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BUWA!

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TITLE CONCEPT: Buwa! is an adaption of the Suthu 'bua' meaning 'speak'.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Vuyiseka Dubula of Sonke Gender Justice addresses the audience during the Ahmed Kathrada memorial at St. Georges Cathedral in Cape Town. 6 April 2017.

Credit: Ashraf Hendricks, GroundUp.

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YOUNG WOMEN AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION in Angola: The case of the 15 + Two

Florita Telo



Among human rights activists and on social networks, a movement was consolidating in defence of the young activists, who dubbed the process "15 + 2", because at first only 15 men were detained and later two women – Rosa Conde and Laurinda Gouveia.

Xê boy, do not speak politics and the antidemocratic culture

– Waldemar Bastos¹

When writing about the political participation of young people (especially young women) in Angola, it is important to consider the Angolan reality.

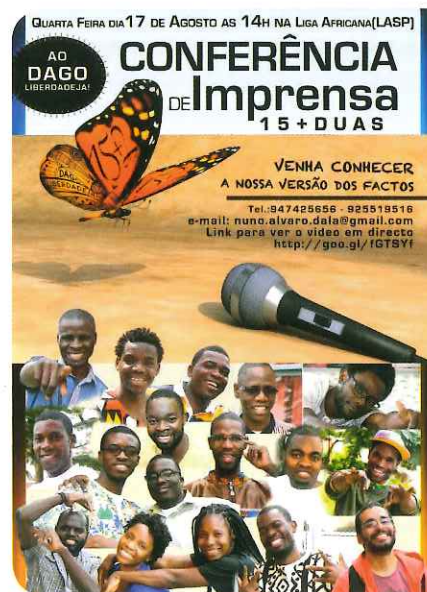
The country was born in 1975 with the proclamation of independence by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA),

in contravention of the Agreement of Alvor.² This agreement provided for the creation of a transitional government and the proclamation of independence by an external entity, apart from the three political movements who were part of the accord – the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), the MPLA, and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). This never actually happened.

Following independence there were 27 years of civil war, involving abuse of power, nepotism, disregard for human rights, political persecution, and summary executions by the organs of state (the police and the army).

The events of 27 May 1977 have been described as a holocaust by Américo Cardoso 2007.³ There were allegations of executions in the dead of night, imprisonment of Angolans and others (some of them pregnant), many of them taken from their families, raped and tortured to death for their political ideas, or for claiming discriminatory and oppressive social and racial practices similar to those of the colonial system before independence.

There was no freedom of demonstration, of association, or of the press. This reality remains to this day in Angola, where basic rights (such as the right to life, basic sanitation, food, education, quality health, development, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to demonstrate, and to the political pluralism enshrined in the constitutions of 1992 and 2010) are completely ignored by the government of President José Eduardo



¹ This phrase is the refrain of the song titled "Velha Chica" by the great Angolan artist Waldemar Bastos, denouncing the misery experienced by the Angolan people. The main message portrays the political and economic reality lived in Angola during the colonial period, where those who claimed their rights and questioned the misery and poverty were "talking politics" and so could be arrested or killed by authorities. And so the adults advised (and still advise): "Boy, do not talk politics", which means "do not complain."

² To read the Acordo de Alvor (Alvor Accord) is available online at <http://cedis.fd.unl.pt/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ACORDO-ALVOR.pdf>.

³ For reports about 27 May 1977, see Nuvemnegra: o drama do 27 de Maio de 1977 (sobrevivente do massacre), Miguel Francisco "Michel" – 2007; Memórias de entre o cárcere e o cemitério, Américo Cardoso Botelho – 2007; Purgaem Angola, Dalila Cabrita Mateus & Álvaro Mateus – 2007.

dos Santos, in power since 1979. Instead, there is widespread use of violence contrary to the principles of governance, corruption, violation of rights, and misery.⁴

This is the Angolan reality, past and present. But does it have to be the future? This is the question young people seem to be asking, and it is the focus of this article.

Young voices, mobilisation and participation in the public sphere of politics in Angola

Data from the 2014 census confirms that the Angolan population is extremely young. It has been the young people who are the main promoters of claims for political change.

