Refuge-Making in West Central Africa: The Other Side of the Age of Revolutions

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The idea of an "Age of Revolutions" occurring between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century celebrates well-known events happening in the Atlantic World's Americas and Europe. Africa, on the other hand, is oftentimes left out of the scholarly debates about this Age. Paul Lovejoy identified this exclusion and showed how *jihad* movements in Islamic West Africa were also part of the revolutionary political events of this period.[1] Bronwen Everill's contribution in this journal followed that direction as well.[2] Instead, in non-Islamic Africa, slavery and the slave trade expanded along with European colonialism during the nineteenth century, including the decades following formal abolition with the flourishing of illegal operations.[3] As a consequence, nevertheless, African people reaffirmed local forms of freedom and resistance in this period.

Emancipation both individual and collective was at the core of concerns of the locals in Catumbela, Dombe Grande, Caconda and surrounding areas in the interior from Benguela in West Central Africa. In responding to the main features of transformation of this period, they might not have used concepts such as "democracy" and "independence" in the fashion that Toussaint Louverture and other "Black Jacobins" in the Americas did. Yet, they continued to use two precolonial forms of refuge from enslavement called *Vatira* and *Shimbika* or *Tombika*, which could not only entail exiting the places under colonial jurisdiction, but also staying in those places at other households different from

the ones of people claiming ownership over them. In so doing, they challenged Portuguese colonial laws for possession over land and human beings, oftentimes winning their battles for freedom. Ownership was at the center of the Lusophone Atlantic legal culture.[4] Hence, local forms of refuge contributed to hinder the possibilities for the Portuguese to expand colonial rule as well.

Cases of people fleeing from the ones claiming ownership over them increased in response to the expansion of slavery, yet not all flights occurred in the same manner. In a collection of his records from 1849 to 1857, László Magyar noted that the residents of Ndongo—an autonomous state located to the northeast from the area of Benguela—recognized at least two ways of fleeing, whether far away into foreign lands or within allied jurisdictions.[5] The first way, called *Vatira*, probably in the Kimbundu language from the Ndongo area, implied a complete detachment from the former owner or community of residence, leading the person to either an independent life or to join an autonomous community. In the second way, called *Shimbika* or *Tumbika*, enslaved individuals made refuge at a different household, usually the one of a more powerful resident located in neighboring vassal chiefdoms. Rather than primarily looking for a free status, these people attempted to ameliorate their relation of dependency or simply find a shelter while figuring out further. The fact that they looked for refuge nearby was important because it implied that the former owner and other free people would recognize this change and had to accept it as legitimate. More than rupture from enslavement, it was a transfer of loyalty, according to Magyar's record. In fact, around the area of Luanda the term *Tumbika* in the Kimbundu language was used for prisoners of war and other

outsiders who were more vulnerable to deportation in the Atlantic slave trade, accentuating the vulnerability of refugees.[6]

According to Magyar, in Ndongo,

> The slave who is not satisfied with their owner can run away from their place … and go to the place of another influential family … where they will kill an animal, be it a dog, a sheep, a goat, or any other domestic animal that they come across before explaining to the new family that they are seeking to stay here now while leaving their former owners.[7]

This passage suggests that killing someone else's domestic animals or cattle in Ndongo was a strategy that self-liberated individuals employed to find refuge. The injured party had the right to seize anyone who had provoked his loss, which could lead to the continuation of bondage conditions for the individuals seeking for shelter. In Benguela and nearby colonial settlements or subjected chiefdoms, *Tumbika* offered dissatisfied captives the chance to push back against mistreatment, and forced enslavers to listen to their grievances or otherwise they could flee in search of a new household to live. This practice suggests the limitations of the colonial jurisdiction to impose Portuguese laws on possession since people followed the local norms for relations of dependency and refuge in areas under colonial jurisdiction. One of the features of Portuguese colonialism in West Central Africa was its adoption of local legal practices, so it is not surprising that enslaved individuals resorted to local norms to ameliorate their conditions even if they stayed in captivity.[8] Rather than searching for breaches in the colonial legislation, they mobilized practices that were familiar and effective to them.

Further reports of individuals finding refuge at other people's places also indicate the possibility of finding refuge within colonial settings. In 1828 Maria, an enslaved woman, walked away from the person claiming ownership over her. She was allegedly

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"tricked by the Black man Manuel" while farming in Catumbela.[9] Like Maria, another enslaved woman—who was left anonymous in the record—also fled her owner following the "trickery" of António Custódio, a free man, in another population center, Dombe Grande.[10] Both accounts describe the motivation for these flights as "trickery" by the men with whom the enslaved women fled because these records represent the interests of the original owners to make these look like cases of kidnapping rather than refuge-making. In another case, an enslaved woman moved away from "Joaquim, a free Black man resident in Caconda" who claimed possession over her. She was reportedly "under the protection" of the Black man Cahondo, which could either indicate refuge, a new relation of dependency, or a personal relationship between them.[11] Although their motivations are not clear in these short reports, it seems that the colonial authorities feared that they had resorted to *Tumbika*, or found refuge, as Magyar described. The colonial administration's fear of *Tumbika* indicated the force of this practice among local societies, and that it overrode the capacity of the Portuguese to end it or sanction the people involved in it.

