

Reflection on poverty of displaced populations: the Hanha case

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Abstract

The following text presents a reflection on the study being produced by the author about the Hanha population, one of the people included in the denominated Ovimbundu grouping, spread along rural and urban locations. This initial reflection is focused on the perception the Vahanha have about their poverty and wellbeing, from the period ranging from the Independence all the way through Peace and, since then, until the moment. Due to the sociological structure of the Hanha population, this reflection will be preceded by a brief historical retrospective about their socioeconomic existence.

Introduction

The research leading to this essay was made in the realm of the project Pobreza e Paz (Project Poverty and Peace) in the PALOP – Official Portuguese-speaking African Countries. The causes for the high rates of poverty observed in these countries have been discussed, and the occurrence of war (in the countries on which it occurred) comes up as the main explanation. Yet that occurrence persists in a context of peace, whether peace is an intermittent or a permanent situation, such in the cases of Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe.

The area of research has been limited to the Hanha (or Hanya) population, located between the costal line of Benguela (Angola) and the highlands in the central region of the country, bordered by the river Cubal da Hanha and delimited by the settlements of Alto Chimboa da Hanha, Capupa and Caviva. The town of Kambodongolo, about 45 kilometers south of Cubal, is the core of this region.

This essay accounts for the conditions on which poverty subsists and which manners it is perceived by its protagonists in distinct chronological and geographical contexts. It was not intended to compare poverty in these contexts, but rather to identify patterns and similarities in the subjacent causes, and in attitudes and solutions found by the intervenient populations to cope within the occurrence.

Part of the motivation to follow this path: the Hanha population has been living for decades between two sociological realities, one urban and one rural; it is identified as one of the groups composing the large ethno-linguistic Ovimbundu grouping; history has dictated that this region, where they were ancestrally established, had become main stage of a merciless civil wars that ravaged the country; and the Vahanha have divided themselves into two factions, one part migrated to the seaside and settling in the suburbs located in the axis Benguela-Lobito, and a smaller part in the regions of Lubango and Huambo.

The investigation focused on the manner the Vahanha people looks at poverty, both the members “gone astray” in the urban suburbs, as well as those who have remained in the Hanha region, how they relate to it and their perception of its effects on themselves. It is required to search into the way of life of the Vahanha before the present phase of peace and the way they lived before the civil and colonial wars, to have a better understanding

of their experience of “poverty” today. For that reason, it will be presented a brief historical retrospect, to produce an outlook of the living conditions of the Vahanha through facts collected by the few researchers who have focused their studies on that region and, in some cases, through the recollections of the interviewed individuals.

Chosen Methodologies

The investigation was based on a qualitative approach, supported on a non-statistical sample by convenience. The inquired individuals are aged between 25 and 54 years old, seven males and one female. The inquiry was formed by semi-structured interviews, produced throughout several stages. Two of the individuals were taken into consideration as qualified informants, given their educational level and their knowledge of the societal structures of the population and recent historical events. The narratives of all eight subjects allowed us to focus the research on the conception of their own reality and assorted backgrounds in which they were implicated. The crossing of information collected from the subjects was determinant to assess the coherence and consistency of their distinctive life stories. Coherence in the sense of their narratives sharing the same logic arguments and congruent conclusions, consistency in their capacity of resisting to opposing argumentation. My knowledge of the Angolan reality, including the historical and political progressions in the last forty years, allowed me to verify the objectivity of the inquired individuals as well as the veracity of the narrated facts. I also made use of some records amassed by Manuel Hamilton Fernando, our cherished fellow researcher, resulting from 85 inquiries made in Benguela, as comparative references.

The process of investigation was prepared, followed and concluded with the assistance of additional documental and bibliographic reading materials.

About the Conceptual Operability

The debate about the notion of poverty has been enriched with extremely active contributions about the social policies and political measures which have been proposed as solutions to this problem. Promoting debates about poverty, social exclusion and other related themes became mandatory. The concept of poverty has evolved, splitting into several dimensions to embrace all new realities associated to poverty (Costa, 1984 and Rodrigues et al, 1999).

However, this paper does not intend to explain traditional premises or the differences between them, nor the concept’s multiplication, since much of the concepts mentioned along this discussion will not be applicable to the Angolan society nor particularly to the specific target population. In addition, any references made to some of the several dichotomies implied in the multiple meanings of the concept – relative/absolute poverty, objective/subjective poverty, traditional/modern poverty, rural/urban poverty, temporary/longstanding poverty (Rodrigues et al, 1999: 67). Consequently, I’ve selected a few of the concepts that I consider to be appropriate and worked over them, analyzing some of these dichotomies.

- The concept of absolute poverty, based on the notion of basic necessities (biological viewpoint) was initially defined by Seebohm Rowntree (1901) and mentioned by Sen (1981: 27), and relates to the notion of subsistence, in which individual and household resources are manifestly insufficient to provide for a suitable level of “physical efficiency” (Capucha, 2005: 69). By

antagonism/complementary, the more used concept of relative poverty, leading towards an analysis of poverty along the lines of general social patterns (Rodrigues et al, 1999: 67).

- The concept of rural poverty, translated in a basic deprivation of resources caused by low agricultural productivity, absent productivity and equally by a lack of alternative economic activities, opposing to urban poverty which is related to exclusion, low wages, unemployment or precarious employment, diseases caused by inadequate sanitary conditions, addiction, physical handicaps, urban discrimination and social segregation (Rodrigues et al, 1999: 68).
- The concept of property and trade rights, stipulating that in a market society for each given property there is a correspondent packet of trade rights, defining the possibilities of exchanging a viable amount of sufficient food provisions (Sen, 1981: 15).
- The concept of social exclusion, connected to the concept of poverty but at the same time clearly separated, defined as “a disarticulation among several constituents in a market society and the individuals, resulting in non-participation in the minimum set of benefits that define a full member of that society” (Rodrigues et al, 1999: 64).