There is a strong mobilisation by the young population in Angola, a movement small in numbers but with actions impacting against the status quo of the country. The first official youth mobilisation took place on 7 March 2011, a demonstration called through social networks, demanding the exit of the President. The police violently suppressed the demonstration, arresting some of the participants, most notably the journalist Ana Margoso, who was covering the event at the time.⁵

Other demonstrations were held, always called with early communication to the organs of the provincial government, as provided for in the law of assembly and demonstration. All of them were repressed violently, with kidnappings, torture, executions, arrests, and intimidation. This was a non-homogeneous movement, consolidating itself only around specific common purposes.

15+2 – Rosa and Laurinda were made more prominent through this counter-narrative, whereas they had almost been ignored in the focus and emphasis that people put on the 15 men.

4 In the rankings on transparency among 167 countries, Angola occupies position 163 (Transparency International 2015). In terms of press freedom, the situation is critical; among 180 countries, Angola is ranked at 125 (Reporters Without Frontiers 2017). Angola is among the 50 countries with the most alarming rates in the Global Hunger Index 2016, despite being one of the three largest oil producers in Africa.

5 More information at <http://www.esquerda.net/artigo/angola-pol%C3%ADcia-prende-manifestantes-e-jornalistas>. See also the case of activists Alves Kamulingue and Isafas Sebastião Cassule. More information on: http://www.club-k.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16742:memorando-revela-como-cassule-e-kamulingue-foram-executados&catid=11:foco-do-dia&Itemid=130&lang=pt.

From seventeen youth activists to 15 + 2

Laurinda Gouveia participated in the first demonstration on 7 March 2011, called via Facebook and supported by the Angolan rapper Ikonoclasta. She was 22 years old. At this point people who did not know each other joined the march. At the time they did not have the label of revolutionaries, and were known only as university students or demonstrators. The main motivation for joining this event, according to Laurinda Gouveia, is because she believed it was possible in this way to solve basic problems such as lack of electricity, health, quality education, access to drinking water, and basic sanitation.⁴

Laurinda had witnessed medical malpractice cases in the country's largest hospital (Josina Machel), and she hoped that it was possible to address the situation through her participation in the demonstration. She felt motivated and hoped that the realities of the population could change.²

She also believed, together with the promoters of the demonstration, that the greatest obstacle to a better life for Angolan women and men was the President of the Republic, José Eduardo do Santos, who was supposed to have stepped down from power. Instead he appropriated the country as if it were the property of his father or mother.

This movement, dubbed a revolutionary one, does not exist. It is just a group of young people with a common aim to have a fairer and more equal Angola for all, who have organised and participated in demonstrations, marches and other activities to promote access to basic rights and respect for democratic principles.

Their activities included debating sessions and training (for women and men) in political and ideological terms, performed with some regularity in Luanda

On 20 June 2015, the young people had planned to study the sixth chapter of the brochure "The Inevitable Need for Strategic Planning" when they debated the group's structure and ideological philosophy. The meeting was raided by agents of the Criminal Investigation Service, who collected all personal belongings of the people present (personal computers, copies of the brochure, phones, flash drives, external disks, pens, backpacks, bicycles, etc.), including the board. Thirteen young men were handcuffed and taken to the Radio Patrol Unit, before being sent to prison.

Initially, they were accused of an "attempted coup", but later this was changed to the criminal charge of "association with wrongdoers".³ Defendants were constituted in this process. In addition to the thirteen, two more young men were arrested who were not in the room, Domingos da Cruz and Osvaldo Caholo. Domingos was arrested on 21 June in Santa Clara, and Osvaldo on 24 June at his home.

Rosa Conde and Laurinda Gouveia were indicted on 31 August. Before that they had been pronounced only as declarants (respondents). On 16 November 2015, a trial began, with the defendants still

*15+TWO women Press
Conference Announcement.*



imprisoned. The sentence was only read in March 2016, with a sentence of between two and eight years in prison. There was an appeal to the Supreme Court, but the convicted were sent to jail, where they remained until the enactment of a presidential amnesty law.

Rose and Laurinda and the revolutionary movement: 15 + Two

Up until this time, the press had generally referred to the case as “the seventeen activists”, not mentioning that they had women in this group (although some had indicated this fact). This is how it had been reported and commented on in the various mass media and by the population in general.

