

# Fear and fainting in Luanda: paranoid politics and the problem of interpretative authority in Angola

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This article unpacks the events and reactions surrounding a mysterious ‘fainting wave’ that swept through Angolan middle and high schools from early 2011 on. By attending to the historicity and materiality of the fainting wave, the article investigates why the strong conviction took root of a dark political intentionality behind this inexplicable phenomenon, and why this conspiratorial interpretation prevailed over alternative explanations of a more psychological or spiritual bent. Through this, the article contributes to disaggregating the seemingly monolithic, neo-authoritarian Angolan state. More importantly, it points to the limitations of analyses pivoting on an idea of opposing rationalities, while at the same time demonstrating how historically attuned, deep ethnography can help us overcome the limits of more ‘scientific’ psychological explanations.

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## The fainting wave: unknown evildoers threatening peace

Gina<sup>1</sup> lay on a thin foam mattress in her room, the saline drip stuck in the back of her hand, feeling ‘very feeble’. The sister of one of my regular research interlocutors, Gina was but one of the countless victims of the ‘fainting wave’ that swept through middle and high schools in Angola from April to September 2011. These *desmaios* (faintings) affected scores of teenage school girls, usually twenty to 100 victims per episode, but also, in a few cases, some male students and teachers.

Gina had been in class when she and her classmates heard shouting and running from the corridors. ‘When our friends started fainting’, she told me, ‘we knew we had to get out, otherwise something even worse would happen to us’. Victims like Gina typically reported a horrible ‘kind of rotten’ smell, a cold sensation, an unexplained mist in the school halls, shortness of breath, dizziness, and loss of consciousness. Gina herself collapsed outside the gates of her school after she saw ambulances arrive and take her classmates away. She was taken to a health centre, then discharged home to her family with a saline drip and the recommendation to drink lots of fluids.

Like the broader Angolan public in the grip of the fainting wave, Gina was anxiously awaiting the results of the tests that the ‘competent authorities’ were carrying out

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to discover what unknown substance or gas had caused her to faint. And, more significantly, she shared the widespread belief that someone had to be behind the mysterious attacks: 'It can only be a person who is behind this. There is no other reason, no other justification for this. No one knows, even the *segurança* [state security service] do not know'.

The fainting wave had started in technical schools, when over ninety students fainted at the PUNIV (pre-university) in Nova Vida, and around twenty students at the Cazenga *politécnico* (polytechnic high school) a few days later. Because these were newly built schools, with laboratories, and because the first victims reported a 'smell of gas', it was thought that an 'unknown gas' had caused the fainting. The authorities reacted swiftly: victims were rushed to hospitals by ambulance, where they were administered saline drips, while the Criminal Investigation Service (Serviço de Investigação Criminal, SIC) launched a forensic investigation into the nature of the gas, declaring that a group of unknown *malfeitores* (evildoers) were using an unknown toxic substance to create panic and destabilize the country. The police were conducting investigations to identify the gas, as well as the people who were responsible for the attacks, state media reported.

As the wave started spreading across Luanda's high schools, the authorities stepped up their response: armed police units and canine brigades set up entry checks at the school gates, with students searched and any suspicious items of cosmetics confiscated. Victims were rushed to isolation wards and had their blood taken for analysis, though the only treatment available was ultimately the administration of fluids. Leading lights of the ruling MPLA – the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) – appealed for calm. Sebastião Bento Bento, the then first party secretary for Luanda, deplored the 'general climate of instability' in the state-controlled public newspaper *Jornal de Angola*, and demanded 'vigilance' from all citizens to denounce and 'unmask the evil-doing individuals at the service of crime and interests alien to the Angolan people'. He added that he had no doubt that the same people who 'mobilize the youth to realize ... demonstrations of public disorder, intrigue, and offence to government entities' were also behind these criminal acts in the schools (*Jornal de Angola* 2011).

Still the fainting wave gained in amplitude. Having by now affected a majority of Luandan high schools, it reached Caxito, the provincial capital of neighbouring Bengo; then reports started coming in from more distant provinces, like Cabinda, Uíge, and Namibe. In July, at the peak of the wave, state news agency ANGOP reported, 'Over the last twenty-four hours, [there have been] 570 cases of fainting in the provinces of Luanda and Namibe', and affirmed that the police were still searching for the gas that caused it: 'Until now, the type of toxic substance has not been identified, nor have the authors of those practices been repudiated by society' (ANGOP 2011).

As the authorities appeared unable to put a stop to the phenomenon, alternative interpretations of the attacks started circulating. Yes, it was an unknown gas, people said, deployed with evil intent, but surely if Angola's state security service – 'the most powerful in the world, and stronger than the CIA', as a friend's cousin asserted – had not managed to discover who was behind it, it was obviously the government itself who was behind the attacks. Only the Ministry of the Interior had the capacity to import such a dangerous substance, and it was testing the gas on innocent girls as a means of crowd control. This would only get worse in the run-up to the elections, scheduled for late August 2012, citizens surmised darkly.

Phenomena such as mass fainting, mass hysteria, or ‘mass psychogenic illnesses’ (in psychological parlance) pose a problem of interpretation, not only to the people directly affected by them, their closest friends and relatives, and society at large, but, as I develop below, also for anthropological scholarship. More than a metaphorical rumour or moral panic, the fainting wave had a distinct physicality and historicity. Taking Angolans’ claims about the causes of the fainting wave seriously (cf. Littlewood 2016) sheds a light on recent Angolan political history. Returning to that history allows us to understand why the interpretations of the *desmaios* might have taken on this specific form and in this specific moment.

I suggest that the material reality of the fainting wave, and its effect on people’s bodies, echoed Angolans’ previous experiences of horrible, inexplicable events, of disappearing people, and of the state’s capacity for violence against the population. At the same time, there was an unruliness to the fainting wave that resists simple, instrumental explanations, and, as I detail in the following, invites us to rethink the capacities and supposed unity of purpose of neo-authoritarian regimes like Angola and beyond, revealing how both the dominated and the dominant are caught up in the same webs of paranoia. The specificities of the Angolan case also open up a set of interrogations about anthropological interpretative authority itself, its limits and its strengths, especially when juxtaposed with facile culturalist or pop psychological analyses of comparable phenomena.

