Notes on a Disputed Process of Signification

The Practice of Communication in Spiritain Missions in the Central Highlands of Angola[1]

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Dieu n'a pas fini de pleurer après la traduction
de son nom alors même qu'il l'interdit.
(Derrida 1985)

The practice of communication in the mission from a relational perspective

This paper considers the interaction of the various agents involved in the context of the Spiritain missions in the Central Highlands of Angola; from the establishment of the first Catholic missions in the mid-19th century until the pre-Liberation War period (1961). With this purpose, the analysis focuses on Spiritain translations of Catholic doctrinal material into Umbundu, on collections of Umbundu oral genres translated into Portuguese and on ethnographic as well as historic records from the period. Based on these sources, the paper retraces the process of symbolic struggle between the agents, which resulted in the convention of meaning established in the mission. This convention was formed by indexing local ritual practices that fell under the rubric of "ancestor worship" to the Christian universe.

According to this theoretical stance, records were produced in the communication between the agents in the practice of their daily lives. The fact that the empirical material consists of written sources presents two important methodological issues: On the one hand, how to have access to practice

1 Translated by the author and proofread by Dean de Lucia.

2 The research on which this essay is based was funded by FAPESP.

based on documents; on the other hand, how to approach communication in the mission from a relational perspective given the weight of the missionary point of view in the constitution of records. Missionary translations – inevitably attached to the local mode of expression in Umbundu and to the meanings conveyed by vernacular categories – are considered to be a privileged source for grasping processes of symbolic struggle in the mission.

This is possible because missionary practice is marked by a quite recurrent procedure: searching for, finding, arguing, and producing similarity in the practice of evangelization. From then on, elements that have been made equivalent are considered to be equal. In the daily routine of evangelization, local categories are indexed to elements of the Christian universe according to whether it is possible or not to make the symbolic horizons of agents converge in practice. This does not mean, however, that missionaries are the only agents of indexation,[3] which occurs in the daily disputes among agents: missionaries, catechists, "sorcerers", "medicine men", catechumens, villages and station chiefs.[4] This essay focuses on the struggle between missionaries and "sorcerers", as expressed in the language of "ancestor worship" and "Christianism"; more specifically on the equivalence between *suku* or "God" established by these agents. Thus, the struggle for this classification helps us understand the indexation of codes that resulted in a convention of meaning that was never mentioned by any of the agents, but was crucial to the practice of communication in Spiritain missions among the Ovimbundu.[5]

Sharing codes

In missionary sources, the Christian God is translated as *suku*. This translation presupposes commensurability between the two categories, which

3 In *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, Sahlins (1985) proposes a notion of indexation that is methodologically similar to the one used here. The main analytical difference lies in the fact that the author refers the indexation of categories to an accommodation of cosmologies in interaction after contact. By considering indexation from a relational perspective and, therefore, from the perspective of the struggle between agents in practice, not of cosmologies, there is no need to reorganize a cultural system after change occurs because the latter has not been presupposed.

4 *Chefes de posto*.

5 This essay focuses exclusively on processes of dispute in the mission, a space that was evidently not isolated from the colonial context in which it was inserted. On the relation between Catholic missions and Portuguese colonialism, cf. Thomaz (2002), Péclard (1998), and Dulley (2008).

may be explained by the missionary view of human substantial unity and totality, on the one hand, and by the agents' need to find equivalents for their own categories in order to communicate. Thus, missionary efforts consisted of finding a channel of communication with a human essence, secured by the human bond with god. This essence, in turn, ratified the translatability of the various forms of human expression and, therefore, the possibility of understanding between all men. However, it is worth emphasizing that missionaries did not set out to overcome the dilemma of particularity in a systematic and conscious way, although this need was posed when missionaries perceived they would have to match the cultural specificities they observed to the universality of the human condition on which their catechetical and civilizational project was based. Here it is possible to think of the match between categories from the perspective of "orthopractical" communication as described by Nicola Gasbarro (2006: 93): Focusing on practice and aiming to situate the codes articulated for communication to occur evades the presupposition that human universality would have been systematized and cultural particularities would have been merely fit into it by missionaries. This standpoint makes it possible to think of the universal in a non-systematic and heterogeneous manner, since it suggests no contradiction in the practical action of subjects who, although oriented by the presupposition of universality, did not consider it a constraint to the indexation they carried out.

The proposed approach makes it possible to think of practice as a conglomerate of particles not organized into a coherent system. Therefore, let us take a closer look at the translation issue, which acquires methodological importance since it allows thinking of the communication established between the agents. Nevertheless, although missionaries considered translation a tool to make senses compatible and make themselves understood by those they intended to convert, the analysis approaches it as a negotiation of communication codes in practice, since it does not intend to focus on the effectiveness of the convincement intended by the missionaries. In this sense, communication does not necessarily presuppose intelligibility, but is the condition of possibility of interaction.

Missionary texts result from the interaction, negotiation, and communication that took place in the mission based on how agents conceived each other's alterity. Concerning sources, the predominance of the missionary point of view is manifest: They were responsible for the records and wrote them according to the logic of what was required by their project. However, sources, if examined carefully, make it possible to think of something other than how missionaries viewed this "other" or how local populations responded to or resisted their foreign presence. Texts are first the product of a relation materialized in historic records. The challenge is, therefore, to attempt a processual approach to an object that is presented as static. From this perspective, "missionaries" and "the Ovimbundu" may not be separated unequivocally in the relation between the agents under the risk of losing track of the complexity that characterized interaction. The subjects involved in it built the relation and were built by it; to this extent, they acted in a context that overlapped individual interests and constrained the forms of signification at stake. In this sense, it is not possible to examine available sources searching for the "missionary" or the "native" standpoint; one should inquire into the relation that built the agents' perspectives and was built by them, in a dialectical process of which the available records are a picture. It is a picture of a given moment in the construction of meaning that necessarily takes place in practice, based on the successful and failed strategies of agents who, in a given context, needed to deal with what is presented to them as "the other' and find a place for that in their framework of perception of the world.

