AO SERVIÇO DO POVO ANGOLANO

Chieftaincy as religion: a conjectural interpretation of its role in the decolonization process in "Northern Angola"

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Introduction

When I left London for Luanda in view of carrying out fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in 2006, I did not expect to encounter my interlocutors. They were a first post-Independence cohort of an indigenous Catholic clergy that spoke both the language of what would be recognisable as Christianity to a Western audience as well as the language of an African religion more difficult to classify as Christian.[1] Nothing in the literature on colonial and post-Independence Angola signalled their existence, or the province of their competence, on both a symbolic and pragmatic level. As one of my interlocutors put it, "during communism we defended religion and during the war we defended peace, but now?"

"Angola" is in itself a label with a problematic referent. In the colonial discourse, the label angolas was synonymous with ambaquistas as a sociological category specific to the populations of the northern regions and which were considered as somewhat more civilised than other categories of Africans such as lundas, quiocos, lúluas, and bàlubas among others.[2] And the eastern regions were by contrast represented as "lands at the end of the earth".[3] Nevertheless, so far "Angola" has been taken for granted as one context (national) and as a nation-state with a territory and a population. As such, it has been framed within African studies with reference to state and politics[4] or else within Lusophone studies with reference to language.

Perhaps because of a focus on the post-Independence and post-Socialist armed conflict as a political and economic problem but less so as a religious one, there has been an almost exclusive focus on the State and a macro-level analysis of political economy marginalising the role of popular Christian cultures.[5] Some studies have pointed out the role of the

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1   Cf. KOLLMAN, 2010a and KOLLMAN, 2010b.
2   SERRA FRAZÃO, 1952: 1.
3   BRINKMAN & FLEISCH, 1999: 38.
4   E.g. CHABAL & VIDAL eds., 2008.
5   HODGES, 2004; CHABAL & VIDAL eds., 2008; PECLARD, 2008; VALLEE, 2008.

Catholic Church as a hierarchy and a political rival of the ruling party[6], but not for its role in shaping cultural perceptions of power in the margins of the state. More recently, attention has turned to national identity as "cultural project" as opposed to a "political" one[7], but leaving out "religion" in spite of the importance of its place in popular political culture.[8] Else, there have been studies of the relation between religion and ethnicity[9], but which cannot account for the formation of this post-Independence cohort and its domain of competence, which opposes the postcolonial state by means of a knowledge acquired outside the state. One of my interlocutors for instance recalled the years spent in the Seminar as reading books that were censored by the state, which were imported from Rome and Brazil and purchased in the bookshops opened during the colonial time by the Portuguese (e.g. Livraria Lello in Luanda).

The Church has come back into the larger picture of the institutional framework mostly after the transition from one-party state to a multi-party government between 1991 and 1992. For instance, as part of an inter-ecclesial organization, which obscures the unequal historical depth of the influence of the various religious currents.[10] Or else in studies of the pre-Independence war.[11] When the role of the Catholic Church has been highlighted, it has been described in the context of the peace process but not of the war process, with some exceptions.[12] Overall the study of postcolonial ecclesiastical developments have focused on the upper levels of the institutional organization, thus obscuring the role of a lower African clergy.

Further, the focus on the institutionalised aspect of religion has privileged an understanding of religion "proper" as doctrine fixed in writing, which has contributed to the uncoupling of "religion" from what has been called "traditional authority". "Traditional authority" has been linked to "ethnicity" and "ethnicity" has been understood as synonymous with culture and as distinct from religion. But "tradition" in this perspective is seen as unchanging and standing outside the process of history, and culture as an internally coherent system of beliefs and shared understandings of their meanings. Thus, the notion of "cultural expertise" has been forged by policy makers as an intermediary level between the rationality of developmental agencies and donors on the one hand and local actors on the other as a potential source of unrest and disruption.[13]

On the other hand, the idea of a local level of unchanging beliefs is awkward given that the post-Independence war had international dimensions and that the local population was exposed to the dynamics of a globalized world market through their experience, for instance, of hunger and fear as effects of the arms trade. The classificatory system of international discourses on "democratisation" and "peace" not only makes the postcolonial indigenous clergy invisible but also redundant, because made irrelevant. In this picture, the knowledge acquired during the post-Independence war is not transferable into the post-war scene as a theological competence relevant in the post-war society, precisely because it had been acquired in the context of the post-Independence war. Thus, to play a role in the post-war scene, priests had to unlearn their priesthood and eventually learn

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6 MESSIANT, 2008 [1994]: 81-82.
7 MOORMAN, 2008: 10.
8 BIRMINGHAM, 1999a: 63-81; BRINKMAN, 2003a; BRINKMAN, 2003b and BRINKMAN, 2006.
9 SARRÓ et al., 2008.
10 COMERFORD, 2005; MESSIANT, 2008 [2003].
11 BESSON, 2002.
12 E.g. SCHUBERT, 1997.
13 *Cf.* COMERFORD, 2005: 213, 231.

to perform the role of "cultural consultants".[14] With irony, my interlocutors referred to their role in the post-war context as *fazer feitiços* (making fetishes).

In this paper it is argued that the language of postcolonial subjects is a site where to access knowledge of the role of "chieftaincy" in the process of decolonization, as well as of the role of Christianity in the process of colonization. "Chieftaincy" is here understood as religious knowledge rather than as a political institution defined in terms of a binary opposition between "traditional authority" and "modern state bureaucracy". An ethnographic approach to "chieftaincy" as "religion" tries to document and understand those communicative practices through which in the present are created social links that enable the formation of alternative frameworks for the organisation of experience to those of Church and State. I am thinking for instance of the level of the household and of its ramification through kinship connections as important sites of both colonization and decolonization of the imagination that mediates communication. Context is made rather than given, and it concerns the connotative meanings of signs. In what cultural context, for instance, was Catholic education after Independence valued? What was Catholic knowledge expected to achieve for those who had been in the margins of the colonial state? If decolonization supposes an appropriation of the colonial heritage, was the process of learning the language of colonial power after Independence a means of emancipation or of colonization?