The argument I develop here is largely based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Luanda (2010–11), during which I tried to understand the ways in which the MPLA’s continued dominance of Angolan social and political life was socially reproduced and renegotiated (Schubert 2017). When the fainting started, its political connotations made it centrally relevant to the questions I was interested in. However, questions of power, memory, and violence are delicate subjects in a post-conflict environment like Angola’s, and talking about politics was, for a long time, almost impossible. Accordingly, while I managed to interview some official figures about the fainting wave, directly accessing its victims proved much more difficult. On the one hand, this was due to formal hurdles: schoolteachers and directors felt they could not openly reveal to me, a foreigner, what had happened, and especially not while the competent authorities were still investigating. On the other hand, despite my long-standing familiarity and ties with Angola,<sup>2</sup> I was socially not the best-placed person to freely talk to the girls and young women who had fainted, and, vice versa, they were not necessarily at ease discussing their bodily afflictions with me – a foreign, white, university-educated man, then unmarried and in my late twenties. As such, my access to the fainting wave was necessarily more oblique, through old friends or select contacts I had cultivated before it started, as well as through careful attention to hearsay, rumour, and reporting in the media and on social media. This, as well as the challenging nature of the material itself, might also explain why it took me nine years to feel in a position where I could properly start thinking and writing about it.

I start with government attempts to instrumentalize the inexplicable phenomenon for political purposes. I then place competing popular political interpretations in their sociohistorical context to propose why the nefarious political intent behind the events was never doubted, even if its authorship was. The next section considers the place and limits of anthropological and psychological interpretative authority. I then show how the phenomenon resists neat mapping onto political binaries by examining how the ‘competent authorities’, too, were caught up in the webs of this paranoid politics,

which serves to disaggregate the seemingly monolithic MPLA state. The article's final section engages with the fainting wave's gendered dimension, before concluding with reflections on what is at stake in interpretative power and the limits of that authority.

### **Instrumentalizing a discourse of stability**

After the first episodes of fainting in Nova Vida and Cazenga, government authorities were quick to ascribe the fainting wave to enemies of the nation. Political leaders, police commanders, and state media such as *Jornal de Angola* and Televisão Pública de Angola (TPA, the public broadcaster) propagated the idea of a mysterious gas, and blamed the events on 'unknown evildoers', dissidents, or other 'enemies' seeking to create fear (e.g. Mendes 2011). In many ways, the official take on the events followed the classic MPLA playbook, by instrumentalizing what was happening to appeal for calm, vigilance, and the upholding of the post-war status quo of stability and reconstruction. The aggressive rhetoric against 'enemies of peace' such as deployed by Bento Bento (above) comes as no surprise, especially as the MPLA government was careful to nip in the bud any challenges to its authority.

February 2011 had seen, for the first time in decades, an open call for an anti-government demonstration, launched anonymously on the internet. The call made explicit reference to the then ongoing Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, drawing parallels between the long-standing dictatorships of North Africa and the situation in Angola, and demanded the resignation of President José Eduardo dos Santos, who at that time had been in power for thirty-two years. The call initially circulated in restricted circles and was met with widespread scepticism, only gaining wider notoriety when the government reacted, with visible nervousness, two weeks after it was first announced. State media denounced the proposed demonstration as an attempt to destabilize the country and threaten the 'gains of peace'.<sup>3</sup> Government officials and high-ranking MPLA members also publicly spoke out against the demonstration, arguing that there was no need to protest because things were fine. Moreover, they said, it was dangerous and irresponsible to create *confusão* (confusion, disorder) and instability ahead of the 2012 elections (e.g. VOA 2011). After such a build-up of tensions and bellicose government rhetoric, only around twenty people appeared at Independence Square at dawn on 7 March. All of them, including four journalists, were immediately arrested. They were released later in the evening, with the police stating that the protesters had been taken into custody for their own protection. And yet the government was visibly rattled, especially when a group of activists eventually lumped together under the epithet 'youth revolutionaries' called for further demonstrations, all of which, from 2011 through 2017, were met with increasing police violence and judicial prosecution.

It is thus hardly surprising that party ideologues were quick to ascribe the fainting wave to the same nefarious evildoers and enemies of stability, foreign agents who were corrupting Angola's youth and inciting them to criticize our Comrade President. Wielding a discourse of 'stability' to repress possible challenges and reassert authority is, after all, standard practice for authoritarian regimes. Identifying the traitors within is a classic means to create certainty in the face of uncertainty, to 'make a claim to power, to try to police the boundaries of permissible politics, and to exert authority in the face of constantly shifting affiliations' (Thiranagama & Kelly 2010: 3). Karen Kroeger, for example, writing on AIDS rumours in Indonesia in 1990, reveals how the government, instead of dismissing the rumours, characterized them as 'politically

motivated', implicating undefined 'anti-establishment groups', and reappropriated the narrative, aiming to re-establish the government's authority as experts and 'protectors of the public good' (2003: 252). Here, we can also see clear attempts by government authorities to control the narrative in this fashion. But the fainting wave, in its seemingly unstoppable physical unruliness, resisted straightforward political instrumentalization.

### Suspecting the state

Our police are so efficient, if they really wanted to end this they could do so immediately. But those monkeys at SINFO [state security and intelligence service] refuse to work! It's the PIR [Rapid Intervention Police] who have this substance [i.e. the suspected gas], to stop demonstrations. The substance that is being used – it is only the Ministry of the Interior that is importing it for the PIR, to take down individuals who are demonstrating and creating public confusion. I think it is to distract the people ahead of approving the new electoral laws.