In the stimulating work entitled *Contracting Colonialism. Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Vicente Rafael (1988) affirms that the conversion of the Tagalog by Spanish Catholic missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries was paradoxically possible both in spite and because of the failure of missionary translation. This way of presenting the issue draws attention to the fact that the translation process implies submission to the conditions of speech and behavior imposed by the other's language (and language should be understood in a broad sense here):

> *Translation is then a matter of first discerning the differences between and within social codes and then of seeing the possibility of getting across those differences. To do so is to succeed in communicating, that is, in recognizing and being recognized within the intelligible limits of a linguistic and social order. Hence, if translation takes place at all, it must do so within a context of expectation: that in return for one's submission, one gets back the other's acknowledgment of the value of one's words and behavior. In this way, one finds for oneself a place on the social map.* (Rafael 1988: 210)

In order to communicate, missionaries had to submit themselves to the logic of the vernacular in an attempt to submit it to the logic of their own language. As a consequence, the threat of being engulfed by the logic of the vernacular when forming sentences and using Umbundu terms was posed. And when missionaries tried to avoid this possibility by vernacularizing Portuguese words, they risked being misinterpreted by potential converts because, although words would sound similar phonetically to the vernacular,, there was no guarantee that their meaning would be understood as intended. The vernacularization of terms imbued with doctrinal significance was a typical example of this type of constraint. Spiritains resorted to the Umbundization of some of these Portuguese terms when translating catechisms and liturgies into Umbundu. The following terms be highlighted: *opekalu* (sin), *okilisitãwu* (Christian), *ombatisimu* (baptism), *osakalamendu* (sacrament), *ovasentiu* (heathen [in Portuguese: *gentio*]) (Lecomte 1899; 1937). This procedure – the initial purpose of which was to preserve the meaning of terms from the Christian doctrine by avoiding charging them with the meanings inherent to the Ovimbundu symbolic universe in the process of translation – could not be conducted without taking into account the rules of Umbundu phonetics, which determine, for example, that an "o" be added to the beginning of vernacularized terms and that every "r", absent from the Umbundu phonetic system, be replaced by an "l." Moreover, if keeping Christian terms closer to Portuguese aimed to avoid undue interpretations, it posed the possibility of them being either assigned new meanings based on acoustic similarities with other terms in the vernacular or understood at first as signifiers without referents, making it possible to add any meaning to the semantic void created within the discourse.[6] This was one of the possible

6 Umbundization of Portuguese also implies the establishment of a linguistic hierarchy in which Portuguese had a higher status; vernacularization, carried out with the purpose of retaining the doctrine's "original" meaning, carries with it the implicit judgment that the vernacular does not contain, in its form of expression, the possibility of conveying the meanings found in the Portuguese language. The terms inserted into the vernacular seem to emanate from an external and superior source, which made it possible to determine that new elements should be incorporated to the Umbundu linguistic repertoire. Such linguistic hierarchy is homologous with the hierarchy established by evangelization concerning "Christian" and "indigenous" "beliefs." Koren, for instance, a Spiritain missionary and historian of missions, states the following: "*Quand après un pénible travail, les pères parvenaient enfin à maîtriser une langue, ils étaient souvent désappointés par sa pauvreté, réelle ou apparente. Bien qu'adaptée aux simples besoins de la vie concrète, elle semblait manquer de termes et de notions qu'ils considéraient comme nécessaires pour la transmission de la foi et de la pensée chrétienne. Ainsi leur tâche linguistique exigeait plus que le parler courant. Ils avaient aussi à travailler à l'unification de plusieurs dialectes en une seule langue, à l'extension de certaines langues à un domaine plus étendu, (…) et surtout à l'enrichissement de ces langues au*

ways to articulate categories pertaining to different codes with the creation of a new convention of meaning as a result.

Yet other concepts of the Christian doctrine inevitably had to be translated. This is the case, for example, of the term chosen as a translation for "God": *suku*. The apparent absence of terms in Umbundu to express all Christian concepts clearly due to the semantic gap between the two languages, perceived by missionaries in the process of translation, already indicated the difficulty of conversion based on faith, indispensable from the missionary perspective. Umbundization of Portuguese words associated with the manifest possibility of semantic slips in translations of doctrinal material into the vernacular poses the issue of their inevitable incompleteness in terms of equivalence for the agents responsible for the conceptual transfer in translations. If this were not the case, they would have looked for synonyms for all Portuguese terms in the vernacular. The partial impossibility of translation questioned the possibility of conversion. The importance of translation for the missionary project is due to the fact that the degree of conformity with which it could be carried out would determine either the success or the failure of the evangelization project, which accounts for its central role in missionary undertakings– especially concerning missionaries.[7]

It is worth emphasizing that the degree of effectiveness of conversion was an issue only for the agents involved in the process. It is not an issue for the anthropologist, who is not supposed to determine to what extent the Ovimbundu were converted by Spiritain missionaries, but to understand what codes were articulated to make mutual understanding possible in the process of communication. In this sense, not much would be gained by using concepts that regard this process of symbolic construction as a misunderstanding, as is the case of the concept of "*mistranslation*" proposed by Rafael

moyen de mots ou de concepts inconnus jusque-là.' (Koren 1982: 502)

7 Missionary concern for the process of translation is an old issue. Theological debates on the issue date back to the first translations of the Bible and to the Council of Trent, having gained momentum when the Jesuits arrived in America in the 16th century. Although quite opposite views existed about how to do a translation, the fundamental opposition occurred between priests with field experience, who advocated the need to bridge the gaps between the universe they viewed as radically different and their own; and theologists, more distant from missionary practice, for whom the use of vernacular terms to express core elements of the Christian doctrine would lead to unacceptable contamination. In practice, a compromise between both positions was usually adopted, and the majority of the terms considered essential were kept in the European language; others were translated when found necessary. Choices were made in context (Agnolin 2006).