Historical Stages of the Vahanha

The Hanha region was already inhabited when discovered by the Portuguese, and ancestrally extended from the south coastline of Benguela to Kilengue and Cikuma. The inhabitants are subsistence farmers, hunters-gatherers and herdsman. The Nano wars, in the 18th and 19th centuries, had resulted in political and geographical configurations that pushed the Hanha populations into the inland, finally settling in a region south of Cubal in the end of the 19th century (Pélissier 1986: 67, Péclard 1995: 48).

The presence of Portuguese merchants in the Benguela region would convert the Ovimbundu into traders and caravan traders carrying European products to the inland kingdoms and bringing others products from there (initially slaves and natural rubber), producing profound changes in this society. “*The commercial activities permitted the accumulation of wealth and political power in the hands of the chiefs and put agriculture, still carried on by women, in a secondary role*”. (Pössinger, 1986: 77). The expansion of the highland kingdoms will start a process of “umbulization” of the miscellaneous populations all over the region: Vahanha, Mundombe, Vakakonda, Muganda and Vatchyaka then became integrated in the large Ovimbundu grouping.

The social and political transformation of the Ovimbundu during this period encompasses a new kind of spatial occupation, creating larger population concentrations. Pössinger underlines economic, social, political and even psychological consequences. It is not possible to reflect in terms of the Vahanha being or not being poor, but it is possible to take into consideration that they too have been transformed during this period. One of the few remaining narratives about the region refers to the attacks inflicted by the Portuguese government, European merchants and other Ovimbundo, and even sustained violent assaults from the Ambós (Cuanhamas). This seems to have been the motive for leaving the coastal regions and finding new roots in the Hanha region, because “the Hanha was unwholesome” (Pélissier, 1986: 67), or since it was at a considerable distance from the most popular itineraries (through east and

climbing the highlands, the path crossed the Munganda and Vatchyaka lands, and to the south passed through Mundombe and Vakakonda lands). For that reason, the transformations will occur at a slower pace and there won't be much large population concentrations to be found.

The caravanning period lasted around eighty years and ended with the crash of rubber prices in the international market, the Ovimbundu's military defeats and the arrival of European merchants into the inland of Angola. Having become dependent of the income provided by the caravanning trading, they found a new alternative in commercial agriculture. This sort of agriculture, given that soil typology in the highlands is usually depleted, will guide the territorial expansion of the Ovimbundu people. Produced by the osongo¹, the new lands are initially considered communal ground. But later a new kind of commercial agriculture will put an end to the communal model and evolve it into familial-based rural enterprises. The search for new domains will continue until the sixth decade of the twentieth century.

The Vahanha would maintain some of their trading activity (particularly livestock) with the southern populations, such as the Nyaneka-Nkumbi, and with the Europeans who had meanwhile settled in the highland of Huíla, as well as with the Ambós and the Herero. Although they had been "umbulized", they kept their occupations as farmers and herdsmen (Silva, 1974: 4). They produce corn, massambala (sorghum), beans and sisal, and raise bovine and caprine cattle.

The agricultural produce and a few cattle are taken to European merchants located in townships like Ganda, Cubal or other settling along the CFB – the railway of Benguela constructed in 1903-1929. Bovine livestock are only sold in case of necessity or preferentially to other Ovimbundu, and only in small quantities. Cattle ownership presupposes wealth. Only in the two final decades of colonial regimen will this presumption changed.

The movement of territorial expansion, caused by the necessity of increasing the land dedicated to commercial agriculture, transforms the Ovimbundu society and in result the Hanha society too. Though remaining a culture founded on economically, socially and politically traditional structures, the ever increasing presence of familial-based commercial agriculture enterprises of European nature would introduce new realities, new approaches to matters of land possession. Another important fact deriving from this period is the increase of agricultural output for exportation, carried on by the Europeans. This increase is linked to the invasive incursions of the best farming lands (the Ovimbundu people have almost nonexistent protection mechanisms for these cases) and to forced labour or compulsory recruitment.

This type of labour force was useful for constructing public projects such as roads, and for large commissions such as the CFB, but was equally used by large-scaled commercial agriculture enterprises. Not even better legislation and improved governmental control on the matter prevented an outcome of low production rates (caused by inadequate techniques, exhausted soils and other causes), fraudulent debts in trades with European merchants and a corrupted supervision, which resulted in numerous Ovimbundu workers taking "contracts", consequently disordering their weakened society and adding to their proletarianization.

¹ Osongo is the denomination of the clan, but also of the clan's chieftain (note by Pössinger, 1986: 77).

The post-caravanning period went from around 1912 until the fifth decade of the last century is furthermore the period when the incidence of religious missions has expanded and multiplied the most in Angola. In the south border of Hanha was build the first religious mission, denominated Lincon and founded by the “Philafrican Liberator’s League” in 1897. The originally protestant mission was under the supervision of Heli Chatelain and according to its founder, was “an industrial and agricultural mission, interconfessional and mostly secular” (Péclard, 1993: 37). In 1954, the Catholic Mission of Hanha was established in Kambondogolo, south of Cubal. These missions were extremely significant, not only for the educational (foundation of schools), sanitary (creation of health centres) and religious components, but also for creating affordance to qualified instruction in topics of industry and agriculture.