Like Lucas Pedro, quoted above, who at that time ran one of Angola's few independent online news portals, Club-K, many people suspected a sinister government plan behind the fainting wave. Either, people said, they were testing a crowd control gas, or simply creating *confusão* so that they could 'restore order' and claim credit for this ahead of the elections. Bela, Gina's sister, expressed similar sentiments when she said, 'This will only get worse towards the elections', without, however, being able to specify why she had that feeling. Lucas questioned the government's capabilities, decrying it as incompetent, while at the same time reinforcing the image of an all-powerful and evil security apparatus by alleging a dark design behind the events.<sup>4</sup>

By examining these explanations within the context of Angolan political history, we can begin to untangle the webs of meaning that were attached to this singular event, and to understand its material reality. There is often a historical reality to phenomena superficially glossed as rumour or superstition that has to be taken seriously (Bernault 2006; Ellis 1989; Sanders 2008). As several of my interlocutors underlined, the fainting wave was a tangible reality, not just a myth or a rumour, as they still felt its after-effects in their bodies, and, anyway, it was 'impossible that 2,000 people would simply pretend to faint'. As Didier Fassin writes of South African rumours about medical experiments on the population, these circulated the way they did because 'plots were actually conceived, horrifying stories were partially disclosed and circulated' (2008: 324). And as Simukai Chigudu compellingly argues in the case of a cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe in 2008/9, the notion that the government would poison water supplies with cholera was convincing for many, precisely because it resonated with people's substantive experiences of citizenship: houses demolished, aid withheld, opposition supporters crushed, and the overall uneven provision of public services (Chigudu 2019: 420, 428). For most of the last sixty years of Angolan history, political violence – including by the government – was a brutal reality and Angolans had every reason to distrust official explanations. The material reality of the fainting wave, and its effect on people's *bodies*, echoed Angolans' previous experiences of horrible, inexplicable events, of disappearing people, and of the state's capacity for violence against the population.

The most emblematic signifier of that capacity has been the 'coup attempt' of 27 May 1977, the long shadow of which has loomed over Angola's political landscape since early post-independence days. The events itself are disputed amongst Angolans and historians alike: according to the government's reading, MPLA factionalists led by Nito Alves and backed by the masses from Luanda's *musseques* (shantytowns) planned a coup to overthrow the government and assassinate President Neto. Participants, however,

mostly claim that they had only planned a demonstration. In the early morning of 27 May 1977, groups of *nitistas*, as the putschists were subsequently labelled, seized the central São Paulo prison and the National Radio, and one band detained and killed eight important MPLA commanders. Cuban forces were called in, retook the National Radio, and proceeded to hunt down suspected putschists in the neighbourhoods of Sambizanga and Rangel. As a result, it brought about an internal purge of the party, and the killing and imprisonment of suspected dissidents all over the country. While the government later talked of about 200 deaths, advocacy groups claim that between 40,000 and 82,000 people were killed in the aftermath of the events (Cabrita Mateus 2007; Francisco 2007; Pawson 2014). Much of the trauma of the *27 de Maio* is due to the fact that this was primarily an internal purge of the MPLA government against its own citizens, the arbitrary character of arrests and summary executions, the use of torture, and the fact that bodies were not returned to their families for burial. Already Portugal's brutal counterinsurgency war (1961-74) had made use of a wide network of informants and traitors reporting to the dreaded secret police, the PIDE (Policia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado), with deep corrosive effects on communities and families. Now, the newly independent government was deploying strikingly similar tactics against its own supporters. As it is commonly said, afterwards there was no family left in Angola that had not been affected somehow by the purges.

The MPLA continued in power, and key perpetrators of the purges have remained in key positions until today – including, allegedly, José Eduardo dos Santos himself (Kassembe 1995: 152). As the civil war against the rival former liberation movement UNITA – the South-Africa backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) – escalated, the 'enemy' was everywhere, and for a very long time it was impossible to talk openly about the events of 1977. Moreover, when, following the first round of the 1992 elections, the MPLA distributed arms to the population in Luanda to unleash deadly violence against suspected supporters of its wartime opponent, and now main opposition party, UNITA, this echoed in the minds of Luandans the violence of 1977, as revealed in the pithy saying: 'Blood is flowing down from the Kinaxixe [a central square] again.'

Angolans thus have good reasons to suspect their government of wanting to physically harm and even obliterate them, and having the capacity to do so. Events like the *27 de Maio* or the 1992/3 killings in Luanda have left physical traces and visible absences in people's lives and families. The impact of the fainting wave as well as the reactions to it can only be understood by looking at Angolans' experiences of a history of political violence and disappearances, through which the dark political intentionality ascribed to the fainting wave becomes in fact existentially true (Scheper-Hughes 1996: 9; see also Humphrey 2003: 185).

While state violence against the population was, in the post-war period, only rarely acted out against initially relatively marginal malcontents such as the youth demonstrators from 2011 onwards, the memory and possible threat of violence loomed large in people's imagination. In that sense, the routinization of violence in everyday life was not actualized violence, but, for most of the time, a learned, embodied experience of potential violence. The threat of state violence, combined with the experience of living under a surveillance state, has led to deeply engrained habits of suspicion and caution. Like in Linda Green's landmark study on 'fear as a way of life' in the Guatemalan highlands, 'the spectacle of tortures and death and massacres and disappearances in the recent past have become more deeply inscribed in individual bodies and the collective

imagination through a constant sense of threat'. Fear thus becomes a 'chronic condition' that pervades and destabilizes social relations and thrives on ambiguities like rumours, innuendos, and suspicions of denunciations (Green 1994: 227). It is by attending to this historical dimension, and the strong taboo against discussing events of Angola's violent past, that we can begin to understand the internal logic of the interpretations of the fainting wave.