(1988), of Gruzinski's (1988) interpretation of the communication between missionaries and Amerindians as a "*malentendu*", and of MacGaffey's "dialogues of the deaf" (1994). Such an interpretive stance supposes the existence of a correct way of understanding, besides suggesting that the anthropologist is the only one who is capable of distinguishing who understood whom. It would be more interesting to suppose that semantic slips undoubtedly occurred in this dispute between different symbolic universes – and here I refer to symbolic struggle as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (2007). However, although the different meanings agents attributed to alterity led to the association of codes that enabled communication, these meanings may not be fully grasped by examining available records. Thus, translation analysis focuses on codes in order to have access to practice, to the agents' daily need to communicate when they share the space of the mission. Despite the missionary attempt to extend translation to the psychic sphere of "*indígenas*"[8] and thus create a new subjective grammar in line with the presuppositions of the Christian doctrine (Agnolin 2006), the analysis would gain more by focusing on the agents' practice and thinking of it in terms of the constitution of strategies than by trying to apprehend cosmological meanings behind these codes.

This is because although evangelization is based on preaching and on exhortations for "*indígenas*" to behave and feel a given way, the measure of the success of evangelization is, in principle, the habits of "converts". Missionaries gauge the "success" or "failure" of conversion by considering the behavior of "*indígenas*". Similarly, "Christians" behave in a given way based on the representation they have of the missionary proposal and on the response they intend to give it. Thus, what is being suggested is that when agents are faced with alterity, the negotiation of codes is performatic: They act in a given way based on the representation they have of others and on the idea they have of the other's representation of them. Moreover, by behaving in a certain way, agents intend to be understood in a given manner (Bourdieu 1972). Material and symbolic relations in the context of the mission are based upon this play of images, in which all agents play an active role. Thus,

8 „"*Indígenas*" was the legal category adopted by Portuguese colonial legislation to refer to native populations inhabiting Portuguese territories overseas. It was also adopted by the missionaries of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. I evidently do not adopt this classification in my analysis. Whenever the term appears, it refers to the category used by the agents themselves. On *indigenato*, cf. Thomaz (2002); on the relation between *indigenato* and Catholic missions, cf. Dulley (2008).

meaning is not to be found in the agents themselves, but in the relationship that is established between them; to put it differently, meaning is produced in the relational context in which communication is developed. Nothing is static in this situation: The context influences the agents who, in turn, transform the very context in which they are inserted based on their interrelations. Access to meaning is gained more from the context than from discourse, as it is predominantly perceived in performance.

When the analysis focuses on practice, the code appears as a privileged locus for agents to build meanings. However, it is important to emphasize that the convergence established between the agents and expressed in these "shared codes" (Pompa 2003; Montero 2006) occurs at the level of practices, not of perspectives. Although the code needs to be the same in order to operate in practice, its meaning can be different for the various agents. Sharing codes creates the conditions of possibility for communicative practice to occur, as the code is a point of convergence for different perspectives. An analysis that considers the convergence of codes is in a position to dispense with posing the question of whether agents (mis)understood each other; instead, it can make an effort to understand how communication became effective in practice. Thus, the meaning of shared codes may be grasped and analyzed only from the perspective of strategy, not of intentionality.

In the process of code negotiation, elements in interaction are exactly those that make sense for related agents, although they may not necessarily make the same sense for each of them (Montero 2006: 28). Meanings do not need to be the same for every agent. Their equivalence at the level of representation becomes a problem only as practice reveals incongruities. Translation is necessary for communication, but the impossibility of its completeness is experienced by agents in practice when they find out, for example, that certain practices of given agents conflict with certain representations related to some of the practices of others. The (missionary) task of conversion aims, therefore, to make the practices and representations of "*indígenas*" converge with the Christian universality of the human (Montero 1996), which poses the possibility of such an undertaking. This is why the missionary project – the paradox of which is its intention to convey a "subjective grammar" – is oriented by the method of successful and failed strategies: It is when it becomes visible, in practice, that the meaning understood by the "*indígenas*" does not correspond to missionaries' intention that the need to revise the chosen translation is posed. This explains, for example, the growing Umbundization of Portuguese terms in Spiritain catechisms and gospels: The initial option for translating some terms based on the establishment of a semantic equivalence between the Portuguese and the vernacular was, in some cases, reviewed and replaced by the Umbundization of a Portuguese term. This is the case for the term "sin", initially translated as *ekandu* (Lecomte 1899) and gradually replaced by *opekalu* (e.g. Alves 1954), as well as of "Holy Spirit", initially translated as *Omwenho Ieyelo*[9] (Lecomte 1899) and almost completely replaced by *Espilitu Santu* (e.g. Lecomte 1934; Alves 1954) in subsequent years.

Suku onganga

As mentioned above, the need to translate the Christian doctrine compelled missionaries to find synonyms for its concepts. In the case of the translation for the word God, *suku*, it is interesting to observe how it refers, in missionary writings, to the symbolic struggle between the latter and the *ovimbanda* and *olonganga*[10], "sorcerers" representing the so-called traditional power. They were opposed by missionaries because they threatened evangelization. Let us see how these translations become imbricated and set up the field of symbolic struggle between these agents. In this struggle, "ancestor worship" is, to the eyes of missionaries, the main organizer of local notions of "God", "sorcery", "spirit", and so on. Thus, it would be necessary to understand it in order to subsume it to "Christian religiosity." The central character of these

9 The meaning of these replacements will not be considered here. However, it is interesting to note that *omwenho ieyelo* suggests a conception of the Ovimbundu as close to the universe of colonizers (cf. Dulley 2008, chapters 1 and 2). *Omwenho* would be, according to missionary literature at the time, the term in Umbundu for what Tempels, a Protestant missionary working in the Belgian Congo, named "vital force", supposedly the core element to understand "Bantu" cosmology. For Tempels, the "principle of vital force" would guide every "Bantu" conception of life and would be reated to "ancestor worship" to the extent that ancestors would be the providers of the quantum of vital energy needed by the living (Tempels 1945; Kagame 1976). In Spiritain translations, *omwenho* appears as "blow", "life" or "vital energy" (e.g. Alves 1954). *Ieyelo*, in turn, is translated either as "white" or ""sacred" (e.g. Valente 1973). Thus, missionary intention to associate the "sacredness" of this religiosity to the "white" element becomes clear. Moreover, it is possible to note that this indexation made sense until a given moment, but then had to be replaced by another; the Umbundization of *Espilitu Santu*, for reasons that may not be deduced from the records.