In the midst of a disintegrating society, the missions had become accomplished protagonist and had simultaneously created a centripetal movement that would turn them into the core of this population’s life, enforcing gradually a new model of society, but still tolerating the traditional culture. One of the interviewed individuals declared at a certain moment that “the Mission was the civilizational and evangelical centre” (P1, 2008), the same as “each mission was, at the same time, the centre of social and Christian living and each missionary was kind of a farmer or industrial lord, without forgetting the role of evangelizer” (Faure, 1908: 24).

The introduction of tools such as the European plow and hoes allowed the Ovimbundu to enlarge their farming areas, thus coping more appropriately with the loss of the best lands to the hands of the European agriculture enterprises. But this enlargement hasn’t resulted necessarily in increased productivity. To compensate this loss of income from commercial agriculture, the Ovimbundu accepted voluntarily to sign “contracts” with European enterprises or migrated to urban areas in search of employment. The Vahanha initiated a migration process towards Benguela, becoming themselves part of the proletarianization of the Ovimbundu. As the number of European colonizing traders and farmers in the Hanha region increases, roads are being built connecting the Mission to Cubal and Ganda.

The available records confirm that after a stage of some prosperity during the “caravanning” period, the economy of the Ovimbundu society falls into a phase of decadence, only partially opposed by the popularity of coffee bean crops. These new cultures occupy increasingly larger areas of soil; however, their production output declined, given that soils were rundown or the farming techniques inadequate. The conversion from a communal agriculture to a commercial familial-based agriculture and the incomes from salaried jobs partially contested the impoverishment. The same occurrence happened in the Hanha society, evolving into a sort of stability, with the rural impoverishment being contested by cattle trading and employment opportunities in the Missions, in european agricultural enterprises, in public or private services institutions in Benguela, and in the CFB – Benguela Railroad.

A third long period starts in the end of the 50s and follows through until the Independence. It was a time of great political convulsions and major transformations.

The outbursts are followed by declarations of independence all over Africa. In Angola, the first registered incidents occurred in the end of the fifties, at the central highlands,

city of Nova Lisboa, Huambo. They were classified as ordinary misconduct incidents. After came the rebellion of the residents and workers of Baixa do Cassange, in January 1961, manifesting against the conditions imposed for the production and trade of cotton. The rebellion was smashed by the Portuguese military forces, supported by air bombarding of villages in the region. Thousands of people died, and in disregard to the military reports blaming the cotton corporation Cotonang and the local administration members which collaborate with that company (Nunes, 2008: 29), the matter is silenced as much as possible by the Portuguese regime. The following repression in the region (in the north area of the country) is intended as a warning, and the Ovimbundu workers labouring under “contract” in this region start to flee towards the south. This faction will grow steadily after the beginning of the colonial war (revolt of March 15th 1961). The political events occurring during this period assume relevance since a) the Ovimbundu have returned to their homelands (including the Vahanha), increasing the demographic pressure over the agricultural production in these areas; b) by fleeing to their homes, in most cases they return without the meagre wages from their work; c) the corporations who had them under “contract” (farming or otherwise) take advantage of this fearful and vengeful atmosphere to seize salaries and assets from the populations (in the Hanha inclusively); d) the policy of mass colonization (affirmed in the statement made by A. Salazar “To Angola, quickly and with strength!” (Gomes & Afonso 2009: 60)² will promote the European presence, the usurpation of the best lands and concurrency in agricultural production.

Following the period of some balance that was mentioned above, came an impoverishment period for the Angolan inhabitants, including the Hanha population.

The arrival of thousands of Europeans colonists alters the agricultural and economic conditions. The idea of placing agricultural colonies in specific regions is abandoned. The quantity of European agricultural enterprises expands all over the country and the central highlands become the “cellar” of Angola. The growing incidence of exhausted soils from intensive farming (in particular for exportation) only endorses the appropriation of even more land.

The last period before the Independence is a phase of extensive social transformations completing a cycle. From subsistence agriculture with long fallow periods to an intensive industrial agriculture in more restricted areas, from a way of life based on farming models to a crescent proletarianization as alternative to the impoverishment of their economic foundation. “The family, separated from the clan, living in privately owned land and situated mainly around schools, chapels or nursing centres, does not possess anymore a solid structure that allows it to prevent economic and social disaggregation” (Pössinger, 1986: 83).

The Vahanha region was one of the affected by the introduction of european agricultural enterprises. The savanization process felt in the central highlands since 1930 will become particularly accentuated in this area. The adjustments will eventually impoverish the agricultural complex in the central highlands and its populations, but the individualization of economy by implementing of agricultural family enterprises will concede a more “democratic” management of available resources, removing responsibility from the traditional chieftains. The proletarianization (more labour for

² Speech made by the president of the council of minister, A. Salazar, in April 14th 1961, during the appointment of new cabinet members of the Portuguese government.

third parties, in European agriculture companies³, more employment in Christian missions, more labour in public sectors, more employment in urban services sector, incorporation in the Portuguese military forces) will lead to reinvested economic resources in the (never abandoned) rural homelands and family businesses.

“The social structure, slowly destroyed, was being substituted by the consolidation of family units, or what was left of them, around new leaders that were however unaware of the ancient Ovimbundu society. They were catholic and protestant missionaries, their respective catechists, teachers or school monitors (in the beginning, exclusively from the Christian missions and later, in a large number, from the State) and nurses from the missionary hospitals or public sanitary stations” (Pössinger, 1986: 100).