### Reconsidering anthropological authority

Given this historical baggage, it would be tempting to fall back on a relatively standard analytical trope. Popular commentary on the fainting wave that attributed its evil political intentionality to the government could easily be interpreted as popular critique of, and resistance to, state power – as indeed many accounts of similar phenomena as counter-hegemonic practices tend to do (e.g. Comaroff 1985; Scott 1990; Thomson 2011). From vernacular critique it is but a small analytical step to interpret the fainting wave as a Scottian 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985), a means for these normally voiceless young female students to express their unease about the approaching elections (see also Ong 1988). My own first, instinctive reaction to the events was also to interpret it as an act of resistance, a way of speaking the unspeakable. However, as Todd Sanders justly points out in his critique of the 'seductive analytics' of the occult, this line of interpretation has somewhat become 'anthropological orthodoxy' because it conforms, in its 'intuitive plausibility, seductiveness and persuasiveness', with 'broader anthropological sensibilities' (2008: 108-9): that is, our innate sympathies for the powerless.

None of the girls I spoke to or who talked about their experiences to friends or the media even hinted at the possibility that they were resisting an overbearing state power. Students I met at the Cazenga Polytechnic also rejected any notion of stress, saying the fainting had happened out of the blue, and that they hadn't been studying for exams at that time. However, they had heard that one of the suspects apprehended had a brother in the *segurança*, which would explain how he had access to the gas, though it was unconscionable to use such a product against students. If the elections were mentioned at all, it was obliquely, and not directly by the victims themselves (though they, too, would have been socialized into Angolan political culture and thus steeped in the tensions surrounding all things political). And this is where the problem of anthropology's interpretative authority comes into light.

As anthropologists, we tend to interpret certain social phenomena as thinly veiled metaphors for something else. Vampire rumours in Puerto Rico are, in this logic, 'a popular commentary on modernity and its risks as they are perceived' (Derby 2008: 292), stories about zombies a vernacular criticism of 'millennial capitalism' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003; Geschiere 1997; but see also Niehaus 2005 for a critique). Spirit visitations in Malaysian garment factories are 'the unconscious beginning of an idiom of protest against labor discipline and male control' (Ong 2010: 207), while in rural post-war Mozambique spirit possession offers 'practices suited to cope with the past' (Honwana 2003: 72). Similarly, epiphenomena such as mass fainting, collective hysteria, or laughter epidemics present anthropologists 'with the task of deciphering covert messages embedded in possession incidents' (Ong 1988: 33), and have accordingly been diagnosed as the 'somatization of a pathology in the body politic' (Kroeger 2003: 254; see also Green 1994: 248).

Much as the literature on ‘spirit possession’ (see Boddy 1994 for an overview) and similar phenomena is inspiring, it does require somewhat of an analytical leap to make authoritative statements about somatization and the ‘real’ underlying causes of a social phenomenon. Anthropologically informed analysis rightly resists translating such afflictions as ‘mass hysteria’ (in itself a term with a long, deeply sexist history) or ‘conversion disorder’ such as to avoid producing ‘commensurability between European and non-Western conceptual categories’ (Seale-Feldman 2019: 308-9). One dominant mode of analysis then resorts to juxtaposing different ‘rationalities’ – more often than not the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ – that stand in tension, asserting that it is this tension that is expressed or somatized in culturally resonant registers. In the case of the Angolan fainting wave, however, we are manifestly not presented with an opposition between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ worlds, where a ‘traditional field’ evades and undercuts the state’s ordering attempts (Bertelsen 2016). This should invite us to rethink the notion of opposing rationalities, and whether, when analysing repertoires of political culture, the analytical binary of tradition and modernity still has any heuristic value.

In her analysis of spirit possession at a Ugandan girls’ school, Letha Victor enjoins us to leave open in our interpretations the uncertainty the people affected by such an inexplicable phenomenon are experiencing: ‘In concluding that spirit possession is definitively idiomatic or metaphorical, or a tool of subconscious critique, something of the uncertainty of those lived experiences ... is lost’ (2019: 399). If standard explanations of ‘mass hysteria’ or ‘conversion disorder’ are unsatisfying, both for discounting the lived experiences of the victims and for not following standard vectors of propagation, and while we should be wary of arrogating to ourselves the interpretative authority to interpret the girls’ fainting as resistance, we may still interpret the *reactions* to such an event, and how these are shaped by larger sociopolitical dynamics at play. In doing so, the fainting wave opens up insights into the Angolan popular political imaginary and its circulation, and the violence inherent in it.

In following this tack, I am inspired by Donna Goldstein and Kira Hall’s analysis of a 2012 outbreak of inexplicable motor tics among teenage school girls in Le Roy, New York. Like Goldstein and Hall (2015: 641), my purpose is not to *diagnose* this mysterious disease (thereby reducing it to a single, neat explanation), but rather to try to understand why one account prevailed over others in explaining the phenomenon. In the Le Roy case, Goldstein and Hall elaborate, the affliction was interpreted by neurologists as ‘conversion disorder’ or ‘mass psychogenic illness’, reviving a Freudian understanding of teenage girls being especially susceptible to somatizing stress, and bolstered by state-of-the-art fMRI scans. Although the explanation was implausible, as the girls had not socialized together and their families rejected the stress diagnosis, it ‘outsourced its competitors’ because it drew on neuroscience’s cultural and scientific capital and lazy media depictions of Le Roy residents as parochial and medically uneducated. More crucially, it foreclosed any inquiry into potential environmental causes, despite various industrial hazards in the area – what Nick Shapiro (2014) refers to as ‘strategic unknowing’. Rather than seeking remedy from a company or the authorities, the neuropsychological explanation ‘sought to locate the cause narrowly: inside the brain and among the afflicted themselves’ (Goldstein & Hall 2015: 651).

