Afro-Autarky

Onjangos and Utopias of Contemporary Angolan Activism

RUY LLERA BLANES and **HITLER SAMUSSUKU**

ABSTRACT   This dispatch examines contemporary activist movements in Angola and their political utopias, namely their relevance to citizenship and governance, and their increasing importance in the political landscape. The authors describe the civic mobilization toward the implementation of a municipal electoral system (*autarquia*) and argue that it poses an Afro-utopian challenge: the issue of autarky, or the recognition of self-organization and self-sufficiency vis-à-vis postcolonial autocratic rule.

KEYWORDS   Angola, autarky, autocracy, postcoloniality, activism, utopia

This picture of a graffito of Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah was taken back in 2016 in Cacuaco, a district north of Luanda, with a population of nearly one million residents, the majority of whom are of Ovimbundo origin, from the country's central plateau and the region of Huambo.[1] From a political perspective, this translates into traditional support of the UNITA party (União Nacional para a Independência de Angola, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and corresponding opposition against the long-standing and self-perpetuating ruling party in Angola, the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola, People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola).[2] This is also one of the poorest districts of Luanda, suffering from a long-term lack of state investment and subsequent infrastructural deficit, particularly in terms of access to water, sanitation, energy, and so on.[3] It also has a recent history of violence stemming from forced evictions and resettlements under the aegis of new urban development projects promoted by the central government.

The graffito lies next door to the house of Alá, a schoolteacher who has been involved in several social and activist movements, including the extreme hip-hop collective Terceira Divisão ("Third Division"), a local crew that has released several

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FIGURE 1. Mural with portrait of Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, by Muananga Diambi, in the Vila de Cacuaco, October 2016. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

mixtapes and spearheads several civic and activist initiatives across Cacuaco and Luanda. Some members of this crew were part of the Movimento Revolucionário (the "Revolutionary Movement," often referred to as "Revú" in Angola), a youth activist movement that emerged in 2011, explicitly inspired by the then-burgeoning Arab Spring movement.[4] They had established a protest route against the MPLA government and its longtime president José Eduardo dos Santos.[5] And some members (including a coauthor of this text, Hitler Samussuku) were part of the notorious "15+2 process" of 2015 and 2016, where a group of seventeen activists were detained and accused of attempting coup d'état.

On this particular occasion, before taking this picture, we had spent some time walking around the neighborhood with other members of the Terceira Divisão. We visited the famous Quinta do Rap, a legendary venue in the local hip-hop and rap scene, at the time closed for refurbishment. Alá's small *quintal* (front yard) was often a place for occasional gatherings among activists. At another meeting Ruy attended soon later, Hitler, Alá, and other local activists discussed the creation of a movement called Projecto AGIR, a self-defined citizen movement focused on local community action, struggling for better life conditions for its residents and developing initiatives such as community libraries, solidarity campaigns, and other projects. Currently, Alá serves as the coordinator of Projecto AGIR.

Movements such as Projecto AGIR can be understood as emerging in a second wave of Angolan activism, where, after the 15+2 process, many activists have rerouted their political activities into civic organizations that are mobilizing to respond to local community concerns and at the same time networking to establish a nationwide strategy of citizen participatory democratic practice. As Projecto AGIR recently claimed in a public statement, "We are the rulers in our municipality, and we do not feel represented by anyone" (No município mandamos nós e não nos sentimos representados por ninguém).[6] This followed another claim issued by AGIR: "In Angola, authorities are more invested in creating a society of subjects and not of citizens" (Em Angola, as autoridades estão mais empenhadas em criar uma sociedade de súbditos e não de cidadãos),[7] a statement that immediately resonates with Mahmood Mamdani's discussion of the political legacy of colonialism and the postcolonial production of the political subject in Africa[8] and also explicitly reflects a growing demand among the Angolan youth: the quest for a horizontal democracy that reverses Angola's political history of autocratic and authoritarian rule.[9]

