

Towards an understanding of modern political ideology in Africa: the case of the Ovimbundu of Angola

Linda M. Heywood*

In 1992, several national newspapers in America and Europe ran headline stories which accused Jonas Savimbi, the leader of UNITA, the nationalist movement which had been locked in a vicious civil war with the MPLA–PT government of Angola, of conducting witchcraft trials and burnings of witches at his liberation base at Jamba. The revelations, provided by two high-ranking defectors from UNITA, caused an outcry among both critics and supporters, with all predicting Savimbi's ignominious defeat. Savimbi's longtime critics expected the latest scandal to deprive him of his remaining credibility, and predicted that the support he had gathered as a fighter for Angolan nationalism and a supporter of democracy would evaporate.¹

On the contrary, the incident had little impact on Savimbi's stature among his Ovimbundu supporters. Later that year he went on to win the majority of the Ovimbundu votes in the United Nations sponsored elections, and gained a chance to be in a run-off election against José Eduardo dos Santos for the presidency of Angola. Details about these and similar incidents which have taken place in Africa from the time of conquest reflect a political legacy that has deep roots in Africa's pre-colonial past. They also illustrate some of the fundamental differences that exist between African and Western conceptions of political behaviour and ideology that need to be addressed.²

Indeed, much of the writing on modern African leaders who integrate African ideologies and symbols into their modern political

* Associate Professor, Department of History, Howard University, Washington, DC. I would like to thank Wyatt MacGaffey, John Thornton and the anonymous reader for critical comments on this article.

¹ *Washington Post*, 26, 29, 30 Mar. 1992; 30 Aug. 1992.

² See for example, Stephen Weigert, *Traditional Religion and Guerrilla Warfare in Modern Africa* (New York, 1996) for the Mayi.

rhetoric and practice has often been antagonistic to the prevalence of traditional African political ideology in modern African politics. The scholarly and journalistic accounts of leaders like Savimbi, or Mobutu, for example, present them as African Machiavellis who deliberately exploit the 'pre-modern' sentiments of gullible rural constituents or supporters. When not poking fun at African ways, the reports and studies of contemporary African politics simply ignore the pre-colonial African ideology and political culture which pervade the modern African political landscape. Instead, scholars and journalists too often prefer to seek the source of Africa's political behaviour in colonial and Western models, and downplay the pre-colonial cultural legacy.³

A case in point is Benedict Anderson's reappraisal of the origin and spread of modern nationalism. In *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Anderson retracts his earlier position, which argued that in Asia and Africa, nationalism was modelled on the nationalism of the dynastic states of nineteenth-century Europe. In its place he favours a colonial link, arguing that modern nationalism in Asia and Africa was related to the 'imaginings of the colonial state'.⁴ He credits colonialism with mapping the contours of the state, creating the population that comprised the state, and promoting a cultural legacy that helped legitimise the colonial state. All these elements, Anderson argues, became the foundations of modern nationalism in Asia and Africa. In Anderson's musings, traditional ideologies and symbols have no place in the construction and operation of modern nationalism in these regions.

The political studies on colonial and post-colonial Africa also expressed this bias, as they tended to look beyond the continent for insights into modern political behaviour. The scholarship on Belgian Congo/Zaire, today the Republic of the Congo, is a case in point. The country was an early favourite of political scientists, whose publications on modernisation provided models that profoundly shaped the modern African political theory taught in universities in the United States.⁵ Both Crawford Young and Thomas Callaghy, the leading political scientists on the Congo, linked politics in colonial Belgian Congo and

³ See, for example, John W. Harbeson, Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (Boulder, CO, 1994). This bias is also evident in a recent *Wall Street Journal* report on Mobutu. The article, entitled 'Africa's Tito', noted that 'like a French King of the 18th century, Mr. Mobutu considers L'état c'est Mobutu'. *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Dec. 1996, p. 6.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (New York, 1991 rev. edn).

⁵ See, for example, 'The tribal-ethnic road in Africa: Belgian Congo/Zaire 1885-1990', in Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: a new view of modern world history* (Syracuse, 1996).

post-colonial Zaïre to the legacy of Belgian colonialism and foreign ideology. Indeed, in 1985 Crawford Young even raised the possibility of comparing Mobutu's ideology to that of then North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, instead of examining it as a modern manifestation of the Bantu notion that Jan Vansina terms the 'Big Man'.⁶

Furthermore, although Callaghy and other scholars acknowledged Mobutu's attempts, with his leopard-skin cap and *authenticité* campaign, to harness the energies of 'Bantu culture', and were aware of the widespread popular belief that Mobutu and his supporters owed their longevity to sorcery, none of these scholars explored this ideology systematically.⁷ Thus political studies on Zaïre remained overwhelmingly informed more by the European experience than by Africa's pre-colonial political culture.⁸

This means that instead of helping us understand the operation of traditional African political ideology in the modern state, by examining how modern African leaders utilise it alongside European concepts to formulate a modern African political ideology, the subject was framed in terms of Western concepts derived from nineteenth-century Weberian concepts, or twentieth-century American models on consensus political behaviour.⁹ European socialist ideologies which modern African leaders themselves adopted, as they galvanised international support during the years of decolonisation and liberation, have also masked the African dimension.¹⁰

The tendency to ignore African political ideology continues in the post-Cold War era, even in the face of the ethnic and regional tensions which have surfaced, and the realignment of colonial boundaries which many parts of Africa are witnessing. Instead of looking for solutions based on African realities, the tendency is still to favour non-African concepts. Thus there is an explosion of studies dealing with concepts

⁶ Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State* (Madison, 1985), p. 443, n. 55. For the concept of the 'Big Man', see Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest* (Madison, 1990), pp. 73-4.

⁷ For the earlier literature see, for example, David E. Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago, 1967); in his 1980 article, Callaghy did conclude that Mobutu merged 'traditional African notions of chiefly power and of the state with concepts from Christianity and Roman law'. See Thomas Callaghy, 'State-subject communication in Zaïre: domination and the concept of domain consensus', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 18, 3 (1980), 471.

⁸ See, for example, Crawford Young, *Ideology and Development in Africa* (New Haven, 1982); Thomas M. Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaïre in comparative perspective* (New York, 1986); Callaghy, 'Absolutism, Bonapartism, and the formation of ruling classes: Zaïre in comparative perspective', in Irving Leonard Markovitz (ed.), *Studies in Power and Class in Africa* (New York, 1987); Harbeson *et al.*, *Civil Society and the State in Africa*.

⁹ For an example of this approach see, Peter Duignan and Robert Jackson, *Politics and Government in African States, 1960-1985* (Stanford, 1986).

¹⁰ Barry Munslow (ed.), *Africa: problems in the transition to socialism* (London, 1986).

such as democracy and power sharing which are more rooted in Western than African political norms.

This problem arises from the dismissal of the pre-colonial African political heritage. This is surprising, since many African nationalists and rulers have owed their position to their ability to exploit political symbols from the political legacy of pre-colonial Africa. The fact that these ideas have reinforced rather than weakened ethnic, regional, and other ties in many states, and indeed are partly responsible for the weakness of the modern African state, suggests the importance of understanding the African dimension.¹¹ Such an exercise may help prevent further ‘abuse of cultural memory [and] the manipulation of long invalid past grievances to obtain present-day advantage’, which led to the recent genocide in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.¹²

There have been times when a more careful and integrated approach to the interactions between African and Western ideology has been employed. As early as 1968, scholars such as Terence Ranger pointed to the importance of a whole range of pre-colonial African motifs and traditions in early resistance and nationalist activities in Zimbabwe.¹³ However, this kind of analysis was soon swept away by the onslaught of Marxist and underdevelopment studies that dominated historical scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the political scientists whose works dominated the study of modern nationalism privileged imported ideologies, and paid little attention to how the nationalist leadership manipulated African cultural motifs to advance the nationalist cause. In addition, they were also impatient with the cultural and linguistic studies required for a serious analysis, while anthropologists were seldom interested in politics.

