**The social and the economic in south-east Angola**

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I wrote a book on southeast Angola. But no publishing house wanted to publish it. They all basically said: 'This is a very good manuscript (was I proud!), but there will be no audience, as this concerns an area that is not in the centre of developments in Africa: it is too marginal (was I angry!).' With this statement the publishing houses not only condemned the region to perpetual marginality, they also in my view missed out on marginality as being exemplary of Angola as a whole, of Africa as a whole. To discuss so-called 'marginal' people in a so-called 'marginal' region may form a window into larger structures of hierarchy and inequality by excellence (cf Lonsdale, 'Agency in a tight corner' and Foucault).

The book was called 'A war for people'. In it I argued that the nationalist wars fought in this region between 1966 to 1975 had been focused on 'people' much more so than on territory. This can be explained rather easily. In the region there are no strategic targets of importance: only secondary roads without tarmac, only small wooden bridges, no railways (only more to the North) etc. So, mobilizing popular support, 'hearts and minds' campaign was the only way to control. But, as I argued, there is more to this. The fact that it was a 'war for people' is related to socio-economic ideals and principles prevalent in this area.

@Of course even terms like 'the social and the economic' require qualification when reasoning from a conceptual history perspective. Political, economic, religious are categorizations developed in the west and may not be everywhere and always valid (macGaffey). As we will see, also the limits of what constitutes 'economy' or 'social' may change and vary.

First let me briefly introduce the area and its history.

**Southeastern Angola:**
The south-east of Angola is a land of sand and rivers, by the Portuguese colonials called: 'the lands at the end of the earth', regarded as one of the most remote areas of the country. While the Portuguese had started some colonies at the coast of Angola in the 15th century already, the south-east never really became colonised: some parts remained exempted from taxation throughout the colonial era, because the costs to collect them were higher than the revenues. A few administrative posts were built, called *mbongi* (town), but nothing much was done in the realm of colonial rule and administration, road construction, education, health services, etc.

The south-east also remained a land 'without missionaries': quite exceptional for 20th century Africa. In contrast to the North then, there was no development of a local educated elite, of Christianity during the colonial era. And after independence there was the civil war, so what there is in terms of educated elite is either originally born in another region of Angola, or educated abroad, mostly in Zambia, Namibia, or South-Africa.

The south-east of Angola was a marginalised area: politically, economically, socially the region was considered unimportant and backward. Often it was also considered isolated: yet as a matter of fact marginalisation and isolation were more like opposites: many people from the region travelled widely in search of work and food, not only within the region, or

within Angola, but also to Zambia (n-Rhod), Namibia (South-West Afr), and South-Africa. Portuguese was not widely spoken; if a European tongue was known at all it was rather English or Afrikaans. Travelling was in any case crucial for social existence: the idea to have one fixed abode was quite foreign to the inhabitants. 'Dwelling-in-travel', a concept coined by James Clifford, seems very at to describe the way of living in this vast area. As an example: the English question: 'Where are you from?' is translated with '*Ndonga*?', 'river?' The answer will be one of the rivers in the region. Home and origin are fluid, moving, connecting various places.

People lived in relatively moveable villages along the rivers in a slash-and-burn agricultural system. 'the bush' (*musenge*) was a resource: meat from hunting, honey from bees, fruits, roots, wax, etc were all important for most households. Only few people lived in 'town' (*mbongi*), although people might visit town for administrative purposes, forced labour or small-scale trade.

In the 1950s rumours about independence reached the region. War started in 1966/1967 when the MPLA and to a lesser degree UNITA opened the so-called eastern front from the newly independent Zambia. They tried to recruit followers, among immigrants from the region living in Zambia and among people in the region itself.

Many people fled to neighbouring countries: Zambia and Namibia. The Portuguese retreated to the *mbongi* (administrative centres) and they built 'security villages', settlements with barbed wire and watchtowers, while the MPLA guerrillas tried to build up camps in the bush and had bases in Zambia. Until the early 1970s south-eastern Angola can be characterised as military zones; with army presence, population in fenced concentrated settlements, guerrilla actions. After the Portuguese army staged a coup in Lisbon in 1974, a cease-fire was signed and in 1975 Angola became an independent country.