Therefore, across the Luanda region, Projecto AGIR is for Cacuaco what PLACA (Plataforma Cazenga em Acção) and LDM (Libertadores de Mentes) are for the district of Cazenga, MUDAR is for Viana, PIKK (Plataforma de Intervenção) is for Kilamba Kiaxi, and NBA (Núcleo de Boas Acções) is for Benfica—all neighborhood- or district-based citizen-driven movements toward democratic participation. Likewise, in other provinces outside Luanda, other citizen movements in Angola have also emerged: Okulinga (Matala, Huíla), Kintwadi (Uige), Lauleno (Moxico), MRB (Lobito), Balumukeno (Malanje).[10] A central contention of these movements is the problem of political participation and representation in Angola, which in recent years has been framed as "o problema das autarquias" (the problem of autarkies), or the issue of implementing of a municipal electoral system in the country.[11] In fact, from 2018 onward these different movements converged in a nationwide platform known as Jovens Pelas Autarquias (Youth for the Municipalities), led until 2020 by José Gomes Hata, also a member of the Terceira Divisão and one of the 15+2.

In Portuguese (the official language of Angola), the word *autarquia* is commonly used as a technical administrative term that refers to a local political and territorial circumscription, equivalent to a borough, municipality, town, or county. However, for citizen activist movements such as Projecto AGIR, the problem of *autarquia* is, to dwell on the phonetic and semantic proximity, principally a problem of *autarky*: the utopian, emancipatory possibility of economic and political independence, self-sufficiency, and self-sustainability in the framework of wider political units such as regions or nations.

Working through this semantic potential, we propose here the concept of Afro-autarky: a term to describe a growing citizen concern and implication in issues of

personal and collective sovereignty, one invested in aspects of territory and governance, that is observed across the African continent and that is currently defining the Angolan civic and activist space.

The notion of autarky has a history in trade and economic theory as a formulation of a "closed economy," or a system that has achieved self-sufficiency and therefore does not require international exchange of goods and services.[12] However, as a political ideology or formulation, autarky has historically been associated with autonomist and emancipatory endeavors such as independence movements, utopian communities, mutual aid and fraternal societies, cooperatives, and so on, with well-known territorial expressions in Chiapas, Marinaleda, Auroville, and countless intentional communities. In this framework, beyond the more obvious movements of decolonization that strove toward self-determination,[13] Africa has known multiple examples of autarkic rule throughout its history, notoriously in nineteenth-century Madagascar,[14] or perhaps even in a darker and more violent version, King Leopold II's Congo Free State (1885–1908). In any case, what these examples show us is that autarky emerges from the intersection of a social and political ideology of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and a territorial opportunity.

But in terms of contemporary Africa, autarky can be framed within a specific problem of postcolonial rule, in particular in response/reaction to, or as resistance against, a dominant feature in mid- to late-twentieth-century African independent regimes: autocracy, of which Angola (along with Zimbabwe) might be the ultimate example, with the perpetual, concentrated rule by single figures (José Eduardo dos Santos, Robert Mugabe) and parties (MPLA, ZANU-PF). In this framework, Robert Rotberg has discussed autocracy as a despotic political form that is in many ways typical of postindependence southern Africa—a form that transformed the anticolonial dream of emancipation and self-governance into a neocolonial replication of authoritarianism.[15] More generally, from Southeast Asia[16] to South America,[17] this autocratic political form has historically relied on the vertical construction of hierarchical and unequal distributions of power, following logics of concentration (e.g., from nepotism to elitism, presidentialism, centralization, etc.) and in concomitance with exploitative economic processes such as kleptocracy and other forms of parasitism, and the usurpation of resources. As Rotberg has pointed out for the case of Angola,[18] this is typically the case for the vast majority of extraction-based (e.g., oil, diamond) economies, which are historically less prone to widespread distribution of revenue. But it is also typical of many postcolonial formations that have experienced replications of colonial, elite-based systems of resource extraction.[19]

At the same time, however, autocracy is often invoked by those making arguments for "authenticity" and "tradition"—namely, in African contexts where patriarchy and gerontocracy appear as anthropological structures within

so-called traditional societies. This—the purported naturalness of hierarchy in African traditional societies—is a contested yet relevant issue, considering its currency in political discourse.[20] In any case, it is against such anthropological pessimism or fatalism that the will to autarky emerges.[21]

In this framework, the response/reaction/resistance of autarky is more than a mere longing for self-determination: it is also a struggle for horizontalism and a new distribution of power within unsettled and precarious democratic regimes. It is an antiautocratic movement. Consequently, what we refer to here as an autarkic utopia can also be understood as a new instance of an older process of struggle toward justice and freedom against necropolitical autocratic domination, be it in its colonial or postcolonial form.