In the end of the sixties, the economic development in the Angolan territory (though not directly advantageous to the African populations) will bring some improvements to their living conditions. Concerning the analyzed case study, it is observed some stabilization in the impoverishment process. Families who were producing for self-consumption and had surplus in their corn, *massambala*, beans or sisal productions would sell it to the web of European traders, or exchange it in the missions. They complemented these products with a few cattle, either to consume or to trade, especially swine and caprine cattle.⁴ All families had avian production. To this agricultural income coming from produce and cattle were added the wages from jobs held within several services in the Portuguese administration, the Hanha Mission, “contract” work in urban corporations or as domestic servants, together with some income from serving in the Portuguese Military Forces.

But to which degree was the Hanha population poor? *“We did not lack food, there was always some left to sell to a trader, in the market or in the canteen of the Mission. Poor, yes there were pauper folks, but those were the ones without any outfits to go to mass”* (B1, 2008). The perception of poverty itself assumes, in this instance, a determinate relativity rooted in memories of a time posterior to the one mentioned, when the socioeconomic conditions had deteriorated. The notion of poor is only attributed to those who had no suitable garments (as in different from everyday garments) to attend religious ceremonies. The presupposition founding this assumption is that everyone was linked in networks of familial or traditional relationships that gave them affordance to all necessary consumption goods, which did not include clothing. With a life anchored around the Hanha Mission, this society becomes more and more proletarianized and, in this circumstance lasts until the occurrence of Independence.

³ Although the system of “contracts” was still active, there was more supervision and less abuse, but in the last years prior to the Independence the Ovimbundu themselves opt for contracts as a way of obtaining financial assets.

⁴ According to the Agricultural Census made by the MIAA in 1972 in the regions of Hanha, Ganda and Kakonda, the total number of swine cattle would be 255.336, while in 1961 it wouldn't be over 67 thousand. Concerning the caprine cattle, in an area embracing Hanha, Ganda, Kakonda, Lubango, and south of Lubango, the increase was equally significant, going from 135,000 up to 428,000. Regarding the avian production, it sustained an important enlargement, rising to 1,147,000 specimens in this last region alone. In average, from slaughtered animals, 25% of caprine, 14% of swine and 48% of avian specimens are destined for self-consumption.

Independence and the Vahanha

Between April 1974 and the Independence day, numerous factors will have direct influence over the reality of the Hanha. Straight away, being at peace with the guerilla movements permitted the entrance of these factions into the cities and into political life. Afterwards, the beginning of a civil war⁵ leads to the departure of thousands of Europeans from farming properties, commercial establishments, enterprises and dwellings. Agricultural and commercial activities are paralyzed. Civil war rises. Portugal, the colonialist potency, chooses to withdraw. The conflict escalates, at first involving the Mpla and Fnla forces, then among the Mpla, Fnla and Unita forces. The Europeans abandon Angola in clusters, disarticulating all economic and administrative organization. During 1974 and partly 1975, subsistence cultivation is still a common practice in the Hanha region. The unfeasibility of commercial trade due to the disappearance of the net of European traders would be compensated by an access to the merchandises and products left behind by the European dealers, farmers and companies, so although in an atypical manner, their revenues would not drop immediately.

In the few months previous to the independence, with the intensification of civil war, loss of the Portuguese administrative and military organization and intervention of two foreign armies (Cuban and the South-African soldiers), the Hanha people will confront their first social and political division. The absence of the Portuguese administrative structure, the shutdown of businesses and the correlation of the movements to ethnic grounds will lead many Vahanha youngsters to participate in the conflict by joining Unita. The elder members of the Vahanha, as well as the women, children and other young people who chose not to adhere to any faction remained in their homeland. The initial combats between the Cuban army /Fapla⁶ and the South-African army/Fala⁷ happened in this region, one month prior to the Independence and throughout the following months. The retreat of the South-African army and Unita going guerrilla (taking refuge in the east of Angola) will permit a brief peaceful period in the Hanha region.

The phase extending from April 25th 1974 until February 1976⁸ was not long enough to allow an investigation about poverty. The initial stage of tranquillity and better earnings for the waged black populations is followed by a civil war, dispersion of the Hanha population and therefore what can be considered a loss of incomes. After an immediate euphoria, the independence of November 11th 1975 is recollected by the interviewed individuals with some apprehension: “We thought we were going to have a better life, just like the whites, and then came the war” (H4, 2008), “and those of us who had qualifications went back to farming the land” (H3, 2008). The direct impoverishment is not perceived and none of the interviewees has mentioned it.

⁵ Civil war in Angola starts with an armed confrontation between two factions within the Mpla, one led by Agostinho Neto (internationally recognized as legitimate) and another by Daniel Chipenda (who had won the internal elections for the movement's presidency) in October 1974.

⁶ Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola – Mpla armed forces.

⁷ Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola –Unita armed forces.

⁸ The joint forces of the Cuban army/FAPLA started their headway toward the south of Angola in the beginning of February 1976, reaching the road and rail network of Benguela-Huambo in February 6th, so this was considered a key date.

From Independence to Peace in 1991/1992

The Constitutional Law of November 1975, ratified in the completion of Independence by the Mpla, imposes a planned and centralized system of economic policy, among other structuring measures for the new nation (Ferreira, 1999: 14). Subsequently, it compels the nationalization of companies and assets. In the period from February 1976 until the end of 1977, the region is afflicted by sporadic attacks conducted by the guerrilla. Accustomed to self-consumption agriculture, performed at the same time as the intensive commercial agriculture, the Vahanha will come across some stability, only affected by the demand of various goods that could not be found. The inexistence of traders would eventually be surpassed through the efforts of the Catholic Mission of Hanha which, due to the endeavor of their priests, will manage to bring essential goods into the region. *“In those times, the government chased the religious and tried to nationalize the Church’s assets. I don’t know how, but Father Luís Keller always found salt, demdém (palm oil), pure olive oil, milk for the infants, rice”* (P1, 2008).

