



ARTICLE

Kufala! Translating witchcraft in an Angolan–Chinese labor dispute

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Drawing on fieldwork conducted at a Chinese state-owned enterprise brought to Angola in the postwar reconstruction boom, this article devotes sustained attention to a labor dispute between an Angolan laid-off worker and his former Chinese employers. Called upon to interpret between the worker and his bosses, neither of whom spoke directly or transparently, the ethnographer found herself implicated in a prolonged negotiation of attempted kindness and unavoidable cruelty. Through repeated translations and circumlocutions, both parties attempted to preserve sociality despite being structurally positioned in an exploitative relationship. Translating this exchange into an ethnographic narrative, this paper explores how the indirectness both of speech and of witchcraft failed as social relations broke down.

Keywords: translation, labor, witchcraft, China–Africa relations, Angola

Around 7am, I was preparing to leave my room at the compound, when a loud knocking suddenly interrupted the morning calm. I opened the door to find Yan, a Chinese driver and low-level manager, standing in front of me, a half-burned cigarette held between his fingers. “Awake yet?” he teased, “One of the black guys (*heizi*) from the oil depot is here. Come and translate one or two, would you?” Having worked with Yan’s company for the better part of a year, I was no longer shocked by these abrupt calls to action, nor was I surprised to be given so little contextual information, though a bit more would have certainly diminished the sense of mystery and suspense I felt as I followed Yan to the entrance of the compound.

Yan had me wait just inside the gate as he called out to a small, thin, and apparently elderly Angolan man named Francisco, who limped over to where I stood. He trembled slightly as he began to speak, though it was unclear whether this was due to nervousness, anger, or some physical ailment. “Good morning, my sister.” He greeted me with formality and warmth, then went on to explain what had brought him to the Northwest Construction compound. “I have worked here, with the Chinese, for five years. I’ve had three bosses, and now, my boss is Mister Yan. Now, I caught a disease at work,

where I was also living.” Francisco had been employed as a manual laborer at a facility where the company stored diesel for sale to Chinese clients.

He rolled up his right pant leg to reveal what looked like a healing infection, with several scars from sores or blisters covering his shin and calf. “This here,” he waved his hand around the affected area, “before, it was *very* inflamed. They gave me 20,000 kwanzas [about US \$200 at the time] to go to the doctor. Now, when I went, the doctor said that over there, at work, there was *feitiço*. Do you know what *feitiço* is? He said that this could not be treated with medicines, that I had to go to the *k-k-k-KIMBANDEIRO*.” He stuttered as he pronounced this last word, uttering it finally with dramatic emphasis. “The doctor wanted to cut my leg off! He told me that otherwise the disease would spread upwards and infect my entire body,” he moved his hands from his leg up to his chest to illustrate. “I told him no, don’t cut it! I cried! And so I had to go there, to the traditional doctor, but that cost 40,000. My wife paid for it. Now I’ve come here to work, so that I can return the money we’ve borrowed, and I hear them saying that someone else is already working there, that I don’t have a place anymore. But if they’re not going to let me work, I still need money to pay back my debt!”



Feitiço is a Portuguese word for magical practices, spells, or sorcery. It is the basis for the pidgin word *fetisso*, which emerged in the zone of multicultural interaction around the coast of West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was later transformed into the concept of the “fetish” (Pietz 1985), a major preoccupation for thinkers like Marx and Freud (Morris 2017; Matory 2018). Whereas the fetish has inspired theoretical discussions of value misrecognition, or of imbuing objects with personal qualities (Silva 2011: 5), *feitiço* appeared in Francisco’s story as an explanation for misfortune (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976: 13), in his case an illness. It was therefore much closer to what in Anglophone anthropology has been discussed under the general label of “witchcraft.”¹

Witchcraft had come up directly only once before during my time with Yan’s company, when another Angolan employee, Alberto, had missed work for several days and later arrived with a bandaged foot that he could barely walk on. His Chinese supervisors asked what had happened, and when I transmitted their question to him, he explained to me that the wound had appeared after an argument with his neighbor. This logic, in which a connection was drawn between a known person wishing someone ill and the manifestation of a physical ailment, was recognizable from anthropological accounts. However, when I told one of Alberto’s supervisors that his foot injury had been caused by “witchcraft,” using the Chinese term *wushu*, the man had scoffed: “Witchcraft?!” His tone was one of open incredulity, and I suspected that, to him, the claim made Alberto, someone who was already often accused of laziness for missing work, appear foolish or dishonest, perhaps both.