To answer these questions I propose to replace "chieftaincy" with "religious knowledge" without however beginning from a theoretical definition of "religion". Religion is not understood as the study of God and of the revelation he has made of himself, or of beliefs in supernatural forces abstracted from any concrete situation and material environment, it is not framed by a binary opposition to "secular" knowledge either. Rather, I understand "religion" as follows:

> Theological issues must be understood in terms of what people say and what people do but without differentiating between "right" and "wrong" conceptions: it means to understand how people try to make sense of their experience of what lies beyond mundane perception in terms of the idioms and materials available to them.[15]

Contrary to the idea of "tradition" as unchanging culture in the discourse of developmental industry[16], the sheer existence of a post-Independence cohort of an indigenous Catholic clergy was evidence of postcolonial change in how people imagined that which lay beyond mundane perception. This namely concerns the horizons created by decolonization where some generations earlier Christian eschatology had provided the means to imagine the horizons created by colonization.[17] This cohort was to some extent an expression of a cultural understanding of Independence as appropriation of the Portuguese language and Catholic religion in the service of a social organisation both different from the colonial one and outside of the context created by the armed conflict. What the existence of this cohort points at is a social and cultural milieu in which Catholic education after Independence appeared accessible to African boys and a source

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14 COMERFORD, 2005: 231.
15 PEEL, 2000: 120.
16 Cf. COMERFORD, 2005.
17 GRAY, 1990: 68-69.

of knowledge giving them mastery over the postcolonial environment, thus fulfilling cultural expectations of an appropriate male adulthood. It is to this extent that I understand the cohort in question to be the product of "chieftaincy" in the sense of a cultural understanding of Independence as the new potential of Catholic knowledge as source of spiritual power. The latter was regarded as necessary for creating a context autonomous from that produced by the armed conflict and in which the growth of the younger generations would be culturally meaningful.

The point is not to "discover" the history behind cultural imaginaries, but to understand the role of these imaginaries in making history. Seen from this perspective, colonization and decolonization are an ongoing dialectical process rather than two stages following one another in a chronological succession, and the passage of time is less apprehensible as number of years or centuries than as contrasts in meanings.

The past as a dangerous margin of the present in post-war Luanda

As in other countries under state socialism, after Independence the MPLA controlled the production of authorised representations of the past as a source of legitimacy for its rule.[18] In the aftermath of the armed conflict the MPLA reclaimed an exclusive authorship of Independence by making Luanda and 4 February 1961 the place and date of birth of the war for decolonization. This date was inscribed in the post-Independence landscape as the name of the only international airport of Angola and based in Luanda. The symbolic power of this naming only stands out against the historical background of this region and of what the monopoly of the connection between national and international scales has represented both before and after colonialism. The national media (although with a visibility limited to the urban space) were another site in addition to the built environment for the inscription of party history. Thus, in the aftermath of the war, in a special dossier of the newspaper *Jornal de Angola*, the portrait of the president Eduardo dos Santos would appear on the front page adjacent to the portrait of the first president Agostinho Neto as his direct successor, and as if that succession were a natural link in a quasi cosmological order. The iconography used was reminiscent of the iconography of the state in other Socialist regimes where the portrait of the ruler would be inserted in a genealogy including the faces of Marx, Lenin, Mao Tse Tung, and Stalin. Moreover, the creation of links of referentiality between Party iconography and the urban environment was reminiscent of the propaganda apparatus used by Salazar to promote his ideology of "Portugal" as an overseas nation.[19] The MPLA control of the authorised representations of the past was thus reliant on its control of the wealth accumulated during colonialism as colonial infrastructure. It also implied a relation of hostility with those who understood independence in a framework other than that of party history.

The narrative of party history would construct continuity between the One Party and multi-party regimes, while on the international scene the official discourse would claim a radical break with the Socialist past. The contest would thus be over whose representations of the past established relations of ownership with the lived environment. After

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18 MESSIANT, 2008 [1998]; WATSON, 1994: 1.
19 CUSACK, 2005; CORKILL & ALMEIDA, 2009; CAIRO, 2006.

the war, in the official rhetoric, a boundary was drawn between the colonial built environment as a space of "civilization" and a space of "savagery" that in the print media based in Luanda was symbolised as "Bakongo cosmology".

In Luanda, on the other hand, people drew boundaries of inclusion and exclusion at the level of speech (sotaque) and of religion rather than in terms of membership in political parties. With the ending of the post-Independence war, for instance, the border between Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo became "dangerous" because porous to "witchcraft beliefs" and "un-Catholic" behaviour towards children. Until then it had been a strategic gateway onto the international market for the opposition. To a large extent, UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) had been able to oppose the Government based in Luanda less because of a greater social basis and more so because of this independent access to the international market. The power associated with this border was both spiritual and economical, and the control of spiritual power was the basis of political power. Thus, the various independent churches that sprang in the wake of the migration from DRC at the time of the war were said to foment disguised conspiratorial plots for overthrowing governments in both Angola and DRC.[20] But if in the official discourse these churches were considered to be "Bakongo", in popular parlance they were said to be "Zairian".

On public transport in the capital it was not the language of "the Bakongo" (Kikongo) but the language of "Zairians" (Lingala) that was stigmatised as not giving a person the right to speak in public because that public space was an exclusively Lusophone space. The Portuguese language spoken there was further differentiated from Brazilian Portuguese as having a different sotaque. Thus, contrary to the idea that Angola is part of a wider "Lusophone space", populations on the ground did not seem to recognise kinship relations between their language and African languages from neighbouring countries, or between their Portuguese and the Portuguese from other parts of the world. Intelligibility had to do with the connotative meaning of words, not with their dictionary definition. The domain in which words would be connoted as "local" or "foreign" was delimited also by specific standards of the physical integrity of banknotes and documents of identity and what was being filtered out was the space of "the bush" as the space of unauthorised trade. This was the "illegal" trade associated with the war economy of the "enemy", and the stereotypical "bush trader" was the "Zairian". As popular commentaries made in Luanda during the legislative elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo suggest, the popular perception was that the governments in the two countries were interrelated in ways that change in one would automaticamente ("automatically") trigger a change in the other. The referent of "Zaire" on the other hand was not the territory of former Zaire, but the mata (forest) by contrast to capim (the "bush" immediately outside the town or village). The ending of the war was a contestation over who counted as "proper Angolan", given that there was no more an opposition between "MPLA" and "UNITA".

