Indexation and Displacement: Spiritan Missions and Their Catechists in the Central Highlands of Angola*

Iracema Dulley**

Missionization in Angola was always marked by an intense and diversified flow of people, ideas, objects, and languages. This diversity constituted both the missions and the colonial situation in which they operated and largely contributed to the formation of an intellectual elite.[1] As Christian missions were almost the only means of upward social mobility in colonial Angola, they are important not only from a cultural and religious perspective, but also from a social and political one. The French Congregation of the Holy Ghost[2] was the main institution in charge of Catholic evangelization in Angola during the colonial period and was widely present in the Central Highlands. The first Spiritan missions in the region were founded in the white settlement areas of Huila (1881) and Caconda (1882). Spiritan rural missions would be established from the 1890s among the people who the missionaries contributed to designate Ovimbundu. Both urban and rural missions in the region were considered successful by the Spiritan missionaries and the colonial administration.

In what follows, I focus on two complementary aspects of the Catholic missions in Angola: the relationship between the Catholic church, the state and those legally classed as *indígenas* (natives), which is related to what was perceived as the receptivity of the inhabitants of the central highlands to Christianity, and the architecture of the Catholic mission in the region, in which catechists played a major role. I argue that the mission was able to establish itself in the central highlands not only because of its relation to the state and the opportunities it offered, but also because of the way in which it related local institutions to the Christian missionary project. In other words, the mission is to be understood as a process in which a convention is both created and disputed through the ongoing indexation of languages, rituals, and institutions.

In this process, catechists played a crucial role that is frequently overlooked by studies focusing on missions. What follows is a brief ethnographic account of Spiritan missions that considers them as much as possible given their recurrent omission in colonial sources.

The church, the state, and the *indígenas*

The arrival of the first Franciscan missionaries in 1484 and acceptance of Christianity in the kingdom of Kongo[3] are very much constitutive of the Catholic narrative on its presence in Angola. However, at that time, the European presence was restricted to trading posts and enclaves on the coast. The interior remained unavailable for Europeans except for the few merchants residing along the trade routes. The post-Berlin Conference (1984-5) scenario was one in which it was no longer possible to have such a loose grip on overseas territories, and the Portuguese state proceeded to the military occupation of the interior of what was to become Angola in its present territorial configuration in order to be able to claim it. A series of "pacification" wars in the interior would be conducted from the last decade of the 19th century until the late 1910s. The Bailundo war (1902-3) marked the military subjugation of the central highlands. Evangelization was not carried out in a systematic way until the end of the 19th century and did not encompass much of the Angolan territory, but the early Catholic presence constitutes missionary imagination regarding Angola and was part of the justification for Portuguese colonialism. Missionary accounts frequently allude to the conversion of the Congolese court to Catholicism and to the diplomatic relations between the kings of Portugal and Kongo (Koren, 1982; Lourenço, 2003).

Collaboration between the Portuguese state and the Catholic church concerning overseas territories dates back to the Portuguese maritime expansion.[4] However, the secular missionaries sent by the Portuguese government were never enough. It was hard to find them in sufficient number, and those who did go to the colony would not leave any successors. Rome was especially concerned about the expansion of Protestantism in Africa and urged the Portuguese state to provide Angola with enough missionaries. As no Portuguese congregation was available to undertake the evangelization of Angola, the territory was assigned by the Vatican to the Congregation of the Holy Ghost in 1865. Although the Portuguese state was suspicious of the presence of foreign missions in its territory, the issue was solved after the Catholic congregation affirmed its apolitical and antimilitaristic character and stated that it had nothing to do with French imperial projects. The Spiritans had missions in Senegal since 1779 and in Gabon since 1844 and intended to expand their work in Africa. The congregation's charisma was to provide spiritual and temporal aid to the "neglected black people of Africa" (Griffin, 1957: 30). Thus, the Congregation of the Holy Ghost arrived in Angola in 1866 with the purpose of expanding its missions to the whole territory.

---

[3] The literature concerned with the early days of Catholic evangelization in the kingdom of Kongo is vast. Cf. Thornton (1984, and 1998) and Almeida (2009).

[4] This does not mean, however, that the colonial and missionary enterprises were simply and always juxtaposed. For more on the subject, see Etherington (2005).

Except for very brief periods of anticlericalism, such as the one which occurred during the First Republic (1910-1926), the tendency was for the Portuguese government to support Catholic missions, on which it counted to promote the "education" and "civilization" of those the Political, Civil and Criminal Statute of the Indigenous People (1926), also known as the *indigenato* regime, designated *indígenas*.[5] The passing of this law deprived the vast majority of the African population in the Portuguese colonies of the right to citizenship and compelled them to work under dire conditions in order to meet taxation demands. In the absence of state-funded public education, the Catholic church was expected to fulfill this function. Christian missions, both Catholic and Protestant, became one of the very few alternatives for *indígenas* to have access to the education and social insertion that might allow them to achieve the status of *assimilado* (assimilated), i.e. Portuguese citizen. Although less than 1 % of the Angolan population had acquired this privilege when Angola became independent in 1975, this remained an aspiration for those who were in a position to dream of it. Although *assimilados* were as a rule considered second-class citizens, citizenship allowed them to have second-rank jobs in the civil service, better material conditions of life, status, and exemption from labor recruitment.