10 *Ovimbanda* is the plural of *ochimbanda*. *Olonganga* is the plural of *onganga*. The semantic implications of the terms will be considered in more detail later on.

practices and their potentiality as a means of access to Christianism by these populations appears not only in Catholic, but also in Protestant missionary records (Scott 1959; Ennis 1962).

This concern for "ancestor worship" is expressed in Estermann's statement on "Bantu sorcerers"[11], privileged agents of the intermediation between the world of the living and the world of the dead, just like the missionaries. Estermann was a Spiritain missionary important both in the congregation and in the scientific environment of his time.

> *Il est indéniable que l'influence de ces derniers est encore énorme dans tout ce groupe bantou et il ne sera pas déplacé de nous arrêter un peu à ces représentants qualifiés du paganisme africain dont ils constitueront encore longtemps peut-être le suprême rempart.* (Estermann 1934)

The excerpt reveals the extent of the influence missionaries attributed to these agents, as well as the hardly encouraging expectation that this power would persist for a long time. In the article quoted, as in many others, Estermann and Valente – the Congregation's main author of bilingual collections of elements of oral expression, dictionaries, and grammars in Umbundu and Portuguese – describe the activities of these "sorcerers" and the related "beliefs" of "*indígenas*" in detail. It was truly surprising to learn that the idea of God was associated with "sorcerers" in most of its occurrences both in the collections of proverbs and fables, and in ethnographic texts. Estermann is concerned with the action of "sorcerers" in the entire "Bantu" group (Estermann 1983), while Valente describes the functions and ritual practices of the various types of *ovimbanda* in detail (Valente 1973). Both provide a detailed list of the types of existing "sorcerers", "spirits", and "charms" (e.g. Valente 1973: 426-428), at a level of detail that is reproduced in their exhortations to "*indígenas*" in catechisms. In his *Instrucção aos catequistas* [*Instruction to Catechists*], Alves admonishes catechists to exert control over the "superstitious beliefs and practices" of their catechumens:

> Catechists shall not allow their catechumens to invoke spirits or offer them sacrifices. You shall not agree to divining, healing by improper means or evil

11 There is no intention to share implicitly the view that there is something that could be called a "Bantu" culture or cosmology. The term is used merely because it is thus used by missionaries and also by a significant number of scholars.

> deeds of any sort. Fight all superstitious beliefs and practices to eliminate such heathen customs; invite those who are married to build houses near the chapel, which shall be located between the heathen and the Christian population both to divide them and to be accessible to all. (Alves 1954)

In Lecomte's catechism, the same level of detail of ethnographies is reproduced in his admonitions to catechumens concerning practices related to "ancestor worship": The excerpt below is an excellent example of how problems were raised by missionaries and allows the elements to be viewed as they relate to "ancestor worship":

ELONGISO III
LESSON III

> * Efendo nhe?
> *Okutumbangiya Suku, okufenda, okulivondela kokuae lokuuvumbila, momo otchime tchietu uatupanga.*
> * What is Religion or worship?
> It is to pay God the honors and the reverence we owe him for being the creator and Supreme Lord of all things.
>
> ** Velie vakamba efendo?*
> *Ava valukisa Suku tchimue tchiñgi.*
> *Ava vatava viokovilulu lumbanda uâliapu.*
> *Ava vasumba octhîla tchiovimbundu louima.*
> *Ava vatomba via Suku, levumbilo liae.*
> *Ava valilula otchîla tchia Suku.*
> * What are the sins against Religion?
> They are idolatry, that is, worshiping a creature.
> Superstition, the worship of the dead, and magic arts.
> The vain observance of omens and certain prohibitions.
> Sacrilege or profanation of sacred things.
> Irreligion or despise for God and His worship.
>
> *Viokovilulu vipi?*
> *Okulikutilila, okusembika, okuipae ohutu, letchi tchiose thiokusakuisa ovilulu.*
> What is superstitious worship of the dead?
> The various practices, ceremonies, and offerings of victims to the honor

of the dead with the purpose of getting rid of the evil influence that is attributed to them.

Umbanda uâliapu umbanda upi?
Umbanda uâliapu: âuanga, okuloua, okuliangula, okutaha, lokulimbingila lokunhua ombulungu.
What is magic art?
Evil deeds and sortileges, the various types of divination, evocation of the dead, the poison ordeal, etc.

Evi viose kaviatundile ku Suku?
Ndati, viatunda kâliapu, va vayongia omanu kosiahulu otchio vatutuale vondalu.
Do not these practices come from God?
No, they come from the devil, who thus cheated ancestors to lure men to hell.

Evi viokusakuisa kaviuako?
Kuli ovihemba viotchili viokusakuisa uvela; puãi etchi tchiokusakuisa âuanga lovilulu katchiuako.
Are remedies illicit?
There are some true remedies to heal diseases; however, the remedies for evil deeds and souls from the other world are prohibited.