Individuals who fled their former owners or actively looked for ways to find refuge or establish new relations of dependency in places under colonial jurisdiction relied on the collaboration of free subjects, which unified their experience as one of actively threatening the colonial establishment. By not following the principle in Portuguese law that enslavers' ownership could be guaranteed simply through the testimony of witnesses who could confirm their possession, some free and enslaved colonial subjects sabotaged the ability of the colonial administration to impose their forms of control of people.[12] Enslaved individuals either challenged the imposition of commodification of their bodies and lives when they liberated themselves from

enslavement altogether, or showed that they did not depend on Portuguese terms for the recognition of their possibility to seek for better life conditions. Finally, they contested the notion that free subjects' property and power were secured under Portuguese rule, shaking some of the foundations of colonial rule.

Further readings

Candido, Mariana. *Wealth, Land, and Property in Angola: A History of Dispossession, Slavery, and Inequality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Diouf, Sylviane, ed. *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Oxford: James Currey, 2003.

Domingues da Silva, Daniel. *The Atlantic Slave Trade from West Central Africa, 1780–1867*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Ferreira, Roquinaldo. *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil during the Era of the Slave Trade*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Green, Toby. *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa From the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Nafafé, José Lingna. *Lourenço Da Silva Mendonça and the Black Atlantic Abolitionist Movement in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

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the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, the Kellogg Institute for International Studies, the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, and Royal Air Maroc have supported his research in Angola, Portugal, and the United States. His publications include contributions on the volumes *African Women in the Atlantic World, Property, Vulnerability and Mobility, 1660-1880* and *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*.

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[1] Paul Lovejoy, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

[2] Bronwen Everill, "Demarginalizing West Africa in the Age of Revolutions," *Age of Revolutions*, 2018, ageofrevolutions.com.

[3] In the area of this paper, the Portuguese had attempted to expand the colonization of surrounding territories since their foundation of the port-town of Benguela in 1617. This port became one of the most important ones in Africa for the Atlantic slave trade up until the nineteenth century. Mariana Candido, "The Expansion of Slavery in Benguela During the Nineteenth Century," *International Review of Social History* 65, no. 28 (2020): 67–92.

[4] Mariana Dias Paes, "Shared Atlantic Legal Culture: The Case of a Freedom Suit in Benguela," *Atlantic Studies* 17, no. 3 (2020): 419–40.

[5] László Magyar, *Reisen in Südafrika in den Jahren 1849 bis 1857* (Pest: Verlag von Lauffer & Stolp, 1860), 287–88; Eva Sebestyén, "Escravização, escravidão e fugas na vida e obra do viajante-explorador húngaro László Magyar (Angola, meados do século XIX)," in *Doze capítulos sobre escravizar gente e governar escravos, Brasil e Angola - séculos XVII-XIX*, ed. Roberto Guedes, Ítalo Domingos Santirocchi, and Denise Vieira Demetrio (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 2017), 303–5.

[6] The term *Tumbika* in the Kimbundu language was related to the Kikongo term *m'vika* of the same meaning, hence likely originating from Kongo. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Economic and Social Dimensions of Kongo Slavery," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 243; Beatrix Heintze, *Studien zur Geschichte Angolas im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert: ein Lesebuch* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe, 1996), 218–19; Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 196; Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 77–79.

[7] Magyar, *Reisen in Südafrika*, 288.

[8] See, for example, the Portuguese colonial appropriation of the West Central African *undamento*, *mucano*, and *baculamento* institutions. Heintze, *Studien zur Geschichte Angolas*, Ch. 8; Roquinaldo Ferreira, *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Atlantic World: Angola and Brazil during the Era of the Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Ch. 3; Toby Green, "Baculamento or Encomienda? Legal Pluralisms and the Contestation of Power in the Pan-Atlantic World of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Journal of Global Slavery* 2 (2017): 310–36.

[9] ANA, C. 7182, "Registro de Requerimentos," January 14, 1828, f. 78. For more on Catumbela see Esteban Salas, "Women and Food Production: Agriculture, Demography, and Access to Land in Late-Eighteenth Century Catumbela," in *African Women in the Atlantic World: Property, Vulnerability and Mobility, 1660-1880*, ed. Mariana Candido and Adam Jones (Rochester: James Currey, 2019), 55–69.

[10] ANA, C. 7182, "Registro de Requerimentos," November 12, 1827, f. 71v. For more on Dombe Grande see Maria Alexandra Aparicio, "Política de boa vizinhança: os chefes locais e os europeus em meados do século XIX, o caso do Dombe Grande," in *II Reunião Internacional de História de Angola*, ed. CEA-USP and SDG-Marinha (Rio de Janeiro: CAPES, 1996), 109–16; Armindo Jaime Gomes, *As civilizações lacustres das margens do Kupololo* (Benguela: KAT Emprendimentos e Consultoria, 2007); Armindo Jaime Gomes, "Mundombe do «Dombe» ou Ndombe do Mundombe?...," *Mulemba* 4, no. 8 (2014): 77–100.

[11] ANA, C. 7182, "Registro de Requerimentos," August 24, 1826, f. 21v. Caconda was the main colonial settlements and trade routes connecting Benguela to the powerful states in the central highlands. For more on Caconda see Mariana Candido, "Trade, Slavery and Migration in the Interior of Benguela: The Case of the Caconda, 1830-1870.," in *Angola on the Move: Transport Routes, Communications, and History*, ed. Beatrix Heintze and Achim von Oppen (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2008), 63–84; Mariana Candido, *Fronteras de esclavización: esclavitud, comercio e identidad en Benguela, 1780-1850* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios de Ásia y África, 2011).

[12] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, Ch. 2; Tilly, "Domination, Resistance"; Cooper, "Conflict and Connection," 1518; Crais, "Chiefs and Bureaucrats in the Making of Empire," 1037.