], but this is mostly a business venture for many hoping to earn money or followers for their church. For instance, many old *kimbandeiros* [traditional healers] are now presenting themselves as 'prophets' who sell solutions for witchcraft. Then, churches like the Pentecostals usually deal with it through prayer and counselling. The *mpeve ya nlongo* churches, in turn, often use waters.

Maturino was suggesting the different configurations that *ndoki* acquires in the different 'prescriptions' through which the disease (*ndoki*) is diagnosed or identified as well as its solution or deliverance. The different churches in the Palanca often act in complementary fashion to conventional medicine. The diagnostic determines if the disease is produced within or beyond the realm of *ndoki* and then will either heal it or discard it as a 'conventional problem'.

For instance, in the EKWESA Church – a more institutionalized version of the *mpeve ya nlongo* – people often come to the church for healing because they know it is 'spiritual', in the sense that it is Christian and comes from the Holy Spirit. They explain their case to the church members, who write down the symptoms in a book. Then there is a scheduled appointment for healing. The *mbikudi* (prophet) arrives and sits down, allowing the spirit to enter his or her body and to reveal itself.

The group works with the revealers and with spiritual chants. When the spirits are inside, the group begins to disclose statements and ask questions, writing in their booklets until they find a 'solution'. They also use holy water and earth from specific holy places. Oftentimes, it can be decided that there are certain diseases that must be treated in the hospital; this also depends on the revealer and the spirit, as sometimes it is possible to combine a mixture of therapies. I once asked Pastor Nunes, the leader of the church, how they dealt with diseases that were just spiritual and not physical. He explained that many patients actually come to the church after leaving the hospital, where they were not healed, due to the persistent action of evil spirits. They have realized that their problem is not 'conventional' but spiritual. This is determined by the process of identification of the ailment and the subsequent itinerary of healing, decided by the spirits that inhabit the mbikudi.

This process of highlighting spiritual and physical problems and prescribing solutions often finds expression in the constant references we hear in and around Luanda to the idea of 'insurance' as a method or strategy for self-protection. To be *asegurado*, insured, means to be protected against evil invisible agencies. In the Palanca in particular, traditional wisdom such as *ndoki* is often invoked as an insurance mechanism against such negativities, often framed within logics of evil spirits, envy or 'evil eye' (*mau olhado*), which can in turn be themselves a product of *ndoki*. The classic protagonist of such a process is the successful man or woman. Regardless of status, he or she who 'stands out' due to their financial, political or public image achievements becomes inevitably induced into the logic of *ndoki*: either they have become successful due to use of bad *ndoki*, or they have been successfully *asegurado*, protected by a savvy *kimbandeiro* – a master of traditional knowledge.

Two examples that Ruy was given in Luanda were of the former Congolese president Mobutu and the jazz musician Franco (from TP OK Jazz), also known as *Le Sorcier*, or 'The Sorcerer', due to his outstanding guitar skills allegedly gained through his involvement in black magic. In any case, *inveja* (envy) or evil eye logic appears when individual success is not coupled with some sort of mechanism of redistribution towards the collective entity – clan, lineage, domestic unit, neighbourhood etc. In other words, if the successful man or woman chooses to accumulate rather than distribute his or her wealth (a typical 'urban behaviour'), he or she will suffer from the effects of bad *ndoki*.

This is what the elder Mabuila, head of the UTK, explained once when he described how hard it was for him to build his garage in the Palanca. The building, which also includes a hostel occupied by

Chinese workers and the headquarters of the UTK, is a large red, four-story construction that has become a landmark reference both for the neighbourhood and for the Luandans that travel Catete Road back and forth every day. Today, Mabuila's house is 'complete', but it took him decades to finish it due to what he described as the 'constant attacks' by neighbours of this section of the Palanca. He did not say it openly but one can assume that he was able to persevere after seeking some sort of insurance on behalf of some spiritualist specialist.