This time, with Francisco, I wanted to avoid the risk of a similar response from Yan. In my translation, I therefore omitted the part about *feitiço* and instead explained that Francisco had fallen ill, paid for an expensive treatment, and now sought compensation. By not translating the word “witchcraft,” I attempted to render Francisco’s injury as a biomedical condition to which I hoped his former employers would respond with material help.

1. Use of the term “witchcraft” in Western social science has itself been criticized as a mistranslation, since it is used to describe a variety of concepts and practices referred to by distinct words in African languages (Crick 1979; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Pels 1998). I follow a loose definition offered by Ashforth: “the capacity to cause harm or accumulate wealth by illegitimate occult means” (2000: 9).

Indeed, the series of affectively loaded conversations that would follow this initial encounter involved repeated translations of an Angolan worker’s injuries for his Chinese managers. What Francisco first attributed to witchcraft he would later explain as a result of work-related causes. The Chinese managers, for their part, would resort to a series of bureaucratic procedures in order to defer announcing his dismissal and the pain or conflict that might ensue. Mediating between these two positions, I found myself attempting to commensurate between multiple and shifting codes.

Having heard my translation of Francisco’s predicament, Yan was less than sympathetic. “He told *me* he paid 35,000, not 40,” he said, indicating that this was not the first time he had heard Francisco’s story, and sparking a doubt in my mind as to how necessary I was as a translator. “Tell him the leaders (*lingdao*) said they could only give him 20,000,” he said sternly, “They had to find someone to replace him because he left to seek medical treatment.” Then Yan explained to me, in a more sympathetic tone, that he had already spoken to Fourth Brother, a higher-level manager, about Francisco’s case: “He’s already pretty old; we can’t hire him again. Fourth Brother implied as much (*shuode shi zhege yisi*, lit: This was the meaning of what he said). He doesn’t pay attention to hygiene, so he caught a disease. We don’t want him (*buyao le*.)” From a slight shift in the quality of Yan’s voice, I perceived that Yan meant these last few statements for me to hear, but not to translate. Perhaps he thought that if I understood that Fourth Brother had already made the decision to lay off Francisco, I would convey his earlier message more definitively, rather than simply repeating his words. Filtering through multiple layers of interpretation—of Yan’s previous communications with Francisco, his relaying of Fourth Brother’s “meaning,” and his seemingly sympathetic exhortation to me—I decided it would be too harsh to tell Francisco directly that the company “didn’t want him.”

Instead, I told Francisco the company had already compensated him as much as they could and that they’d had to find a replacement during his long health-related absence. He protested vehemently, shouting, “I want to speak to the boss!” Trying to circumvent Yan’s authority, he demanded to see Fourth Brother, referring to him with a friendly nickname derived from his physical appearance, “Where’s the boss? Where’s baldy (*o careca*)? I can’t leave here empty-handed!”

By then, a small crowd of Angolan and Chinese employees had gathered around to watch the spectacle.



Apparently anxious about drawing too much attention, Yan proposed what he thought would be a quick solution: “Tell him we’ll give him 15,000 more,” he said to me, “and then we’re clear.”

Lei, a young Chinese technician and friend of Yan’s who had been listening quietly until then, chimed in, “Right, tell him we’ll give him the money and then he has to go away. Wait,” he corrected himself, laughing darkly, “we can’t tell him that. Tell him to go see a doctor.”