A spate of recent works by anthropologists has done much to enrich our understanding of the rôle of African political ideology in the modern state.¹⁴ For example, Peter Geschiere’s works on Cameroon provide penetrating analyses of the interplay between traditional

¹¹ For a sampling of these works see, for example, Patrick Chabal, *Amilcar Cabral: revolutionary leadership and people’s war* (New York, 1983); James Mittleman, *Underdevelopment and the Transition to Socialism: Mozambique and Tanzania* (New York, 1981).

¹² For the situation in the Balkan states, see Thomas Butler, ‘The ends of history: Balkan culture and catastrophe’, *Washington Post*, 30 Aug. 1992, C3.

¹³ Terence Ranger, ‘Connexions between primary resistance movements and modern mass nationalisms in East and Central Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 9, 4 (1968), 437–53.

¹⁴ See, for example, J. F. Bayart, *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly* (London, 1993); M. E. Gruénais et al., ‘Messies, fétiches et lutte de pouvoirs entre les “grands hommes” du Congo démocratique’, *Cahiers d’études africaines* 137 (1995), 169–93; Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Henri Moniot (eds), *Dialoguer avec le léopard? Pratiques, savoirs et actes du peuple face au politique en Afrique noire contemporaine* (Paris, 1988), pp. 179–94.

African beliefs, and modern politics and entrepreneurship. They demonstrate the dynamic capacity of pre-colonial African ideology to adapt to, incorporate and address modern changes.¹⁵

But the fact remains that from the earliest phase of decolonisation, African leaders appropriated African political ideology. In the post-World War II period, leaders from Senghor to Nkrumah, Kenyatta to Nyerere sought to articulate a modern nationalism based on what they argued were 'traditional' African political values. Presenting themselves as the rightful representatives of colonised Africans, they succeeded in wresting control of the pan-African movement from the North American and Antillean blacks who had hitherto been the articulators of pan-Africanism, the only political ideology to emerge among African diasporic peoples up to that time.¹⁶

These young African nationalists often adopted structuralist models made popular by Western ethnographers and anthropologists, who promoted cultural relativism in contrast to the racist social science scholarship which the Nazis and some of their European and American sympathisers had popularised during the previous decades. The writings of the late Jomo Kenyatta, who took Malinowski's teaching and used it to promote his ideas about Kikuyu political traditions, gave an early indication of the significance that nationalists attached to the African dimension.¹⁷ Similarly, Leopold Sédar Senghor's linking of the diasporic concept of *Négritude* to a wider set of African cultural values was yet another manifestation of the importance that African nationalists gave to the African 'traditional' heritage.¹⁸

This attempt to connect modern African nationalism to African values and culture became much more commonplace when the early nationalists returned from abroad, and began mobilising the population in the anti-colonial struggle. As they struggled to form political parties, they blatantly co-opted pre-colonial rituals, symbols and language which had survived in the rural areas, mining compounds, migrant camps, urban shanties, independent churches and other locales. African popular culture thus thrived during the heady days of nationalism, as the nationalists encouraged people to sing 'traditional'

¹⁵ Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: politics and the occult in post-colonial Africa* (Charlottesville, 1997).

¹⁶ For the impact of Pan-Africanism on the political development of African leaders, see Kwame A. Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture* (New York, 1992).

¹⁷ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London, 1938 also London, 1979).

¹⁸ See, for example, Irving Markovitz, *Leopold L. Sédar Senghor and the Politics of Négritude* (New York, 1969).

songs, perform the old dances and rituals, parade in the 'traditional' dress and eat the 'traditional' food of the pre-colonial past. The appropriation of African political culture was most effective in regions of southern Africa, where liberation wars were fought from the 1960s onwards. In their 'liberated zones', guerrilla leaders succeeded in establishing a counter administration, and imposed their own version of African 'tradition' on the population. One way in which they advanced their agenda was by cultivating the traditional authorities, whom they had earlier condemned for collaborating with the colonial state. With the legitimacy which this alliance conferred on them, they brought the peasants along by publicly incorporating the dances, rituals, songs and language at party conventions and other public occasions. This link to the peasant formalised their role as upholders of African tradition and resisters to colonial oppression, although it also unleashed and did not always control the conceptualisations of politics held by the peasants.¹⁹ The new political ideology also relied for its success on the ability of the liberation movements to fuse the pertinent elements from African traditions with socialist and democratic imports from abroad. In any event, the nationalists not only legitimised their position among the peasants, but they also kept open their sources of military and financial support abroad.

The appropriation of the vast array of African political and cultural traditions in support of modern nationalist goals did not end once the nationalists came to power. Rather, alongside the imported marxist, socialist, negritude and other 'modern' ideologies, coexisted evidences of indigenous ideas about power, evil, leadership and the like. Indeed, in most places they were so pervasive that they became part of national politics. What is not known, however, is how this pre-colonial African ideology survived during the colonial period and managed to enter national politics in the post-colonial period. This is surprising since most of the post-colonial African régimes relied on them. Along with Western arms and ideology, they broadened their local support through successfully presenting themselves as embodying ideals in the older and deeper African ideological background.²⁰

Alan Cowell touched on this issue in his recent book, *Killing the Wizards: wars of power and freedom from Zaire to South Africa*. He observed, for example, that modern African leaders manipulate African politics

¹⁹ See, for example, Basil Davidson, *In the Eye of the Storm: Angola's people* (Garden City, 1973).

²⁰ Take, for example, the issue of African socialism (ujamaa) which Julius Nyerere so skilfully manipulated for so many years before retreating from active politics in Tanzania.

by effectively blending the African 'traditions of despotism' with 'enlightened Western values' as a way of maintaining power.²¹ Contemporary African politics is in his view a combination of African and Western constructs.

These traditions are not, however, as uni-dimensional and easily manipulated as Cowell suggests. The recent works of Terence Ranger and David Lan have also reopened the issue of the importance of pre-colonial African ideology and institutions in the colonial and post-colonial periods. These two authors have presented persuasive evidence showing the dynamic ways that both the guerrilla and peasant leadership used the traditions in Zimbabwe's war of liberation. Lan argued that Robert Mugabe's ability to exploit pre-colonial political ideology was the crucial factor in the consolidation of nationalism in Zimbabwe.²² This is particularly significant in light of the urban and Western educated background of Zimbabwe's nationalist leaders.

In the case of Angola, neither the early studies on the origins of nationalism, nor the more recent political science literature on the civil war, gave any weight to the rôle of pre-colonial African political ideology in the origin and growth of Angolan nationalism.²³

The civil unrest which Liberia and Sierra Leone have recently experienced, and the evident manipulation of traditional African ideology by those involved, only belies the pervasiveness of indigenous culture in contemporary Africa. Scholars often misunderstand the rôle of African ideology in contemporary Africa, because they view it as monolithic and lacking flexibility or nuance. The truth is that the ideology is dynamic and multifaceted, and that leaders cannot simply manipulate it at will to fool the unsophisticated.

Anthropologists have long focused on the dynamic rôle of African traditions in modern Africa. Wyatt McGaffey's pioneering studies of Kongolesé cosmology in Belgian Congo and Zaïre provide some crucial insights. For example, he has argued that the notion of witchcraft must

²¹ Alan Cowell, *Killing the Wizards: wars of power and freedom from Zaïre to South Africa* (New York, 1993), p. 100.

²² Terence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (London, 1985); David Lan, *Guns and Rain: guerrillas and spirit mediums in Zimbabwe* (Los Angeles, 1985); see also R. Werbner, *Tears of the Dead: the social biography of an African family* (Edinburgh, 1991).