For example, the problem of autarky versus autocracy finds maximum expression in the urban space, where political contention and the stakes of citizenship peak. The case of Angola is particularly telling, as it has experienced, since the end of its civil war in 2002, an economic boom that has translated into an aggressive policy of urban construction and subsequently into countless episodes of forced evictions, expropriations, and dispossession against the Angolan citizenry.[22] Such processes have placed issues of housing, access to water, or pollution at the center of contemporary mobilizations.

In any case, Angola is no exception in this respect. One noteworthy example of this is the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement in Durban, South Africa, struggling to improve the living conditions of shack dwellers and to democratize society from below.[23] We can also see similar processes in Occupy Nigeria's oil subsidy protest[24] or Wangari Maathai's environmentalist Green Belt Movement in Kenya.[25] Such movements express the continental continuity of contemporary collective mobilizations that have shouted "Enough is enough!" and moved from a situation of waiting and expectation to a movement of proactive protest and intervention.[26] While not necessarily new in terms of social movements in Africa,[27] they embody novel forms of citizen struggles for change in the continent.

So, why understand such processes as autarky? And why would we think of it as an Afro-utopia? On the one hand, the issue of autarky embodies a multiplicity of African utopian political topographies: while it can be found in the narrative of anticolonial liberationist African socialism, it is also identified in more traditional autochthon forms of sociopolitical organization (pre- or alter-colonial), also perceived as utopian in terms of their "Afro-authenticity"—that is, their embodiment of local social relationalities beyond the hierarchy, exploitation, and inequality endemic to forms of colonial and postcolonial political domination. This utopian Afro-authenticity is palpable, for instance, in the circulation of *ubuntu* as a philosophical category that invokes an African tradition of fraternity, hospitality, mutuality, and commonality.[28] It is also characteristic of the case of the Angolan

onjangos we describe below. But this philosophy is also acknowledged within the process of postcolonial citizen struggle in Africa, addressing the possibility of horizontal, nonauthoritarian democratic rule, in reaction against antiegalitarian forms such as autocracy and dictatorship. In sum, it embodies what Felwine Sarr[29] describes as an Afrotopia—the *topoi* or places of articulation of an alternative African future beyond the epistemological and political hegemony of the present postcolonial form dominated by neocolonial, developmentalist, and repressive ideologies and practices.

In this respect, the initial invocation of Nkrumah and Kenyatta in the politically contentious space of Cacuaco is not so much a claim for inspiration, continuity, or lineage, but instead a critical and often ironic nod to another Angolan and African utopia: that of the freedom struggles that resulted in African independence[30]—of which Nkrumah and Kenyatta became emblems. In the case of Angola, the famous "generation of utopia"[31] of independence heroes such as Agostinho Neto, Lucio Lara, and others shapeshifted, in the postcolonial period, into a militarized dictatorship that co-opted citizenship into a compulsory and depoliticized cult following of the MPLA party[32] across its transmogrifications from a socialist into a petro-capitalist regime.[33] Thus, the critical interlocution of contemporary activism with the former independentist utopia addresses fundamental problems of democratic rule: citizenship, representation, territorial sovereignty, and political legitimacy.[34] This is what happened with the Revú movement since 2011, and is perhaps better illustrated in Projecto AGIR's current motto: *Reconstituição do poder popular* (Reconstitution of the Popular Power), which implies the reclaiming of the original "popular power" sequestered by the MPLA throughout the decades of omnipotent, nepotistic self-perpetuating rule. In what follows, we offer a short genealogy of activism in Angola, exploring its spatial and utopian components, in order to situate the AGIR project and its current struggles for autarky within a wider context.

Activist Topographies

Contemporary activism in Angola emerged in 2011, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. After witnessing the events that were taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere, many Angolan youth began to mobilize against the state of things in a country where, after almost a decade since the end of the civil war, and in a period of impressive economic growth in the country, the majority of Angolans were still living in destitution, perpetually stuck below the poverty line and subject to authoritarian governance.[35]

This mobilization, as argued elsewhere,[36] was not a formal, institutional association of interests, but instead a confluence of a heterogeneous group of

people—ranging from university students and teachers to hip-hop artists, journalists, and lawyers—mobilizing in demonstrations against the regime, most of which were violently repressed by the Angolan authorities. These mobilizations replicated a movement of physical and symbolic "occupation" of the public space, particularly in Luanda. Similar to Tahrir, Gezi Park, or even Occupy Wall Street and 15M in Spain, it was about making public space a politically claimable territory, targeting symbolic places collectively identified as spaces of performance, representation, and symbolization of the republic, such as the Largo Primeiro de Maio, governmental ministries, and the Cidade Alta ("Upper City," where the president of the Angolan government officially resides).