Since the end of 1977, the Unita guerrilla increases their attacks, creates military bases in the region and incorporates Vahanha elements into their ranks so they can obtain needed information and resources. As a counter-measure, the Government will assault villages suspected of being sympathetic towards the guerrilla. The governmental air force bombards communities and croplands. The situation intensifies gradually, becoming impossible to move people and merchandise or even do any farming activity. The implementation of Marxism-Leninism will have influence over the attitude of the Vahanha youth regarding the civil war⁹.

There are additional difficulties with nourishment, and the Government declares 1978 an official Agriculture Year. The population relocates in considerable number into urban surroundings, in the initial stage going to the nearest localities, such as Cubal. Here, they will settle along the Cubal River and try to come back to subsistence farming. During this phase, the government enforces food rations and sets up public corporations to buy surplus produce and allocate essential goods. The abuses and corruption caused by these measures are well known, contributing even further to the impoverishment of the living conditions of the Vahanha people.

Nevertheless, the interviewed subjects have a perception from those times as being a period when they become pauper for being expelled from their homeland without any mean of survival, other than begging along the margins of the Cubal River or making do with subsistence farming. Those who worked as public servants, for public companies or as “staff” for the Mission in Hanha (as catechists or teachers) will take refuge in Benguela, where there is more certainty of receiving wages and benefits given by the regime to their supporters, relocating mostly in the suburban quarters.

“We first arrived at Cubal, where my father had to ask for a piece of land near the river to our distant relatives, so we could farm it. But it wasn’t enough for everybody. Since

⁹ To understand this influence, it should be taken in consideration a note mentioned by Ferreira (1999: 36, b) “... during the visit of the Prime-Minister Lopo do Nascimento to the sugar company ‘4 de Fevereiro’ in Benguela. At the time, he stated: “yesterday the comrades responsible for the National Commission showed me the programs for courses available in the technical school (MEF’s note: Technical School of Sugar Amílcar Cabral, to instruct qualified labourers for the sugar industry). We asked our comrades to make a slight alteration. An introduction to Marxism-Leninism. This request is not a personal decision. It is a ruling made by the Politic Bureau, so that all courses and all schools can divulge proletariat’s ideology”.

father was a teacher, he had right to receive additional ration coupons, which we would exchange for manioc and beans...” “... but we did not stay for long, my father preferred to move to Benguela, because he was a teacher” (P1, 2008).

It is interesting to examine this settling, using as blueprint the study conducted in Luanda by Rodrigues (2004: 4). The solidarity group that facilitates the settling corresponds to an enlarged family circle. Although new links of solidarity occur, “*it is the network anchored in family relationships that supports reciprocities and exchanges of more importance, as well as providing the basis for the definition of social status*”. The formation of this sort of solidarity links had started off before the Independence and has become more significant and functioning in line with the numerous waves of Vahanha arriving to Benguela. Here, the weakening of traditional solidarities experienced in Luanda goes unnoticed, since maybe the early inexistence of large suburban quarters in Benguela had allowed the foundation of contiguous accommodation for the Vahanha people. As in Luanda, there are other types of network on which these individuals can count – religious groups for example. However, diverging from what had been observed in the capital, this type of connections were originated before the relocation to Benguela, assuming a role almost as important as family relationships, which in this environment will sustain and expand further.

The explanation for the large importance play by these connections of religious nature seems to be the performance of the Catholic Mission in Hanha in the lives of the Vahanha people, given that the institutions of the Catholic Church in Benguela had systematically welcomed and assisted the refugees in this town (interviewed subjects always mentioned the aid provided by the Mission of Nazaré in Benguela and numerous schools and seminaries). While integrating in these networks other than family-based they get admission to education¹⁰ and healthcare. But these links go beyond, while providing jobs, alimentary aid and in some cases monetary aid. Teachers, catechists and seminarists will acquire a new kind of social standing, but without forgoing the traditional structure. The impossibility of contacting the traditional political leadership remaining in the Hanha region will make the Vahanha refugee community in Benguela select new *soba* leaderships amongst the most respected individuals belonging to the main lineages in their community (usually overlapping this role with those of teacher, nurse or catechist). However, the bond between these newly elected chieftains and the traditional chiefdom was never forsaken; they always considered themselves to be subordinates to the *soba*.

The Bicesse peace accords will find most of the Vahanha located in Cubal, Ganda and Benguela. The complications faced by country during this stage are enormous and the Vahanha, either from the Hanha region or from Benguela, become even more impoverished. The peace accords and the tense period of tranquillity that followed in 1991 and 1992 have had a propagating effect on the informal economy, improving the living conditions of both Vahanha groups, particularly those located in Benguela. Afterward, immediately takes place a return to the homeland, but the low credibility in this process, new relationships, better access to merchandises and services that do not exist outside urban locations, all these will cause most Vahanha situated in Benguela to

¹⁰ There had always been access to education, even when the seminaries were shut down and their buildings confiscated by the Angolan political regime most classes kept being instructed; the seminarians got divided into small groups and classes were given in private homes or other buildings that had not confiscated.

remain there. Now, the communication between the new *sobas* and the Hanha traditional chieftains is re-established, and both leaderships cooperate.