Ovilulu lâuanga kavilingi tchimue?
Ndati, kavilingi tchimue, té âliapu; lâliapu vo, u olisole la Suku kakavatile usumba; okuvela lokufa kuomanu Suku muele eie otchisea.
Cannot we be harmed by souls and evil deeds?
No, not even the devil can harm us without God's explicit permission; a good Christian should never fear the devil; we know that our lives are only in the hands of God.

** Etchi tchiokutaha katchiuako?*
Ndati, kuli tchimue tchiokuliañga ñgõ, kuli tchimue tchiâliapu.
* Is divining not licit?
No, some of these practices are merely deceitful, others are the devil's work.

> *Umbanda uukongo, lu uongiolele, lu uongiau, lu uokupula ombela hauotchiliko?*
> *Ndati, umbanda uatchio uose uokilikemba ñgõ hale uâliapu.*
> Is it not legitimate to use objects to bring luck in hunting, business, harvesting, and to make or maintain the rain?
> No, they are reprehensible superstitions, vulgar frauds or satanic practices.
>
> *Etchi tchiokutchila konambi lokusikila oloñgoma, levi viondombokua kaviaposokele?*
> *Ndati, viañgõ, viaviha; ovakilisitão kavakavilinge.*
> Are not celebrations, dances, drum playing, and the killing of victims on the occasion of death acceptable customs?
> No, all that is reprehensible; a Christian may not attend them. (Lecomte 1899: 30-33) (author's translation)

The lesson above is not prescriptive, but prohibitive, as it aims to inform catechumens of all the practices that are to be avoided because they are contrary to the conduct of a "good Christian". However, the translation appropriates elements of the universe of the same "ancestor worship": *Efendo*, for instance, is translated by missionaries as "religion or worship", but is the same term used by the Ovimbundu which they define as "heathens" when they "worship" these very "ancestors". As will become clear later on, the distinction between "godly practices" and "satanic practices" in catechisms, as may be observed above, contributed to the catechumens' notion that they should also worship the "devil". As described in Berger's ethnographic work (1979), the devil was responsible for controlling the ancestors they worshiped. Concerning "spirits", Valente states the following about the conception of *indígenas*:

> These spirits were created directly by God; some were chosen as members of God's court and were dedicated to His service, and others descended to Earth to live with men.
> As the "sorcerer's" attitude has special characteristics, a different one in each case, there is a proper and precise term for each of them; the main ones are named: *okulembula* (consolation), *okufeliya* (placation and consecration),

okulikutilila (supplication and request for protection), *okusembika* (fulfillment and release from commitments). (Valente 1973: 411) (author's translation)

The excerpt above indicates two different elements: The first, concerning the translation of terms, reveals other missionary appropriations of terms they use in their own descriptions of "ancestor worship" in doctrinal writings: *okulembuka*, for instance, is translated as "to sanctify", in the context of "keeping Sundays holy and sanctifying God" in the catechism; *okufeliya* is translated as "to pray"; *esembikilo*, which has the same root as *okusembika*, indicates the sacrifice of the mass made to the honor of Jesus (Lecomte 1899; 1934). Thus, the incorporation of what is presented in ethnographies as "superstitions" to the very doctrinal material of Spiritains is easily observable.

The second interesting element that may be apprehended from the quotation above is the presence of the "*feiticista*" and his inevitable association with "ancestor worship" – considering that "*feiticista*" was the generic designation for the various types of "medicine men" and "sorcerers", usually subsumed into the categories of *ochimbanda* and *onganga* in missionary records. Valente's work allows grasping the symbolic struggle between Spiritain missionaries and those they considered to be the legitimate representatives of Ovimbundu traditional power. The analysis below will try to offer a brief demonstration of the possibility of making sense of the struggle for influence between these agents.

Let us consider the two "proverbs" below as examples:

I - *Suku akwechye, imbanda vilipande.*
God has released you, let the sorcerers know this.
(Remedies are worth nothing without God's will). (Valente 1964: 53)

II - *Suku onganga.*
God is a sorcerer.
(God, author of all wonders, knows everything and can do everything).
Nb.: There is no agreement in these godly attributes, which indicates the complete unity of the name and its determiner. (*ibidem*: 15. The note is to be found in the original.) (author's translation)

Unlike Spanish missionaries, who historically made the choice not to translate "God", *suku* became the usual translation for it in Umbundu. This translation dates back to the first missionary writings and was also used by

Protestant missionaries (e.g. Sanders and Fay 1885: 15) constantly throughout the whole evangelization process. There is no consensus concerning the "original" meaning of the term *suku*, neither is this the focus of interest here, as has already been stated above.[12] Once again, the focus is on the crystallization of practice that is offered in the records. There is a lengthy discussion on whether the "Bantu" (and Ovimbundu) divine creator would be distant and indifferent to the lives of humans or, to the contrary, omnipresent and omniscient like the Christian God. The point of view usually sustained by Spiritains is that "Bantu" religion is characterized by what Estermann terms "dim monotheism and very lively ancestor worship" (Estermann 1983: 182), which would pose the possibility of rescuing its fundamental monotheism and eradicating "ancestor worship", considered a degeneration of the monotheistic tendency of the human being. This concept of God is to be found especially in "proverbs" and "fables": "from what may be called the early literature of these peoples that has been preserved in proverbs and certain ritual invocations, it seems that it is possible to conclude that these Bantu used to have a more perfect concept of this Supreme Being and Creator in former times". (*ibidem*: 28)