The João Belo law was passed in 1926, the first year of the New State dictatorship that lasted until 1974, and established freedom of religious worship and separation between church and state in the colonies. The Portuguese state remained secular throughout the colonial period, but officially collaborated with and subsidized Catholic missions. In spite of the constant suspicion of foreigners, Portuguese missionaries were never the majority. In 1932, Spiritan missions had 71 priests in Angola, of whom only 13 were Portuguese (C. S. Sp. archives). The Colonial Act of 1930 formalized the collaboration between church and state and the Missionary Agreements and the *Concordata* of 1940 attributed the education of *indígenas* exclusively to the Catholic church (Péclard, 2015). The main source of conflict between the Portuguese government and the Congregation of the Holy Ghost was always the high number of foreigners it employed in its missions, but it was as a rule overcome in view of the privileges given by the colonial state to Catholic missions and of the strategic position of missions in the colonial system.[6]

Yet there are many common elements concerning how the Congregation of the Holy Ghost and the colonial administration made sense of those legally classed as *indígenas*. Both institutions shared a concern over how to accommodate the diversity they found to their universalizing project of Christianization and "civilization," and both tried to make sense of this "other" in order to be capable of distinguishing the elements that did not pose an obstacle to their project (and could therefore be preserved) from elements that opposed it (and should therefore be gradually transformed). In the narrative of both Spiritan missionaries and colonial administrators, *indígenas* were to be guided through the various stages of development in the evolutionary ladder towards "civilization," an evolution that should go hand in hand with the understanding and practice of the Christian doctrine. However, while Catholic missions were made responsible for providing *indígenas* with the necessary education

---

[5] For more information on the *indigenato* and its consequences in Angola, see the beautiful work of Messiant (2006).

[6] For more details on the relationship between the church and the state in colonial Angola, see Péclard (2001; 2015, cap. 2).

to achieve this goal, rudimentary education was neither available for the whole *indígena* population nor of sufficient quality for those who received it to achieve what was understood to be the desired level of "civilization" necessary for assimilation.

While most Africans attended village schools in which they were taught by a catechist who had rarely received more than four years of formal education himself and frequently did not fully master the Portuguese language, the possibility of finishing secondary education and applying for the status of *assimilado* with the support of the Catholic church was restricted to a few mission students. Given the scarcity of public secular schools in Angola and the fact that the few places available were reserved for Portuguese citizens, missionary education was the sole opportunity for those who could not afford to send their children to private schools. As a result, *indígenas* who aspired to become *assimilados* were expected to be Christians. "Native secular priests" (*prêtres séculiers indigènes*) in the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, for example, were all "of Portuguese nationality" (C. S. Sp. archives), i.e., *assimilados*.

As for language, Decree 77 of 1921 determined that rudimentary education was to be given exclusively in Portuguese, while religious instruction might be carried out in vernacular languages provided that those to be evangelized did not speak Portuguese, which was frequently the case (Koren, 1982: 498). All mission stations and parishes adopted the catechism of Saint Pius X. Missionaries were to master the local language so that they could preach and confess in the vernacular and catechists were expected to attend meetings organized by the missionaries on a regular basis so as to ensure their surveillance. Formal education in Portuguese undoubtedly hindered the access of the majority of the population to it, as very few inhabitants of the interior could speak this language, and this can be partly rendered responsible for the reduced number of *assimilados* found in Angola during the colonial period (Bender, 1978). On the other hand, evangelization in the vernacular made Christianity accessible to all those who lived in missionized areas. The Catholic doctrinal material was translated into local languages in collaboration with catechists, whose contribution to the work of mediation necessary for the establishment of equivalences between Christian and local concepts is not to be underestimated. The catechism, instructions to catechists, and liturgy respectively translated by Lecomte (1899), Alves (1954), and Valente (1956) reveal the translational displacement of concepts that was both inevitable and productive in the mission.[7]

The classification and grammatization of local languages was carried out along with the classification of *indígenas* into different ethnic groups, in a process that bears similarities to the one described by Ranger (1989) for the Manyika in Zimbabwe. In Angola, *indígenas* were divided into Bochimans and Bantu, and those classed as Bantu were further subdivided into numerous ethnicities to which a territory, a language, customs, and a psychology were attributed. Language was important not only for communication, but also because it was construed as a way of gaining access to the specific "mentality" of those who spoke it. The ethnicity that roughly corresponded to the mostly Umbundu-speaking central highlands was that of the Ovimbundu (in Portuguese *vimbundos* or *bundos*), in spite of the fact that during the caravan trade period no such polity existed that could bear this name; rather, the region had been divided into about twelve polities

---

[7] On missionary translation and indexation, see Dulley (2009). On missionary work as mediation, see Montero (2009).

translated as "kingdoms" by the missionaries (e.g. Childs, 1970), among which Viye and Bailundu. The Ovimbundu were classed as Bantu, and from this racial belonging resulted a series of characteristics that stood in opposition to those of the "civilized" Europeans, on the one hand, and of the "most primitive" Bochimans (Estermann, 1983), on the other hand. The latter were considered unsuitable as labor, while missionaries attributed to them a primitive form of monotheism.