In this line, for example, the iconic Largo Primeiro de Maio square played an important role. The Largo is one of the main mobility and transport hubs in Luanda, linking the residents of Viana and the eastern *musseques* (slums) to the city center. It connects passengers to and from universities and the international Quatro de Fevereiro airport. It is also where several secondary schools are located (Largo das Escolas), so it is very common to find students in their white gowns circulating the square. And this is also where we find the famous Jardim da Independência (Independence Garden), which hosts social and cultural events on weekends, such as album releases, autograph sessions, fairs, parties, and such. From this point of view, it is more than just a place of passage—it is a dynamic and semantically profuse place in the city.

At the same time, the Largo also embodies what Robert Orsi called "abundant history,"[37] deeply embedded within Angola's independent history. It was in this space where, on November 11, 1975, Agostinho Neto, Angola's first president, declared on behalf of the MPLA the independence of the country, surpassing the statements of UNITA in Huambo and FNLA in Ambriz. Hence the current official name, Largo da Independência (Independence Square). And for many years, it was the site of the official, annual celebration of the country's independence—up until the inauguration of Agostinho Neto's mausoleum in 2012. From this perspective, the Largo is an integral part of Angola's "triumphal" political history—or rather, that of the eternal regime of the MPLA—expressed through mnemonic and ritualized collective behaviors. In other words, it is a "commemorative space" that operates through conceptual metaphors and organizational practices, in terms similar to those described by Pablo Alonso regarding the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana.[38] Today, it is still presided over by the statue of Agostinho Neto, placed in 2000, and represents the "official record" of Angolan history. This explains why places such as the Largo Primeiro de Maio were chosen for demonstrations against the government, and it was in these spaces that such violent encounters took place between the state and political dissent (fig. 2).

FIGURE 2. Demonstration in the Largo Primeiro de Maio against the Angolan government, April 2011. Photo from Central 7311.

Readers familiar with Angolan politics are aware that there is a background to this activist topography, which hearkens back to the constitutional revision that took place in 2010. This revision, at least in theory, created (with the notorious Article 47)[39] a groundwork for public gatherings that had been seriously undermined during the post-1992 constitutional period.[40] While the constitutional revision of 2010 was widely recognized as promoting a reduction of public space and active citizen participation in the political life of the country,[41] its Article 47 opened the door to greater autonomy and freedom of organization and demonstration, as it no longer enforced the need for prior authorization for gatherings, in contrast to previous constitutional texts. In this context, the Constitution itself was perceived as a space of activism, and many of the activist demonstrations were trying to exercise this article in the public spaces of Luanda and Benguela, for example. However, in practice this did not prevent violent police counteractions against these demonstrations, often justified by the authorities as a reaction to the "disturbance of public order."

At the same time, the activist topography also revealed a territorial scope clearly focused on the Angolan national space as a "zone of vindication." From this perspective, the space of criticism and dissent created by *Revú* activism also addressed historically complicated territorialities such as Cabinda, the Lunda territory, and Tundavala from the point of view of official Angolan political historiography.[42] In other words, it was about placing the country and the national project

at the center of activist contention by critically challenging the geometry imposed by the winning party.[43]

Here, the issue of Angolan nationality played an interesting role: while the Revús were repeatedly accused by state entities of acting in the service of "external interests" (the United States of America, the Open Society, and so on), they themselves criticized the MPLA's regime of governance as an extractive and parasitic process of Angola's national/natural resources, promoted by an elite structure (the so-called presidential circle) without any actual grounding in or belonging to the Angolan territory and enjoying the privilege of double nationality, with the additional Portuguese passports.[44] In this context, the recurrent rumors regarding José Eduardo dos Santos's foreign origin (São Tomé and Príncipe) were illustrative.