In post-war Luanda, the official discourse and popular memory were two different narratives of the same story. In the official discourse the post-Independence war was constructed as a "closed" and "remote" past, whereas in popular memory it was a most recent past that had not yet been "closed". In popular memory, the danger of the margin

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20 *Cf.* SARRÒ *et al.*, 2008.

between the most recent past and the present was marked by the label "Zairian", whereas in the official discourse it was marked by the label "Bakongo". The temporal frameworks of the official discourse and popular memory in the capital were not the same. The former was created by a language of "ethnicity" that created continuity with the colonial classification of the African populations into "ethnic groups". Instead, the latter used a language of nationality in which the connotative meanings of national labels were influenced by the perception that the war continued nearby, as if just outside the city. But these two narratives were coterminous.

In the post-war context, the effectiveness of the official discourse to create authoritative representations of the past and of the present was such that popular uses of the Portuguese language in the capital were not successful at appropriating the built environment by investing it with new meanings that would create distance with both colonial and one-party regimes. Thus, "Zairian" was the tag of a dangerous margin between the present and the war. It would be used to refer to people (or perhaps something closer to "spirits"?) while the label "Cuban" would be used to designate buildings (os prédios dos Cubanos). The history of the relationship between the space of the "forest" and the capital was not recalled as knowledge of events having unfolded in time in a chronological order, but as contrasts between meanings. This is not to say that party history was a "false" representation of the past and that popular memory in the capital was more "transparent". What is meaningful is the juxtaposition of "Zaire" and "Cuba" in the popular language of post-war Luanda and the definition of this juxtaposition as characteristic of the "Angolan" sotaque by contrast to the "Brazilian" sotaque or Lingala.

The extent to which the post-Independence war has been about decolonization, or can on the contrary be understood as a process of colonization, can be measured at the level of the relationships between the various representations of the past, which are always political acts and sites of contestation.[21] Also, reconstructions and interpretations of the past are guidelines to understanding popular perceptions of what relations are today being forged between postcolonial states and societies.[22] It is not only nations, but also states that are imagined, and representations of the past are practices constitutive of states in that they produce particular imaginaries – to the exclusion of others – into "a concrete, overarching, spatially encompassing reality".[23] These imaginaries are further rooted in the production of hierarchies that allocate geographical mobility and immobility to particular subjects: in turn, the breadth of geographical mobility determines the scope of vision that becomes the source of legitimacy for its authoritative generalizations: "The 'higher up' officials are, the broader the geographical range of their peregrinations, and the more encompassing their optics".[24] In post-Independence Mozambique, for instance, state planners were able to forget colonialism in ways that peasants could not.[25] The former had become "independent" in ways that the latter had not. The divide between urban and rural spaces is thus itself a way of imagining the state, rather than a given of empirical reality. The fact that states are produced and reproduced through particular imaginaries further shows that it is more appropriate to speak of the role of chieftaincy as religion that is part and parcel of modern state apparatuses rather than external to

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21 ISAACMAN, 1997: 786.
22 PITCHER, 2006: 108.
23 FERGUSON & GUPTA, 2002: 981.
24 *Ibid.*: 987.
25 ISAACMAN, 1997: 787.

them. As imaginary of lies beyond mundane perception, "chieftaincy" undermines the dichotomy between urban/rural spaces that often underpins the dichotomy between "modern state" and "traditional authority".

For instance, some authors have argued that the mass return from Kinshasa of the Bakongo of the 1961 exodus has been "one of the most fundamental changes to postcolonial Angola".[26] For others, such a fundamental change was instead by the Cuban military intervention in support of the MPLA in 1975 and subsequent repression of the attempted coup of the 27 May 1977.[27] But in both cases two aspects of one and the same political structure are commented upon in isolation, partly because of the too narrow temporal span employed to look at the cultural frameworks of decolonization. The popular language of the post-war capital suggests taking a closer look at why the ending of the war had created a "dangerous" margin between past and present that was referred to as "the forest".

The significance of the Ndembu forest in the relations between Luanda and Kongo has been acknowledged for the 16th and 17th centuries.[28] It also played an important role in the early 20th century when labour recruitment for the timber industry in the Mayombe forest caused a great revolt in 1917 that was blamed on Protestant influence by the Portuguese officials.[29] Further, the history of the Angolan war for decolonization has largely been the story of the crossing of the border between Angola and Belgian Congo/Zaire, which transformed itself into an irreducible opposition between the nationalisms of an MPLA based in Luanda and an UPA/FNLA based in Kinshasa. Each movement claimed an exclusive role as representatives of the Angolan war for Independence on the new international scale created by the ending of the Second World War. But no links have been made between the repeated crossing of this border and the political structure of the Angolan state as a structure articulated rather than undermined by a struggle over the control of spiritual power attached to that act of passage.[30]

The failure in the formation of a unified nationalist front in Angola seems to have deep historical roots: a conflict between mutually exclusive perspectives on what the name "Angola" stands for. The role of Kinshasa in the history of Angolan Independence has been strategically omitted from the MPLA historical narrative that has instead highlighted the role of Cuba, or else the historical resistance of the Queen Njinga against the Portuguese, but without an account of how that resistance is connected to the Cuban intervention and to the post-war present. In this narrative, the other shore of the Atlantic seems closer than the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, making Lingala more "dangerous" than the Brazilian sotaque for those who considered themselves Lusophone Angolans in post-war Luanda.

The political structure of the Angolan state may be better understood in terms of competing epistemologies for the control of spiritual power in a region that for centuries had been influenced by various and competing missionary currents as well as by a changing position in international relations and on the world market. On the other hand, an excessive focus on the pair MPLA/UNITA as political factions opposing one another has reduced the visibility of other cultural contexts that have organised the experience and

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26 BIRMINGHAM, 2002: 156.
27 COMERFORD, 2005: 123, n.º 23.
28 E.g. BIRMINGHAM, 1999c: 60.
29 BIRMINGHAM, 1999b: 75-76.
30 *Cf.* WEST & LUEDKE, 2005: 4-6.

expectations of Independence. Making this change in context visible allows us to understand how the postcolonial state has been imagined in terms of cultural frameworks not reducible to either "Christianity" or "African chieftaincy".