I translated for Francisco, who again responded with indignation, “It shouldn’t be 15,000! I worked *this* many days before I got sick, and then I borrowed *this* much money!” He used his finger to draw the numbers in the dirt and then jumped up to shout dramatically, “Besides, here in Angola you can’t just dismiss someone without giving them anything. I worked here for *five years!* Since 2009! I *never* stole anything! It wasn’t, ‘Francisco here, *alibaba!* Francisco there, *alibaba!*’” He hopped from side to side as he spoke, and he used a term *alibaba*, with which Chinese expatriates in Angola commonly referred to thieves.² Summarizing the injustice of his situation, Francisco concluded, “I caught a disease while on the job, and now because of that I no longer have a job!”

I translated for Yan, explaining that Francisco felt it was unfair that he had lost his job. Yan looked at me skeptically, “So he’s saying he can work now?”

“I’m ready to work! My leg is good now,” Francisco stomped his foot to demonstrate, “They wanted to cut it, but now it’s good. I can start work tomorrow!”

“Fine,” Yan said. He asked me to tell Francisco to come back to the company the next day at seven in the morning. We would have to discuss his case with the leadership. Francisco seemed pleased when I translated this for him, but Yan continued to look disturbed. It would be more complicated for Yan to try to arrange a job for Francisco, and thereby contradict his own supervisor’s orders. If Francisco had left after they told him to “see the doctor,” he may not have come back, and Yan could go on with his work. But after so much

time working together, Yan may have also had sympathy for Francisco, especially given his old age and frail condition. Frowning, Yan teased his former employee, speaking to him directly in ungrammatical Portuguese, “You go home! Tomorrow seven o’clock. You know or don’t know?”

A smile spread across Francisco’s face, as he turned to me and beamed, “He is my boss! A very good one!” Then he hobbled away.

Over the next several days, Francisco returned to the compound three more times, and at each visit I was asked to translate in negotiations between him and the Chinese managers. Hanks and Severi (2014) have called for a focus not on the technical aspects of translation but on translation as an “epistemological principle.” If translation, they argue, is itself a basis for understanding, anthropologists must attend not only to difference between ‘cultures,’ but to “the constant *work of translation* of languages, nonlinguistic codes, contexts of communication, and different traditions” (Hanks and Severi 2014: 12, emphasis in original). Following this methodological cue, I examine here three processes of translation: (1) the transposition of messages between Portuguese and Chinese, mediated by myself, the translator; (2) intralingual or “intracultural” translation (Hanks 2014: 18–19), such as the circumlocutions of Chinese managers, which rendered apparent what was considered unsayable and thereby unethical; and (3) the translation of damage initially said to be caused by witchcraft into an appeal for moral retribution to be compensated for with money.³ The writing of this account has also involved a fourth translational process: the translation of my own fieldwork experience into a language intelligible to the “culture” of anthropology.

The title of this article, *kufala*, is a word I heard frequently during fieldwork, to indicate when something was broken, rotten, or dead. If an Angolan worker failed to show up at his job due to illness, his friend might explain to the Chinese boss that he was *kufala* (sick). A Chinese supervisor on a construction site might criticize his Angolan subordinate’s handywork as *kufala* (shoddy) and tell him to do it again. A person who had died was “*kufala!*” Machinery that had broken down was “*kufala!*” When I initially asked a worker from Lubango, in the

2. Chinese interlocutors claimed that *alibaba* was an “African” way of referring to thieves, though it was certainly not common in Angola except among Chinese-speakers or those working with Chinese. It is possible that Chinese migrants in Arabic-speaking parts of Africa encountered it as a reference to “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” and it later circulated among Chinese communities elsewhere.