This emphasis on the topographies and circumscriptions of the political partially explains the emphasis given by Projecto AGIR and other civic movements to the issue of the *autarquias*. For those familiar with Angolan politics, local elections constitute a phantasmagoria of sorts in the country, in the sense that they have been on the political agenda several years—at least since the 2010 constitutional revision—but have never gone from "paper to practice," meeting multiple instances of resistance from MPLA leadership.[45] However, after the 2017 elections, which marked the end of José Eduardo dos Santos's rule and the rise to power of his designated successor João Lourenço, and after Lourenço's public commitment to tackle the issue under the aegis of an "overarching public debate," a recent memorandum from the Ministry of Territorial Administration and State Reform (from 2018) revealed a specific plan with gradual phases for the effective implementation of local authorities that would partially certify, in a first stage, some municipalities as fit for autarchic election and governance.

In this respect, while Projecto AGIR converged in general with the Lourenço cabinet's plan for the implementation of municipal elections (the Pacote Legislativo Autárquico, or Municipal Legislative Package), they intensely contested the gradual mechanism of implementation. Per the 2010 Constitution (Article 242), this gradualist approach is determined by the government itself, who decides which municipalities will be able to vote in a first phase and which will have to do so at a later stage. "Coincidentally," constituencies such as Cacuaco and other regions traditionally nonaligned with the MPLA have been left out of the initial roster. So, from the perspective of Projecto AGIR, this was a trickster move: while the government was aware of its constituency's ambition to more direct representation, they were also aware of the possibility of losing instances of governance to oppositionist parties (namely the UNITA). In response, they publicly enacted a move toward the opening up of governance to citizenship but did so only in terms that enabled the perpetuation of their rule.

FIGURE 3. Demonstration by members of Projecto AGIR and PLACA to demand effective implementation of autarchic governance in Angola, August 2019. Photo by Hitler Samussuku.

Onjangos, Devolution of Democracy, and the Spirit of Autarky

In this piece we alluded to the 15+2 process as a pivotal moment that marked a change in Angolan activism, in particular through their intervention in the public space. In the case of Projecto AGIR, for instance, many of its members also have a history of participating in marches and demonstrations to protest governmental action[46] and still continue to do so. One recent occasion was the demonstration for the implementation of the *autarquia* system in front of the National Assembly in August 2019 (see fig. 3). On other occasions they demonstrated across different territorial scales and spaces—for instance, in protests to overthrow the local administrator of the district of Cazenga (Tany Narciso) due to corruption and poor public management; to rehabilitate an abandoned public Angola-Cuba school; to demand nationwide abolition of school fees; to protest against unemployment rates; and so on.

However, members of 15+2 have also incorporated a different kind of mobilization: what in Angola is traditionally referred to as a *onjango* (or *jango*): a collective gathering of people to discuss public matters. Traditionally, in rural Angola, *onjangos* are held in the villages by the local elders or leaders (*sobas* or traditional authorities), for solving conflicts or discussing issues affecting community life (see fig. 4). They are thus part of traditional, communal regulatory systems—a system of authority in nonurban areas where the juridical apparatus is scarcely present.[47]

FIGURE 4. *Onjango* being held in "traditional style," under a tree, in Curoca, Namibe, November 2020. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

On the one hand, *onjangos* can be understood as grassroots democratic processes, in terms of their promotion of collective, participatory decision-making. On the other hand, they are not necessarily fully horizontal due to their gerontocratic and patriarchal dispositions, as well as to their hierarchical style of decision-making, based on the *soba*'s authority. Furthermore, such traditional authorities played a particularly complicated role due to their cooptation and instrumentalization in both the colonial and postcolonial regimes.[48]

In the early 2000s, *onjangos* were integrated in a political discussion that unfolded in the Angolan public space concerning the role of traditional authorities in the national politico-juridical framework.[49] But in the aftermath of the constitutional revision of 2010, and with the increasing pressure of post–Arab Spring civic mobilizations, the discussion waned. Today, these traditional political authorities are perceived as domesticated, subordinate protojuridical systems, devoid of political agency, inasmuch as *sobas* and their *onjangos* only solve conflicts related to "tradition" (cow theft, marital infidelity, and accusations of witchcraft). Furthermore, it is also common knowledge that *sobas* are also card carrying MPLA members.