Among human rights activists and on social networks, a movement was consolidating in defence of the young activists, who dubbed the process “15+2”, because at first only 15 men were detained and later two women (Rosa Conde and Laurinda Gouveia). This was intended to give visibility to the course that the process was taking, including now other people who were not present at the meeting on 20 June. It also served to make visible the disparity of women’s participation in active politics and movements, given that in this case it was 15 men and only two women.

In addition, some women feminists (and non-feminists) created a movement in support of the group, giving greater prominence to the two women defendants by appropriating the term “15 + Two” rather than just 17. The adoption 15 + Two (as opposed to 15+2) was deliberate and strategic, as it served to remove any doubts as to the presence of the two women in this group and in this struggle.

This movement spread through the media (although mostly still under the banner of the initial acronym of 15+2), and young people promptly adopted this term. And so a small solidarity movement formed all over the world. In this context, the page on Facebook called LAPA (Freedom for the Arrested Activists in Angola) was published, where all the actions were publicised in support of the case, as well as daily appeals from individuals and non-governmental organisations for the release of the young people.

Significantly, a Facebook page “Supporting the Heroines of Freedom Rosa & Laurinda + 15” was also created at this time, bringing the “Two” into the foreground and the centre of the struggle, instead of depicting them as the additions to the 15. This new Facebook page served to highlight and spread information on the process, a lot of it shared from the LAPA page. The important point is that Rosa and Laurinda were made more prominent through

this counter-narrative, whereas they had almost been ignored in the focus and emphasis that people put on the 15 men. There was an incessant search in the media for information on the two women, to understand their backgrounds and their activism. This was not the case before the Facebook page, since the focus had previously been just 15+2 and referenced generally. The biographies and testimonies of the Two while they were in prison were recorded by a group of feminist women, of which I was also a member.⁹⁴

This story demonstrates that it was – and still is – essential to deliberately give visibility to women in spaces that are predominantly identified as male domains. There were concrete actions taken by women (and some men) to make it possible to draw attention to the role of these two women who had dared to challenge not only the political system, but also patriarchy that consigns the majority of women to the condition of subalternity.

The revolutionary movement in Angola identifies itself as being composed of young people from various social backgrounds, at various levels of training or without any training, partisans or non-partisans, religious or atheists, employed or unemployed, self-educated or educated. We are children of peasants and of the wealthy, we are in the gutter and in the offices too, we live in the

The history of Angolan women continues to be hidden in the gender-specific grammar of (for example) political prisoners and revolutionaries. This makes the male the model to which women must adjust.

musseques (informal settlements) or in the city. The most important point to make is that we are all bringing our agency to bear – both young women and young men – and this has to be acknowledged.

The present challenge is not to make the same mistakes of the post-independence generation, and this movement recognises that the change that is intended for Angola will not be possible without the emancipation of women. There must be equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. As in the past, women should join together for the just cause of all.⁵

This is sometimes mistakenly interpreted to mean that the struggle is not for women; appealing to women to “join” could imply that it is the struggle of men, which women can join. But the fight is for everyone (men and women), and especially for women who, in addition to suffering from the hardships of the authoritarian regime, also suffer because of domestic violence, femicide and maternal deaths.

In fact, women have never been estranged from this struggle; as demonstrated by them taking up arms, being informants, or sheltering the revolutionaries. Inspiring heroines are also those who resisted the system by educating their children to fight against injustices, supporting and instructing their husbands. Women are and remain central to the struggle.

The baby on the back, the weapon on the shoulder: lessons from the history of women in politics

The involvement of women in political affairs in the public sphere in Angola dates back before independence with Nzinga Mbandi and Kimpa Vita. There are also officially unrecognised heroines, whose accounts were published in the book *O livro da paz da mulher angolana – Heroínas sem nome* (The Book of Peace for Angolan Women – Heroines Without a Name)⁶, besides the well-known Deolinda Rodrigues, Lucrécia Paím, Engrácia Santos, Irene Cohen and Teresa Afonso.

However, it is still very strong in the collective imagination that the place of women is in the home (taking care of husband and children), an inheritance reinforced by the colonial system that placed black indigenous women at the base of the pyramid of rights and citizenship – a reflection of Judeo-Christian morality.