It is noteworthy that *indígenas* are not usually named individually in most of the Congregation's internal records. Their names are not mentioned in the missionaries' letters or reports. Africans usually appear as *negros* (blacks), *indígenas* (natives), *cristãos* (Christians) or *pagãos* (heathens) in statistical records and missionary reports (C. S. Sp. archives). In such records, the racial component in the classification of *indígenas* becomes very visible, more so than in documents aimed at the broader public. The inhabitants of Angola are designated *indígenas* or *negros* not only in statistics, but also in the letters exchanged between the missionaries. Hierarchization based on racial criteria, epitomized in racial segregation in the seminars, provides a good illustration of the differences perceived to exist between "black" and "white:" The racial hierarchy of colonial legislation, which in principle contradicted the rules of the Congregation, was reproduced in practice in the relationship between its members. It is worth noting that when someone related to the mission is mentioned in the documents of the Congregation during the colonial period, only his name is given when he is white and/or European, while in cases in which the person in question is not white, his name is followed by a descriptive: *indígena* (native), *mestiço* (mixed-race), or *negro* (black).

Most mission-related statistics are based on categories such as "Catholics", "catechism students", "baptisms", "marriages", "confessions", "communions", "medical treatments", "interns of both sexes", "primary school students", and "secondary school students". As for evangelization, special emphasis is placed on the number of "Catholics" and on the administration of sacraments, which are frequently presented as evidence of the expansion of the mission. Regarding education, the great majority of "Catholics" are catechism students and very few are primary or secondary school students. In the 1955-1960 report on Sá da Bandeira (today Lubango), said to be "inhabited (...) by the Ovimbundu tribe" (*tribo dos Vimbundos*), which was presented to Rome, the population is described as follows:

Table 1: Population of the diocese of Sá da Bandeira (1955-1960)

The number of inhabitants in the diocese is	1,204, 776
The surface of the diocese is	65,560 km²
The number of Catholics is	611,518
Among which:	
Native Catholics (*católicos indígenas*)	559,618
White European Catholics (*católicos europeus brancos*)	40,000

Mixed-race Catholics (*católicos mestiços*)	12,000
The number of catechism students is	54,831
The number of Protestants is	150,000
The number of heathens (*pagãos*) is	388,427

Source: C. S. Sp archives

The number of "native Catholics" is presented as being superior to that of "heathens," which legitimizes discourse on the receptivity to Christianity in the region. The presence of Protestants in the report and their reduced number in relation to Catholics points to the already mentioned competition between Catholics and Protestants and reiterates once more the discourse on the prevalence of Catholic conversion. The number of catechism students serves as evidence for the ongoing the work of evangelization, for they represent potential Christians. In the various reports and letters, the mission is described as "flourishing" in spite of lack of personnel, difficulty in ensuring full compliance with Catholicism, and competition from Protestant missions. The reports intend to confirm the dissemination of Christianity throughout the Angolan territory and present ever increasing numbers: new churches, schools, and seminars are built; new catechists are trained; native friars (*irmãos indígenas*) are ordained[8].

In spite of the initial setbacks that are commonly part of the heroic narrative on the establishment of Christian missions, the one among the Ovimbundu was always seen by Spiritans as successful, especially in comparison with their attempts to found missions in Southern Angola–a view shared by Spiritan missionary and British anthropologist Edwards (1962), who did fieldwork in the northwestern central highlands in the 1950s, and by Péclard (1995), who shares the Protestant reticence regarding actual conversion, but nonetheless portrays the inhabitants of the central highlands as receptive to Christianity. According to the Péclard, Protestant missions (and especially Chatelain's Lincoln mission) were stricter than Catholic ones regarding conversion, which caused Protestant missionaries to consider evangelization to be extremely difficult. Chatelain, for instance, attributed the setbacks of his evangelizing project to polygamy, "sorcery", "native indolence", and intoxication.