²³ See for example, John Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution, Vol. I: The Anatomy of an Explosion, 1950-1962* (Cambridge, MA, 1969); Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution, Vol. II: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare, 1962-1976* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); Marcum, 'Angola: twenty-five years of war'. *Current History* 85, 511 (1986); Gerald Bender, 'Peacemaking in Southern Africa: the Luanda-Pretoria tug-of-war', *Third World Quarterly* 11, 2 (1989), 15-30; Barry Munslow (ed.), *Africa: problems in the transition to socialism* (London, 1986); James Martin III, *A Political History of the Civil War in Angola 1974-1990* (New Jersey, 1992).

be conceptualised, among other things, as a particularly African form of social science. In applying the concept to developments in the Belgian Congo, he argued that after the colonial authorities had undermined the traditional system of chieftainship, Africans believed that witchcraft went uncontrolled, and a leader such as Simon Kimbangu gained status and power in his position as a suppressor of witchcraft.²⁴

Eugenia Herbert and John Thornton have addressed the issue of how political ideology functioned in the deep pre-colonial period as well. Thornton, for example, has argued that in the late eighteenth century in Kongo and among Kongo slaves in Haiti, a central African political construct was evident and was being espoused by leaders. He noted that these included the notions that rulers should be open-handed, generous, consultative and the like. This framework relies on the notion of opposed ideas of centralised and decentralised power, and the concept of misuse of power through witchcraft. Moreover, Thornton argued that rulers were alleged to have spiritual powers which could be used to control witchcraft (selfishness). The Kongolese regarded rulers who acted autocratically and exploited the population as witches.²⁵

SAVIMBI, WITCHCRAFT AND NATIONALIST POLITICS: THE CASE OUTLINED

The witchcraft allegations made by former leaders of UNITA against Jonas Savimbi and other members of the UNITA leadership in 1992 present an intriguing example of the salience of African indigenous beliefs and rituals in contemporary African politics. They also provide an opportunity to examine the continuing links between pre-colonial African political ideology and modern African nationalism. To do this we must highlight some pertinent elements of the pre-colonial political ideology and functioning, and explore their adaptation to Catholic and Protestant evangelising and colonial machinations.

As was noted above, the witchcraft accusation against Savimbi broke a few months before he and the UNITA leadership were about to participate in historic elections in Angola to bring an end to decades of

²⁴ Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: the BaKongo of lower Zaïre* (Chicago, 1986), pp. 214–16.

²⁵ John Thornton, “‘I am the subject of the king of Congo’: African political ideology in the Haitian revolution”, *Journal of World History* 4, 2 (1993), 181–214; Eugenia Herbert, *Iron, Gender and Power, Rituals of Transformation in African societies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993).

civil war. The defectors from the movement who broke the story provided detailed accounts of Savimbi conducting witchcraft trials at his liberation capital at Jamba, and of his participating in the burning of witches. The most serious of the charges made against Savimbi was that in 1991 he condoned the murder of Pedro N'gueve Jonatão (Tito) Chingunji, a popular former high representative of UNITA in the United States, and at least eleven other people, including women and children. Moreover, critics accused Savimbi and the core UNITA leadership of condoning the witchcraft accusations and trials, of ordering witch burnings and live burials, and of the isolation of witches in Jamba, the movement's capital which had become home to more than 100,000 Ovimbundu and other Angolans since 1975.²⁶

Furthermore, suggestions at the time pointed to many other opponents who shared a similar fate to Tito Chingunji. Allegations accused agents loyal to Savimbi of having systematically eliminated a total of thirty-five members of the Chingunji family between 1980 and 1991, in addition to others who were perceived as threats to Savimbi.²⁷ Critics also accused Savimbi of not being the democratic visionary his propagandists made him out to be, but a leader who promoted a personality cult, which as one writer put it, made Savimbi indistinguishable from UNITA. Moreover, the accusations confirmed the suspicion of many that he was no more than a 'primitive tribalist' or one of those Africans who cynically exploited the 'primitive tribalism' of his ignorant followers.

As in the case of Mobutu, many of the Western journalists and observers who had defended Savimbi as the future democratic leader of Angola became his most severe critics accusing him of megalomania, xenophobia and ethnic pride. Some who had ridden UNITA's bandwagon in the past quickly retreated and like Savimbi's laudatory biographer Fred Bridgland, predicted that his power would 'evaporate like the morning dew'.²⁸

Yet despite predictions to the contrary in the Western press, Savimbi maintained the support of many Angolans, especially the Ovimbundu. For all the talk of his imminent demise, Savimbi won handsomely in the heavily Ovimbundu regions of the country in the United Nations monitored elections on 29–30 September 1992. Moreover, despite restarting the civil war after he accused the MPLA government of

²⁶ *Washington Post*, 26 Mar. 1992. See also, *Washington Post*, 30, 20 Mar., 30 Aug. 1992.

²⁷ *Washington Post*, 26 Mar. 1992, A29 and A38.

²⁸ *Washington Post*, 29 Mar. 1992, C4.

rigging the elections, and making it almost impossible for the authority of the national government to extend to areas under UNITA control, as of September 1997 Savimbi and UNITA became part of a power-sharing arrangement in the Government of National Unity (GURN). UNITA's seventy Deputies took their seats in the National Assembly, and Savimbi was accorded a special status as the president of the Main Opposition Party approved by the National Assembly. The National Assembly passed a law guaranteeing him special protection, giving him various protocol privileges, and providing him with a 'dignified salary including subsidies, advances, and allowances'.²⁹ Despite Savimbi's and UNITA's weak popular base among segments of the urban population, support for the party and admiration for Savimbi remained high among significant elements of Angola's rural population. An excursion into Ovimbundu political ideology, as it was transformed from the pre-colonial period up to 1992, goes a long way to explain Savimbi's political survival despite all the predictions of supporters and critics both inside and outside Angola.

OVIMBUNDU POLITICAL IDEOLOGY: THE PRE-COLONIAL DIMENSIONS

Since the foundation of UNITA in 1966, Savimbi and the UNITA leadership have never deviated from the line that they were Angolan nationalists. Despite this position, a powerful stream of Ovimbundu nationalism underlies this claim to Angolan nationalism. Understanding the roots of this nationalism is important, for as Lawrence Henderson, an expert on the Ovimbundu and personal friend of many of their leaders, lamented, 'some of Savimbi's actions that I feel are quite negative, I'm afraid the Ovimbundu see as positive'.³⁰ Henderson believed that the Ovimbundu support for Savimbi despite the serious accusations against him can be explained by Ovimbundu 'ethnic pride'. This, as another observer recently noted, explained why Savimbi supporters treat him 'as if he were some kind of great black god who would bring light and justice'³¹

The contradictions between the 'grisly tales of UNITA torture, beatings, and burnings at the stake',³² and the near veneration of

²⁹ 'The special status of Dr Jonas Savimbi as the president of the main opposition party'. 8 Apr. 1997. (Washington, Center For Democracy in Angola).

³⁰ As quoted in Leon Dash, 'Angola's desperate decision', *Washington Post*, 1992.

³¹ Cowell, *Killing the Wizards*.

³² Fred Bridgland, 'Angola's secret bloodbath', *Washington Post*, 1992.

Savimbi by his supporters, which have confounded Western reporters and commentators, may be better understood when seen against the backdrop of a pervasive pre-colonial political legacy, which most Ovimbundu recognise and implicitly accept. Several factors explain why this made for a powerful unifying force among the population, and why Savimbi was able to exploit it so effectively. For one, the Ovimbundu, who comprise the most important political bloc in UNITA, are also the largest ethnic grouping in Angola, numbering over 3 million in a total population of over 10 million. Moreover, despite their forcible integration into the Portuguese colony of Angola between 1890 and 1904, and their precocious and almost complete Christianisation beginning in 1880, the bulk of the population remained rural and maintained their traditions. One development which differentiated and continues to set the Ovimbundu apart from the Afro-Portuguese and Mbundu supporters of the MPLA, for example, was their ability to mesh their political and cultural traditions with Western ideas. This allowed the traditions to find new life, particularly under the umbrella of UNITA, whose leaders used it to bolster their status as representatives of a genuine Angolan nationalism, as opposed to the tainted (foreign) nationalism of the MPLA.

Pre-colonial Ovimbundu political ideology had two elements, which were common central African political motifs, and which influenced modern Ovimbundu conceptions of politics. One notion concerned a constitutional principle, which defined power as a balance between the consultative element (the blacksmith king or spokesman concept), and the authoritarian element (the hunter king concept). The other notion concerned the supernatural, expressed as magic and witchcraft. This involved the belief that some people (i.e. the ruler) have the power to kill by day and by night (magically). The ruler could use this power either for the common good, or to increase his or his lineage's power and wealth (use it for personal-selfish, rather than communal, benefit).³³ Typically, a common critique lodged in witchcraft accusations was that the person used power for selfish ends, and identifying and eradicating witchcraft (burning witches) was one way in which rulers demonstrated their power, and opponents justified revolt.³⁴

³³ The connection between rulers' use of power for private and public ends has been explored most thoroughly for the Congo, but has wide application for all of Bantu Africa. See McGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, pp. 5–8; also, Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers* (Bloomington, 1993), pp. 40–61.