In sum, the ascription of "danger" to particular identities indicated where imagination took over perception as an effect of perspectives on power related to particular locations in the aftermath of war. In a perspective situated in Luanda as centre of a Lusophone space, "the forest" belonged to the imagination of what lied beyond its margins, and whose danger was described as "Bakongo" or "Zairian". And this stereotyping was part of as much as it created local theories of causation. As Gluckman has observed, stereotyping is a theory of causation that disguises the contradictions inherent in the social structure.[31] This observation can be extended to political and ecclesiastical institutions. The boundary between Angola and the neighbouring DRC was thus not only geographical and sociological but also – and perhaps above all – linguistic and symbolic. The role of stereotyping in "closing" the post-Independence war and thus making it into a distant past brings about questions about identity rather than about a modality of power: whose decolonization from whose colonization?

Colonisation and decolonization as changing landscapes

In the official state discourse, the tagging of the "dangerous" margin of the post-war Lusophone space as "Bakongo" concealed from the public view the transnational level of Angolan postcolonial society: on the international level, the Angolan government insisted to be the exclusive representative of an Angolan nation bounded by the Portuguese language. It also obscured the role of Kinshasa in the history of decolonization as competition between MPLA and the UPA/FNLA (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola), for the control of the spiritual power, inherent in their international recognition as exclusive representatives of the Angolan war for Independence and therefore as legitimate recipients of military aid. But in popular memory, the cultural association of danger with "Zaire" revealed what the official ideology concealed, namely the perception of a link of causality between political power in Luanda and political power in Kinshasa. This link was articulated at the level of discourse as fundamental relationship to the spread of the religion of "the Other", such as the "witchcraft beliefs" promoted by the evangelical churches of the "Zairians". This is why, when looking at representations of the past in search of insights into the process of decolonization from within the present, it seems more productive to speak of the role of "chieftaincy" as religion, and to define "religion" as a relation between perception and imagination that is specific to a particular situation within a political structure.

Anthropologists have recently defined this relation as "semiotic ideology": sets of assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world, such as the hypothesis that signs are meaningful whereas materiality is practical.[32] "Semiotic form" blends the meaning and the materiality of signs: materiality is constitutive of meaning and has a moral dimension, which is why the definition of what are "signs" and what are not "signs" has been a battle-ground during the colonial encounter.[33] It can be seen

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31 GLUCKMAN, 1972: 10, 42.
32 ENGELKE, 2007: 10.
33 KEANE, 2007: 4-6.

more generally as a battle-ground where colonization and decolonization take place side by side as a dialectical process that is never overcome once and for all. Semiotic ideology is thus a cultural production of both the "signs" that organise mundane perception (whose materiality is culturally constructed) as well as of the stereotypes that organise the imagination of what lies beyond (in which case there is a cultural construction of immateriality). Decolonization is thus emancipation from a dominant ideology that governs both mundane perception and the imagination of a "transcendental" realm. For instance, the colonial authority of the written word (e.g. the caderneta) existed alongside the authorization by Protestant missionaries of the appropriation of the written word of God (vernacular translations of the Bible). Thus, colonial rule cannot be isolated from conversions to Christianity and, reciprocally, decolonization will happen on both levels: the level of "politics" (mundane perception) and the level of "religion" (imagination). Portuguese rule created the space it governed as Lusophone and Catholic and inaccessible to those classified as "natives". Missionaries sought instead to govern the spirituality and domestic life of colonial subjects by connoting the material consequences of colonialism with moral meanings, but that cut across the boundaries separating one colonial regime from another. Thus, to speak of "chieftaincy" only within or in relation to the framework created by a particular colonial administration misses the point of decolonization: that of reacquiring mastery over imagination, or spirituality, by appropriating the language of colonial power as a "semiotic ideology" without for that matter reproduce the order of the colonial discourse.

"The forest", I suggest, was a "sign" within a semiotic ideology where there was no clear demarcation between "colonialism" and "postcolonialism". The "danger" associated with the margin of a "purified" Lusophone space suggests that at the level of meaning not much time had passed since the official presence of a border between different colonial administrations as well as different religious spaces (Catholic and Lusophone, Catholic and Francophone, Protestant and Francophone). On the other hand, the designation of this border as "forest" reveals a semantic domain linked to a landscape whose history was longer than the history of colonialism, and whose narrative showed the importance of the agency of the environment itself. My conjecture for the moment is that "the forest" belonged to a pre-colonial semiotic ideology in which the materiality of mundane perception and of imagination was the same: acting on what is visible and concrete (perceived) by means that are invisible and not tangible (imagined) was the "logical" counterpart of acting on the imagination (what is invisible and not tangible) through perception (what is visible and tangible).

This semiotic ideology has a history traceable to an opposition between the network of the "Ambaquistas" and the "Ndembu chiefs" in the 17th and 18th centuries: the former were agents of Portuguese advances whereas the latter were its opponents. Also, the Ndembu forest was part of the economy of the plantations in ways that the Ambaquista corridor between Luanda and the Lunda was not.[34] The perception of the Angola/DRC border as "dangerous" appears to correspond to the perspective of the situation of "Ambaquistas" facing "Ndembu chiefs", albeit these latter would remain invisible for the former, "hidden by the forest" as it were. Categories of time would be represented as categories of space. Instead of looking at individual chiefs or at one chieftaincy in isolation from coterminous

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34 BIRMINGHAM, 1999b: 108.

others, it becomes possible to attempt grasping the cultural nexus that eventually kept together the various levels of the political structure of the Angolan state. This structure is here understood as the "semiotic ideology" that delimited areas of perception from areas of the imagination: what can be seen given one's place in a hierarchy and what is imagined as continuation of that perception. Semiotic ideologies can thus be understood as political structures that have agency in determining the perceived pace of the passage of time from or between events. The part played by the imagination was to represent the most recent past as if it were "immaterial and invisible", misrecognising this most recent past in the materiality of the immediate environment. Thus, what to an external observer may appear as distinct events because very much apart from one another within a chronological sequence, for locals they may be perceived as the recurrence of one and the same event. Likewise, what to an observer external from a political structure may appear as related events, may for insiders appear unconnected.