However, in recent years and in the urban context, *onjango* has been progressively used as a term to describe gatherings for the discussion of collective issues,

often in the framework of social activism. This is the case of Projecto AGIR and other associations that have promoted *onjangos* on many occasions in order to promote public awareness and civic mobilization (see figs. 5 and 6).

In this sense, these contemporary urban *onjangos* appear as an activist methodology that reclaims a "traditional" political form but repurposes it for its grassroots, horizontal, and participatory dimensions. Thus, they materialize the utopian spirit of "extended democracy" and informed civic engagement.[50]

Precisely one of the main points of discussion in such *onjangos* was the issue of the *autarquia* (figs. 5 and 6). For instance, in late 2019 Projecto AGIR held several *onjangos* across Luanda's neighborhoods to discuss the problem. One such occasion was the Jornada de Poder Local (Local Governance Day) in early December in Cacuaco, where, for instance, the constitutional definition of *autarquia* as a "collective territorial identity" and its implications were unpacked before an audience of dozens.[51] In the process, concepts such as autonomy, representation, and local specificity surfaced.

It was precisely in such *onjango* debates that Projecto AGIR promoted the critical undertaking of the government's Pacote Legislativo Autárquico on the implementation of municipal elections. Subsequently, together with PLACA, they published their own revision of the package,[52] wherein they argue that the *autárquico* system, implemented in a general, nongradual process, is the only way in which an

FIGURE 5. *Onjango* organized by Projecto AGIR in Luanda to discuss the *autarquia* problem, December 2019. Courtesy of Projecto AGIR.

FIGURE 6. Poster and picture of *Onjango* organized by the authors and Terceira Divisão in Viana, Luanda, on the topic of "Garbage, Citizenship, and Local Politics," July 2021. Photo by Ruy Llera Blanes.

authentic "devolução do poder aos cidadãos" (devolution of power to the citizenship) can actually take place. A starting point for this argument is the acknowledgment that political participation in Angola is restricted, gerontocratic, and elitist, excluding an age group that in fact represents the majority of the Angolan people: the youth. In the document, they explain:

> Although politics is typically considered a space for politically experienced men and women, young people are systematically marginalized because of their young age, limited opportunities and lack of projected experience. In fact, given the demographic situation in Angola, the political project, such as municipalities, will not be successful if the positions and voices of young people, especially activists, are not taken seriously.[53]

Another statement in the document can be described as an inversion of the prevailing politics of representation in Angola: "No meu município, eu não posso ser representado, mas sim, eu devo participar" (In my municipality, I am not to be represented, instead I should participate). It is an exhortation for an active, engaged citizenship in local circles. In this respect, the *onjango* becomes the ideal method or platform through which the activists can promote an inversion from a passive to a proactive politics.

As Projecto AGIR recently announced,

> The Angolan youth committed to their homeland and to the life of the sovereign people of Angola from the country's 164 municipalities of the 1246,700 km² promise to shout loudly to the deaf governors of the Upper City: we want municipalities in all

municipalities, for the development of our communities. In addition, we will continue to encourage public participation by citizens, redeem citizenship and make it clear that Angola is not just about partisanship. So, consider this the Return of Popular Power.[54]

Conclusion: The Utopia of Afro-Autarkies

The Angolan political scientist Paulo Faria recently published an article in which he frames the current situation of citizenship in Angola as a demand for an "inclusionary politics."[55] As he explains, what we observe in post–Arab Spring Angola is the emergence of a counterpublic that unfolds through, and at the same time beyond, the trope of resistance against authoritarianism. From this perspective, as we suggested above, there is a struggle against multiple historical trajectories of autocracy and authoritarianism in this country, situated within the story of transition from colonial to postcolonial rule. Here, through the spatial metaphor of vertical versus horizontal rule, we have framed autarky against a specific postcolonial form, autocracy, which describes the impulse toward concentration of both power and economic resources.

In this respect, the activist topographies described here expose routes that combine the effervescence of popular uprising with other forms of encounter and occupation.[56] Here, as we have described, current activism in Angola is being played out not just through more "traditional" occupations of the public space of cities such as Luanda, but also through logics of gathering, illustrated in the refiguring of an otherwise traditional socio-juridical framework: the *onjangos* or collective decision circles. While these forms formally embody an Angolan (and African) tradition of politics, they also incorporate an equally important semantic redefinition, whereby the *onjango* is no longer a space of decision but one of deconstruction and critical undertaking.