In the Angolan case, as I will further detail below, psychological or spiritual explanations were roundly rejected in favour of a techno-scientific, conspiratorial interpretation: a mysterious gas deployed by unknown evildoers. The main contention,

as outlined above, was over the identity and political intentionality of these evildoers, not over the gaseous nature of the phenomenon itself, nor over its gendered dimension. By unravelling the contingency of these explanations – the long history of unacknowledged state violence against the citizenry and the ambivalent status of young women in urban Angola – we may come to a closer understanding not of the ‘actual root causes’ of the fainting wave itself, but as to why, in this specific place and time, the idea of the unknown gas deployed for evil purposes ‘outconspired’ competing possible explanations. In rural Mozambique, Harry West describes how, on the Mueda plateau after the war, ‘beliefs in sorcery and sorcery-related discursive acts have constituted ... a means of apprehending the fundamental characteristics of power and have served as a social diagnostics of power’ (2001: 123). Similarly did a belief in a political conspiracy offer convincing answers to Angolans confronted with the 2011 fainting wave.

Shifting the gaze away from the victims alone by tracing the rejection of psychological explanations and the resonance of the conspiratorial interpretation among a multiplicity of actors also allows us to see how both ‘the dominated’ and ‘the dominant’ are caught up in the same ‘webs of meaning’ – in this case, the hegemonic, paranoid politics that enables the social reproduction of neo-authoritarian power. At the same time, it reveals this hegemony’s limitations, helping us disaggregate the seemingly monolithic state.

### Multidirectional state fantasies

So far, both the initial reaction of the authorities – denouncing unknown evildoers as enemies of stability – and the competing interpretation that circulated, which revealed widespread distrust of the government’s motivations and actions, could suggest a simple opposition between state power and its agents, on one side, and the resistant population, on the other side. However, the unruliness of the fainting wave – that is, the visible, physical effects on its victims and the state’s manifest incapacity to stem it – complicates this binary, echoing what Begoña Aretxaga has described as the ‘mirroring paranoid dynamic’ through which, in a climate marked by (state) terror, those commonly identified with the state are equally ‘haunted by the perceived power of terrorists, subversives, criminals, or guerrillas’ (2003: 402). The fantasy of nefarious state power is multidirectional and not limited to its subjects: it also affects those commonly identified as agents of the state. And while during the long civil war the internal other was easily identifiable as the ‘bandits’ and ‘apartheid stooges’ of UNITA, the end of the civil war has rendered supposed ‘enemies of stability’ much more elusive and harder to pin down.

When I interviewed Dr André Soma, the then provincial director of education in Luanda, he insisted on the political intentionality behind the gas attacks, categorically refuting that the fainting wave was a moral panic, akin to earlier school panics that had made the rounds in Luanda in the 1980s. He was specifically referring to the *caixão vazio*, the infamous ‘Empty Coffin’, memories of which this fainting wave provoked among many of my interlocutors. The *caixão vazio* was, according to Luandans who had been in state high schools in the mid-1980s, a gang of criminals that drove around town in an open-bed lorry that carried an open, empty coffin, and who attacked high schools, allegedly cutting off the breasts and genitals of teachers and pupils. Many of my interlocutors remembered how they and their classmates fled their classrooms in panic when someone said that the *caixão vazio* were coming to their school, and some kids ‘would jump out, over the walls, even breaking their legs in the process, they were

so afraid!’<sup>5</sup> Predictably, at the height of the terror, some students also used this as a means to disrupt lessons and take a morning off, simply by hollering ‘*caixão vazio*’ and rejoicing in the ensuing chaos. The recurrence of inexplicable, uncanny events at schools specifically, however, underscores the importance of schools and schooling for Angolan urban society: liminal, transformative spaces of success and projection from the colonial regime’s policy of assimilation to today’s landscape of marketized individual advancement through education.<sup>6</sup>

Although, for many, the current fear of the fainting wave echoed the panic about the *caixão vazio*, Dr Soma refused to draw any parallels, asserting that the Empty Coffin had just been a rumour, started by some students intent on creating chaos:

The fainting is a different thing. This is not a myth – no one would play [pretend] to faint. It’s an unknown substance, a gas or a liquid, which after being inhaled makes the people faint. In Luanda alone, 2,000 people fainted, 80 per cent of which are girls. The 10 or 20 per cent of boys were the first who rushed to help the girls. It’s not possible that a group of 2,000 would just feign the fainting. Personally, I believe that it is a substance, but I don’t know which it is, and I am waiting for the competent authorities to tell us what it is.

Like Dr Soma, state health professionals were also anxiously waiting for the ‘competent authorities’ to clarify what was behind the attacks. But who were the competent authorities in this case?

### **A monolithic, powerful party-state?**

The police and the Ministry of Health doggedly pursued the theory of an unknown toxic gas that caused students to faint. Anything remotely suspicious such as lipsticks and deodorants was confiscated at school gates, increasing tensions and distrust amongst students. And the wave escalated further: in August 2011, President dos Santos mobilized the army’s Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defence specialists, and a few days later, the Vice-Governor of Luanda province, Juvelina Imperial, fainted as she was visiting one of the affected schools in the urban district of Cacuaco.

The wife of a friend, working as a senior nurse at the military hospital, told me over dinner that they received a lot of cases. The symptoms the girls exhibited were headaches and breathing difficulties, so the medical personnel gave them oxygen, but after a while the victims recovered and could go home. They only took blood samples from those who had severe headaches, but the results did not show anything unusual. The girls did not have anything in common except for the fact of being at the same school, nor were they closest friends (much like in the Le Roy case). We all agreed that this was a very strange thing, but that no one could explain it. When I asked her if I could come to the hospital next time they had some girls coming in she told me, rather unsurprisingly, that patients were kept in isolation wards, and that the medical staff could only approach them when wearing masks, coats, and gloves, and that no external people were allowed near.

The Ministry of the Interior, by contrast, appointed Dr Rui Pires to head a taskforce to investigate and address the matter. Dr Pires, who was, in 2011, nine years after the end of the war, one of three trained psychiatrists in Angola, fought a lone uphill battle to have the phenomenon recognized and treated as mass psychogenic illness.