Although the interpretation above contrasts enormously with the one officially presented to the broader public by Catholic missionaries in their narratives on the evangelization of the central highlands, in which they almost never mention the occurrence of sorcery, polygamy, and intoxication, it is also true that Protestant and Catholic missionaries alike tend to address such delicate issues mostly in internal correspondence. The contrast between official reports and texts intended to advertise the success of the mission to a broader audience, on the one hand, and internal reports and missionary ethnographies, on the other hand, remains strong. The Spiritans' internal reports repeatedly affirm the need for missionaries to cover the whole Angolan territory and regret the fact that wide areas are assigned to catechists and visited by missionaries only sporadically and with great difficulty. Missionary instructions to catechists exhort them to combat "sorcery", "intoxication", and "polygamy" and stress

---

[8] Missionary statistics were based on the catechists' records about their own villages.

that they are to report the occurrence of any such event to the missionaries (Alves, 1954). The ethnographic writings of Catholic missionaries in journals and books not directly related to the mission also point to the dissemination of such "evils" (e.g. Estermann, 1934; Valente, 1974 e 1985). Complaints regarding "pagan rituals" connected to funerals abound. Not only missionary instructions and ethnography, but also Berger's (1979) work, carried out independently from the missions, lead us to suppose that such non-conforming behavior was not only recurrent, but also frequently occurred with the tacit consent or participation of catechists and others considered to be Christians. Edwards (1962: 85) and Dorsey (1938) report the (clandestine) existence of "medicine men", not only in non-Christian villages.

Such local practices and institutions needed to be accommodated for the Christian mission to be established in the central highlands. This could only occur through the indexation of elements of the local language, rituals, and institutions to the Christian language, rituals, and institutions. According to Sahlins (1985), indexation creates convention by associating parts of the semantic field of categories related to different contexts of signification, in a process not unlike the one described by Rafael (1988) for the Spanish mission among the Tagalog, in which Christianization was possible both because and in spite of translation. The next section focuses on how the establishment of Christian missions went hand in hand with the creation of such a convention that could not help but be pervaded by dissemination and displacement (Derrida, 1972).

The architecture of Catholic missions in the central highlands

The choice of new sites on which to build mission stations usually considered factors such as number of inhabitants, salubrity, and what missionaries understood to be the population's willingness to convert to Christianity. This conjunction of factors turned the central highlands into a privileged site for evangelization, as it had mild climate and a considerable population that manifested interested in the missionary presence. Missions started with the construction of basic buildings: the missionary house, a chapel, and a barn. They would grow as they gathered funds and new converts, who would help to build schools, dispensaries, chapels, and churches. Some missions included a seminar and a boarding school offering primary and secondary education. Technical schools were also a very important aspect of the missionary project, since it was through work that "civilization" was to be learned. As a result, much of the skilled labor available in Angola was composed of former mission students. It was not uncommon for employers to visit missions when searching for qualified personnel. The mission of Caconda, for example, had electric power, a typography where doctrinal material was printed, agricultural fields, a mill, a carpentry shop, schools, a boarding school, a dispensary, and a space in which the future wives of Christians received domestic training (Lourenço, 2003: 129). At the beginning of Spiritan missionization in Angola, boarding schools were attended exclusively by former slaves, who were progressively replaced by the children of new converts, especially those of local chiefs and prominent people. Female congregations such as the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny had boarding schools for girls, but emphasis was placed on the education of boys (Heywood, 2001).

On the foundation of Spiritan missions in Africa, Koren affirms:

> *It was only around 1880 that Spiritan missions divided their territory into sectors, with a central house that led to various secondary stations. As a rule, these residences had two to four priests and one or two friars. They were located in carefully chosen spots to make displacement in all directions easier. The stations that depended on them usually contained a modest chapel and a school in the woods and were assigned to a catechist. They were located in villages that had manifested interest in the mission and were expected to embrace conversion. Those alongside a river or trail were frequently visited by one of the priests living at the central house. This mode of organization was satisfactory when the personnel at the mission was sufficiently stable, but disease and death frequently forced priests to move away and prevented them from establishing lasting relations with the population* (Koren, 1982: 509).

It is clear from Koren's account that the actual conditions of mission stations were usually far from what the missionaries considered to be ideal. Also, given that there were never enough missionaries to cover the whole territory, it was common for catechists to take charge of the work assigned to them without much supervision from the mission. This was not always welcomed by the missionaries, who frequently complained that this situation led to connivance with practices they understood to be in conflict with Christianity. It is thus clear that missionaries were not always in charge of the mission, and the farther one went from its center, the greater the probability that the indexation of Christian practices to local ones would encompass some of the local elements missionaries would have wished to avoid.

In a letter to the head of the Congregation in 1955, for instance, bishop Albino Alves reports that in the districts of Huambo and Benguela within three months there had been a total of 7,286 deaths in a population of roughly 4 million people, among which 3,094 children younger than 5 years old. Alves also mentions the difficulty in convincing *indígenas* not to visit "sorcerers" on such occasions despite the existence of missionary hospitals and dispensaries. The diocese of Nova Lisboa included three large cities at the time: Nova Lisboa (now Huambo), Benguela, and Lobito, plus some small towns of European colonization and 4850 "Catholic villages of black natives (*aldeias católicas de negros indígenas*) with a school led by a catechist" (C. S. Sp. archives). In the 1950s it encompassed 18 parishes and 31 mission stations with their own churches and priests or superiors who were expected to celebrate 11 annual masses. Other masses were celebrated by the catechists in the villages. Great religious celebrations at the central mission station usually attracted thousands of people from the surrounding villages.