This has been the case of Projecto AGIR, which, alongside other civic movements such as Ondjango Feminista, has used the *onjango* form to mobilize Angolans and Luandans in particular. In this respect, their quest for an "autarkic autarchy" is emblematic, inasmuch as it embodies a grassroots activist mode that stems from a simultaneously critical and creative outlook on Angolan and, more generally, African history. In this respect, while anticolonial and postindependence activism in Africa has quickly shifted vertically from the streets into political cabinets and academic environs,[57] struggles for democratic engagement and participation such as those described here reflect a different, horizontal movement that reflects not just the postcolonial moment but the post–Arab Spring moment.[58]

Ultimately, it is what Felwine Sarr recently called the Afrotopos,[59] the space that emerges through the fertilization of "thinking Africa." While the struggle for autarky continues in Angola,[60] the Afro-autarky of Projecto AGIR and other Angolan activists has created, four to five decades after independence, a new topos for the struggle toward more justice and more democracy, both in Angola and Africa.[61]

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Notes

1. Tvedten et al., *Urban Poverty*.
2. Emerging as a communist political and military movement that became, alongside the FNLA (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola; National Front for the Liberation of Angola) and UNITA, one of the protagonists of the liberation wars, the MPLA began by enforcing a Marxist-Leninist agenda. But the civil war that ensued (and lasted until 2002), and the end of the Cold War and subsequent reforms, eventually gave way to a form of authoritarian state capitalism with a single-handed and self-perpetuating government by one party since independence up to the present day. Apart from the first president, Agostinho Neto, in the early days of independence (1975–79), the country had only known one president up to the summer of 2017: José Eduardo dos Santos. Dos Santos would eventually step down voluntarily in 2017, after resigning from the party leadership and preparing a political transition, which, among other things, secured him lifetime immunity. Hodges, *Angola*; Oliveira, *Magnificent and Beggar Land*.
3. Fórum de Cacuaco, *Atlas de Cacuaco*.
4. Mukuta and Fortuna, *Os meandros*.
5. In June 2015, a group of seventeen activists (later known as 15+2 due to the two different moments of arrest) were detained by the police during a self-organized book club where, among other things, they read and debated antiauthoritarian literature. On the specific occasion of their arrest, they were reading Gene Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy* (2002). The arrest and subsequent trial raised international awareness regarding the civic contestation against the MPLA regime. Dala, *O pensamento político*; Blanes, "Optimistic Utopia"; Blanes, "Austerity en Route"; Blanes, "Current State"; Blanes, "A febre do arquivo."
6. Samussuku, "Movimento Jovens Pelas Autarquias," 3. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are our own.
7. Samussuku, "Movimento Jovens Pelas Autarquias."
8. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.
9. Blanes, "A febre do arquivo."
10. It is important to note that such mobilizations focused on aspects of local governance do not exhaust the civic mobilization in Angolan civil society in recent years, which has also seen the emergence of other associations. This is the case, for instance, with feminist and gender activisms (Ondjango Feminista, Arquivos da Identidade), with associations focusing on legal and juridical justice (Handeka, Associação Justiça, Paz e Democracia, etc.) or with

organizations struggling for housing and land rights among rural and urban communities (Associação Construindo Comunidades or Omunga—this last organization was created in 1998 but is still active and relevant in the local activist landscape).

11. In its forty-five years of independent history, Angola has only celebrated legislative elections in 1992 and 2008, and general elections in 2012 and 2017—all of which were won by the MPLA.

12. Candau, Guepie, and Schlick, "Moving to Autarky."

13. Rotberg and Mazrui, *Protest and Power*.

14. Campbell, "Adoption of Autarky"; Kaufmann, "*Faly aux vazaha*."

15. Rotberg, *Ending Autocracy*.

16. Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*.

17. Lazar, "Of Autocracy and Democracy."

18. Rotberg, *Ending Autocracy*, 124.

19. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power*.

20. Mentan, *Democratizing or Reconfiguring*. Below we counter this perspective with another, more horizontal theory of African traditionalism.