Most of the women who participated in the national liberation struggle have not had any kind of recognition; they are not in any history book of Angola, and have not received military honours and rank in life or death. And this is what would happen to the two women in the 15 + Two process, when reference was only to “the seventeen activists”. It was the deliberate counter-narrative created through the mobilisation of many women (and

some men) that ensured the public recognition of Rosa and Laurinda in the narrative of 2016 youth engagement in the politics of this country.

The history of Angolan women continues to be hidden in the gender-specific grammar of (for example) political prisoners and revolutionaries. This makes the male the model to which women must adjust. The resistance movement and its involvement in political struggles is significant, and today throughout the country we follow these reports, but we still need to expand the gender lenses in writing, and challenge the dominant male-centric narratives in the media, which exclude and hide the agency and role of women.

The first challenge is to give visibility to these stories and include everyone (men and women) in this political journey, without generalisations that exclude and conceal us as women. We will then have more motivated women, since the ancestors demonstrated that we equally belong in the public space. The Angolan Women’s Peace Book is an example of collecting the political and life histories of several women in six provinces of the country. Without this effort to counter the dominant exclusionary narratives, we would never have been (re)known.

We still have the historical debt to bring to the fore the stories of the partners of the young people involved in the 15+Two process. They were mentioned very infrequently in the media. For example, it was inspiring to hear an interview with Esperança Gongá, wife of Domingos da Cruz, talking about the situation of the country and the abuse of power of the Angolan police and judicial forces, but unfortunately it was only broadcast by Rádio Angola. The world needs to also hear and know the other actions carried out by this group of women, their sisters, mothers and others who directly and indirectly contributed to this struggle, but who never featured in the media.

We also need to create counter-narratives to the predominant stories of women cast through sexist education and socialisation processes. Sexist education has been reinforced by means of coercion by the state (through patriarchal education models), family socialisation systems, and religious systems that confine women to the private domestic space (as homemakers). It is still strongly rooted in the minds of men and women that gender determines competencies, and this places women in a position of subalternity. This mentality also manifests itself in the attitudes of some young people in the revolutionary movement, expressed in the social networks. The change of attitude needs to be general.

This sexist mentality makes women more vulnerable. For example, in police assaults, women are more likely to be sexually assaulted, or subjected to torture in the genitals or breasts. That is why they are sometimes afraid. According to Laurinda, there were women who started off as part of this movement, but who gave up due to incessant police violence. It is important to review the gender division of labour, especially the sharing of household chores and child-care, to allow women the time to be directly involved in public spaces. The weight of domestic activities is still too heavy for most Angolan women.

At the same time, it is necessary to promote the creation of women's and feminist movements, as well as other spaces that are open to discuss gender and power relations in Angolan society, and to begin to create counter-narratives, as happened on the Facebook page "Supporting the Heroines of Freedom Rosa & Laurinda + 15". The gender issue should be treated as a cross-cutting theme in all areas, together with the deconstruction of male and female stereotypes.

Despite the very adverse reality, it is true that resistance to injustices in Angola has been maintained by the young – including women who are increasingly aware of their right to get directly involved in movements, and also to create specific ones such as *Ondjango Feminista*, an autonomous feminist movement of activism, solidarity, and education for the realisation of the human rights of all the women and girls in Angola founded in 2016.

These initiatives create spaces that confront the dictatorial and patriarchal system designed to exclude the population, and especially the women.

The struggle continues! Viva counter-narratives!

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FOOTNOTES

- Reports collected in an interview via internet with Laurinda Gouveia on June 25, 2017.
- In 2014 Laurinda Gouveia was also a victim of the political violence, more details on: http://club-k.net/~clubknet/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19603:caso-de-universitaria-espantada-por-comandante-da-policia-choca-sociedade-angolana&catid=2&Itemid=1069&lang=pt.
- More details at <https://centralangola7311.net/2016/08/19/o-caso-15duas-uma-longa-cronologia/>.
- The page was created with the consent of Rosa and Laurinda while they were in prison. The initiative was by Sizaltina Cutaia and Flora Telo.
- See <https://centralangola7311.net/2016/08/19/o-caso-15duas-uma-longa-cronologia/>.
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