12 Although it is not the purpose here to recover the "original meaning" of the term *suku*, it is worth mentioning an account by Estermann on missionary setbacks when trying to find a translation for the Christian idea of God among the Herero, inhabitants to the South of the Central Highlands. The account is even more interesting considering that evangelization among populations south of Angola was closely related to the same effort among the Ovimbundu: "Looking for a term to mean God, the [Protestant] missionaries judged to have found it in the word Mukuru. Etymologically, it means elder, ancient, and it was used to name the spirit of an ancestor, more particularly that of a soba. It did not take long for one of the missionaries to realize the misunderstanding. When he threatened an old seculo with God's (Mukuru) punishments, the elder exclaimed: Am I not the Mukuru of my subjects? Furiously, the elder chased the missionary away from the circle formed by his huts. However, missionaries had noticed that the Herero had used the compound noun Kalunga-Ndyambi to indicate a mysterious being. When a missionary asked an elder who was Kalunga-Ndyambi, the answer clarified all his doubts: "It is the one you call Mukuru." It is worth noting that the term Mukuru, which had already been repeated so many times in catechisms and was published in many doctrinal works, prevailed against the ancient and authentic Western Bantu term: Kalunga-Ndyambi. But what is the idea that underlies these terms, Nzambi, Kalunga or Huku? What is the semantics of these phonemes? There is not the slightest doubt that it is the idea of a Supreme Being, personal and spiritual, the Creator of Heavens and the Earth, who is good but does not care about the well-being of mortals". (Estermann 1983:306-307) The long quotation reveals a curious moment in the negotiation between the agents concerning the establishment of the translation for "God": It makes the central character of ancestors clear both for missionaries and local agents. The seculo's anger in face of the missionary's attitude is also manifested and reveals the misunderstanding. Missionary obstinacy to find an equivalent for the Christian "God" in the local symbolic universe is also displayed. It is finally found in the terms *nzambi*, *kalunga* or *huku*, whose equivalent in Umbundu, *suku*, will be addressesd later on.

Yet the Protestant version is less optimistic. The entry for *suku* in the work of Ennis, a Protestant missionary among the Ovimbundu, states:

> *Suku (soo-koo). The Ovimbundu are, by religion, ancestor worshipers, and apparently they have more than one god. There is no sure evidence that there is one Supreme God, nor the personal name of any god. The word suku appears to be another form of kuku, which means "great-grandfather". In naming a human ancestor, suku is not used in place of kuku. There are indications that a deified ancestor to whom prayers are made is looked upon as an advocate before a higher power.* (Ennis 1962: 316)

In the introduction to his collection of proverbs, Valente makes an etymological exposure, rather recurrent in his writings, with the purpose of thinking of the conception of god of "*indígenas*" and explaining how it already contained, even if in germ, the fundamental elements which, if correctly fostered, would make it possible to evangelize the speakers of this language. "The primitive, but philosophical concept of the nature of GOD" (Valente 1964: 12) of the "Bundo[13]" makes it possible to explain how this "mentality (...), considered to be primitive, may be perfectly introduced to religion" (*ibidem*: 16). First of all, Valente mentions the interjection *Suku!*, the manifestation of a "spontaneous feeling of the soul", the meaning of which would be TO COME OUT, TO UNBOSOM (...), to ORIGINATE from the interior, from an INTIMACY that exists, that the heart feels but does not reach". The term *esuku* is the following in the list of words etymologically related to *suku*, "the core of plants, the HEART of trees, the MARROW of bones, the sap that feeds and gives life to the plant. Therefore it also means interior whisper, subtle sound" (*ibidem*: 12). Then comes *ochisuku*, "THICKET, GROVE, THICK WOOD, the interior of which is now closed and, therefore, unknown". This is the missionary's conclusion:

> The ideas arising from the interjection and the two nouns would lead one to condense them in the proper noun and, based on it, conceive that: SUKU is what REMAINS CLOSED to the man, an IMPENETRABLE BEING by NATURE. And as the UNCREATED is reached from what is created, GOD is the SPIRIT THAT MASTERS the HEART of WOODS, CREATOR and FOOD of LIFE, whose existence is known, but not seen by the man. Just like "suco" [juice] in

13 Missionary term for "Ovimbundu".

> Portuguese, so that the abstract is reached from the concrete.
> Suco [juice], life of the plants and God, in Bundo Suku, author of this life, in the trees, in the man, and in the Universe. (ibidem: 13) (author's translation)

The entire argumentation thus intends to have this spark be lit by missions in order to lead the "Bundo" to the "true faith" explicit in Umbundu etymology – as it is viewed as something that reveals the deepest layers of the "mentality of *indígenas*"– in the customs described by proverbs, and in the attitude of the "Bundo" concerning the idea they have of God. Moreover, not only their conception of god, but also their willingness to be humble and subservient, considered necessary for one to be a good Christian, was already contained in the etymology of the word, considered an equivalent to "God":

> Man's relations to GOD are expressed in the derivatives of this word SUKU. (...)
> SUKA – Root of the verb OKU-SUKA, in the action of "NOT HAVING, LACKING, NEEDY."
> E-SUKE – The needy, the destitute.
> U-SUKE – Destitution.
> E-SUKO – Need, privation, lack of...
> The moral sense is more present in these derivatives, as there is a proper or particular term for each of the manifestations of material deprivation. (*ibidem*: 13)

Valente considers speakers of this language to be inherently needy of God and, by extension, of missionary intervention. The missionary "*don de soi*", abnegation, and sacrifice would, therefore, be surely welcome by the manifest "indigence" of these "*indígenas*", whose "mentality" would be most deeply expressed by the etymological meanings of the idea of God. Thus, Valente finds a linguistic echo for his willingness to evangelize and for the very charisma of the congregation to which he belongs, dedicated to the service of the "poor" and "abandoned" Africans (Bouchard 1967).

In the two proverbs above, Valente's attempt to make the local idea of God equivalent to that of Christians is manifest. For Valente, this conception was not at all incompatible with the missionary project although the "*indígenas* had been "[involved] in so much sorcery" before the "propagation of faith" (Valente 1964: 12). Its compatibility was, indeed, a premise for the project to be accomplishable. Indeed, it is noteworthy that this same proverb is still used by the inhabitants of the Central Highlands, already "completely Christianized" from the missionary perspective, which may be considered another indication that the equivalence made sense for all agents involved.