³⁴ Pierre de Maret, 'Ceux qui jouent avec le feu: la place de forgeron en Afrique central', *Africa* 50 (1980), 263–79; see also, Herbert, *Iron, Gender and Power*, pp. 131–87.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, when the Ovimbundu were forcibly integrated into the Portuguese colony of Angola, they constituted not a single people but rather a congeries of polities within a wider continuum. Moreover, although they exercised some cultural domination over their neighbours to the east, 'the Ngangela', based partly on slave raiding, their contacts with the Mbundu to the north, the Portuguese to the west, and the Nyaneka to the south were limited to commerce and occasional military conflicts. Thus although they integrated some 'Ngangela' cultural traditions, they were culturally distinct from the more Lusitanised Mbundu who lived in the Portuguese colony of Angola, especially because of the African political traditions and beliefs which governed their lives.³⁵ Both their fellow Angolan nationalists in the MPLA, and foreign observers who dismissed Savimbi and the UNITA leadership as pawns of conservative South African and Western agents who were bent on derailing modern Angolan nationalism, miscalculated the depth of this legacy, and the extent to which Portuguese colonialism and Christianisation had combined to create a separate Ovimbundu identity.

As Savimbi's early critics laid out the scenario, UNITA's appearance in the middle of the 1960s was the work of Portuguese saboteurs, who wished to undermine the anti-colonial movements that Holden Roberto and Agostinho Neto had initiated in their efforts to end the rule of the Portuguese dictatorship in Angola. In the wake of the disastrous defeat of the UNITA/CIA/South African forces during the 1975–6 war against the victorious Cuban–MPLA alliance, indeed, Savimbi became a pariah among many in Africa and the West who could not stomach his unholy alliance with *apartheid* South Africa.

The reliance of the UNITA leadership on conservative political groups in the United States in the 1980s only confirmed the worst fears of critics. During this period, many journalists and politicians in the West, alarmed by Cuba's satellite role for Soviet imperialism in Angola, promoted Savimbi as the 'epitome of a new kind of African visionary', who would bring racial democracy to Angola.³⁶ This line of analysis reduced UNITA and its Ovimbundu nationalism to pawns in the Cold War politics between the superpowers. In the end, however, having a domestic political base brought more political gain than pleasing foreign supporters.

³⁵ I have examined this subject in a forthcoming book, Heywood, *Thwarted Power: state-society relations in central Angola 1840–1975*, ch. 1.

³⁶ Leon Dash, 'Angola's desperate decision', *Washington Post*, 30 Aug. 1992, C 5.

Savimbi and UNITA persevered to become part of GURN, largely owing to the support they received from the *sekulus* (village elders), *osomas* (chiefs), *ocimbandas* (traditional religious practitioners), pastors, teachers and the rural Ovimbundu masses. These were the men and women who preserved the African traditions in the customs they continued to celebrate, and in the religious and secular institutions that they helped to build and manage during the days of Portuguese colonialism. They made the ideology a force during the liberation struggle and civil war. Although many elements of the traditional ideology changed, the core political beliefs, that rulers' power was based on their control of spiritual and secular forces, the notion of centralised and decentralised power, and the concept of misuse of power through witchcraft, remained stable and retained their vitality.

The centrality of these motifs in Ovimbundu political traditions was evident from the mid-nineteenth century, from which period we have detailed information on the people. All the twenty-two Ovimbundu kingdoms which existed in the nineteenth century had foundation myths which portray the founder as a conquering hunter. For example, in traditions collected in the nineteenth century from the kingdom of Huambo, the ruler (*osoma/soba*), claimed descent from a wandering 'Jaga' (the 'Jagas' were militarised bands of cannibalistic marauders who ravaged Mbundu lands from the later part of the sixteenth century) called Wambu Kalunga.³⁷ Furthermore, the rulers of the kingdom of Ngalangi, like the ruling family of the kingdom of Viye, claimed that their founder was a hunter who came from the south.³⁸ If these traditions about conquering hunters and Jagas establishing the states can be taken as representing an authoritarian ideology (as some recent studies have argued),³⁹ then the presence of so many traditions which linked the foundation of the highland kingdoms to hunters and conquerors surely attest to a concept of leadership based on the view of the hunter as a predator. In this context the leader is regarded as a person who uses violence but also controls violence. The expectation was that rulers who made claims to absolute power must also use it in the defence of the people against evil, and must also be regarded as

³⁷ Childs, *Umbundu Kinship and Character* (London, 1949), p. 176; Anibal dos Santos Brandão, 'O grande Soma Huambo Kalunga o terrível antropafago', *Mensário Administrativo* (1952).

³⁸ Childs, *Umbundu*, pp. 174-6; oral testimony of Arao Cornelio, Grove City, Pennsylvania, USA, 1987.

³⁹ Alfred Hauenstein, 'La royauté chez les Ovimbundu', in *Angola, os símbolos do poder na sociedade tradicional* (Coimbra, 1983).

being above selfishness. This was the way in which the Bantu notion of the 'Big Man' operated among the ruling families in the highlands.

But the hunter imagery also had its counterpart, 'the blacksmith king' (or spokesman king). In this model of leadership, the ruler is like the blacksmith who gives birth to useful objects to enhance the community. Here the ruler is seen as the judge, the builder of consensus, a less authoritarian ruler than the hunter. In this case the constitutional arrangement called on the ruler to exercise a more limited form of power, in consultation with a council, with the understanding that rulers had to consult representatives of this council before making decisions.

The anthropological and ethnographic literature cited earlier represents these two contrasting forms of leadership in terms of a well-known dichotomy between 'blacksmith kings' and 'hunter kings'. As presented, the blacksmith king represents the constitutional ruler, while the hunter king represents the autocratic ruler. 'Blacksmith kings' are given feminine characteristics such as kindness, generosity and justice, suggesting that they made decisions in consultation with their subjects.⁴⁰ 'Hunter kings', on the other hand, represented rulers who had opposite characteristics from those of the blacksmith king. They ruled more autocratically, and had power of life or death over their subjects. They always had to appear independent and strong.⁴¹ Autocracy was thus tolerated in the name of the people. Indeed, if the symbol of the hunter dominated the ideology of the state, the notion of the blacksmith was more visible in personal/residential relations. In any event, these two contradictory concepts of political leadership, the autocratic and democratic, formed the core of Ovimbundu, and indeed, of most rural Angolan political beliefs.

From the 1840s when we have the earliest eyewitness accounts of the way in which this political ideology functioned in the central highlands of Angola, Ovimbundu rulers seemed to rely on the hunter imagery to support their claims to leadership. Moreover, members of civil society had also internalised these traditions, expecting their rulers to act autocratically. As one Ovimbundu proverb put it, *o popia onganji, o*

⁴⁰ Pierre de Maret, 'The smith's myth and the origin of leadership in Central Africa', in Randi Haaland and Peter Shinnie (eds.), *African Iron Working: ancient and traditional* (Oslo, 1985), pp. 73-87. See also Eugenia Herbert, *Iron, Gender and power*, pp. 165-87.

⁴¹ Victor Turner, 'A Lunda love story and its consequences: selected texts from traditions collected by Henrique Dias de Carvalho at the Court of the Muatianvwa in 1887', *Rhodes Livingstone Journal* 19 (1955), 1-26. This story relates the founding of the Lunda empire through the exploits of a wandering hunter, very much as related in the highlands.

malopo osoma (the advocate proposes, the king disposes).⁴² This proverb nicely encapsulates the dominance of the hunter principle at this time, as the advocate is the representative of the decentralised principle.