21. Blanes, "Optimistic Utopia"; Blanes, "Austerity en Route."

22. Tomás, "Refracted Governmentality"; Moreira and Cardoso, "Another Day of Life"; Gastrow, "Aesthetic Dissent"; Buire, "Intimate Encounters"; Blanes, "Scaffolding Heritage."

23. Gibson, "Upright and Free"; Pithouse, "Politics of the Poor"; Mdlalose, "Rise and Fall."

24. Olabode, *Digital Activism*.

25. Muthuki, "Challenging Patriarchal Structures"; Hunt, "It's More than Planting Trees."

26. Tall, Pommerolle, and Cahen, *Collective Mobilisations in Africa*.

27. Dwyer and Zeilig, *African Struggles Today*.

28. Nyamnjoh, *C'est l'homme*, xviii.

29. Sarr, *Afrotopia*, 14.

30. Rotberg and Mazrui, *Protest and Power*.

31. Pepetela, *A geração da utopia*.

32. Péclard, "'Depoliticizing Machine'"; Péclard, "Les chemins."

33. Hodges, *Angola*.

34. Pestana, "As dinâmicas"; Domingos, *Transição pela transação*; Samussuku, "Legitimidade política."

35. Blanes, "Austerity en Route."

36. Beirão, *Sou eu mais livre*; Blanes, "Optimistic Utopia."

37. Orsi, "Abundant History."

38. Alonso González, "Organization of Commemorative Space."

39. "Article 47 (Freedom of Assembly and Demonstration): 1) All citizens are guaranteed freedom of peaceful assembly and of demonstration without weapons without the need for authorization and in accordance with the law. 2) Meetings and demonstrations in public places require prior notification to the competent authority, under the terms and for the purposes established by law" (República de Angola, *Constituição da República de Angola*; our translation).

40. See Faria, "Dawning of Angola's Citizenship Revolution"; Domingos António, *Transição pela transação*; Cruz, *Angola amordaçada*.

41. Miranda, "A constituição de Angola 2010."

42. Cabinda is an exclave Angolan territory that has claimed autonomy since the Angolan independence in 1975, through guerrilla warfare and, more recently, activist mobilization. See Carvalho, *Cabinda*. Similarly, the Lunda Tchokwe region of Eastern Angola, source of

most of the country's diamond exploration, has struggled for autonomy. Tundavala, located in the southern region of Huila, is a known site where many "enemies of the state" were executed between the 1970s and the 1990s. Blanes, "Scaffolding Heritage."

43. Serrano, *Angola*.
44. Blanes, "Austerity en Route."
45. In this context, the issue also has to do with the fact that for many years the MPLA cadres never wanted local elections, and some of its leaders even claimed that such a process would "destroy the country." Orre and Pestana, *Arguments for Democratic Decentralisation*.
46. Blanes, "A febre do arquivo."
47. See, e.g., Robson and Roque, "Here in the City"; Orre, "Fantoches e cavalos de Tróia?"; Rémy, "As 'autoridades tradicionais' angolanas."
48. Orre, "Fantoches e cavalos de Tróia?"
49. Guedes, *Sociedade civil e estado*; Florêncio, "Pluralismo jurídico"; Kapoco et al., "Pluralismo jurídico."
50. Here it is also worth mentioning the case of Ondjango Feminista, a feminist activist platform based in Luanda that has promoted debates concerning gender equality in Angola and incorporates *onjango* into their mobilization strategies.
51. For a short video of that session, see Sammusuku, "Jornada do poder local."
52. Projecto AGIR and PLACA, "Contributos na proposta."
53. Projecto AGIR and PLACA, "Contributos na proposta."
54. Samussuku, "Movimento Jovens Pelas Autarquias."
55. Faria, "Dawning of Angola's Citizenship Revolution."
56. Bertelsen, "Effervescence and Ephemerality."
57. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power*.
58. Branch and Mampilly, *Africa Uprising*.
59. Sarr, *Afrotopia*.
60. Blanes and Samussuku, "How to Govern Angola."
61. Throughout 2020, members of Projecto AGIR and Jovens Pelas Autarquias have also promoted debates with Mozambican and Guinea-Bissauan activists toward the development of similar struggles. While Guinea-Bissau is, like Angola, one of the few countries without municipal elections, Mozambique serves as an example of the implementation of a gradualist system. See, e.g., Buur, "Politics of *Gradualismo*."

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