Even before Independence Day however, fighting had started between the nationalist movements and notably between the UNITA and the MPLA there was heavy fighting. A Northern-oriented movement: FNLA was defeated and disappeared as an important factor (although it still exists).

The fighting was not continuously: in 1992 there were general elections (but the UNITA that lost, did not accept the outcome so fighting broke out again) and there were more intervals in the fighting. The southeast was at the frontline of the war, especially because the UNITA made its headquarters in the region. Only as of 1998, the UNITA retreated to the diamond area of Lunda Norte and peace came in 2002 after Unita's leader, Jonas Savimbi, was killed in combat.

**Catching people**
As said, the war between the Portuguese and the MPLA was not fought over territory or strategic targets. Both parties tried to bring as many people as possible under their control. The MPLA called this 'liberation' of people, the Portuguese called this 'recuperation' of people. The concerned civilians spoke of 'stealing' or 'catching' people, with a clear negative connotation.

The Portuguese took people to the regional towns or to the newly built 'peace settlements' (mark the irony). The MPLA took people to villages surrounding their guerrilla bases. The local villages were emptied, agriculture sharply declined and instead of village life, an opposition between town and bush came into being. 'Town' was in the eyes of the MPLA associated with 'traitors', while 'bush' was for the Portuguese associated with 'bandits'. People fled out of the country, or got stuck under Portuguese or MPLA control. Travelling became next to impossible: this lack of option in the sphere of mobility and dwelling was strongly emphasised by the civilian population: the first and foremost meaning of peace was to be able to move again and to stay in the place of one's own choice.

As indicated, there was little else than 'people' to fight over and other mundane interests also played a role in these 'thefts'. The South-East of Angola was an area of much land and few people throughout the colonial epoch (for more on this, see Iliffe). As many people fled because of the war, 'people' became an ever more important asset.

The MPLA guerrillas needed people for several reasons. The guerrillas needed food and the civilians under MPLA control were obliged to offer food to the troops, which they cultivated under protection of the MPLA troops.

Furthermore the MPLA depended on the civilians for intelligence. MPLA leadership mostly came from Angola's capital Luanda and other central regions. Their ignorance of the region and its people often made them dependent on the knowledge of their following. The commanders often relied on local people for military intelligence concerning the position of the Portuguese, the roads, bridges and other possible targets in the area, etc. This dependence on a local following could give the civilians room for negotiation and manoeuvre.

The MPLA frequently held meetings during which they 'gave politics', meaning that through dance, songs, slogans, speeches, marches, and also trials and executions the civilians and the guerrillas were confronted with the discourse and practice of the nationalist movement. As indicated these meetings cannot be solely interpreted with a top-down model. Although threats and violence were regularly used by the leadership, the interdependence between the various groups was too great to have power concentrated in one single centre. Civilians were necessary: in the first place to build up a labour force for food production and for the acquisition of military intelligence. Young guerrilla trainees were often recruited from civilian families. Furthermore an audience was a prerequisite for the political meetings. One of the MPLA's commanders wrote in a letter that he had wanted to hold a meeting to 'give politics', but there were no people in the camp.[1]

Time and again the fighting parties stress that the South-East is a region of vast lands and few inhabitants: 'One of the greatest handicaps of this region is its low population density'.[2] Or as it was put in an MPLA report of 1970: 'There are many rivers here that have no people. At the river Cuatir there is nobody. At the river Chito and the river Palai there is nobody. At the Lupire, the river Cumassa, the river Choco Kwaluci there is also nobody.'[3] In one of the local slogans MPLA presented itself as a 'gathering of people'; this may be interpreted rather literally.

In other words, the relationship between MPLA and civilians was complex and multi-faceted.

The same held for the Portuguese and the civilians under their control. Portuguese knowledge of the region was even less and they tried to turn as many of their captives as possible into their 'guides' to reveal the guerrilla's whereabouts, fields, movements and bases. For the Portuguese 'the bush' was one undifferentiated whole consisting of all terrain outside 'town.' For the civilians this was obviously different: they knew villages, rivers, fields, footpaths, plains, saltpans, bush with wild animals, etc. The Portuguese needed people not only as guides, but also to withdraw support from the guerrillas. They sought to severe the links between civilians and guerrillas so as to stop guerrilla activities. The Portuguese also needed people simply to control them, 'people' were target in the war and figured in the military statistics. They needed people for their hearts and minds campaign.