The Luanda-based print press of "the opposition" was part of the materiality of this semiotic ideology, and it represented the perspective of the hinterland of the capital (that of "the Ambaquistas"). The way in which the Angola/DRC borderland played out at the level of the imagination of the post-war society is illustrated by how the audience of one of these newspapers was constituted as "Mbundu of Ambaca" in an ambiguous relation with the "Bakongo from Mbanza Congo" as well as with a broader Lusophone community.[35] It was the story of a marriage between a Kimbundu woman from Ambaca whose father had died and a Bakongo man from Mbanza Congo. The marriage was represented as an economic transaction without real love, partly because "the Bakongo" were portrayed as being incapable of such feelings. Their language was said to lack words for "kiss" and "love" altogether. It was also held that the various ethnic groups of Angola had not been in contact with one another until the beginning of the anti-colonial war in 1961 and that it was only since its ending that first contacts were being made between Kimbundu and Bakongo ethnicities through the marriage of the younger generations. On the other hand, if these marriages were said to be an occasion for discovering that there existed similarities and not only "abysmal differences"[36], Kikongo and the "Kimbundu of Ambaca" were languages not translatable into one another. Their "nexus" was expressed in the names of locations used to identify the actors and to make the plot of the story recognisable to an audience "familiar" with a topography of power that was not meaningful within either the framework of colonial administration or of the MPLA administration. In the case of this story, the materiality of "signs" was the plot that was encoded in toponyms used as a code of communication about the "actual" context in which that marriage had taken place: a context in which the contrast between those locations would be significant.

What this newspaper article suggests is that the code of toponyms provided a temporal framework for the organization of the experience of change by refocusing the attention of social actors on a new scale and duration.[37] In a "traditional mode of communication" those who use its language will know that their different memories refer to one and the same event without for that matter sharing their memories of the said event.[38]

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35 *Angolense*, 16 to 23 December 2006.
36 *Ibid.*: 24.
37 Cf. BOYER, 1990: 2.
38 *Ibid.*: 2, 9, 33.

The semantic content of this language can only be accessed "from within" the political structure to which that event belongs. My conjecture is that the event that refocused the attention of those for whom the border between Angola and DRC was "dangerous" was not only the post-Independence war and the alliance between Zaire and UNITA, but also the foundational violence of the Angolan State in the early 17th century[39], whose "repetition" had been "recognised" in the war after Independence. This "memory" on the other hand was diffuse; it belonged to the place itself, not to particular individuals. Thus, and contrary to a recurrent assumption, "Northern Angola", as a cultural context of and for communication about the past that is not narrated in the official history, did not coincide with the linguistic and religious contours of a Kikongo-speaking community. The UPA/FNLA leadership did indeed use a Biblical language in which the experience of colonialism made by the people of Northern Angola was analogous to the experience of exile of the Hebrew people in Egypt.[40] But during the war for decolonization, guerrillas on the ground had to rely on the expertise of chiefs and hunters in order to access the forest beyond the infrastructure of the colonial state as well as beyond the reach of the protection of the Christian God.[41] Because of their knowledge of the pathways through the forest, of how to differentiate between animal tracks and pathways for humans, hunters acquired a new status.[42] This also meant knowledge of those pathways that could be taken by night. Not seeing where to put one's feet was "dangerous", above all for women, because if they fell, as carriers of the pots that contained the food cooked by daylight, everyone went hungry.[43]

Comparison with other parts of Western Africa suggests that this "indigenous knowledge" tapped by civilians in Northern Angola to find protection in the forest, originated in cultural responses to the experience of alienation following the insertion of their landscapes into the Atlantic system. With reference to Sierra Leone, for instance, Shaw argues that during the integration of the Guinea Coast into the Atlantic system there emerged ritual techniques of protection known as Closure and Darkness.[44] These rituals aimed at making individuals invisible and mobile in a landscape where visibility and mobility were made dangerous by the raids for the procurement of slaves. Persons borrowed the techniques of captors and thus learnt to control their capacity to disappear.[45] Over the centuries, these practices endured as social memory to become an authorising discourse for the guerrillas in the war for independence.[46] Their political effectiveness on the other hand has been undermined by their being discredited in the international media where they would be represented with pejorative connotations as "primitive".[47] But contrary to Sierra Leone, where these ritual practices became over time a discourse that could be tapped by the nationalist guerrillas, "Northern Angola" would be the framework in which civilians experienced decolonization on the ground, whereas the nationalist leadership used a language of Christianity. One must therefore distinguish

39 MILLER, 1978: 109-110.
40 BRINKMAN, 2006: 226.
41 *Ibid.*: 215.
42 *Ibid.*: 218.
43 Personal recollection of a former "Angolan refugee" to Kinshasa as a child in 1961, interviewed in Luanda, 5 Jan. 2007.
44 SHAW, 2003.
45 *Ibid.*: 88.
46 *Ibid.*: 91.
47 SHAW, 2003: 102.

between the experience of the war of decolonization and processes of decolonization as a reconfiguration of the imaginaries created by conversion to Christianity.

To recapitulate, the "forest", the "Bakongo cosmology", or "Zairian" were signs of a "dangerous" boundary in popular parlance, the official discourse, and in the national media of the capital in the aftermath of the war. I have argued that this religious boundary is part and parcel of the political structure of the Angolan state. Crossing this boundary has been a source of spiritual power for nationalist guerrillas during the war for decolonization, which made it a source of "danger" after the termination of the post-Independence war because it could potentially be mobilised by the opposition to take over political power. It has been observed, for instance, that in Eastern Africa there is a relation between crossing borders and the power to heal.[48] This suggests that the political structure of the postcolonial Angolan state has its roots in the colonial encounter between the Portuguese and African chieftaincies in the early 17th century. And this encounter has survived as an "imaginary" made of a composition of various situated perspectives that do not "see" but "stereotype" each other, and which has played an important role in the process of both colonization (converting to Christianity) and decolonization (accessing the forest for ancestors'protection).