From this perspective, for many Bakongo *ndoki* acts as an internal ordering mechanism, one that regulates the primacy of the collective over the individual. However, this internal perception contrasts with the external construction, which frames *ndoki* as the ultimate agent of disorder. This contrast, although established in diverging manners by the different creeds and theologies, is often dialectic, confrontational and violent in its deconstruction of *ndoki*.

'All this black magic, this evil wisdom,' Nunes once commented to Ruy, 'is not good.' This is why in his church, the church of the Holy Spirit, they struggle and win the souls of those who are contaminated. They treat people affected by *ndoki* by fighting against it. 'As Jesus Christ says, your faith saved you.' They rely on faith – both in terms of belief in God and of trust and confidence – as the ultimate mechanism of ordering in the city, creating spaces of diagnosis, certainty and comfort, away from the danger zone that is *ndoki*. The Holy Spirit thus becomes an opponent in the spiritual battle, a very powerful one. It can heal, eliminate danger and, especially, redeem.

Let us now turn to the effects of all this on social life in 'Pentecost'. We can recognize in the above descriptions the insecurity, fear and an almost paranoid sociality that we also highlighted in the stories in Chapter 1. In that chapter we looked specifically at the need for protection and borders that this dialectic generates between good and evil, the holy and the demonic. Here, however, we want to develop a slightly different aspect of this, which we call anti-relativism and absolutism.

Anti-relativism and Absolutism

If the inhabitants of the Palanca traverse through different churches in order to seek insurance and deal with their personal and familial issues, thus engaging in a pluralist approach to spirituality, the way in which the churches themselves present their own prescriptions to the people is inherently absolutist – through the therapeutic itineraries (physical *and* moral) that they establish. Thus, plurality and competition, as

markers of the inconstancy of daily urban life, appear to be mechanisms of ordering on their own terms. What it is that the churches that dwell in these states address and 'order' ultimately becomes the key question. They solve problems. They provide insurance. They offer deliverance, healing, protection, security. But, first and foremost, they address doubt and relativism, presenting univocal narratives of certainty, salvation within what is presented as a chaotic state: the moral multiplicity and relativism of urban life. The emergence of a plurality of possibilities concerning the problem of security and insecurity simultaneously casts doubt and opens the space for new alternatives.

Here, we can think again of the words of Neves, who often described religious affairs in Luanda in terms of a 'spiritual market', where different churches, movements and individual healers competed for followers who simultaneously became clients. In other words, he accused several churches of 'clientelizing faith' within what could resemble a 'capitalist Christianity'. Coming from an austere, traditionalist position, Neves blamed the foreign neo-Pentecostal churches for the 'emerging market' that was also an expression of 'spiritual combat' – the militarization of religion, as it were. In fact, this belligerent mindset has a strong currency, both in terms of narrative and praxis, where we can find singing choirs named *Jovens Soldados de Angola* (Young Soldiers of Angola) or church ushers dressed in military uniform, such as in the Kimbanguist Church. With more or less literalism involved in this construction, we can observe how church adherence becomes a form of allegiance and militancy becomes militarism.

Within this framework, healing and deliverance appear as battlefields of sorts, which promote reverberations between the different actors in the public space. It is within this theory and sense of pluralism that many residents in the Palanca seem to navigate in their movements between different churches, prophets, healers etc. But what churches offer the prospective and current believer is not a pluralist worldview but rather an absolutist value, an anti-relativist interpretation, a single path in the road to salvation. This is proper of a Manichean reasoning, a narrative disposition that is necessarily dialectic and oppositional: good/bad, perdition/salvation etc.

This absolutist road seems to work in both directions: guiding eschatologically towards a future of salvation but also enacting a redeeming outlook on the past, either through a confessional biographical regime such as the one evoked by Neves or through a rupturist statement against the present, identified as inherently 'wrong' from a moral point of view. From this perspective, the narrative stemming from such churches in the Palanca seems to be equally based on a form of nostalgia, a longing



Figure 3.4 Members of the Kimbanguist Church in Luanda marching. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

for something that has been lost in the current state of chaos and moral decay. This longing can appear enveloped in metaphors of purity, orderliness, simplicity etc. as well as in explicit temporal connections, such as ideas of ‘biblical times’, the ‘original tribes of Judah’ etc.