The return of the war

As a result of the failure of the elections of 1992, the civil war returns, this time acquiring the features of a conventional war. Once again the Hanha region is stage to the confrontation between two armies. And once again those populations suffer the consequences, both those remaining in the homelands as those who had returned. Violence puts all agricultural production to a halt. The Vahanha congregate yet again in the Ganda, Cubal and Benguela regions.

Cubal and Ganda become exile wards, with NGOs and other international institutions¹¹ creating refugee camps for the purpose of preventing widespread hunger and its consequences. Some interviewees consider these camps to be the places where their traditions, families and religious beliefs were put under pressure the most. In other words, the solidarity networks based on familial, religious and tribal relations have become strained.

It would not appropriate to make a critical analysis of the actions performed by the institutions managing those camps, but the requirement to put into practice survival aid programs, connected to the choices made by the political power, will prevent most of the population from pursuing any productive activity. Consequently, the Vahanha, similarly to other populations in the region, survive by international intervention, reaching their highest rate of poverty yet.

“We got food from PAM and the church, it was the only way to feed” (H4, 2008); “We couldn’t go to the fields” (H2, 2008); “There, we had absolutely nothing, we just stood waiting...” (H1, 2008); “The worst thing was not knowing about our children or husbands, we just waited” (H3, 2008).

The supervision of the cities of Huambo and Kuito in 1994, made by the governmental forces, did little to change the situation in this region – the entire central highlands was immersed in war, and the Hanha region became subjected to military procedures, combats and more or less intensive guerrilla actions. This situation will not change when in 1998 the governmental forces surround and pursuit Unita’s leadership. In 2002, after the death of Jonas Savimbi, and the agreement of a peace accord between Unita and the Angolan Government, the country and this region finally attain Peace.

¹¹ “There is no exact definition of what constitutes a “refugee camp”. The expression is used to describe human settlements varying substantially in dimension and characteristics. In general, refugee camps are delimited areas, restricted to refugees and to those providing assistance, where protection and aid are given until their safe return or relocation into a different region. Contrary to other type of settlements, such as the agricultural establishments or “refugee villages” in Pakistan in the 80s and 90s, refugee camps usually are not self-sustainable. Refugee camps are, by rule, planned as temporary locations and build as such. However, in many cases, they stand for 10 or more years, creating new problems. Water supply and sanitation frequently do not stand long-term use and the parcels become too small while the families grow. In many camps, wood supplies are insufficient and the refugees have to search outside the limits, causing deforestation and numerous ecological imbalances. These problems surpass the camps, affecting the surrounding reception communities, then the governments frequently impose restrictions to refugees, limiting their free circulation and labour options outside the camps” (ACNUR, 200: 112).

From 1994 to 2002, a significant parcel of the population from this region is living in refugee camps or in villages near the camps. But these camps, as was declared by the UNHCR (mentioned on note 13), entail restrictive rules. The Angolan government adds more restrictions to these rules, like prohibiting circulation between several villages and towns. In any moment whatsoever the circulation of these internal refugees is permitted, whether they live in camps or other sites guarded by armed forces. All circumstances push these populations into controlled areas, surviving of international aid, without performing productive activities.

This dependence on external aid, this unfeasibility to contribute to production will alter the social structures of the entire central highlands. This then becomes an extreme situation, in which all population is relocated to camps or other localities, including in this dislocation the traditional system of chiefdom. Adding to the constraints performing in this situation, the government, agencies and NGOs also make use of these politic structures to control and organize the refugees. But the traditional systems can no longer give a solidarity response to their people. Corruption, informal economy, smuggling of goods offered by the international community, these will lead to the creation of new systems, or new functions that will overthrow the traditional ones.

The climax of political manipulation arrives at this stage. The atrocities and physical violence are supplemented by strong propaganda in the media, trade-off of political fidelity in exchange for alimentary aid and access to healthcare or education, even for survival. All these were manipulated by the belligerents to put the populations under pressure. On one side, the Government would employ political structures of substitution, choosing controlled lineages to elect new *sobas*, for mistrusting the traditional *sobas*.

“At the time we went to Benguela my father was chosen as soba. He was a teacher, and we belonged to a lineage with privilege. And so he became soba in Benguela, but he kept telling that the real soba was the one in Hanha” (P1, 2008). “In those days, we could not talk about anything, so they asked the soba. And he had to say he belonged to Unita if there were Unita soldiers coming, or to say he was a EME supporter if the FAA were coming” (H4, 2008).

Those restrictions result in radicalization of some elements from both belligerent parties, but also results clearly in the posterior political indifference of the Vahanha population (very few have high profile legislative or partisan duties), as explained by a few of the interviewed individuals: “Today we are not EME or Unita anymore, not even those who fought in the bush... we are all the same” (H3, 2008); “... we don’t want politics any longer” (B3, 2008).

The Vahanha took shelter in their solidarity nets, reinforced them. Those living in Benguela find ways to help those living in refugee camps or isolated in some designated locations. The religious relations are undoubtedly noticeable. Nevertheless all this assistance, the period between 1994 and 2002 is when the population is afflicted by the most serious poverty conditions. This is not restricted to life below the poverty line, but concerns physical survival, recalling absolute poverty.

Peace of 2002

While the peace was settled in February 2002, the government does not authorize the immediate return of the population to their homelands. Their alternative is to escape from the camps and walk back to their territories, which is a difficult and dangerous task, since the transportation infrastructures such as roads, railroads and bridges have been destroyed and there are minefields¹² around many villages.