The baptism, marriage, and confirmation records kept by parishes and mission stations were used as a source for colonial censuses, and the birth and marriage certificates issued by the Catholic church had legal value while those provided by Protestant missions did not. This was due to the privileged relation between colonial administration and the Catholic church. Protestant converts had to spend significant amounts of money on documents issued by the colonial government and deal with the infamous colonial bureaucracy whenever they needed such documents, which were necessary for enrollment in state schools and for obtaining the status of *assimilado* (Péclard, 2015). Deaths were not as easily recorded, for many occurred in the absence

of the priest and were attended only by the catechist due to the distance between the villages and the mission station. It was not uncommon for missionaries to complain about the occurrence of "pagan rituals" on the occasion of funerals. Ethnographies on the central highlands (Hastings, 1933; Hambly, 1934; Childs, 1949) provide extensive descriptions of the rituals that followed death, especially in the case of prestigious people. They included the interrogation of the corpse in order to find out the cause of his passing as well as large celebrations with music, dance, feasting, and the consumption of alcohol.

Such rites would not be easily eliminated, especially because, as I have argued elsewhere (Dulley, 2010), they were actually incorporated into the convention that resulted from the indexation of local rituals to Christianity. A close analysis of missionary translations reveals that the same concepts related to such ritual practices were used in the translation of Christianity, in a process that has been similarly described by Meyer (1999) and Behrend (2011). An example thereof is the adoption of terms employed in local rituals related to ancestor worship in the translation of the Christian doctrine, as discussed in Dulley (2009). Christianity in the Central Highlands is thus to be understood as a process of displacement, in which local concepts and rituals displaced Christian ones and vice-versa to the point that they could no longer be held separate from each other after the various transformations they endured. The convention that resulted from indexation was therefore not static, but subject to constant iteration (Derrida, 1985).

The model adopted by the Congregation of the Holy Ghost from the foundation of its first missions to the beginning of the 20th century was that of the "Christian village," in which villages composed of slaves redeemed from slave traders were built around the central constructions of the mission.[9] The method was considered to be very efficient by the missionaries because it enabled them to control recent converts and thus easily prevent them from "relapsing into paganism," a temptation that was described as a tendency. However, it was considered by the congregation that the acquisition of former slaves might actually foster the growth of the slave trade because the purchase of slaves by the missionaries could increase the demand for them. Moreover, the concentration of converts around the mission station would not contribute to the dissemination of the mission and the association of Christianity with slavery led non-slaves to disdain it.

Given the congregation's dissatisfaction with the previous method, a choice was made to invest in the training of local catechists fluent in the vernacular who could disseminate the doctrine throughout the interior. As the students educated in Catholic boarding schools rarely became catechists due to the increasing demand for skilled labor, schools were organized in the mission stations to train catechists. Catholic catechists earned no wages, but could not be recruited as labor (a privilege that was not extended to their Protestant counterparts) and were allowed to receive a contribution from their students in the form of work or goods. Catechists were commonly sent to their own villages and tried to convert the heads of villages so that their extended family would join the new religion. In cases in which it was not possible to send

---

[9] In Angola, slave trade continued over the 20th century in spite of its official abolition in the 19th century. It was gradually replaced by forced labor.

catechists to their own village, they were sent to any village requesting their presence. A local elder was frequently an intermediary between the catechist and the village (Edwards, 1962). Although it became increasingly common for Africans to be ordained priests, they were initially only part of the secular clergy. In the mid-1950s, only three Africans were mission superiors in Angola, while there were about 32 African secular priests and 70 Protestant pastors (Edwards, 1962: 28).

If evangelization by African catechists was considered inefficient by Spiritans in Nigeria (Clarke, 1974), in Angola they seem to have been more flexible. In their writings, missionaries in the central highlands frequently praise catechists as valuable auxiliaries. Yet, they repeatedly mention the risk of delegating this task to people who were closer to their kin and customs than to the missionaries and over whom they had little control. Edwards reports an episode in which the catechist of the village of Epalanga was found to be in charge of interrogating a corpse (Edwards, 1962: 72). Complaints about catechists who were conniving with "pagan" practices are as frequent as missionary attempts to control their behavior. Rituals were the privileged site of indexation and displacement in the mission, for the incorporation of Christian rituals did not eradicate others that had for a long time been practiced, especially wedding ceremonies and funerals.[10] They usually occurred in the center of the village.