Twentieth-century recollections collected during the colonial period also recorded the continuation of this principle of political power, even as the Portuguese colonial state was taking shape. For example, Wilfred Hambly related that in Bailundu, where he undertook anthropological research in the late 1920s, villagers addressed traditional rulers by such titles as Lord Lion or Lord Leopard, and that when a chief was speaking and a commoner or elder wished to add a statement, he would first say, 'O Lord Elephant, if one should lay hold on fire, it will burn him', which he interpreted as meaning that the words of the ruler were as fire, and that no one should interrupt them with other words.⁴³

The most widespread customs which continued into the colonial period were those related to the hunting and predatory raids undertaken by newly installed rulers. The requirement called on newly elected rulers to lead all the young men of the villages on a predatory raid against the Ngangelas. This obligatory hunt was a test of the success of the initiation, and rulers who failed to perform it were not considered to be legitimate. From the mid-nineteenth century, when we have the earliest eye-witness accounts, Ovimbundu rulers were well known in the region for the predatory raids they made against neighbouring peoples. Further, the people participated in a wide range of rituals connected to hunting. Thus, for example, in ceremonies performed at the initiation of young hunters, the people venerated the hunter and hunting skills as a way of honouring their founders.⁴⁴ Oral histories collected from the nineteenth century onwards are replete with descriptions of the right of rulers to organise large-scale hunts, especially at the time of the installation of a new ruler who could mobilise hundreds of people. Furthermore, Ovimbundu folktales have many references to hunting, and some even make specific references to the ruler's coronation and the hunt as essential rituals connected with leadership abilities.⁴⁵

⁴² For background, see Gladwyn Murray Childs, *Ovimbundu*; see also Lawrence Henderson, *Angola: five hundred years of conflict* (Ithaca, 1979).

⁴³ Wilfred Hambly, *The Ovimbundu of Angola*, Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 21, 2 (1934), p. 45.

⁴⁴ Hambly, *Ovimbundu*, p. 142; Silva Porto, *Viagens*, p. 174; SGL Res. 2-C-6, 'Apontamentos', vol. I, 'Customes dos Gentilicos', p. 97.

⁴⁵ See the many references to these customs in Merlin Ennis, *Umbundu Folk Tales from Angola* (Boston, 1962).

In folktales collected in the central highlands during his forty-year residency in Angola in the first decades of this century, Merlin Ennis noted that many of them focused on the ruler as a noted hunter. He stressed that at the installation of rulers, all the men of the kingdom participated in a large hunt to secure a supply of meat for the coronation feast.⁴⁶ Many of the tales suggested that hunts were also undertaken to raid neighbouring peoples to gain slaves and cattle, as well as to engender fear and submission. Thus many young men were initiated into battle during the annual hunts which the rulers organised.

Other aspects of the hunter symbolism were also important. For example, the power of the hunter was reflected in the ability to kill at will, or in central African political idiom to 'eat people'. In the initiation raid, the ruler was to participate in ritual cannibalism. Lázló Magyar, a Hungarian national who was married to the daughter of the ruler of Viye, and resided in the highlands between 1849 and 1857, wrote that newly appointed rulers had to 'eat the old one' to initiate their rule. This form of ritual cannibalism was not only connected to the spiritual power which rulers were believed to gain from this seemingly anti-social act, but also indicated to all the total and absolute power which a ritually installed ruler possessed. Ritual cannibalism was also a testament to a ruler's control of evil through witchcraft, since all witchcraft involved cannibalism. Indeed, the ritual was such a significant part of the installation ceremonies of rulers that in the years preceding Portuguese conquest in 1890 some rulers were deposed for refusing to undertake it. The symbolic ceremonies continued after conquest, for Wilfred Hambly reported that animal sacrifice had taken the place of the human sacrifice of earlier times.⁴⁷

But the beliefs linking political power to hunting and absolutist principles coexisted with the blacksmith king principle, which represented more democratic features. For example, in various Ovimbundu states rulers were elected from among eligible candidates of ruling lineages. Although several customs governed the selection of rulers, the matrilineal principle was quite strong. Many mid-nineteenth-century rulers claimed descent from free-born wives of founding eighteenth-century lineages. Maternal kin were eligible to compete for titled positions in the state.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ennis, *Umbundu*, p. 303.

⁴⁷ Heywood, *Thwarted Power* (forthcoming), ch. 1; see also Hauenstein, *Angola: Os simbolos do poder*, pp. 70–2 for modern manifestations of other customs.

⁴⁸ Ennis, *Umbundu*, p. 246.

In Viye, for example, the ruler was normally elected by all the male descendants of the female line (uncles, nephews and brothers), who could prove descent from any past ruler.⁴⁹ In other states, the descendants of the brothers of past rulers were eligible to rule.⁵⁰ In Mbailundu, the ruler was not elected as in Viye, since the crown followed hereditary succession in the female line, but selected his own successor (who could be a brother, nephew or uncle) during his term and placed him in control of a district (*Kapingana ka Soma*), where he remained until the ruler died or was forced to resign.⁵¹

An observer from the early nineteenth century noted how the autocratic model (hunter king), co-existed with the democratic model (blacksmith king). In reference to politics in the kingdom of Mbailundu he observed, 'the government of Bailundu is democratic. These heathen mix the infamous humiliations of the orientals [despotism] with the unabridged coarseness of the English people at election times [democracy] in England. The kings defer to and flatter their counsellors; these are they who elevate a king to the throne and also who cast him down.'⁵²

After a nominee was elected as king or when he inherited power, however, he often relied on the absolutist principles to rule. For example, rulers had the authority to appoint and dismiss certain state officials. The survival of many democratic features into the state none the less acted as a counter-balance to autocratic rule.⁵³ Moreover, in most of the states electors were themselves not eligible to rule,⁵⁴ and in the event that a successful candidate proved unworthy, these electors had the power to nominate a new ruler in his place. Hence, as Magyar recorded for Viye in the late 1840s, by their influence 'the power of the prince is constantly checked'.⁵⁵

In Mbailundu where rulers were not elected, there was a special court (the 'Impunga' court), whose members had the authority to remove unsatisfactory rulers.⁵⁶ Other states had similar institutions. In Huambo which had hereditary rule through matrilineal succession, the ruler's power was limited by the influence of a 'noble people's class'.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Silva Porto, *Viagens*, pp. 172, 184-5; László Magyar, *Reisen in Sud-Afrika, 1849-1857* (New York, 1974 reprint, 1st edn 1859), p. 270.

⁵⁰ Ennis *Umbundu* p. 102; Hambly, *Ovimbundu*; Magyar, *Reisen*, p. 270.

⁵¹ Magyar, *Reisen*, p. 391. ⁵² As quoted in Child, *Umbundu*, p. 22.

⁵³ See G. M. Childs, 'The kingdom of Wambu (Huambo), a tentative chronology', *Journal of African History* 5, 3 (1964), 367-79.

⁵⁴ Silva Porto, *Viagens*, pp. 172, 184-5; Magyar, *Reisen*, p. 270.

⁵⁵ Magyar, *Reisen*, pp. 277-9. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 286, 387 and 415 n. 16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Oral traditions noted that in the pre-conquest period, the group was largely made up of 'ordinary individuals' who functioned as a secret society. They also nominated one of their members, the *erombe sekulu*, as their representative to the capital.⁵⁸

Moreover, in Sambo, another Ovimbundu state, an oral account also recalled that in the pre-conquest period hereditary succession through the matrilineal line prevailed, and as late as 1946 people living in the colonial administrative centre of Sambo recognised as local ruler a man whom they believed to be a direct descendant of the eighteenth-century founder.⁵⁹ Here too, the tradition recorded a limiting institution, that of the *Chindur*, occupied by a person of servile origin who was a faithful royal councillor. He could depose the ruler, and was also in charge of the ceremonies associated with coronation.⁶⁰

There were other customs which checked the authority of rulers. Rulers did not have the right to dismiss or obstruct the election of hereditary title holders, and in some cases (as in Viye) they had to respect the right of some subordinates to elect their own representatives.⁶¹

Several other beliefs and rituals operated as political ideology in the pre-colonial states. Among the most important was the belief that the ruler was also the repository of the spiritual power of the community, because of his links to the founding ancestors. During the nineteenth century the population took this principle quite seriously, and rulers also skilfully exploited it. Eyewitness accounts as well as oral traditions gathered during the early colonial period concerning the initiation ceremonies give detailed accounts of the spiritual power which rulers were believed to have. These ceremonies gave newly elected rulers their first chance to demonstrate the spiritual dimension of their rule in a public setting, when they participated in a ceremony involving the lighting of a ritualistic fire, and engaged in other rituals associated with handling the remains of past rulers. It was at the end of these customs that newly installed rulers led the predatory raid and engaged in ritual cannibalism ceremonies.⁶²

The association between leadership and witchcraft was particularly evident when the kingdom was at the mercy of an authoritarian leader,

⁵⁸ Anibal dos Santos Brandão, "'Vanuambo': nominação de um seculu e seus cargos', *Mensário Administrativo* 5 (1952), 38–9; Magyar, *Reisen*, p. 387.