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[1] PIDE, A, P.Inf. 110.00.30, 18, p. 113: Muana-Uambunga to Chefe de Grupo, 6 September 1968.
[2] *Angola in arms* 3 (4 February 1969) p. 17.
[3] PIDE, A, NT 9084, Cuito Cuanavale, p. 245: Lalatório, probably letter sent to Kakunga, captured by the Portuguese on 13 February 1970; on empty border region.

**Wealth-in-people**

These complex sets of interest are not limited to purely material factors. The 'thefts' of people, especially those by MPLA, were felt to serve a larger purpose. Local concepts of wealth, power and prestige are strongly related to the assemblage of dependants and slaves. Written sources about the history of south-east Angola are scant and oral traditions about the region tend to be fragmented. All the same many informants alluded to the importance of people as a source of wealth:

*Dominga:* What did he [chief Likisi] do?
*Woman:* Chief Likisi? He did not do anything. Chief Likisi just sat in his house. With his drums. And his slaves. That is all he did.[4]

'Wealth in people', a concept introduced into African studies in connection with slavery and kinship, aptly describes these relations between people, wealth and prestige.[5] In many ways people could serve as the basis for political power. People, as a source of labour, as a form of possession, as an audience, as a pool of knowledge, could enhance a person's status. As south-east Angolan societies had no centralised state and the area was relatively scarcely populated, 'big men' (only very few 'big women') stood in fierce competition in the control over people. Free people would leave if a leader was not able to ensure the well-being of followers. Slaves might try to escape. Poor village headmen might even be forced to sell or pawn nephews and nieces in order to repay debts. In the explanations about local ideas of wealth and poverty, the control over people was very important. Informants not only referred to slavery and forced labour - often classified as a form of slavery-, but also to clients, dependants and followers. The MPLA attempts to keep civilians in the bush were often evaluated within this framework of wealth and power.

Guyer and Eno Belinga have pointed out that it is too facile to interpret 'wealth-in-people' solely as the attempts of the powerful to build up a large group of dependants and slaves for production and reproduction. They use the concept wealth-in-people to explore the exchange or monopolisation of knowledge, the gathering of various forms of expertise. Knowledge and expertise constitute resources in themselves. exchangeable or closed-off good). Knowledge in this context becomes a key 'resource', a 'means of production' (117).

**Plenitude and acquisition**

'Wealth' has many meanings. Like in many African languages, the languages of south-east Angola differentiate 'wealth' into various forms. These can be roughly classified into 'plenitude' and 'acquisition'.[6] The various terms tell about the ways in which wealth can be possessed or acquired. Thus one of the words for wealth, *vikuata*, is related to the verb *kukuata*, 'to catch'. 'Catching people', as the MPLA and Portuguese did during the war, would belong to the process of building up *vikuata*. Another acquired form of wealth would be *vumoni*, related to the verb *kumona*: 'see, experience, own, acquire'. This shows the importance of knowledge in the discussions on wealth, an issue taken up in an article by Jane Guyer and Eno Belinga.[7]

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[4] Int. 4, 1997; also Int. 5, 1996.
[5] Jane I. Guyer, and S.M. Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in people as wealth in knowledge: accumulation and composition in equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History* 36 (1995) p. 91; for east Angola and Western Zambia, see Achim von Oppen, *Terms of trade and terms of trust: the history and contexts of pre-colonial market production around the upper Zambezi and Kasai* (Münster, Hamburg s.d. (1997)) p.e. p. 374.
[6] Jane I. Guyer, 'Introduction', *Journal of African History* 36 (1995) p. 88.
[7] Guyer and Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in people', pp. 91-120.

A family may own the knowledge of legends and traditions on its history,[8], the man who draws a sandgraph is called the owner[9] and songs are said to belong to this or that person.[10] Names, in modern Western societies associated only with revealing identities, were in south-east Angola not only meant to identify, but they also formed part of a 'logic of secrecy' (Ferme, 2001: 202-206), like a mask covering identity. And they were a play of knowledge of local social relations, history and geography (Gengenbach 2000). Bewildering to a stranger, people would use personal names, nicknames, kinship terms alternatively to demonstrate such knowledge. Knowledge and secrecy stood in complex interaction.