Considering the obstacle the so-called "sorcerers" posed to the catechizing and civilizational undertaking of the Catholic Church and the Portuguese government, as well as their importance for the organization of the society to which they belonged, in which they acted – and to a great extent still act – as medicine men and intermediaries between the world of the living and the world of the dead, the relative absence of proverbs referring to these figures in the collection stands out. The two proverbs quoted above are among the very few that mention the existence of "sorcerers", and they do it in a very specific context: under the subtitle "Common Proverbs Referring to God" (*ibidem*: 14). It is in relation to the "Bundo" concept of God, therefore, that the *ovimbanda* and *olonganga* are mentioned by Valente. The missionary affirms that many of the proverbs are "particular" to the Ovimbundu and others are "assimilated", but he makes no distinction about the category into which each proverb would fit. Nevertheless, his comments indicate either the success of catechization or an intrinsic inclination of the Ovimbundu to monotheism even before missionary presence, both hypotheses are favorable to the catechetical undertaking.

Out of context, the proverbs quoted could lead one to suppose a contradiction in the meaning assigned by missionaries to the relation between God (*suku*) and the "sorcerers" (*ochimbanda* and *onganga*). In the first proverb, the category of the "sorcerer" seems to be used in opposition to God, who would supposedly have released the Ovimbundu – who, after being incorporated into the Christian faith, would repudiate "sorcerers" –, while the second proverb makes the *onganga* equivalent to God. It is necessary to think of the context of production of the work to understand this apparent paradox, according to which one "sorcerer" may be equivalent to God and not the other, while equivalence is made exactly with the "sorcerer" that is capable of having a disjunctive effect on the community.

Valente's translation for the first proverb is very distant from the meaning it would probably have for a speaker of Umbundu. *Akwechye* comes from the verb *okwecha* and means "to leave" in the sense of "to abandon". A more literal translation for the first proverb could be either "may God leave you and sorcerers boast" or "sorcerers shall show what they are capable of when God leaves you." However, although the meaning attributed to the proverb by Valente's translation is extremely distant from a more literal translation, his comments in parentheses fit both translations and indicate the *ovimbanda*'s helplessness in face of God who, according to the missionary's explanation to the second proverb presented, "knows everything and can do everything". The *ochimbanda*'s knowledge would therefore be worth nothing were it not for the Christian God's will that healing take place. To understand the reason why the missionaries appropriated the semantic properties of the *onganga* and placed the Christian God more distant from the *ochimbanda*, it is necessary to consider the role of each of these "sorcerers" in the local symbolic universe.

The figure of the *ochimbanda* is related to the use made of his power to heal physical or psychological diseases. He conveys the idea of a medicine man committed to the community's well-being, concerned about the reestablishment of social balance. A possible translation for *ochimbanda* would be "medicine man", for his knowledge focuses more on issues that are of the community's interest, such as divination techniques to find the causes of death or prepare remedies for the sick. His efficiency depends on being consulted: He needs to be present to heal. The *onganga*, on the other hand, is a more ambiguous figure, imbued with power to practice magic in the disrupting sense of the term. He is frequently feared for being capable of influencing the course of events so as to cause negative effects on a given person or the whole group. He may even do so from a distance. He lives on the outskirts of society. *Grosso modo*, *ochimbanda* could be translated as medicine man and *onganga* as sorcerer in order to make the opposition explicit, although the respective semantic fields sometimes overlap and an *ochimbanda* is always a potential *onganga*. Missionary translations themselves are ambiguous in this respect.

By choosing an Umbundu term – *suku* – to convey the idea of the Christian sole, omnipotent, and omniscient God, missionaries opened way for a semantic slip between the translations. The choice allowed the indexation of codes in practice: While proper names associate a pure signifier to a singular being and are ultimately untranslatable (but also inapprehensible at first), common names indicate the general character of a sense (Derrida 1985: 1). Therefore, the translation of God as *suku* places this category on the blurred line that separates generality from uniqueness. Paradoxically, this choice implies both the possibility of "degeneration" of the doctrine – there is a risk of relating the idea of divinity to something undesirable within the symbolic universe of those to be evangelized – and a horizon of translatability for an idea of God that shares Christian attributes. A similar risk is implicitly affirmed by Estermann when he vehemently opposes Hambly's (1934) statement that he "would not have found such a perfect concept in a religious tribe such as that of the Mbundo of the Highlands of Huambo. Under the title of 'Supreme Being', [Hambly] says: Suku is the name of the most important deceased mentioned by the Mbundo" (Estermann 1983: 307).

Berger's ethnography – although not mentioned by Spiritains because it was published afterwards – also associates the idea of *suku* to the "sorcery" of both *ovimbanda* and *olonganga*. Berger presents the following definition for *suku*:

> *suku*: the Great, the Powerful: Umbundu designation for God, considered to be the monotheistic Creator and protector, Lord over life and death that calls the good to him according to their actions in life and punishes the bad in his fire, guarded by *onganga yinene*, the first evil person and the friend of everything evil. (Berger 1979: 344, author's translation)

In the narratives of elders collected in the 1970's and translated from Umbundu into German by Berger, *suku* has various attributes: Besides having created all men and everything on Earth, he had the power to decide whether a couple would have children or not and whether the children would be healthy. When he allowed a child to be healthy he would send him a good "spirit". In case he did not, he would send an evil "spirit" of the *onganga* to prevent the couple from having children. *Suku* would also have given men a plant, *uti ua-suku*, which "embraces other plants like death embraces people" (*ibidem*: key to figure 94) and allows a wife to placate her cheated husband's rage by means of the force *suku* gave it, for *suku* would have created women for them to have many children, no matter who the father was (*ibidem*: 208). Thus, the root of this plant was used in many *imbanda* (plural of *umbanda*, translated by missionaries as "charm") related to female fertility and adultery.[14]