Pastor Nunes of the EKWESA Church, for instance, embedded his church within what we could call an ‘ancestralization of Christianity’, its coupling with African (and, more specifically, Bantu and Bakongo) tradition and history. In a conversation held in the church’s headquarters in the Cazenga neighbourhood, he talked to Ruy about a figure known as Nzala Mpandi, who was the first person with the *poder de Deus* (power of God) in the beginning of the world, from the times of Babylon. In the old days, ‘we were all together, we were born among us.’ But then they began building the Babel tower, and people began separating into races (black, white etc.). God spoke to the blacks and told them that those who prayed in the Holy Spirit were on his side. Nzala Mpandi was the first spiritual leader; he spoke to Africa and to the whole world. In those mythic times, the Kongo – what is today the Lower Congo and Northern Angola – did not have borders. As soon as he arrived to the heart of Kongo, to a place called Nyamba, he rose up to the skies, alive. Today there is a sign on that very spot.

Continuing his afro-centred historiographical revision, Nunes explained that Blacks and Israelites were the same people but eventually each 'followed its own prophet'. Thus, the theology of Kongo and 'Issayeli' (the Bakongo name of Israel) ultimately diverged throughout the centuries because people began to follow false prophets. Those who sought the Promised Land arrived at Ethiopia but got lost and returned back home. Different groups emerged from the extant brotherhood, and some arrived in the Kongo. The process of colonization continued the process of deconstruction of the original, pure Christian Church. 'Many of us do not know in what times we live in,' Nunes concluded. 'And we must be ready because the prophets will come and save us. So the church's objective is to await the arrival of the messiah. So we ask: what do the prophets do? We analyse.' Nunes indeed outlines an itinerary, a historiographical path through which we could understand his church's mission and role in this world. While recognizing the current times of ignorance and disconcertment, he showed a trajectory by which we could make sense of the past and also devise a possible future of salvation.

At this point, what we sense from these observations in the Palanca is that in 'Pentecost' churches are prone to produce processes of 'ordering' that unfold in multiple instances: in the way they detect problems and offer solutions (particularly concerning issues of health, security etc.) and in the way they unfold a map of the urban lifestyle, identifying what is wrong and indicating the right way out of it. There are processes of discernment, identification and choice that affect both geography (marking sacred and sinful spaces in the city) and temporality (marking moments of sin and redemption). But if this is the case in the hyper-urban Luanda, what happens in radically different landscapes of 'Pentecost', such as in rural Kiriwina or semi-urban Port Vila? Can we also there identify this move towards an 'absolutism'?

Extending the Context: Finding the True Path

The absolutist road and anti-relativist nostalgias operating in Luanda are part of a moral landscape that is proper of urban life: pluralism, diversity, disorder, uncertainty. From this perspective, places such as the Palanca, once framed by the local media as 'the neighbourhood that never stops', in reference to its burgeoning state of commerce and spiritual activity, seem prone to this kind of dialectics. One could, however, speculate on how this operation is affected in different social settings, such as rural or semi-urban spaces. What kinds of temporal operations, redemptions and salvations are displayed?

For instance, in the Trobriand Islands, witchcraft and sorcery is also seen as the ultimate disorder that social life in 'Pentecost' is geared towards (re)ordering. In what ways might Trobrianders, dwellers of rural settlements, conceive of the necessity of reining in the threatening forces that lead to sinful action? Here, the origin and source of sin is ideologically located in acts of witchcraft, Michelle reports, and in particular in the person of the witch. The acts of the witch are perhaps best understood as antisocial and even anti-feminine, against the 'natural' inclinations of women to be productive and reproductive, though it should be noted that men can be and are witches even as the category is gendered female. Sorcery, carried out at night under cover of darkness, is coded as masculine but likewise threatening and symbolic of social disorder. The threats of both sorcery and witchcraft are seen by Trobrianders as unsettling, chaotic and dangerous and are among the primary targets in Pentecostal Kiriwina and neighbouring islands. Stories, anecdotes, concerns, debates and warnings emerge through conversations and general chit-chat that Michelle engages in with her Trobriand interlocutors, both those who hold positions of authority in the various churches and those who do not.