⁵⁹ CDIH, Est. 33, Cx. 20, Secção 7, no. 2 (1946), 'História dos Postos', n. p.

⁶⁰ Ibid; dos Santos Brandão, 'Vanuambo'. 38–9.

⁶¹ CDIH, Est. 33, Cx. 20, Secção 7, no. 2 (1946), 'História dos Postos', n. p.

⁶² Silva Porto, *Viagens e apontamentos de um Portuense em Africa* (Lisbon, 1942).

whom the people regarded as overstepping his constitutional power. Here the religious practitioners (*ocimbandas*) could accuse him of witchcraft and condemn him to death, and witchcraft thus functioned as a check on autocracy. But the power of the *ocimbandas* represented a critique of personal behaviour, not a critique of the authoritarian concept of power. In the early 1850s, Magyar noted the connection between witchcraft and abuse of political power. He wrote that *ocimbandas* had the power to counteract the rule of the king by denouncing him as a sorcerer, and having him killed.⁶³

Although the nineteenth-century descriptions are scanty, and the twentieth-century respondents may have embellished their recollections in response to the loss of their political leadership, the evidence does present a range of rituals which rulers could manipulate to undermine the effectiveness of the hunter/blacksmith dualism. Those who succeeded condoned violence and brutality against the population. For example, in 1875, the ruler of Viye, in order to strengthen his political base, hid himself for four days and had it reported that he had died. On the fifth day, he appeared and reported that he had brought himself back to life by his magical powers.⁶⁴ But as was noted, people were wary of such rulers and regarded them as evil, i.e. selfish; even if they were believed to possess the spiritual power, it was a negative power. This was often at the root of witchcraft accusations, which served as a powerful social critique.

Despite commodity trade, Portuguese conquest and the establishment of the colonial state, all of which challenged the status quo, the Ovimbundu adapted many of these beliefs and rituals to suit the new political environment. For example, during the conquest, when the Ovimbundu élite faced both the threat of Portuguese conquest and the disaffection of many segments of the population, rulers often manipulated the ideology. Thus in 1890, when defeat by the Portuguese was imminent, and a new ruler of Viye was being installed to replace Njambajamina who had recently died, the new ruler Chindunduma took a new name to reflect his power. Just as Mobutu did a century later, when he changed his name from Joseph Desiré Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Benga ('the all powerful warrior who, by his endurance and inflexible will to win will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake'), so he called himself 'Chindunduma wa Ndumisa Ofeha' ('the terror that causes the earth

⁶³ Magyar, *Reisen*, pp. 280, 449; Hastings, 'Ovimbundu', pp. 128, 150.

⁶⁴ NLS Cameron Journal, entry of 28 Aug. and 2 Oct. 1875.

to tremble'), perhaps in the hope that this would strike fear into his local enemies, as well as the Portuguese.⁶⁵

During the same period, a new challenge to traditional authority surfaced. As a result of the involvement of the majority of Ovimbundu households in the expanding commodity trade, and the democratising effects of this development on the politics of the kingdoms. Here again, however, the association of the ruler with the 'hunter king' traditions retained a vitality, even as rulers found it difficult to mobilise young men to go on the hunt. The thousands of Ovimbundu freemen and slaves, who comprised caravans to undertake the long-distance trading ventures into the interior, were often led by members of the ruling lineages. The putting together of a caravan entailed many rituals to protect caravan members, as well as skilled organisation, negotiation and slave catching. These caravans thus performed functions similar to those connected with the hunt at the initiation of rulers, preserving much of the symbolism that linked the ruler with the predatory hunt. Free-born commoners who used their profits from trade to purchase status and political power also ensured the survival of these political ideas of leadership, even after the demise of the nineteenth-century ruling lineages with Portuguese conquest.⁶⁶

OVIMBUNDU TRADITIONAL IDEOLOGY AND PORTUGUESE COLONIALISM

During the colonial period, the Ovimbundu rôle as migrant labourers *par excellence* also operated in such a way as to maintain the traditions linking political leadership to the hunt. Ovimbundu men and women, who went all over Angola as migrant workers, did not go out as individuals, but formed ethnic blocs which set them apart from their fellow Kongos, Mbundus and other Angolans. Although for the migrants, the colonial régime which exploited their labour had no parallels in the pre-colonial landscape, many of the activities connected with migration were not too far removed from those of the hunt and commodity trade of the pre-colonial period.

The pre-conquest ideology connected with political leadership showed up in other ways as well. As Portuguese exploitation increased

⁶⁵ G. E. Tilsey, *Dan Crawford: missionary pioneer in Central Africa* (New York, n.d.), p. 77.

⁶⁶ Eyewitness accounts of the time are replete with details of how Ovimbundu caravans were organised.

with the development of the colonial state, many Ovimbundu evaded colonial laws and attempted to keep some of the traditions alive. For example, the Canadian missionary John Tucker recorded the foiled plan of 'body snatching' chief Kanjun of Viye, who had died on 19 October 1913. The plan was to be carried out by members of Chiyuka (Ox Society), a secret society which some people of Viye had formed.⁶⁷

During his field work in the region in the 1920s, Wilfred Hambly noted that in some areas the *sekulus* (village representatives), who then functioned as the political representatives of the Ovimbundu in their dealings with the colonial state, continued to practice many of the old rituals. Indeed, some *sekulus* provided him with detailed descriptions of how the rituals functioned in the past. The most important practices during Hambly's day were religious rituals which venerated the ancestors' rôle as spiritual mediators.⁶⁸ Although the kingdoms had been destroyed, the village elders and surviving members of the ruling lineages retained the memory of the African political traditions.

Hambly also wrote that some Ovimbundu villagers whom he interviewed believed that a political leader was a spirit-possessed person, and that leadership was associated with the ancestors who bestowed magical powers on the ruler. He also recorded the existence of several other rituals and taboos associated with the person of the ruler: for example, that people believed that the ruler's person and aura were considered so sacred that people were not supposed to pass behind him. The traditions also recalled that when a ruler moved around the countryside with his counsellors, special rituals were followed. In some instances, the bearers and attendants who carried the rulers sounded whistles and gongs to warn commoners to move away, since it was believed that a person could be harmed by the breath and smell of the king. In addition, they recalled that rulers had to perform certain religious ceremonies, including public sacrifices at the royal shrine, to control the elements and to ensure success in hunting.⁶⁹

Moreover, people often used the ideology of witchcraft in reference to the early colonial state. Not a few Ovimbundu peasants regarded the colonial state in the same way that they regarded rulers in the past who

⁶⁷ Tucker, *Treasury*, pp. 68–9.

⁶⁸ Letters from Leona Stukeby Tucker, the wife of the Canadian missionary John Tucker, contain several descriptions of these practices, which she witnessed in the 1920s. Letters compiled by Catherine Ward in author's possession.