Mobility and knowledge are strongly interlinked: knowledge is at once a prerequisite for travel[11] and stems from it. Returning from a journey, people were obliged to sit down and explain their experiences in recitation.[12] The dissemination of knowledge, the process of teaching and learning was strongly linked to travel. Visitors from other lands, telling about foreign lands and cultures, could be a source of knowledge; as the proverb says: 'You came to teach knowledge in this country'.[13] The recitations told by people returning from a journey, likewise could increase knowledge in the community: 'You did not know that there were trees on the other side of the river, it is because I the elder told you'.[14]

Just as in Kenya Kikuyu are also know as 'the clan of 'hear ye'' and Kalenjin means 'I say to you',[15] in south-east Angola audience and speakers were a prerequisite for the knowledge form of wealth. The emphasis on followers in their capacity as labourers is only part of the story: the mobilisation of expertise, as discussed by Guyer and Eno Belinga, another part, the interaction with audiences yet another. Within this framework, the meaning of performance reaches far beyond the current scholarly interpretation of oral literary forms. As knowledge so often came from outside, the impossibility to travel during the war had far-reaching consequences for people's wealth of experience.

The 'acquisition' and 'plenitude' forms of wealth are of course connected: acquired wealth could help increase fatness and fertility and so contribute to a family's independence. John Lonsdale's study of *wiathi*, the Kikuyu notion of self-sufficiency and self-mastery, shows independence to be a moral category rather than a purely political or economic aim.[16] As in Kikuyu wealth, work and virtue stood in opposition to irresponsible, idle poverty. Yet, chances could in this area turn so rapidly; due to drought or violence independent people could be turned into dependents.

**Chains of dependence**

The forms of wealth could also be opposed: there was a tension between wealth as produced by strong, independent family villages consisting of an ever-changing group of relatives free to establish themselves in the place of their choice and the tendency to measure wealth in terms of control over people. People living near a chief's village could count on protection, but also stood a risk of being visited by tribute collectors. People living in the areas far from

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[8] Int. 26, 1999.

[9] Gerhard Kubik, 'African space/time concepts and the *tusona* ideographs in Luchazi culture with a discussion of possible cross-parallels in music,' *African Music* 6, 4 (1987) p. 62 (sandgraphs and the accompanying narratives reportedly form a male genre).

[10] Inge Brinkman (ed.), *Singing in the bush. MPLA songs during the war for independence in south-east Angola (1966-1975)* (Cologne 2001) p. 26.

[11] White, 'Outline', p. 16.

[12] Emil Pearson, *People of the aurora* (Seal Beach 1977) p. 106; Gerhard Kubik, 'Sozialisierungsprozeß und Gesänge der Initianden in Mukanda-Schulen,' in: Artur Simon (ed) *Musik in Afrika* (Berlin 1983) p. 254.

[13] Int. 25, 1999.

[14] Int. 26, 1999.

[15] Lonsdale, 'Moral economy', p. 335.

[16] Ibidem, pp. 326-327.

any political centre retained a large measure of independence, but were vulnerable in case of a slave raid. During the colonial area this changed, in the sense that the risks for people living far from the colonial centres diminished. Yet, the ambivalence of 'town' remained: each family had to decide to what extent the benefits of shops and trade outweighed the higher risk of forced labour and tax collectors. Political centres thus remained a relative concept: instead of one fixed centre, chains of dependence were formed and dissolved in ever-widening and shifting circles of political power. For each person the balance between being dependent and having dependants was different and could be subject to change. Chiefs did have the largest chances of assembling dependants and become wealthy, but chieftainship was no guarantee of wealth and even slaves could turn themselves into big men and become attributed with the powers of political leadership. Although chiefly position was in principle hereditary - in most cases following the patriliny in contrast to otherwise matrilineal inheritance - the candidates for succession often stood in fierce competition and the candidate who obtained the stool 'always had to assert his or her position anew'.[17] The connections between self-realisation, wealth and political leadership become clear in the one word *muene*: 'him/herself, owner, leader'.