In many such conversations, Michelle perceived the simultaneously geographic and historical grounding of these attributions. Throughout Papua New Guinea and the Pacific more generally, a common metaphor is used to distinguish between the time before the missionaries came and 'enlightened' the previously 'primitive' peoples, some of whom practised regular and brutal warfare, headhunting and cannibalism (though the latter two were never practised in the Trobriands), and the time of Christianity. Before conversion, many Pacific Islanders considered themselves to have been 'in the darkness', while Christianity brought 'the light', which is further brightened with the arrival of the stronger, more powerful faith that evangelical and Pentecostal movements are seen to represent. The darkness, being (as mentioned above) a cover for acts of secrecy, including the evildoing of witches and sorcerers, is again synonymous with disorder and sin, while lightness/whiteness is, in this nearly universal metaphor, purity, cleanliness and order. This chromatic sensation of darkness, which in Luanda would be referred to as *trevas* – the idea of moral sin that also indicates gloom, murk – already denotes a discursive mechanism of ordering that is simultaneously aesthetic and spatializing, determining locations or trajectories that embrace either light or shadow. It effects a moral mapping of the islands but also a projection towards the past, one that reclaims it in an attempt to 'control', appropriate and dominate the present.

This image of a journey from darkness to light is a common feature in Christian thought and narrative and is usually devised as an 'absolutist

road' in its own terms, allowing no optional route other than the route of salvation. This may be because it has a redemptive quality that is proper of confessional regimes that intersect personal and collective histories within the kinds of transformations that are sought and effected in churches of 'Pentecost' throughout processes of individual conversion. However, the perpetual moral demand that is implied in such processes shows us that, in fact, the 'light' is merely a promise, an expectation that is, at most, in the process of confirmation – because, as we saw in Luanda, the crossroads sensation is always there. Here, the eschatological dimension seems to weigh as heavily as the necessity to qualify the present and redeem the past.

In August of 2013, Michelle attended a Revival Crusade in the Trobriand village of Omarakana. Pastors of churches practising a 'revived' form of Christianity, in this case focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit and the importance of spiritual rebirth, had been invited from southern Kiriwina and the outer islands to preach, testify and perform calls from the altar to engage the Holy Spirit and effect conversions for those ready to be born again. While these male pastors were charismatic and compelling, what interested her even more were the conversations she had on the periphery of these proceedings, mostly with women from the southern village of Sinaketa. Several of these women told Michelle that they were witches but that they had now been *kalobusivau* (born again) in the Christian faith and had renounced their past misdeeds. After living for nearly two years on the island, she had had it firmly instilled in her that no one, ever, would openly admit to being, or having been, a witch. Accusations might be made in hushed tones amongst close kin or friends but were never spoken publicly, and there are no public or violent reprisals against known witches. Witchcraft and sorcery are forces that are omnipresent in Trobriand life and are evoked with virtually every illness or death, but this is always shrouded in secrecy, darkness and the unknown.

A century of Methodism and Catholicism has done little to diminish the power of magic spells, sorcery and witchcraft and the sway these hold over Trobrianders' lives. But those born again in the faith have, in some cases, publicly claimed their status as witches – a practice previously unthinkable – in order to demonstrate the power of their faith. Though they had been indoctrinated into these black arts (usually while very young), now, with their faith to guide them, these women resist the temptation to let their spirits roam to do ill to others. Instead, the women (both in spirit and in body) constrain themselves and spend their time in church or safely in the family home. Outside influences threaten evil, which can be rejected by staying at home. To go out – to

traverse the usual boundaries, not only of the village but of the body itself, as the spirit of the witch roams whilst the body stays put – is to do, and to invite, evildoing, violence and disorder.