When I interviewed him, he thought the events were only logical in the Angolan context: ‘We are a country that has seen a lot of war – not only the civil war, but the independence struggle before that. This has led to a widespread paranoid disposition. We see the enemy behind everything’. According to him, the first victims, girls at the

Nova Vida school, had simply been stressed because of exams. They said they had smelled a toxic gas when they came to because that had been a plot twist in a Brazilian *telenovela* just a few days earlier. Dr Pires blamed the authorities for lending credence to that explanation, and then overreacting and thus contributing to the massive spread of the phenomenon. He said that the combination of media sensationalism and martial intervention by the police, which had deployed armed agents, canine brigades, and chemical warfare specialists to school gates, had had a deep effect on impressionable youths. This, combined with bad medical assistance (i.e. fluids and isolation rather than counselling) and some *aproveitamento político* (political profiteering) by MPLA leaders, who equated the attacks with other 'disturbances' such as anti-government demonstrations, created, for him, the perfect storm. Proof for his theory was, according to him, that his small taskforce eventually succeeded in halting the fainting wave by imposing a media blackout and pulling off the police and medical emergency teams from the schools, dispatching psychological assistants instead. This, combined with the post-exam holiday break, finally calmed down the events.

However, for a majority of Angolans, this explanation was clearly not convincing. As I was talking to Dr Pires at the 1<sup>o</sup> de Maio high school, the school director appeared and overheard us. He greeted us politely, but doubted Dr Pires's explanation: 'Mass hysteria? I cannot believe this. I also felt an irritation of the throat and ill at ease'. Dr Pires was undeterred: 'This is pure suggestion! If there was an irritating agent causing your throat to itch, we should first note an irritation of the mucous membranes of the eyes and nose'. The director replied, 'Suggestion, at my age? Impossible!' Dr Pires insisted, 'It is not a question of age, it's a question of mental predisposition'. The director, however, was not convinced: 'But the teachers, too – four of them also felt ill'. Dr Soma also rejected any notion of mass hysteria or suggestion, reiterating in a radio interview how the police were the 'competent organ to repress' the phenomenon.

Fassin describes AIDS rumours in South Africa as 'paranoid-style politics' to 'underline the inflation of themes involving suspicion and accusation, the references to racism and evocation of threats, the violent tone and hyperbolic form in public discourse' (2008: 314). The discursive repertoires mobilized by the authorities around the fainting wave are certainly revealing of the 'paranoid style' of Angolan politics, considering how different interpretations unfolded locally, and at different levels of the state and party hierarchy, and in the media (cf. Fontein 2009: 387). The reaction of functionaries and state officials demonstrates how these supposedly more 'powerful' actors were also not immune to the 'paranoid disposition' that characterizes Angolan political culture. As Caroline Humphrey writes, '[P]aranoid projections and identifications are closed, that is, resistant to unraveling ... because *there is in fact a certain truth to them*' (2003: 185, emphasis in original).

A psychological explanation, such as Dr Pires's, discounted the political intentionality of the phenomenon, and therefore failed to gain much credence. It was not picked up by the media, and the rare mentions of 'mass hysteria' soon fizzled out. When I ventured the idea of mass suggestion to my friend Elizandra, she vehemently rejected the idea as ridiculous:

Mass hysteria? No, I don't believe it. Did you hear when the Vice-Commander of the Police stated that it was that, and other *besteiras* [bullshit]? And then an expert from Portugal also stated that it was a phenomenon of mass panic – how can they call for someone from Portugal to come here and make such stupid statements? How *dare* they? I know people who have inhaled the gas, and they are still suffering from the after-effects.

People insisted on the material reality of the fainting wave, and on the evil intentionality behind it. It was impossible to believe that this could ‘just happen’ without some dark agency causing the fainting. There were likely a number of factors coming together that explain why the idea of the unknown gas ‘outconspired’ alternative explanations. Causes of a more spiritual nature, akin to comparable cases from Mozambique or Tanzania, for example, were never considered (nor did the churches advance differing explanations). Although Angolans might in other cases (and especially in more rural milieus) advance explanations of a more ‘spiritual’ order such as witchcraft (*feitico*), satanic intervention, or other occult forces, explanations for the fainting wave, originating in Luanda, adopted and adapted a technical-political logic that mirrors the MPLA’s rejection of ‘tradition’ and the regime’s own conspiratorial mode of rule.

A more psychological ‘scientific’ explanation, however, such as the one advanced by Dr Rui Pires, failed to gain much traction. Different explanations are ‘enmeshed in ecologies of evidence’ (Briggs 2016): that is, access to the production and circulation of evidence is structured in highly unequal, context-specific ways. There is widespread stigma associated with mental health issues in Angola, where *malucos* (crazy people) – often individuals traumatized from the war – are left without any support, and can be seen wandering the streets of the city with matted hair, tattered clothing, and vacant stares. In addition to a likely reluctance to be pathologized and thus delegitimized as ‘crazy’, accepting a psychological explanation would potentially have meant acknowledging that there were indeed possible stress factors (such as the upcoming elections) among high school students, and that provisions for school meals and mental health in Angola were and continue to be woefully underdeveloped, both of which would have constituted a much more serious criticism of the MPLA government. More importantly, a psychological explanation foreclosed the idea of a *political* intentionality behind the events.

A conspiratorial interpretation, by contrast, made sense. It could be deployed by the authorities as a warning against potential troublemakers. At the same time, the gas attacks provided an opportunity for people to discuss the government’s sinister designs, serving as a chilling reminder of its actual willingness and capacity to act out violence against its own population. As such, the fainting wave did not undermine, but in fact reinforced, ‘the omnipotent presence of the ruling party elite, and its ability to deploy devastating “state power” at will’ (Fontein 2009: 388). Popular theories about the *malfeitores* really being agents of the state security service thus acted as a critique that ‘questions, yet paradoxically at the same time legitimates, state power’, and indicates the ‘inherent dialectical structure of hegemonic processes, blurring any clear demarcation between “state” and “challenger” and call[ing] into question approaches to popular discourse as “resistance”’ (Silverstein 2002: 646).