Decolonization as religious process in the cultural context of the Loango Coast

After the war, in the discourse of the national media and in the discourses of the state and of the Catholic Church witchcraft accusations of children (*crianças acusadas de feitiçaria*) were the principal stereotype of "the Other". Accused children would be "abandoned" by their families and sheltered by the government and the Catholic Church in apposite centres based in the capital and towns in the northern region (*Lar Cuzola, Arnaldo Jannssen, Criança Futuro*). The government, the Catholic Church, and the national media would each represent a particular aspect of an otherwise unitary discourse about what it meant to be a "proper" Angolan national and about the moral nature of the boundaries of the post-war nationality. Thus, the government declared the child under five years of age a top priority of its developmental agenda, whereas the Angolan Episcopacy assumed the responsibility of eradicating "witchcraft beliefs" (*feitiçaria*). In the discourse of the national media based in the capital, "witchcraft" was further represented as "Bakongo cosmology". But in the popular discourse in the capital, as well as in less official discourses in the church, this phenomenon was not linked to the cosmology of "the Bakongo" but to the proliferation of evangelical churches among "Zairian" immigrants the government did not officially recognise. Contrary to the official recognition of the post-war Angolan nation as multi-ethnic, the Angolan government would not also recognise a plurality of nationalities.

The proof of nationality was required for obtaining the new documents of identity, including the voter's card and the standard evidence of nationality was the birth certificate (*cedola*). For those born during colonialism it could only have been issued by the Catholic Church whereas for those born after independence and before 1992 it could only have been issued by the administration of the MPLA One Party state. In recognising

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48 WEST & LUEDKE, 2006: 4.

as valid documents issued by the colonial and by the one party state administrations, the post-war multi-party government also recognised the authority of the categories of identity of the discourses that those administrations served. This meant that the post-war administration recognised as valid the construction of "legitimate" birth as Catholic birth under colonialism or as birth under MPLA jurisdiction if after independence. Those who could not provide this kind of material evidence would instead be tested for their fluency in the languages of the ethnic group that was associated with that person's place of birth.

After the end of the postcolonial civil war, Angolan nationality was constructed as Catholic and Lusophone, and both these attributes were in turn represented as inherited through birth within the space of the Catholic Church. Not only the uneven historical depth of this space mattered, but those whose birth was not "legitimate" were constrained to narrate their "postcolonial" identities in terms of categories of identity that belonged to the colonial discourse. In the colonial classification, moreover, no difference was made between "newer" and "older" ethnicities, such as the Bakongo ethnolinguistic group invented by Baptist missionaries and the pre-colonial Kongo kingdom. The identification of "witchcraft" with the "Bakongo cosmology" in the national media signified that after the end of the war, state, church, and the media imagined the postwar Angolan nation through colonial lenses. The forgetting of the most recent past of the war created a rupture through which returned the colonial discourse, not the memory of colonialism.

The principal effect of this commemoration of the colonial discourse for the ordering of the post-war society was a moralisation of social reproduction in the margins of the state and of the Catholic Church. My claim is that popular religion should be seen in relation to this discourse about "legitimate" and "illegitimate" birth. If popular religion in the margins of the state and of the Catholic Church has played a role in the process of decolonization, then it has done so by constructing alternative domains of "possibility" and "potentiality" to those constructed in the discourses of the state and of Church. Thus, instead of asking questions about "colonization" and "decolonization", which create false discontinuities, it may be more appropriate to ask questions about religion under authoritarian regimes, or, about the ways in which the centralization of power changes religion in both its "popular" and "institutionalised" forms.

Among Lusophones, for instance, the stereotypical story of children's witchcraft was a story of "giving bread" (*deu pão*), rice (*arroz*), sweet potatoes (*batata-doce*), or food (*comida*) in more general terms: food was the vehicle of a destructive power that would cause somebody's death, illness, or other form of misfortune. But there was another aspect of the vehicle through which the power to cause harm circulated, namely its directionality. This particular form of "witchcraft" was said to circulate from North to South, and "the North" encompassed not only DRC, but Western and Northern Africa. The geographical distance was measured in degrees of religious difference: the farther north, the less Christian (and vice versa: the farther south, the more Christian). Thus, if migrants from DRC spread "witchcraft", Lebanese traders were said to bring Islam to Luanda. Thus, the more Catholic Angolan nationality, the less Christian and therefore "dangerous" its margins, and because religious difference was a difference between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" birth, the social anxiety about the effects of the centralisation of power was expressed as anxiety about the potential for growth of those

of "illegitimate" birth because born outside the space of the Catholic Church. If at the beginning of the colonial state Christianity was appealing because of the promise of a "world to come"49 or because of the "transvaluation of death" – the idea that a good death was a gain of eternal life50 - in the aftermath of the war popular Christianity seemed to be about creating culturally meaningful realms of potential for growth in the present. The development of children and youngsters caused anxiety partly because this in turn affected processes of ageing. The cultural logic of the practices that in the official discourse was distorted as "witchcraft beliefs" and accusations of children was verbalised as anxiety about who will educate (*dar formação*) and look after (*cuidar*) the younger generations whose birth was constructed as "illegitimate". Understanding the role played by religion in the process of decolonization means then to try to understand in what ways, after Independence, Christianity reconfigured popular perceptions and understandings of the postcolonial situation as "potential" for growth. To what extent, for instance, was a first post-Independence cohort of an indigenous Catholic clergy postcolonial? What was their perspective on "witchcraft" as a representation of the margins of the Portuguese language and Catholic religion in the aftermath of the post-Independence war? These men had learnt Catholicism through the Portuguese language after Independence: had they been colonised by their education or had they acquired mastery over the means for emancipation? After all, during colonialism, Catholicism and the Portuguese language gave access to "civilization" and in this way protected from the "savagery" of Africans living in the hinterland. And, after all, they themselves had been "abandoned" by their families to the care of the Catholic Church. Did they recognise themselves within the stereotype of "children accused of "witchcraft"?