The reports made by the UNHCR point to obstacles found while returning to their original homelands. Some residents opt to not return and are absorbed in the suburbs of Luanda, Benguela and other urban centres.

“The difficult nature of the reintegration process has manifested in numerous ways: low levels of food security for the exiled and their communities; limited admittance to employment, activities producing income and access to public services; large flux of migrants from rural areas to urban areas. These circumstances have had an outcome particularly adverse to women, girls and other refugees with special attributes...” “... Besides these deeds, the better way to describe the present state of the reintegration process is “limited” and “fragmented”. Limited, for many refugees have faced serious obstacles in their efforts for reintegrating in Angola, and fragmented because the progress made during the reintegration process differs substantially from one region to the next” (UNHCR, 2008: 2).

The target population in this research had to face all of these constraints, but the peace brought a reconnection of contact among the entire population in this region and in this instance the broken links, familial and traditional relationships destroyed by the conflict, are restored. The links formed separately, in urban surroundings, have persisted too, apparently subservient to the superiority of traditional networks in regard of matters and circumstances specific related to the homeland. When the return is authorized, the urban nets will assist with the reinstatement of the Vahanha refugees.

The Mission in Hanha resumed its activities with a more strictly religious facet, given the limitations posed to some of their previous procedures (lack of teachers and healthcare practitioners, restrictive legislation regarding these activities). The legal alterations on land possession matters have made permissible some abusive situations about members of the governmental elite taking ownership of communal lands or of properties belonging to European farming companies.

Society is changing in the large urban districts, besides the “individual resistances, real constraints (...) interferences to the effective period of integration in the urban reality”

¹² The structural crisis in Angola is directly connected to the population departure caused by the long-lasting civil war. Throughout the period of intensive confrontation, between 1992 and 1994, around 1.3 to 2 million individuals have fled from their homes, moving mostly to provincial capitals and Luanda. It is estimated by humanitarian agencies that in the end of 1997 about one million habitants were still displaced, despite the limited reassessment made after the peace accords of Bicesse and Lusaka. Since 1998, when the hostilities between factions restarted, an additional quantity of 3.1 million people was forced to leave their homes, raising the total figure of displaced persons in Angola to 4.1 millions. From these 3.1 millions exiled since 1998, 1.2 million were registered by humanitarian organizations. (OCHA, 2002: 18).

(Rodrigues, 2004: 10), these new urban centres will also be progressively “incorporating the urbanity”.

Meanwhile, the author points to a characterization of Luanda’s society by its “mix of urban and rural elements, a permanent patchwork without any major definite trends crossing its multiple features, such as economic activities, religion or family” (Rodrigues, 2004: 24). Nevertheless, in the urban core forming the axis Benguela/Lobito, this patchwork seems further noticeable, particularly in the suburban areas. Solidarity nets intermingle with rural custom. Networks based on family relationships, networks based on religion, traditional networks, they all appear to assume major importance as bonds connecting the Vahanha people, whether residing in the rural region of Hanha or in the urban environment of Benguela.

“The rigid policy of reassessment that forces people to return only to their homelands and does not allow for reinstatement in neighbouring areas has proved to be totally discouraging” (FAO/PAM; 2004: 13). Even dealing with these obstructions, peace has allowed the return of the Vahanha to their homeland or their relocation in Benguela. In the Hanha region, the residents went back to the traditional farming ways, cultivating for self-consumption and raising small sized animals.

Their reintegration was accomplished with assistance from international organizations, NGO and especially from the Catholic Church, by means of the support given by the Mission in Hanha, the Diocese of Benguela, and their numerous institutions, and the support from the Vahanha residents in Benguela. After the initial stage, without measurable improvements according to available records, the agricultural production in the region is on the rise, an average of 7.8% for cereals and 19.74% for other products (FAO/PAM, 2004). However, this increase does not reflect yet any considerable improvement in the revenue of this region, though the self-consumption may express an improved food safety. The surplus production, necessary for exchanges and consequently for trading supplementary essential products, is having a slower progression: “The biggest obstacle to progress in this sector is the weak development of the rural markets and their low interaction with the urban markets (...) The extremely high costs of imported agricultural inputs, like fertilizers and machinery, also complicate the investment in agriculture and have be considered as limitations to the families (...) The main sources of input (fertilizers and seeds) are the international agencies and the government. (FAO/PAM, 2004: 13).

From the Vahanha standpoint, there is a clear perception of having left absolute poverty behind and having become progressively less destitute, even if in the course of a time-consuming process.

“We’ll keep using our hacks and our hands, next we’ll buy a couple of oxen and then we’ll get more crops” (H1, 2008); “If there was no Mission, the children wouldn’t be able to attend school, because we need their help in the farms” (H2, 2008). “The work almost does not let me help my elders farming the land, but I have to, so I do occasional jobs” (B3, 2008).

Peace and poverty: the Vahanha perception of the present

The Hanha natives have been facing for the last decades a series of constraints caused by the civil war. They have equally contributed to the peaks of internal migration of Angolan citizens (and flight to bordering countries) in the middle of the 1980/1990

decades, in the aftermath of the 1992 elections (until 1994) and in 1998 (Kaun, 2008: 14).

The traditional and religious solidarity networks that had been formed even before the Independence appear to have been not too affected, and in some cases (at least for those of religious nature), they seem to have matured. The familial networks were always ubiquitous. The separation existing among those who had relocated to urban surroundings and those remaining in the rural region was quite real when matters of security prevented them from travelling, but pondering about the last forty years, then it becomes evident that once the insecurity was brought to an end, has returned “a flow of information and ideas between different “urban” and “rural” social spaces (...) assured by a dense web of connections, as a result of family ties, labour-based migration, churches and circulation of some professional groups, for instance, nursing professionals” (Medina, 2003).