In the architecture of Spiritan missions, one characteristic seems to have lasted throughout the missionary project: the centrality of mission buildings. This feature, which was reproduced both in central mission stations and village outstations, contributed to assign a central place to the practice of Christianity in daily life by merging evangelization with moments of sociality. This strategy took various forms in different periods: from the settlement of families of converts around the mission station and the central church at the time of the first missions composed of former slaves to the villages in which the catechist took charge of both rudimentary education and evangelization. In the latter case, the central building of the village was usually both a school and a chapel (Edwards 1962; Clarke 1974; Henderson 2000). The available ethnographies on the central highlands point to transformations in the spatial organization of villages that followed missionization. The *onjango*, a circular wooden structure covered by a thatched roof and located in the middle of the village, is described as a traditional locus of male sociality, the place where men used to gather to share the dinner cooked by their wives, settle disputes, and congregate (Hambly, 1934; Ennis, 1962; Edwards, 1962; Berger, 1979; Henderson, 2000). As many adult men were recruited as labor in distant regions and others acquired the custom of sharing the meal with their wives, the centrality of the *onjango* in the village was replaced by that of the school headed by the catechist. The word for "school" seems to have been the same as the word for "church" in a large part of the region (Henderson 2000: 38), and at least among those who identified themselves as Christians, conviviality seems to have occurred mostly within the space of the school-church that replaced the *onjango*. In the evening, the catechist preached in Umbundu, which was sometimes followed by a gathering around the fire involving songs, dances, and storytelling (Edwards, 1962: 15). The centrality of the school building in the village and the transfer of the moments of sociality that

---

[10] For more on the indexation of Christian rituals to local ones, see Dulley (2010, chapter 5).

characterized the *onjango* to it made it possible to associate a central moment of village life to the experience of Christianity. At such moments, when local narrative genres such as proverbs and fables (*olosapo*) were indexed to Christian rhetoric (Dulley, 2010, chapter 5), the head of the church was the catechist.

Once it was established that catechists would take charge of evangelization in the outstations, missionary visits to the villages were instituted as a means of controlling their activities. Ideally, mission stations should have at least two European priests so that one of them could remain in the main station while the other would go and visit the villages. Such trips became more viable with the inauguration of successive stretches of the Benguela Railway during the 1910s (Neto, 2007). The network of roads departing from the railway made it possible to reach almost any village located within a distance of some kilometers, which enabled missionaries and catechists to visit many villages by car, motorcycle, or bicycle. However, as there were not enough missionaries to cover the whole territory, they ended up visiting each village once or twice a year although that was not considered the ideal periodicity. The villages were left to catechists during most part of the time. Moreover, missionaries were frequently transferred to other stations–José Francisco Valente[11]. Catechists were supposed to visit the mission station monthly and attend its religious celebrations along with the converts in their villages. Although baptism, communion, and marriage were sacraments administered exclusively by the missionaries, catechists were allowed to anoint the sick and, in the case of "pagan" adults between life and death, to baptize them if they so wished and provided that they converted to Catholicism. The children of parents considered to be Christian could be baptized without conversion (Alves, 1954).

Catechists were not only in charge of part of the sacraments; they were also responsible for village schools, which were of great interest for villagers because they represented almost the only opportunity of social mobility for their children. In response to the interest villagers showed in instructing their children, Spiritan bishop Alves recommended that catechists do their best to teach not only the Christian doctrine, but also the first letters and numbers to their students (Alves, 1954). Edwards affirms that it was not uncommon for adults to attend the village school, and his informants identified their belonging to a village according to the place in which the school was located (Edwards, 1962). These chapel-schools (or *écoles de brousse*) concentrated a variety of activities: from rudimentary instruction to evangelization; from storytelling to the telling of Bible passages and prayers; from the examination of catechism students by the missionaries to the settling of disputes between villagers. In this scenario, the catechist emerged as a figure of great prestige (Von Eichenbach, 1971).

The students of village schools included those already baptized and those who were learning the catechism, all of whom were called *vakwasikola*, "those of the school", a designation that was highly prized by the inhabitants of the village, including those who did not attend it (Edwards, 1962). The period of instruction that preceded baptism usually lasted from two to three years, according to the understanding of the doctrine shown by the student upon examination by the missionary. The exam consisted of a set of questions on the Christian doctrine and answers that were to be

---

[11] For example, José Francisco Valente, the author of ethnographic and linguistic writings on Umbundu and its speakers, worked in over 10 mission stations during his 43 years in Angola (C. S. Sp. archives).

memorized by the students. Baptism was followed by the acquisition of a Christian name, said to have been the object of desire also by non-Christians, who frequently chose Christian names for their children in spite of the opposition of those who had been baptized.

According to Edwards, the catechist conducted the daily prayers at the chapel-school in the morning and evening, with men and women on opposite sides. Very few villagers attended the morning prayers, while evening prayers were more popular because they were the occasion on which news related to the village was announced, such as a missionary visit or impending labor recruitment. These gatherings were frequently followed by chanting and dancing. Many villagers attended the religious ceremony conducted by the catechist on Sundays. Prayers were delivered in Umbundu and hymns might be sung in Portuguese. Not everyone attended the services on a regular basis. A great part of those interviewed by Edwards wished to be baptized even if they did not attend the village school. Some had already taken part in the school routine and left, but attended the most important ceremonies occasionally (Edwards, 1962: 77). The author relates the wide acceptance of Catholicism in the village in which he did fieldwork to the appeal of its rituals and to the fact that it was the religion of the government (1962: 84).