One member of this priestly generation explained that the story of children accused of witchcraft reminded him of the story of Moses: like Moses, these children are abandoned by their families. And Moses' mother knew that the daughter of Pharaoh would see and look into the basket where the child had been put, and that she would take the child with her to the palace. Likewise, the parents of these children set their hopes upon the care of the Catholic Church as vehicle of the power and knowledge that produced "civilized" persons, and hoped for their return as adults armed with spiritual power. This perspective on "witchcraft accusations" as a strategy to access a powerful source of knowledge was very different from that of both government and episcopacy, but resembled cultural responses to Independence one or two generations earlier. Thus, this same priest recounted the story of his own initiation into Catholic priesthood in the early 1980s when he had decided to pursue his education at the Catholic seminar instead of the state school because the "religious" knowledge transmitted in the seminar was more powerful than the "atheist" knowledge transmitted through state schools. The former was passed on through books that could be assembled into "personal libraries", whereas the latter was a propaganda that could not be appropriated and personalised:

> [I ended up in the Seminary after] I had been expelled from school for having beaten up the director of the school ... because he said that religion had no value. It was 1st May 1982 and it was a Sunday. People went either to the rally or to church and I went to church. The rally meant to listen to political discourses in the governor's

49 Wilson in Gray, 1990: 69.
50 Peel, 2000: 166.

> palace. The following day at school the director called me priest to make himself worthy as communist [...] The education of priests depended on the Vatican, not on the Government, so during that time [the 1980s] the best libraries belonged to the seminars, and the Vatican requested through letters the respect of these conditions – classrooms, food, books – and each diocese had to procure what was necessary... Besides, each priest had a small library of his own.

The "religious" dimension of the knowledge transmitted in the Catholic seminar had to do with the links established with the environment, and it was these links that would be constitutive of a culturally meaningful personhood. For this reason, the one-party state could not achieve Independence as a new articulation between the realm of spiritual power and that of materiality. Its rejection of Christianity had apparently been understood as a denial of the existence of a "spiritual" realm, which could not be a meaningful representation of the wider context:

> The African is religious and always believes (acredita) in something or someone, and this clashes (choca) with the Marxist doctrine. Hence, the education of Angolans in Eastern Europe and Cuba did not reach their subconscious self. The Party in power had to catch a lift (apanhar boleia) from the Eastern Bloc, but was not convinced of its own ideology.

After Independence, Christian symbols, such as the crucifix, had become a source of legitimacy for opposing the post-Independence government, and post-Independence popular Christianity seems to have emerged from the inclusion of what until then had been considered un-Catholic practices. After the war, however, Christianity became the "sign" of citizenship and loyalty to the presidential regime as winner over and against an unjustified use of violence. And the more "pluralist" the religious scene, the stricter the demarcation between "proper" and "improper" Christian practices. Priests commented that people had become ashamed of wearing the crucifix but not tee-shirts with the face of the president or of "the dead Argentinean", referring to the face of Che Guevara. The redefinition of the boundary between the space of the Catholic Church and that of the State brought to the surface a boundary that was no longer between "civilised" and "natives", as it used to be during colonialism, or between "MPLA" and "UNITA", as it had been the case during the post-Independence war. The new boundary was between ranks within the post-war hierarchy between urban and rural residence and associated life style that in turn determined what counted as "proper" Christian practice, and what did not.

Yet, Catholic knowledge continued to be perceived as a resource of the spiritual power necessary for the production of culturally meaningful adults. The context created by the end of the post-Independence war seems to have been perceived as similar to that created by Independence for those who experienced this change at the margins of citizenship. The "logic" of witchcraft accusations seems to have been that of a popular imaginary according to which crossing the boundary between the "new" and "old" Christian spaces would be a source of spiritual power similar to conversion to Christianity at the beginning of the colonial era. Both Independence and the end of the post-Independence war were understood to make accessible the "new" space thus created in the favour of those children who by their place within the social structure were

in the process of becoming like "chiefs", or who showed signs of having "powerful souls in their bodies".[51]

The Loango coast (especially Cabinda and Western Zaire) has been the locus classicus of what 19th-century anthropologists called "fetishism" in the sense of a belief in the spiritual power of an object. This corresponded to the religion of the Bakongo that Portuguese missionaries of the 16th century called *feitiço* as a translation of nkisi (pl. minkisi). Later ethnographers-missionaries like Van Wing (1920s-1930s) contested this earlier translation holding the Bakongo did not attach the word *nkisi* to natural objects like trees or springs. The new idea was that the Bakongo lacked intellectual maturity and perceived the world like children, which led them to the moral error of idolatry.[52] But the distinction that mattered in this cultural context was not between "matter" and "spirit" but between "ordinary people" and "people with powerful souls"[53], and the latter were classified as "containers" that is, as *minkisi*.[54] And these container-people would produce ambivalent effects depending on where they learnt to use their power.[55] Thus, among the speakers of Kikongo, there was no categorical distinction between "people" and "objects", or between rituals for personal protection and rituals for the protection of the community as a whole.[56] On the other hand, this interrelatedness between magic, ancestors, and chiefship was lost in the categorical distinction made by Catholic missionaries of the 20th century between cult of ancestors and cult of fabricated objects. Moreover, from the 1880s onwards and with the incorporation of the Kongo Kingdom into the Portuguese administration through direct rule, the Kongo religion became seen by missionaries and colonial officials alike as "a unitary idolatrous phenomenon called 'fetishism', whose sinister promoter was the "witch doctor", "fetisher", or "sorcerer" (p. 180).

One should maintain the Loango Coast as spatial referent rather than the Kongo Kingdom or a Kikongo-speaking community. Moore and Vaughan for instance have argued that space is a more stable referential ground than changing political institutions and cultural identities, for orienting oneself in the cultures and societies of others. They also argue that contextualization involves a constant moving back and forth between various levels of representations, such as the household and the regional economy.[57] But, as I try to show in the first section of this essay, the Loango Coast was concealed in both official historiography and popular memory as a relevant, supra-national context for understanding cultural responses to Independence, and to the ending of the post-Independence war as a quest for spiritual power in Catholic knowledge beyond notions of ethnicity and chronological divisions between pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial political institutions. It is only within the context of this regional culture (instead of Lusophone Africa, the Atlantic, Southern Africa, or Western Africa) that crossing religious boundaries as a means for orienting themselves in changing environments becomes a significant domain of action for local populations.[58]

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51 MACGAFFEY, 1977: 178.
52 *Ibid.*: 172.
53 *Ibid.*: 178.
54 MACGAFFEY, 1977: 177.
55 *Ibid.*: 178.
56 *Ibid.*: 179.
57 MOORE & VAUGHAN, 1994: xiii.
58 *Ibid.*: xxiii.