⁶⁹ Ennis, *Umbundu*, p. 9; Hambly, *Ovimbundu*; Henderson, *Five Centuries*, p. 50; for a modern manifestation of this practice see Alfred Hauenstein, *Angola, os símbolos do poder*, pp. 70–2.

abused their power, by relating colonial rule to selfishness, i.e. witchcraft. Indeed, witchcraft accusation was in some ways a critique of the colonial state. People blamed the whites for the changes which had befallen the state, some even believing that the spirit of the white man would not allow an African man's eyes to see and understand the written word, until he had killed some members of his family.⁷⁰ Others like Sekulu Chamuanga, a former slave dealer, explained to Tucker in 1914 why he believed that 'the country is in bad shape', and why 'witches and sorcerers abound'. According to him, this was owing to the new political situation in the country where Europeans had taken over the state, and outlawed some of the traditional practices which used to reorder society and prevent selfishness. He told Tucker, 'formerly we burned alive such people on top of the Chimabango mountain'.⁷¹

The general tendency in the published works which deal with the early colonial period in Africa has been to connect European conquest to the incidence of witchcraft occurrences and accusations, seeing them either as an expression of extreme powerlessness (anomie), or as the African response to the loss of political power.⁷² Perhaps it might be more correct to see the references to witches in the central highlands as a reaction of society to the abuses of power by Portuguese colonial authorities, who the people believed had the power of their ancestors protecting them, similar to their former rulers who could call on the power of their own ancestors. As was noted earlier, in the pre-conquest period, political leaders could use this power for communal good or for selfish purposes. When it was used for the common good, the people prospered and witchcraft (the private accumulation of power which threatened societal order) was suppressed.

In the colonial period, however, the Portuguese were abusing political power with their forced labour policies, land alienation, racial segregation, physical brutality and the denigration of local traditions. To Ovimbundu villagers the colonial state represented evil, the uncontrolled greed and selfishness which only anti-witchcraft agencies could eradicate. Thus witchcraft accusations and rituals associated with the eradication of witchcraft continued unabated in village life during the colonial period. The longevity of the beliefs which linked witchcraft to political power was in part owing to the rôle of *ocimbandas*. While the status of remaining secular authorities in the villages

⁷⁰ Canadian Council of Foreign Missionary Societies (CCFMS) Box 5, File 75b WCC Angola, M. Dawson, 13 June 1959.

⁷¹ Tucker, *Treasury*, p. 191.

⁷² MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa*.

declined, because of their co-optation and abuse by colonial authorities, and by implication in their witchcraft, that of the *ocimbandas* increased. *Ocimbandas* gained the allegiance of the population because they were powerful symbols of spiritual power and protectors of the people. They spent much of their time settling witchcraft cases, and one long-time observer noted that in many of the rural areas in the highlands, persons performing forced labour were no more likely to have been tax defaulters, than to have been convicted of witchcraft and punished by being sent away as forced labour.⁷³

The main competition that the *ocimbandas* and other traditional authorities faced for the political allegiance of the population came from the pastors, deacons, teachers and health personnel, who 'have advanced greatly in European habits and are practically Christians', and who brought the Bible and Western Christian beliefs, concepts and rituals (literacy, know-how, Western political concepts) to the population.⁷⁴ The almost complete Christianisation which large segments of the Ovimbundu population underwent from 1880 as a result of the efforts of North American Congregationalist missionaries, French Spiritan Catholics, and small groups of Swiss Calvinists and Seventh Day Adventists, none the less did little to dampen the vitality of non-Christian beliefs.

By the 1950s, there was a fairly wide divide between Ovimbundu Protestants and Catholics, but it was the North American congregationalists, totalling over half a million by the 1970s, who challenged traditional beliefs and practices.⁷⁵ Protestant missionaries offered not only technical know-how to Ovimbundu, but also the North American version of missionary Christianity with its underlying principles of democracy, self-help and the like. For some Ovimbundu, these teachings displaced pre-colonial beliefs, and served as the groundswell in the nationalist struggle against the Portuguese state. Thus Protestant education promoted the more representative blacksmith king motif, and Protestant morality became a powerful anti-witchcraft force.

Despite the fervent Christian belief which Ovimbundu Protestants professed, and the democratic values that they exhibited, non-Christian elements retained their vitality. For many Ovimbundu, greed needed to be checked, whether this was practised by the state, settlers and some of their own leaders. Missionaries who took their children, and

⁷³ Adrian Edwards, *The Ovimbundu under Two Sovereignties* (London, 1962), p. 43.

⁷⁴ In 1920, Leona Stucky Tucker referred to the power these individuals wielded in the villages, and the efforts of the missionaries to undermine them.

⁷⁵ Lawrence Henderson, *The Church in Angola; a river of many currents* (Cleveland, 1992).

weakened the kin's hold on them, were believed to be out of control. Sometimes relatives of prospective converts resorted to witchcraft to stop younger members from converting to Christianity, or from working for the state.⁷⁶ As colonial rule became more oppressive, even Protestants in good standing were involved in witchcraft and non-Christian indigenous associations.⁷⁷ Indeed, Ovimbundu Protestantism had its own witchcraft ideology, especially regarding backsliders.

In this climate the *ocimbandas* became adept at incorporating the new power symbols into their rituals. The early missionaries noted how they adapted the new ritual objects. One *ocimbanda*, whom the missionary Tucker questioned regarding his use of a Portuguese flag and an old copy of the Umbundu translation of St John's Gospel in his divining basket, replied without hesitating, 'when it is anyone connected with the Ombange (fort) who is guilty of witchcraft (umbanda) ... we can't get him unless we have the Portuguese flag'. He also noted that he needed the 'Book' to 'catch those Christians. Without it we have no power over them.'⁷⁸

Other less organised reactions were also recorded. For example, in 1941 in a report from the Protestant villages near the Dondi station, which described the expulsion of 184 Ovimbundu men from the church for 'backsliding', most were guilty of participating in 'divination'. Interestingly enough, they were also wealthy and lived in polygamous households,⁷⁹ even though polygamy was outlawed by the church. In 1944, Catholic missionaries reported similar occurrences among their own converts.⁸⁰ Older kin members pressured young converts to break their ties with the church, which they held responsible for the kin's decline and misfortunes. Younger kinsmen of former members of the ruling elite who had lost so much prestige and power in the colonial period also confronted similar pressures.⁸¹

Indeed, by the 1950s no segment of the Ovimbundu population was far removed from this traditional milieu. A description from 1953 from the Protestant missionaries Elizabeth Utting and Margaret Dawson vividly portrays the interpenetration of Christian and non-Christian life in the rural villages. They wrote that the village of Chikala, which was the home of a group of Protestant students, had on one side 'the

⁷⁶ CCFMS, Box 5, File 75 WCC Angola, M. Dawson, 13 June 1959.

⁷⁷ Heywood, *Thwarted Power* (forthcoming), ch. 4. ⁷⁸ Tucker, *Treasury*, p. 123.

⁷⁹ CCFMS, J. T. Tucker Papers, Box 7, file 130, Dondi Station Report, 1941.

⁸⁰ Agência Geral Das Colonias, 'A Diocese de Nova Lisboa 1944' (Lisbon, 1946), p. 19.

⁸¹ CCFMS, WCC, WMS, Angola, Box 5, File 77b, M. Dawson Collection, 1950s.

heathen section' and on the other side 'relatives who have chosen the Roman Catholic Faith'. They noted further that Christians and non-Catholics alike were affected by the 'witchcraft, moonlight dancing, drunken debauchery and all evils of heathenism', which were still present in the village.⁸² An observer noted in 1957 that many Christians 'still have great fear of charms and witch doctors' medicines'.⁸³ Indeed, in the Protestant churches, Ovimbundu converts continued to be labelled as 'backsliders', not only for adultery, smoking, drinking, polygyny and the like, but also for consulting with the *ocimbanda* instead of the pastor, who spoke out against witchcraft.⁸⁴

This explains why Tocoism, a Christian anti-witchcraft and anti-missionary ideology, even though associated with northern Angola and the Belgian Congo, had its supporters in the highlands. As early as the 1930s, its manifestation in the highlands took the form of prohibitions against the colour black (which was associated with the world of the living).⁸⁵ People were called on to kill all black livestock, and to eschew planting black seed; even dark-coloured corn seed was prohibited, according to the missionary who recorded these events in 1934.⁸⁶

By the 1950s many of the anti-Portuguese ideologies which had their roots in the African conception of political power were widespread in Angola. The most troublesome for the authorities, Tocoism, had by this time shifted from being a religious movement to being an anti-colonial movement. The message which Simon Toko sent to the Portuguese authorities in 1958 clearly revealed the African tendency to link the colonial state with powers other than those coming from God (witchcraft). The statement read in part, 'there is no reason for the white man, because he has already lost the power previously given him by God. God is very angry with him, because he has committed several great sins. A new Christ shall come, but black, and Toko is his prophet. To him God has conferred the power which before he had given to the

⁸² UCC, Box 5, File 75 WMS, Overseas Mission, Angola, Missionaries – Margaret Dawson. E. Utting and M. Dawson to Friends, Sept. 1953, p. 2.