### **A gendered gas?**

In keeping with the argument developed here, we obviously cannot say with authority why the girls *really* fainted. However, it seems important to ask why no one seemed overly surprised that only girls fainted, and why that fact, to Angolans observing and commenting on the fainting wave, did not invalidate the theory of the unknown gas. Beyond simply ascertaining the fact that it was, in fact, in the great majority, only girls who fainted, the gendered dimension of the fainting remained surprisingly unremarked upon.

I think that the relative normality of only girls fainting speaks to the ambivalent position of (young) women in Angolan urban society: there is an official discourse that promotes women in the public sphere (a result of the MPLA's socialist past), ranging from the monument to the 'heroines' of the liberation struggle on Ho Chi Minh Avenue to the comparatively high visibility of select MPLA women appointed to ministerial and vice-ministerial posts. While women are often glorified in discourse as 'fighters' and mothers, they are discursively lifted onto this pedestal but then confined there – a dynamic that Dorothee Boulanger also retraces in her excellent political reading of Angolan post-independence literature (2017: 41, 65). In everyday practice, women remain overall limited to positions of structural social invisibility and vulnerability. This becomes evident, for example, in the way female street vendors are glossed as heroic, battling mothers fighting for their families' livelihoods while at the same time being decried as disorderly elements who create confusion and threaten the 'modern' functioning of the city, and are routinely subjected to police brutality and extortion.

There is also a clear element of wanting to regulate and control the bodies and sexuality of young women. This can be seen in recurring, frenzied debates about 'moral degradation' linked to appropriate or inappropriate ways of dressing. The *catorzinha*, the literal 'little fourteen' that a much older man in a position of influence will entertain as his lover, is rarely seen as victim, but rather scripted at best as a cunning seductress in search of easy money, or at worst as a prostitute (even though gossip about *catorzinhas* usually also includes a moral judgement of the men, and of money's corrupting power: cf. Fonseca 2015: 207; Schubert 2010: 668).

And thus, the fainting wave led to cyclical reasoning: it had to be a gas, but it could not be a gas that only targeted young women, so it had to be the products that the girls used – lipstick, powders, deodorants, or hair relaxers – or their insufficient food intake (another element of victim-shaming here). But as none of these explanations held up, people went back to the original idea of the gas, even if this did still not resolve the mystery. This is indicative of the gendered dimension of paranoid politics: young women scripted both as victims, vulnerable and in need of the paternalistic, controlling state's protection, and as loose and uncontrollable at the same time.

Although some male students and male adults also fainted, boys were harder to 'see' as victims: in a context where gender roles have been fundamentally shaped by war (Spall 2020), men were portrayed as naturally being able to resist and overcome any 'suggestion' of weakness (as per the school director's statement). Girls, by contrast, are lumped together as a seemingly homogeneous, vulnerable group, whose agency is only evident when stereotyped as manipulators, schemers, and seducers of (older) men.

In addition, the onset of the fainting wave did coincide with the embryonic first anti-government protests by loosely defined 'youth revolutionaries'. So the regime's evident and publicly asserted mistrust of young, 'disrespectful' *confusionistas* (troublemakers) would lend credence to the theory that the government was, in fact, testing out non-lethal means of controlling and subduing 'the youth'. In that sense, the rejection of psychological interpretations and the insistence on being acknowledged as *victims* of a sinister political intention begs acknowledgement and 'reinjects indeterminacy' (Victor 2019: 399) into a discourse dominated (though not controlled) by 'competent authorities'.

### Moral panics, paranoid politics, and the problem of interpretative authority

Charles Briggs, writing on how a cholera outbreak in eastern Venezuela was blamed on indigenous cultures, notes that ‘it is alarming to see how little overt discursive work is needed to turn a medical nightmare fostered by racialized medical inequalities into something that seems natural and interpretable’ (2004: 167). Similarly, in the Angolan case, very little discursive work was necessary to turn a dark past of state violence, as well as the looming threat of its repetition against any potential challengers, into a logical, internally coherent, and broadly accepted framework of explanation. At the same time, the authorities’ incapacity to stem the phenomenon, and the refusal of many in positions of authority to consider a psychological explanation, shows how fragile and inchoate this seemingly monolithic party-state was, even at the apex of its power. Interpretations of the fainting wave in Luanda were thus neither simply an instrument of hegemonic power, nor weapons of the weak, but rather continue to elude any easy interpretation. This attests to the multifaceted and multidirectional realities of the paranoid disposition that has dominated Angolan politics for most of the past sixty years.

Although the big 2011 fainting wave eventually died down, new cases have sporadically been recorded since: in 2016, the police in Sumbe and Porto-Amboim said an artisanal product made from chalk dust (from school blackboards), Omo soap, perfume, and Shelltox (an insecticide spray) had led to the hospitalization of more than 3,000 female students in the province of Kwanza-Sul. In 2017, a victim in the province of Uíge complained that the governor should not ‘come with political discourses’ but find mechanisms to end this as she could not be expected to continue attending school when her life was in danger. And when twenty-two students fainted in Mussungue, Lunda-Norte, in October 2018, the director of the general hospital of the centrality (*centralidade*, i.e. new urban development) recommended heightened vigilance in schools to impede the entry of foreign persons and toxic substances.

When I met Bela, Gina’s sister, again in 2017, she had become a teacher in a high school in neighbouring Bengo province. In her school, up until the previous trimester, faintings had been a regular occurrence, affecting dozens of girls in her classes.

As soon as one would faint, the others would also start feeling it, and then fell like a wave. But they [the authorities] still haven’t elucidated it. It must be a toxic product that only targets the age range of 11 to 20 – I am also a woman, and the teachers in class have never felt anything. The victims have after-effects – headaches, asthma – and those who were pregnant lost their babies and still have difficulties conceiving.

She told me this very matter-of-factly, and then, further indicating the ambivalent status of young women, added: ‘I think it must be the government doing this, maybe to reduce teenage pregnancies – I can’t tell you with 100 per cent certainty, though’.