The occasional missionary visits were preceded by a welcome ceremony that included songs and speeches. Edwards compares their formality and ritual to local wedding ceremonies. When the missionary was in the village, he administered the sacraments: He listened to the confessions of villagers, baptized the catechism students considered to be ready, and held masses in which "Christians" received communion. The catechist was to report the occurrence of "pagan" weddings or funerals in the village and was inquired about the "spiritual state" of those attending the school. The missionary was also to be informed of the presence of "medicine men", "sorcerers", and polygamous residential units, for medicine men and baptized polygamous men might be put to jail. Catechists might ask missionaries to act on their behalf concerning issues between villagers and the colonial administration. This might also be done on one of the visits the catechist was expected to pay to the mission station every year. It was common for catechists to act as intermediaries between the mission and the village on the behalf of all villagers. They seem to have been able to influence decisions regarding labor recruitment as well. There is not much information on the school elder, but it is known that he was an intermediary between the catechist–usually too young to gain the respect of the community and obtain its authorization to establish a chapel and school there–and the villagers (Edwards, 1962).

Chefes de posto (colonial officers working at the local administration post), who seem to have been almost always white and Portuguese, were the only local representatives of the colonial government. An interpreter, officials with primary schooling and *cipaios* (policemen) also worked at the post. Village chiefs were to visit the post in their regions monthly. *Chefes de posto* were in charge of gathering data for the census, recruiting labor, and collecting taxes. They were also to be asked for *guias de marcha*, the permits those legally classified as *indígenas* needed in order to leave their place of residence. *Chefes de posto* were both admired and feared for influencing the deposition of chiefs and putting offenders to jail. They usually spoke little Umbundu, were transferred to other posts frequently and were unfamiliar with local customs. Edwards affirms that

the predominant feeling towards these agents was fear, but they were frequently asked to intervene in conflict resolution (Edwards, 1962). Catechists, who could usually speak (at least some) Portuguese and lived in the villages, frequently mediated cases involving villagers and the colonial administration at this level.

A similar position of prestige was held by *assimilados*, officially acknowledged or not. Among *assimilados*, individuals belonging to the clergy had higher status when compared to salespeople or civil servants. It is thus clear that the mission presented itself as a promising alternative for the social mobility of *indígenas* in colonial Angola. My purpose with this ethnographic account of mission outstations in which the village school was the most important institution was to highlight the importance of catechists in the indexation of local meanings and practices to Christianity. It is common for missionary studies to focus on the main stations, but it was in the outstations assigned to catechists that Christianity was disseminated to the majority of Africans, and catechists were key agents in this process because they were simultaneously informed by the training they received in the mission and their own experience of the local context.

Final remarks

The centrality assigned to the chapel-school in daily village life and the prestigious position of the catechist in the village contributed to the indexation of local practices and institutions to Christian ones. Local power relations were also reconfigured, as those connected to the mission and/or local colonial administration were in a better position to negotiate taxation and labor recruitment. The mission gradually assumed the role of an intermediary between the villagers and the colonial administration. Thus, the opposition that some chiefs presented to the establishment of chapels and schools in their territory right after the military "pacification" of the central highlands (Dulley, forthcoming) gradually gave way to the need to compromise. This does not mean, of course, that the Christian message and rituals did not appeal to the inhabitants of the central highlands. This might also have been the case. However, as the translation of the verb "to convert" into Umbundu, *okutava*, leads us to suppose, believing and accepting were juxataposed–which dodges the question of whether receptivity to Christianity "really meant" conversion. Thus, in saying *Nditava*, which was translated as "I believe" or "I convert," but might also be translated as "I accept," one might as well be acknowledging that Christianity was no longer really a choice. It is no coincidence that to believe and to convert were translated by the same word (*okutava*) by both Catholics and Protestants. For the catechists who participated in the dissemination of translation, to believe might as well have been glossed as to accept.

Bibliographic references

Almeida, Carlos (2009), Uma infelicidade feliz. A imagem de África e dos africanos na literatura missionária sobre o Kongo e a região mbundu (meados do séc. XVI – primeiro quartel do séc. XVIII), tese de doutoramento, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Lisboa.

Alves, Albino (1954), Directorio dos catequistas, Huambo, Tipografia da Missão do Cuando.

Behrend, Heike (2011), Ressurecting Cannibals. The Catholic Church, Witch-Hunts, and the Production of Pagans in Western Uganda, Woodbridge, James Currey.

Bender, Gerald (1978), Angola under the Portuguese. The Myth and the Reality, Berkeley, The University of California Press.

Berger, Friedemann (org.) (1979), Im Zeichen der Ahnen. Chronik eines angolanisches Dorfes Kasenje erzählt von seinen Bewohnern, Leipzig, Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag.

Childs, Gladwyn (1949), Umbundu Kinship and Character. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

_____ (1970), The Chronology of the Ovimbundu Kingdoms, *Journal of African History*, vol. 11, n.º 2.

Clarke, Peter (1974), The Methods and Ideology of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria. 1885-1905, Journal of Religion in Africa, vol. 6, n.º 2.

Derrida, Jacques (1972), La dissemination, Paris, Éditions du Seuil.