⁸³ UCC, Angola Box 4, File 72, Edith Clark to Friends, Dec. 1957, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Dewar, Interview; in a letter from Margaret Dawson and Elizabeth Utting to friends in 1956, they wrote that 'the heathen still rage about us. They tell us about bad spirits which cause illness as they encourage us to try the "treatment" of the witch doctors. They attempt to harm us in every way'. UCC, WMS, Angola, Box 5, File 75b, Utting and Dawson to Friends, May 1956. Moreover, in 1966 the parents of George Vaetim (who was to become UNITA information minister), were both reprimanded and temporarily thrown out of the church in the highlands because of witchcraft. Vaetim's mother was a deaconess in the church (private conversation, Larry Henderson).

⁸⁵ For the specific symbolism of red, white and black in Congo cosmology, see MacGaffey, *Religion and Society and Modern Kongo Prophets*.

⁸⁶ CCFMS, J. T. Tucker Papers Box 1, File 14, 12 Mar. 1934, p. 1.

white man. The land is ours and the white man stole it...'⁸⁷ Thus whites, who had been strong and blessed, had lost that blessing through greed (i.e. witchcraft).

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL IDEOLOGY AND THE NATIONALIST
STRUGGLE

It is not surprising, then, that as the nationalist campaign in the Ovimbundu highlands got under way from the mid-1960s, many rural Ovimbundu welcomed Savimbi and appropriated aspects of the traditional motifs to describe his activities. The escapades of Savimbi, who infiltrated into the highlands, and stayed in Ovimbundu 'safe' houses despite the security set up by the officers of the secret police PIDE and its Ovimbundu informers, became linked in the popular mind with magical powers. As the late Janatão Chingunji noted, many of the people he knew in the highlands in the late 1960s and early 1970s believed that Savimbi could fly and perform other feats, because of his knowledge of these forces.⁸⁸

This imagery of Savimbi was reinforced because of his intimate knowledge of pre-colonial history, ideology and folktales, and his common use of traditional idioms in his dealings with the population. Although one sceptic once derisively dismissed Savimbi's manipulation of these beliefs which occurred at UNITA's base in Jamba, as 'something between conjurer-with-rabbit and priest-with-sacrifice', the spectacle no doubt resonated with UNITA's Ovimbundu and rural supporters. None of them would question Savimbi's right to identify and eradicate or separate those among his followers who were suspected of being witches. As a leader, he could use witchcraft for public good.

This legacy in large part explains why Savimbi was able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of Ovimbundu peasants, who remained loyal to him even as external supporters wrote him off, and the movement was militarily defeated. Although Western journalists who visited UNITA's headquarters in the isolated section of south-eastern Angola during the years of the civil war credited American and South African aid for UNITA's survival, this was only part of the reason.

The long traditions associated with 'hunting', and Ovimbundu acceptance of the hunter-king motif, meant that at times of crisis when

⁸⁷ António da Silva Rego, 'Syncretic movements in Angola', *Luso-Brazilian Review* 7, 2 (1970).

⁸⁸ Interview with Janatão (Tito) Chingunji, 1990. Lawrence Henderson recently told the author that as many as 75 per cent of the Protestants in the highlands at the time believed in some form of witchcraft.

autocracy was essential, the hunter-king model surfaced. The liberation war against the Portuguese, and in particular, the civil war against the MPLA/PT with its alien communist ideology, represented such a time. Indeed, in the 1980s as Savimbi expanded the war against the MPLA, journalists who travelled with UNITA's guerrilla forces deep into northern Angola touched on this link between Savimbi and his guerrillas. As Cowell rather grudgingly acknowledged, UNITA's success lay 'in its soldiers' ability to cover huge distances on foot and still maintain unanswering loyalty to a man who sent them tramping hundred of miles across inhospitable ground'.⁸⁹ Among the Ovimbundu, a ruler's status and longevity always lay in his proven ability to organise large bands of followers during the 'annual looting raid of the dry season', and Savimbi's political success in commanding Ovimbundu loyalty rested in part on this tradition.⁹⁰

Although it would be impossible to demonstrate a direct link between Savimbi's popularity among the Ovimbundu and his high regard for and use of traditional political ideology, this regard separated him from other Angolan nationalists. When UNITA was driven out of central Angola and established its base at Jamba in 1976, the African political heritage of connecting political power to spiritual forces came into its own. Savimbi did not hesitate to incorporate *ocimbandas*, *sekulus* and Christian converts into the leadership of UNITA. Aware of the crucial political role these individuals played in the colony, he skilfully cultivated them, an act that guaranteed him the allegiance of the villagers who still regarded the *sekulus* and *ocimbandas* as legitimate political representatives. In their view, Savimbi, the grandson of a chief, could recognise who was and was not a witch, and could use witchcraft himself.

UNITA's survival during the 1980s was thus in part owing to the manipulation of these non-Western elements, and especially ideas regarding witchcraft. The revelations about the incidents of witchcraft at Jamba show exactly how non-Western ideas retained their vitality and usefulness, even as the Christian and Westernised leadership relied for their military survival on Western technology and expertise. Indeed, the number of people identified as witches in Jamba was large enough for UNITA officials to create a special village for them.⁹¹ Savimbi, relying on his reputation as a witch finder, tolerated

⁸⁹ Cowell, *Killing the Wizards*, p. 106.

⁹⁰ Ennis, *Umbundu*, p. 202.

⁹¹ Interview, UNITA officials, Washington, 1992.

witchcraft trials and burnings, because of the power these rituals still held in the minds of many of his followers. He escaped reprimand from those inside the movement who still held on to these ideas, because he was not seen as personally selfish. The fact that he helped bring to justice witches who were among his followers only reinforced his personal power as leader.

Thus, the use of witchcraft accusations and denunciations by UNITA officials as a political tool against dissidents in the 1980s reinforced rather than weakened their authority. The UNITA leadership survived, despite the confirmation of their activities by a report from Amnesty International which noted that 'some critics were accused of being witches and burnt to death with members of their families before watching crowds...in March 1982 and September 1983'.⁹² Indeed, A. DaCosta 'Tony' Fernandes and Miguel N'Zua Puna, two UNITA founders and dissidents of the movement, attested to having been present when the burnings took place in 1983, and identified the names of more than twenty prominent UNITA members and their children who they alleged were burned on charges of witchcraft.⁹³ Their break with the movement may have had less to do with their distaste for the witchcraft aspects of the traditional African ideology, and more to do with their resentment that Savimbi was using his power for personal aggrandisement.

Angolans who support Savimbi and the UNITA leadership must judge whether he and the leadership should be blamed for manipulating the traditions, or given credit for using the powerful stream of modern Ovimbundu nationalism to support his claim to Angolan nationalism. No one can doubt, however, that Savimbi's willingness to incorporate rituals and beliefs from the Ovimbundu past helped to legitimise his rôle as one of the architects of modern Angolan nationalism. This suggests that African leaders like Savimbi who capitalise on ethnic solidarity and who skilfully use African rituals and beliefs have a legitimacy among the rural masses that guarantees them staying power in the politics of the post-colonial African state.

These beliefs are still widespread among rural Angolans. As their leaders take their place in the GURN government, Angolan leaders and the international community should not dismiss lightly this dimension of UNITA's nationalism. The African-influenced nationalism which UNITA promoted is sure to present formidable obstacles to

⁹² As quoted in Leon Dash, 'Angola's desperate decision', *Washington Post*, C 5.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

the full integration of the Ovimbundu and other rural populations into a modern Angolan state. Scholars of modern Angola need to pay as much attention to African political ideology as they have to the socialist and democratic ideas emanating from the West.