In the narrative below, it is possible to note the imbrications between "ancestor worship" and the Christian doctrine of heaven and hell. The

14 It is, however, noteworthy that the plant is not at all mentioned in the lists of plants used by the *ochimbanda* and the *onganga* in their healings and "charms" (cf., for instance, Valente 1973: 420).

punishment of evil is associated to a visit from ancestor “spirits”:

> *Suku* has spirits for various purposes: Those who help people with plants for remedies and those who watch people, accuse them, and assign them a punishment. (...) When *suku* punished the first spirit in his fire he told him: “You shall now watch the evil who comes to us! You shall punish them fire as I punished you.”
> This first evil being was called *onganga yinene*. Thus he became responsible for receiving the evil, punishing it in fire, in *ondaulu yongana*, and thus he became its friend. When an evil spirit was sent to be punished in fire, the *onganga* called one of the spirits who had already experienced this and sent him to the deceased’s family to tell them the following: “My family, give me something so that I can pay the *onganga*, he is punishing me terribly”!
> When the spirit brings such news, somebody in the family becomes sick, and the diviner soon discovers the cause of the evil.
> A celebration is then prepared and the required sacrifice is made, as commanded by the *ocimbanda*: “Kill a pig and some hens, their spirits shall be the *onganga*’s payment”.
> So everyone helps the deceased’s spirit to be released from punishment.
> When one of *suku*’s or the *onganga*’s spirits needs something or is not satisfied with his family, he returns. (*ibidem*: 155-156, author’s translation)

The narrative above reveals the rather curious association between the *onganga* and the devil. This is curious because the translation for “devil” adopted by Spiritains in their catechisms in Umbundu is the umbundization of the Portuguese term *diabo* (in Umbundu, *elyapu*), not its equivalence to *onganga* (Lecomte 1937; Alves 1954). This devil-sorcerer is also associated with God, to the extent that he is responsible for punishing the evil in the fire of hell. The *ochimbanda* becomes an intermediary for the demands of spirits, both divine and diabolic. He is the one who finds the reason for the disease caused by the “spirit” punished by the *onganga*. He also conducts the propitiatory ritual in which animals are sacrificed. The ritual is conducted again if the “spirit” comes back. It is thus not without reason that a symbolic struggle between missionaries and *ovimbanda* took place, as both appeared to society as legitimate mediators between the living and the dead, as well as auxiliaries in the choice between *suku* and the *onganga*. Estermann’s narrative concerning this imbrication is curious:

> Former Capuchin missionaries and others found the term so harmless that they chose it to translate the Portuguese term "sacerdote" [priest], merely adding to it the determiner God. Thus the Catholic priest was *nganga ya Nzambi* or *nganga yo missa*. And still in our days Father Le Guennec, a great expert in Umbundu, did everything he could to make the adoption of the term compulsory in religious education books in Umbundu in the form of *onganga ya Suku*. But I have already said elsewhere that the term seems to be too hard a word for us to try to introduce it. (Estermann 1983: 346)

A similar assertion on the resemblance of missionaries and local "sorcerers" is rather carelessly made by Valente:

> And who cannot notice the analogy between sacred concepts existing in the terminology of the two terms: *pontífice* [pontiff] and *quimbanda?* *Pontífice*, from *pontem facere*, to build a bridge, to create a bridge to enable the encounter of those at the two margins, God and man, man and God, as a designation for the one who is imbued with such power or faculty. *Quimbanda*, from *ukwa-ku-vanda*, a person who can level different heights, such as the ones which set spirits apart from men, or men apart from spirits, placing them face to face. (Valente 1973: 405)

At first, the equivalence between *suku* and the *onganga* would be a heresy from the point of view of Christianism. However, the missionary idea seems to be to preserve the truth of the Christian doctrine while transferring to it the power of the *olonganga*, extremely powerful agents exactly because of the ambiguity mentioned above. *Suku* and the *onganga* are commensurable because they share the attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, as well as the fear these characteristics instill in others. Here we have a significant example of what John Monteiro calls "persuasion by similarity" (Monteiro 2001: 40): From the perspective of missionary strategy, the translation adds to the Christian God the familiarity and respect evoked by the *onganga*, thus making him stronger. The semantic reconciliation between "God" and the "*onganga*" would contribute to the missionary undertaking to the extent that it would reduce the resistance of *indígenas* to evangelization by reducing the antagonism between the *onganga* and the mission. Concerning the strategy to accommodate local ritual practices, openly combated by missionaries, nothing would be more natural than the existence of a sorcerer-ancestor-god, a *suku-onganga*, as distant from the Ovimbundu as would be expected of a supreme being of the white: powerful as an *onganga* and out of immediate reach as an ancestor.

The equivalence of practical cognitive categories, made ad hoc in the context of the mission, not only allowed agents to communicate, but also opened way for the ongoing resignification of their practices. The establishment of this specific indexation, mediated by a close symbolic struggle expressed in the language of "ancestor worship" and the "Christian religion", did not attach the agents to a fixed prescription of beliefs and practices, but set a convention of meaning within which the various categories mentioned, placed in mutual relation and articulated in daily negotiations, acquired different meanings for the various agents and created the conditions of their daily interaction.

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the practice of communication in the Catholic missions of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit in the Central Highlands of Angola, in the territory of the Ovimbundu, from the mid-19th century to the pre-Liberation War period in the 20th century. Its empirical sources basically consist of translations of Catholic doctrinal material into Umbundu, of collections of oral genres translated from Umbundu into Portuguese, and of ethnographic and historic records referring to the period. Based on these sources, the aim is to reconstruct the process of symbolic struggle between the agents which gave rise to the convention of meaning established in the missions. The hypothesis is that this convention was formed by indexing local ritual practices of "ancestor worship" to Christian ritual practices and doctrine.

Key-words: missions – Angola – communication – translation