This confessional regime on behalf of ex-witches becomes part of the process of ordering in ‘Pentecost’ – of time and space but first and foremost of the individual into the collective, into the ‘community’. The story I shared above of Neves and his ‘adventures’ in the mpeve ya nlongo churches of Luanda is also one of someone who was born into a Tokoist family and eventually ‘strayed’ as a youngster, seeking other spiritual experiences before returning home to his family (spiritually *and* physically). This sensation of ‘returning home’ or ‘finding your place’ is often populated by episodes and events of revelation and acknowledgement that bring the believer towards a sensation or idea of ‘truth’ that somehow becomes recognizable.

This is, at least, what Annelin found throughout her fieldwork with prophetesses in Fresh Wota, Port Vila. After a Bible reading session in church on a late afternoon in 2010, one such prophetess, Rose, told Annelin that she had decided to give her a Bible. ‘I have noticed that you never bring one,’ said Rose (she always shared hers with Annelin). She had realized that Annelin probably did not have one and wanted to help her out. Rose had long known, of course, that Annelin was not in church for the same reason as her. This did not stop her, however, from pretending that she was. As Annelin was usually a very interested conversation partner, she liked discussing her thoughts and intellectual puzzles and challenges. The Bible is interesting and useful for everyday challenges, she pointed out. Annelin asked her in what way the stories in the Bible, and especially the stories in the Old Testament, for which she had a particular fondness, gave her answers to her everyday challenges in Fresh Wota. Rose explained to Annelin that it gave her comfort to know that there were real answers to be found on difficult questions, such as how to deal with her brother, who was drinking and mistreating his wife; how to deal with her daughter, who had started working in a kava bar (which serves intoxicating beverages) to support her child; and how to save enough money to start building a proper cement house so that they could move out of the temporary house of corrugated iron that threatened to fall down in the rainy seasons. How should she help her family; how should she make the right decisions ...?

‘What you need to realize,’ Rose told Annelin, ‘is that there is only one answer, one truth, and it is to be found in the Bible.’ She went on to explain that although the Bible contained clear and unambiguous answers, one needed to work, to make an intellectual effort, to find them. ‘It is like this,’ she said, ‘when you start reading the Bible; it is as

if a door opens. You realize then that there is a path to be followed (*yu save se gat wan rod istap*).’ She elaborated by telling Annelin that there is only one path; however, it might seem, at times, as if there are alternatives. ‘You might come to a crossroad, and there seem to be good reasons for going in both directions. However, there is always only one road,’ she emphasized. Looking back on her life, she said that she might have tried different paths, different roads but had always come to a dead end. ‘Then, one must return,’ she said, ‘and try the other way.’ She emphasized, again and again, that this is hard work and demands constant attention. When you find the right road, however, you know that this is it. There is only one path, not several.

This sense of absolute truth was often articulated not only in conversations with Rose but also in perceptions of guilt in discussions of, and dealings with, witchcraft and witchcraft accusations. In these cases, there are no ‘grey areas’, no ambivalent cases or expressions of doubt. Quite the contrary, there is always a victim and an undisputable guilty party. Locating the witch is often the work of the healers. It involves their ability to see. The witch, as an expression of pure evil, can hide on the inside of a person. People can therefore be unsuspecting but still the target of an attack from a source of evil. In Fresh Wota, witchcraft can therefore often take the form of witchcraft hunts and witchcraft lynching, as has been the case throughout Papua New Guinea and in Vanuatu, where several witches were lynched, burned alive or beaten to death for ‘challenging’ Christian morality (see e.g. Rio 2014).