_____ (1985), Signature Event Context, Margins of Philosophy, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Dorsey, George (1938), The Ocimbanda, or Witch-Doctor of the Ovimbundu of Portuguese Southwest Africa, The Journal of American Folklore, vol. 11, n.º 3.

Dulley, Iracema (2009), Notes on a Disputed Process of Signification. The Practice of Communication in Spiritan Missions in the Central Highlands of Angola, Vibrant, v. 5, n.º 2.

_____ (2010), Deus é feiticeiro. Prática e disputa nas missões católicas em Angola colonial, Sao Paolo, Annablume.

_____ (forthcoming), A historiografia sobre a "conversão" nas colônias portuguesas na África e a trajetória de Jesse Chiula Chipenda, África.

Edwards, Adrian (1962), The Ovimbundu under Two Sovereignties. A Study of Social Control and Social Change among a People of Angola, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Ennis, Merlin (1962), Umbundu Folktales from Angola, Boston, Beacon Press.

Estermann, Carlos (1934), La tribu Kwanyama en face de la civilisation européenne, Africa: Journal of the International African Institute, vol. 7, n.º 4.

_____ (1983), Etnografia de Angola (Sudoeste e Centro). Coletânea de artigos disperses, Lisbon, Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical.

Etherington, Norman (org.) (2005), Missions and Empire, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Griffin, Franciscus (1957), Regulae et Constitutiones Congregationis Sancti Spiritus sub Ttutela Immaculati Cordis Beatissimae Virginis Mariae, Paris, *In* Domo Primaria.

Hambly, Wilfrid Dyson (1934), The Ovimbundu of Angola, Chicago, Field Museum of Natural History.

Hastings, Daniel (1933), Ovimbundu Customs and Practices as Centered around the Principles of Kinship and Psychic Power, Hartford Seminary Foundation, Kennedy School of Missions, unpublished monograph.

Henderson, Lawrence (1992), The Church in Angola: A River of Many Currents, Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press.

_____ (2000), Development and the Church in Angola. Jesse Chipenda the Trailblazer, Nairobi, Acton Publishers.

Heywood, Linda (2001), Ovimbundu Women and Social Change, A África e a instalação do sistema colonial – c. 1885 – c. 1930. III Reunião Internacional de História de África: actas. Centro de Estudos de História e Cartografia Antiga.

Koren, Henry (1982), Les spiritains. Trois siècles d'histoire religieuse et missionnaire, Paris, Beauchesne.

Lecomte, Ernesto (1899), Ondaka ia suku ou Doutrina Christa em umbundu e portuguez, Luanda, Imprensa Nacional.

Lourenço, Serafim (2003), A missão espiritana no Sudoeste de Angola, Lisbon, Gráfica Povoense Ltda.

Messiant, Christine (2006), *1961. L'Angola colonial, histoire et société. Les premises du movement nationaliste, Basel, Schlettwein Publishing.

Meyer, Birgit (1999), *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Montero, Paula (2009), Salesian Ethnographies in Brazil and the Work of Cultural Mediation, Social Sciences and Missions.

Neto, Maria da Conceição (2007), História urbana de Angola no século XX: quase tudo por fazer, III Encontro Internacional de História de Luanda.

_____ (2012), In Town and Out of Town: A Social History of Huambo (Angola) 1902-1961, PhD dissertation, Department of History, School of Oriental and African Studies.

Péclard, Didier (1995), Ethos missionnaire et l'esprit du capitalisme. 1897-1907, Le Fait Missionnaire.

_____ (2001), Savoir colonial, missions chrétiennes et nationalisme en Angola, Genèses, v. 45.

_____ (2015), Les incertitudes de la nation en Angola: aux raciness sociales de l'Unita, Paris, Karthala.

Pélissier, Réné (1997), História das campanhas de Angola: resistências e revoltas. 1845-1941, Lisboa, Editorial Estampa.

Rafael, Vicente (1988), Contracting Colonialism. Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule, Londres, Cornell University Press.

Ranger, Terence, Missionares, Migrants and the Manyika: the Invention of Ethnicity, Vail, Leroy (org.) (1989), The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa, Berkeley, University of California Press.

Sahlins, Marshall (1985), Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities. Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press.

Schubert, Benedict (2000), A guerra e as igrejas: Angola 1961-1991, Basel, Schlettwein Publishing.

Thornton, John (1984), The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1483-1750, Journal of African History, v. 25.

_____ (1998), The Kongolese Saint Anthony. Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Valente, José Francisco (1956), Ovisungo vikola. Cânticos religiosos tradicionais nas Missões Católicas de Nova Lisboa, Huambo, Tipografia da Missão.

_____ (1974), Namussunguila, a Ceres umbundu, Luanda, Instituto de Investigação Científica de Angola.

_____ (1985), A problemática do matrimônio tribal, Lisboa, Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical.

Von Eichenbach, José (1971), O catequista em terras de missão, Portugal em África. Revista de cultura missionária, n.º 174.