## War and legitimacy

During the war, civilians attempted to become at least valuable clients. Their villages had been destroyed and their farms were ruined. They were no longer allowed to travel or stay as they deemed fit. Thus they had lost the sources to build up wealth: their possessions, independence, and mobility. The possibilities to remain self-sufficient had sharply declined: they depended on the fighting parties for protection. There was much anger and frustration about this: the accounts stress not only deprivation and poverty in the bush, but also the fact that civilians no longer had their own things. In some camps during some periods civilians may have been able to live their lives as independent people: they may have been self-sufficient in terms of food and even exerted considerable political influence over guerrilla decisions. In other camps or during other periods, control may have been tight. The guerrillas' use of force was sometimes understood, but also caused fear of becoming even less than clients. Especially the fact that people were often forced to stay put was reflected upon with much bitterness: only slaves were not allowed to vote with their feet and not allowed to leave if leaders did not fulfil clients' expectations.

During the war for independence civilians sought to become independent again, or to at least be valuable clients. They felt that at times the guerrillas tried to reduce them to the slave status by not only making them dependent, but also impeding their movement. Although the legitimacy of MPLA's actions was often questioned, however, in this phase of the war 'wealth in people' still remained a principle governing social relations. Guyer and Belinga focus on precolonial Equatorial Africa and argue that that colonialism greatly altered the precolonial 'terms for political mobilization'.[18] However, in South-East Angola, this line of interpretation remained important during the colonial era as well. It has also been noted that in general early colonial powers acted little differently from the Big Men they encountered:

> Frequently there was haggling between the colonial powers, which turned on a desire to monopolize particular sets of Africans as much as it involved competition for ownership of territorial space. In that sense, the colonial state did

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[17] von Oppen, *Terms of trade* 348.
[18] Guyer and Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in people', pp. 91-120.

> not behave too differently from its pre-colonial forebears, for whom people were normally considered a more strategic resource than mere land.[19]

Wealth-in-people, in its broadest largely governed social, economic and political relations in south-east Angola until independence, when the civil war between UNITA and MPLA broke out. The rift with the post-independence war is perceived of as being enormous: one of the most terrifying features of the civil war between MPLA and UNITA after Angolan independence, was that it seemed as if people had become completely worthless. Captives were often being killed: the end of the 'wealth in people' principle took on exceedingly violent properties in the Angolan context. And even so, it remained a gradual process. While for the fighting parties, the wealth-in-people principle became less and less important, civilians themselves took pride and boasted about their productive knowledge in learning techniques to survive in the bush to make soap, cook, etc. Also for civilians in exile, the notion of wealth-in-people remained crucial. A local proverb has it that 'The country is the people'; rather some refugees felt that 'a return' to Angola was impossible, because 'the country' had changed beyond recognition as the population had fled, been taken captive, new inhabitants had been forcibly brought in, etc.

So also now, the economic, social and political principles of 'wealth-in-people/wealth-in-knowledge remain partially functioning in south-east Angolan societies.

**Knowledge/information**
Information is becoming ever more important as an economic asset, a commodity in Western societies: 'the information society.' This sort of information is technology-related and 'scientific'. The paradox is that, despite it being a commodity, information comes in the form of unitary, centralized knowledge that is presented 'as a public good that is essentially innocent of power' (Schech 20). The 'information society' embodies forms of knowledge that stand disconnected from people and are seen as unequivocally 'good'. This inherently positive image of 'information' has clearly influenced the development discourse and development activities.

In south-east Angolan societies this is very different. Knowledge is here fragmented and local. One of the reasons why it is fragmented is because it is people-related knowledge, very much unlike the 'public good' notion in western societies. Knowledge is here not at all presented as unequivocally positive. The economy of knowledge has many dangerous sides to it; revelation and secrecy stand in clear interaction. In south-east Angolan societies knowledge and power are clearly connected in economic, social and political sense.

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[19]  Paul Nugent and A.I. Asiwayu (eds.), *African boundaries. Barriers, conduits and opportunities* (London, New York 1996) p. 2.

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