Such public lynching (physical or symbolic) becomes part of the process of identification and solution offered by ‘Pentecost’. In August 2013, in Kiriwina, a case of ‘sorcery illness’ took place in a hamlet next to where Michelle was living. Peter is the brother of Stephen, a catechist in the Catholic Church who is known to have visions and other spiritual gifts – despite the Catholic Church’s usually conservative stance concerning these. Peter was still a young man when he became very ill after a land dispute in a neighbouring hamlet. He went to the hospital on 2 August after Stephen preached in church and later announced again at the soccer field that he saw in a dream who was responsible for performing sorcery against Peter and said that all sorcery had to stop. Stephen is known for having very strong faith (*dubumi*) as well as the gift of being able to see things in visions or dreams – special abilities that are given by God and give him great power. Stephen wears a wooden cross around his neck, a totem through which he accesses God and this divine knowledge.

Stephen’s public announcement of the man’s name – a strong social taboo – led to a court case in Oluweta hamlet, with the elder/magistrate

Samgwa, from Michelle's own hamlet of Modawosi, presiding along with an elder woman from a prominent family in the village. All members of the village were invited to attend the court case, which began with a prayer and appeals to leave the matter in God's hands. In the context of the court case, Stephen did not repeat the story of his dream but claimed that the entire matter was Satan's work (*Satan lapaisewa*), but other elders present attested to the spiritual powers God had given to Stephen, saying '*lagift guyau iseki*' (his gift is given by God). Stephen, for his part, noted that it was *bomala* (forbidden by custom, but also used in the context of church to mean 'holy' or 'sacred') to speak openly the names of practitioners of sorcery. The elders spoke out about the need to rein in sorcery, especially by young people, and also chastised women who gossiped and spread stories. The court case was closed with a prayer after mutual apologies between the accused and Stephen.

Peter stayed in hospital for several weeks, but medical treatments did nothing to improve his condition. The fact that he was brought home from the hospital still unwell re-aroused the suspicion of sorcery, and the family thus decided to 'go another way' to get healthy, as Vero, Michelle's adoptive mother, put it. By this, she meant prayer and spiritual healing. Stephen would use prayer, holy water and/or laying of hands as necessary to help, but 'bush medicine' or counter-sorcery spells would not be sought, Michelle was told. This incident prompted Vero to tell her of other stories in which Stephen's powers had helped those in need, specifically mentioning several difficult births (usually off limits to men) in which mothers and/or babies were in distress, ensuring successful deliveries thanks to his spiritual gifts. Stephen, unlike sorcerers, never asks for or accepts payment for healing, as he sees his gifts as a blessing from God using him for His work, much as Annelin describes for the women healers in Port Vila in Chapter 1. Perhaps notably, for prayer or faith healing to work, Michelle was told that all parties involved have to believe fully, have strong faith in God's power. Unlike medicine or magic (*megwa*), which works independently of one's beliefs and are seen to have their own agency or power, faith healing is only successful for the truly devout.

Here, through these acts of discernment and their often violent outcomes, there is both a moral absolutism and an ontological absolutism involved, spurred by the way in which witchcraft in particular is dealt with in 'Pentecost', often inserted within more overarching sensations of 'unknowing-ness', of what cannot be seen, perceived or understood.

For instance, as Annelin realized in Vanuatu, people often pointed out, in nostalgic terms, that 'Port Vila is different now.' The sensation of 'order' that was present in the city (either as an actual experience or

a constructed memory) in the colonial period seemed to have disappeared. One might say that the aesthetics of visual order is no longer detectable; more is heard about the fear and danger of the 'hidden'. There are endless rumours about teenage boys hiding from the intruding gaze of adults, smoking marijuana. There are also other rumours, about places where people worship dark forces ('satanic worshippers') in houses without windows. There is a popular story about a house built on the way out of Port Vila's city centre, just as one crosses the city border towards the peri-urban town of Mele Maat. Here there is a brick house without windows. Many people tell the story of how men, most of them white businessmen, meet in the dark to perform grotesque rituals, slaughtering chickens and drinking blood. These stories reflect the fear of the hidden, dark and inaccessible places that are the absolute opposite of the values people try to uphold in their everyday life; values of visibility and openness, emphasized in the practices of beautification – of bodies, houses, gardens etc. These values are also present in the churches of Luanda that engage in uniform aesthetics to promote strategies of organization, both internally and as a statement towards the exterior, to give the impression of control and safekeeping.