This circulation of persons and products between two worlds seems to assume two characteristic for the Vahanha. There are some individuals who go from rural to urban environment or vice-versa, but there are others who periodically leave the rural environment to do “business” in urban surroundings (for periods lasting several months) and those from urban centres who also periodically return to the rural region, to aid their relatives re-establish or to help in farming activities. It is remarkable that some of these individuals returning occasionally to the Hanha don’t have origins in this region, although they may have “*roots in the countryside*”. Several solidarity nets would get a more or less significant role, in line to which environment the person stands at any specific moment. Nowadays the effect this “flow” has on the personal wellbeing, although beyond measurable, is systematically taken into consideration in researches about poverty. The familial network appears to be the strongest. In economic matters or even political matters, those individuals sharing family ties but standing in opposite politic factions or opposite military forces constantly try to look after each other: “Those in the EME would warn the ones in Unita and vice-versa. They were family, we had to protect them” (P1, 2008).

The available records, although incomplete due to methodological deficiencies, confirm the rates of urban and rural poverty. In 1995, 67% of Angolans lived in poverty or in extreme poverty (respectively 53.6% and 13.4%). In 2000/2001, this figure had increased slightly to 68.2%. During the segment of time linking those studies, it is less significant the slight increase in poverty than the raise in the extreme poverty rate, 96% for individuals and 119% for family units. In a third study (focused only on poverty in Luanda), which followed a distinctive methodology from the previous studies since the author choose to inquire about the informants’ perceptions of their own and others poverty, it is shown that 58.7% of the inquired individuals consider themselves to be poor, 6.7% cannot classify but plunges into the poor category, totalling 65.4% (Carvalho, 2004: 6). These figures correspond to the Vahanha’s perception in their most impoverished periods. One of the most interesting conclusions from this study is the replies given by the subjects to the question about poverty affecting most Angolans, since 75.9% agreed. It becomes interesting for the reason that it can be associated to the interviews produced in our research. Generally speaking, the inquired individuals consider themselves to be less poor than “other” Angolans, attending to the fact that not every subject had Vahanha origins.

From the inquiry made to 85 individuals in Benguela, performed by our esteemed colleague Manuel H. Fernando, only 1.18% considers to be extremely poor, 28.24% are poor but in a sustainable situation, and 70.58% consider themselves average. These

records are significant because they are linked to the subjectivity of the notion of poverty, as the perception of the subjects about their own condition and the social perception of poverty (Gaulejac & Léonetti, 1994, *apud* Carvalho 2004). However, even taking into consideration that the concept of poverty fluctuates according to each person, with personal interests clearly influencing their values (Sen, 1999: 35), this social perception of poverty can not be too distant from the objective experience of poverty (Carvalho, 2004: 4).

Safekeeping all these features, it is also relevant to note that the inquired Vahanha individuals believe this peace period to be better than the last stages of conflict. “Now there is no hunger, we can always prepare manioc” (H1, 2008). Their perception of extreme poverty encompasses not having enough to eat, similar to what happened in the period from 1994 to 1998 (at which time they were required to live from the charity of the previously mentioned agencies and NGOs), as was stated. They believe the Vahanha became poor when they lost the possibility to hold cattle and farmland. “My father had to ask for a piece of land to our distant relatives, near the river, so we could farm it” (P1, 2008). The inquired individuals with rural origins judge themselves to be poorer than those living in urban environments, but recognize that one can starve in the city too.

It was also possible to detect a perception that some essential products that are needed nowadays in the urban surroundings are not essential in rural settings (they are talking about mobile phones - so omnipresent in the urban scenery - and transportation). “There we don’t have so many expenditures, where we spend a lot in terminals (mobile phone) and taxis” (B1, 2008).

Regarding the interviewed individuals with urban origins, they consider themselves as less poor than those in the rural regions, but they also protect the temporal period, believing that life conditions in rural environments will get better. Furthermore, they believe to be better food safety in the rural regions, “because in the Hanha, you can grow anything and have always something to eat” (B2, 2008).

Despite the compulsory displacement, or perhaps due to the conditions in which it occurred, the Vahanha appear to be reacting positively to their impoverishment, interpreting it as a transitory situation. The familial, religious and traditional solidarity nets prove to be resilient enough to support the recovery of most cultural and monetary patrimonies existing before the conflict.

One last feature that should be mentioned is the social exclusion. The notion has been deeply debated, but as mentioned in a previous chapter, it may be considered a “disarticulation between several components of a society and the individuals, resulting in non-participation in the minimum set of benefits that define a full membership in that society” (Rodrigues et al, 1999: 64). The selection of this notion comes from its seemingly adaptation to the context of Angola. A large part of the Angolan population is victim of social exclusion, from lacking access to the rights or benefits incorporated in their citizenship. In Angola, “the traditional inequalities do not disaggregate the society or the social relationships, because they are mainly consensual. Modern inequalities do translate in social disintegration.” (Fernandes, 200: 206). This social disaggregation is the result of exclusion and poverty, taking place between ruled and rulers, clientelist elites and underprivileged majorities surviving from subsistence agriculture and informal economy.

The existent social exclusion does not appear to be further disaggregating the structures positioned inside familial, traditional or religious solidarity networks, but it is manifest in the link between the governmental/administrative structures and the citizen. The

Vahanha, owing to an integrative sense conceded by their religious solidarity net, do not feel excluded, but they tend to self-exclude from public political and social structures.

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