This supra-national regional level was the cultural context of communication between those who "accused" children of "witchcraft" and the priests who "understood" the "logic" of these "accusations". Priests' understanding was that these "accusations" expressed the cultural expectation that after Independence the Catholic Church had become a place where to "animate" chiefs with the spirit of a chief. They recognised a similarity between the cultural expectations after the end of the post-Independence war and those after Independence when children sent to the Catholic seminar instead of the "atheist" state schools would be fabricated like a *nkisi.* But, after the end of the war as after Independence, the situation of communication was one in which the expectations of what the Catholic Church would offer in exchange for the service of children, were not in a dialogue with how the Catholic Church perceived this practice of "sending" children there to be in its service. The temporal and semantic framework in which children were "sent" to the Catholic Church and the framework in which the Catholic Church received them were not the same. Likewise, the relations in which Catholicism had been learnt after Independence as knowledge of how to be in the service of the hierarchy of the Church had been characterised by a "misunderstanding". This "misunderstanding" resulted from the relations of power and communication between Africans at the margins of the colonial state on the one hand and the understanding the Catholic Church had of the expectations of Christians in Africa on the other. It would further be a part of the subjecthood of a first post-Independence cohort of indigenous Catholic clergymen.

The role of the priest and the subjecthood of the priest were not only the product of the Catholic doctrine, but also of the interaction with the audience whose culture would no longer be demonised but accepted as a legitimate language of Christianity. The perception of the priest's audience and the understanding of his function would contribute to define that role, and this redefinition of the responsibility of the Catholic priest in the "margins" of the space of Christianity was part of the decolonization process in the sense of articulating a different perspective on and of Christianity, a new variant of Christianity. In postcolonial Southern Tanzania, for instance, the popular understanding of the role of the Catholic priest is not so much that of a mediator between God and the people but that of a distributor of Christian "medicines" or "substances" that are incorporated during and as part of the ritual process.[59] The priest is thus a medium of spiritual power within a chain that makes his body a container of "substances", which then become transposed into the bodies and minds of his audience.

The communication between the divinity and the populations is not reciprocal. In this cultural context, the spiritual and the material are not linked through words and abstract notions but through substances: thinking has a palpable quality as it were. Confession cannot take place because sins cannot be made into words and exchanged for forgiveness, as words are not "objects" that can be exchanged.[60] By contrast, the words of the priest, his reading of the Scripture and his commentary, are ritual artefacts: a condensation of Christian spiritual power that can be appropriated as "blessings".[61] The incorporation of these "objects" or "substances" in turn situates people within the spiritual geography of the Catholic Church and further in a worldwide community of Christians.[62]

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59 GREEN, 2003: 67.
60 GREEN, 2003: 66.
61 *Ibid.*: 67.
62 *Ibid.*: 68.

In a context like this, religion, as communicative practice between God and humans, is experienced as relations of contiguity rather than as relations of similarity: it is metonymic links that enable communication, not metaphoric ones. Thus, in contexts where colonial power consisted of the control of spirituality by means of the Catholic Church, Independence has perhaps been understood as the possibility of a new mode of communication with that spiritual power. It was not the doctrine of the Catholic Church but the knowledge of their audience acquired through performance, that enabled this clergy to understand the "logic" of "witchcraft accusations" as not being, precisely, about "witchcraft", but about a cultural understanding of the nature of their relation to the Church by those who had been in the margins of the colonial state, and who remained in the margins of the postcolonial state. Without "interpreters", this cultural imaginary is ineffective as means of decolonization. This interpretation on the other hand is a competence acquired by virtue of, rather than in spite of experience of the social dynamics of the post-Independence war within spaces of civilian life. It is this kind of competence that is lost in the implementation of "peace processes" such as in the case of programmes of structural adjustment. The latter impose ideas of culture as unchanging traditions and require the production of "cultural consultants" in line with this kind of ideology, defining the nature of knowledge and ignorance.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that as a process, decolonization should be studied in relation to colonization as a dialectical pair rather than as two successive stages in a linear chronological sequence. Colonization and decolonization are not only about changes at the level of the concrete reality but also at the level of how domains of "possibility" or "potentiality" are created. This involves the imaginary that mediates how subjects perceive themselves in relation to others, institutions, and the environment. They are two sides of one process, the dynamic of a political structure that is rooted in the history of a particular place, which is why the passage of time is not universally homogeneous because different cultural identities are the product of foundational events. Thus, looking at decolonization in relation to colonization brings forth the importance of "religion" as cultural construction of the boundary and link between what belongs to mundane perception and what belongs to the imagination. The imaginary side of "religion" is historical in the sense that it is organized by images, or stereotypes, which encode historical events but in ways that are only recognisable to their "insiders" of those events.

For this reason, I have suggested that it is perhaps more analytically productive to replace "chieftaincy" with "religion" for gaining a more nuanced understanding of processes of colonization and decolonization as communicative practices. Attention to the language used can provide a source of information about the nature of the links that exist between apparently incommensurable understandings, but language in turn requires contextualization. The cultural dynamic of change and continuity can be accessed by looking at how people establish links of referentiality with their environment under circumstances of major changes at various levels of a society and its institutions.

On the other hand, the context of such communicative practices is not necessarily shared by participants. The difference may be temporal but, again, not because some are more "developed" than others, but because the distance from or between events is

not the same across cultures and space. Further, the meta-level of the context of communication should not be conceptualised as temporal but as spatial: space is a more stable referent than political institutions or cultural identities. Thus, the Loango coast (rather than Lusophone Africa, Atlantic Africa, or Southern Africa) has been identified as a supra-national cultural region (and not only in economic terms). As such, it is the relevant cultural context for identifying the interrelated practices and meanings within the language used in post-war Luanda and Northern Angola, to redefine boundaries and relations of power between postcolonial identities, institutions, and the environment. In this context the formation of postcolonial identities requires the decolonization not only of the state apparatus but also of the Catholic Church as an international institution represented at the United Nations since 1967. Part of the decolonization process is therefore also a recognition by the Catholic Church of the memory of its expansion to those parts of the world that are now "margins" of a "globalized market".

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