Back in Port Vila, this dynamic of hidden/open and the aesthetic of a visual order are clearly mirrored in the abilities of the healers, who can 'see' where others cannot. One of the most useful gifts healers use is, for instance, the gift of 'X-ray' vision. This enables healers and prophetesses to penetrate even the most closed materials and to see that which others cannot. Order is thus related to the technology of seeing and the value of visibility or 'transparency'. Beautification is a way in which this is made obvious or given more attention.

Conclusion: Nostalgia, Absolutism, Escaping the Danger Zone

Ideas of discernment and truth are commonplace in Christianity. As we saw in this ethnographic journey between Luanda, Kiriwina and Port Vila, such ideas are conveyed against a negative sensation of pluralism and spiritual breakdown provoked by the typical amoral relativism of non-Pentecostal worlds. This sensation is heightened in the hyper-urban setting of Luanda but can also be found in Port Vila and Kiriwina, in particular concerning the construction of the ultimate alterity: witchcraft. Witchcraft appears in these contexts enveloped by a chromatic metaphor of darkness and 'fuzziness' and is attacked in 'Pentecost' due to its apparent emptiness in what concerns (Christian) morality. It is

also enveloped by a temporal argument that, in a first instance, seems to place it in an unwanted past – the preconversion, traditional past. However, what we realize is that it operates very much in the present, as a counterpart to the kinds of moral mappings and routes effected in ‘Pentecost’.

Within this framework, the processes of social/political ordering and establishing absolutist, anti-pluralist routes on behalf of churches of ‘Pentecost’ reveal not just a process of establishing an eschatology (as is the common understanding in the anthropology of Christianity) but also and especially a process of simultaneously reclaiming/redeeming the past and ‘breaking with the present’ (see Meyer 1998). This takes place in two movements: firstly, in the commonplace confessional regimes that are part of the narratives of conversion and self-transformation – as revealed, for instance, among the ex-witches interviewed by Michelle in Kiriwina; and secondly, in a sort of nostalgia, a longing for order (often located in a biblical, mythified, ‘pre-corruption’ past) that is effected by churches in response to the present day experience of pluralism, disorder, uncertainty etc.

In these regimes we can observe a certain ‘resentment’, as it were, towards the present. And an interesting contradiction is detected: Pentecostal churches criticize and attack pluralism but nevertheless ‘need’ it in order to establish their Manichean reasoning and dialectic. From this perspective, many such movements rely on the identification of an enemy – be it witchcraft, disbelief, secularity, other churches etc. – for their identification of a specific truth. This truth often emerges in the spatialized, geographic form of a route within a maze-like map of never-ending infrastructural alternatives: a road, an absolutist road, that allows no other option to those of us who wish to be saved and enter the Kingdom of God.

It is precisely this presentification of the route that makes ‘Pentecost’ – more than an event or a temporality – a space. For instance, if the MER (Missão Evangélica da Reconciliação – Evangelical Mission for Reconciliation) announces, on the church’s wall, a service for women on Mondays, an intercession and pastoral dialogue every Tuesday, lessons and prayers on Wednesdays, fasting and prayers on Fridays, intercessions every Saturday and the main Culto de Adoração (worship service) every Sunday, it does not just offer a calendar ordering of the prospective believers’ lives but also an itinerary of effect, a trajectory throughout the city that becomes a space of spiritual conviviality. By guiding Luandans (and the Palancans, in particular) through time and space, in this respect, as we will argue in Chapter 6, the absolutist road is found to be more than an eschatological theology but a cartography of faith.

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