We cannot say what the girls were *really* experiencing beyond the stories they told, and so we cannot claim that they were unconsciously or strategically voicing fear or rage that they could not otherwise express. But adopting a psychological explanation would clearly not do justice to the lived experience of Angolans. Rather, following Briggs, I have sought to highlight ‘important overlaps between the political-economic underpinnings of the distribution of power, wealth, and violence and of the circulation of public discourse’ (2004: 182). And as in Victor’s Ugandan case, ‘in resisting

the impulse to explain with unwavering authority, an anthropologist approaches an interpretive judgment more in keeping with the vagaries of lived experience' (2019: 399).

The MPLA's post-war grip on Angola is predicated on paranoid politics, which made the theory that unknown perpetrators were orchestrating a gas attack on innocent children more plausible than the notion of mass hysteria. This paranoid disposition is multidirectional, cutting across neat oppositions between 'agents of the state' and 'citizens'. The primacy of 'scientific' explanations over possible 'spiritual' causes ties in with the MPLA government's high modernist, anti-traditionalist mindset. Maybe the imagery of a toxic gas was originally lifted from a Brazilian *telenovela*, but the firm belief in the dark political intentionality of the events has deeper, historical, gnarled roots. From the surveillance and terror regime of the Salazarist PIDE to their relatives and friends who disappeared after the *27 de Maio*, Angolans often feel as if they live in a continuum of state violence, the looming threat of which produces this paranoid disposition.

While the fainting wave was instrumentalized by the authorities to warn against potential dissent and reassert the MPLA's dominance, its unruliness and physicality resisted such straightforward appropriation. Because the government, for all its talk of control and repressing the culprits, was visibly unable to stop the propagation of the fainting, it reinforced paranoia and helpless appeals to the 'competent authorities' amongst public servants themselves. The deferral to higher, more competent powers exemplifies not only the strong hierarchization of public administration and preemptive obedience to higher orders (Schubert 2018), but also how this paranoia pervades Angolan public life, binding ordinary citizens and representatives of the state together in shared webs of meaning. Conspiracy theories about the state's evil intentions produce 'a particular political subject . . . , a skeptical citizen', but such practices cannot be subsumed under resistance: conspiracy theories grant to the forces of the state (security forces, government institutions) 'stability, agency, and control that they do not otherwise or necessarily enjoy'; this 'hegemonic process of mutual determination' reproduces a specific political culture marked by civil war, state violence, and paranoia (Silverstein 2002: 656).

This is what is at stake in this interpretative power: conspiracy theorizing 'disrupts official channels of knowledge and information and cultivates suspicion and paranoia' (Boulanger 2017: 108), but, more importantly, asserting one interpretation over the other means making a claim to specific political subjectivities (cf. Chigudu 2019: 421; Victor 2019: 400) – in this case demanding acknowledgement of a history of suffering violence at the hands of one's own government.<sup>7</sup>

The specificities of the Angolan case help us shift our attention away from the supposed tension between 'traditional' and 'modern' that sometimes still undergirds the analysis of comparable phenomena, especially in Africa. When standard tropes of resistance are equally inadequate to understanding the fainting epidemic, a context-sensitive, historically aware, ethnographic approach to the 'structured ecologies of evidence' (Briggs 2016) can help us overcome the limitations of 'scientific' psychological explanations, which Angolans affected by the fainting wave so roundly rejected. It is only by taking into account, and taking seriously, embodied experiences of state violence that we can begin to understand not only how Angolans made sense of the fainting wave, and why they did so specifically in this form, but also, through this, the ambiguities of paranoid politics.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unless they are public figures speaking on the record, all interlocutors have been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> See Schubert (2017: 20-2) for a longer note on my engagement with Angola.

<sup>3</sup> As I explain elsewhere (Schubert 2015), the MPLA has weaponized a discourse of stability and the 'gains of peace' to shut down anyone questioning its dominance and the post-war status quo.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas's use of 'our police', however, also points to an element of proprietary pride in a security service that is 'stronger than the CIA', indicating an element of complicity I develop at length in Schubert (2017).

<sup>5</sup> See also the novel *Bom dia, camaradas* by Angolan author Ondjaki (2003), in which the protagonist flees his classroom in panic at the *caixão vazio*'s arrival.

<sup>6</sup> There is evidently a class dimension to this, too: people attending these state middle schools could loosely be termed 'middle class' – that is, able to send their children to school beyond primary school, and to view schooling as an investment for social advancement. The old revolutionary bourgeoisie and elite will send their children to the French, US, international, or Portuguese school in Luanda – or send them abroad for studies.

<sup>7</sup> There is a longer history, examined in detail by Justin Pearce (2015), of associating Luandans and urban Angolans more generally as 'people of the MPLA', while rural Angolans in territories controlled by UNITA were seen as *povo da UNITA*.

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## **Peur et évanouissements à Luanda : politique paranoïaque et problème de l'autorité interprétative en Angola**

### *Résumé*

Cet article examine les réactions et réponses à une mystérieuse « vague d'évanouissements » qui sévit dans les collèges et les lycées d'Angola au début de 2011. En prêtant attention à l'historicité et à la matérialité de la vague d'évanouissements, l'article analyse de manière critique les raisons pour lesquelles la plupart des Angolais ont développé la profonde conviction qu'une intention politique néfaste était à l'œuvre derrière ce phénomène inexplicable, et examine pourquoi cette interprétation conspirationniste a pu l'emporter sur d'autres explications d'ordre plus psychologique ou spirituel. Grâce à cela, l'article contribue à déconstruire l'État angolais, néo-autoritaire et monolithique en apparence. D'autre part, le texte met en avant les limites des analyses reposant sur l'idée de rationalités opposées, tout en démontrant en même temps comment une ethnographie en profondeur, attentive à l'histoire, peut nous aider à dépasser les limites d'explications psychologiques plus « scientifiques ».

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