3. These three modes of translation roughly correspond to what Jakobson (1959) distinguishes as standard linguistic translation (L1 to L2), intralinguistic translation, and cross-modal translation.



south of the country, whether this was an Angolan word, he told me no, if someone was sick or had died, he would normally use the Portuguese words *doente* or *morto*, but if he were talking to a Chinese person he would say *kufala*. It was only later, through consultation with another anthropologist, that I discovered *kufa* was indeed the infinitive of the verb “to die” in Kimbundu, a language commonly spoken in the area of Luanda. The ending *-la* may have been derived from the Mandarin Chinese particle *le*, indicating completed action. This pidgin term has thus emerged out of the specific interactions between Angolan labor and Chinese capital in the twenty-first century. It is also an apt descriptor for the breakdown in social relations I describe here.

Witchcraft, indirectness, and subjunctivity

After Francisco had left, I accompanied several staff members to a store the company ran nearby. Alberto, the Angolan employee who had previously suffered a foot injury, worked there as a salesclerk. In the afternoon, during a lull in sales of electronics and construction materials, I approached him to seek confirmation as to whether I had properly understood Francisco’s story. “The word *kimbandeiro*,” I said tentatively, “it means *curandeiro*, right?” I used the Portuguese word for “healer.”

“Yes,” Alberto said.

Nearby, leaning on a display shelf, Rosa and Fabiana, two Angolan salesgirls who worked at the shop, giggled, and one of them asked, “Why would you want to know about that, Cheryl?”

Ignoring them, Alberto explained with a patient smile,

A *kimbandeiro* is a traditional doctor. Here in Africa—I don’t know if it’s the same in the United States, but we have what is called “tradition.” And with some diseases, you can’t go to the hospital for treatment because, if you do, you will die. The doctor won’t be able to cure you. You must go to a traditional doctor. Remember before, when I had problems with my feet? That was because someone put something on the ground, and I stepped on it, and after that I started to have those problems. That is what we call *mbasso*. It means someone wishes evil upon you. And it is very dangerous. Without treating it, you could lose your job, go crazy, start drinking a lot. It’s terrible.

I later verified that *mbasso* was a Kimbundu term used to describe a “nocturnal trap” set for a specific person, often in a place where the victim would step on it

and then feel the effect in his or her feet. “For example,” an Angolan friend explained to me, “if the *mbasso* were aimed at the door to your home, and if it were meant for you, when you passed through the door, you would be hit, and then you would have problems with your feet.” He went on to say that this is what had happened to a former governor of Huambo province, who had to have his legs amputated after being “hit” by something sent from his political enemies. “In conclusion,” said the friend, “*mbasso* is a trap set in the night. You cannot see it, but it is there, at the site where it has been placed. And once the victim steps on it he or she gets sick.” Like a landmine, the *mbasso* would have to be installed in a particular location, but it would only detonate when encountered by the specific individual for whom it was intended. The perpetrator would be unknown and could only be suspected as someone who harbored jealousy or ill will toward the victim.

A key characteristic of both sorcery and the curative powers that counteract it is that they can only take effect through “an intermediary with the appropriate knowledge and power” (Blanes 2017: 96). *Kimbanda* (also spelled *quimbanda*) is the word in Kimbundu for a traditional healer who diagnoses ailments and cures them with the use of plants. *Kimbandas* are known to be able to communicate with ancestral spirits and “obtain therapeutic guidance from them” (Viegas and Varanda 2015: 213). During colonial times, *quimbanda* was reportedly the most common indigenous term for a person who had inherited “supernatural” powers, namely those of prophecy and healing, through spiritual possession by an ancestral practitioner of such arts (Estermann 1983: 340, 343–44).⁴ According to Estermann, *quimbandas* held special status in Angolan indigenous society because they possessed spiritual powers not only to cure diseases, but also, more importantly, because they could bring secrets into the open and reveal the identities of criminals.⁵ In other

4. In Sónia Silva’s account of basket divination among Angolan refugees in Zambia, diviners were similarly “possessed” by ancestral spirits, though this simultaneously allowed them to “possess” spiritual powers (Silva 2011: 54–5).

5. As in other African contexts, witchcraft in Angola is not a relic of pre-colonial times nor is it limited to “indigenous” society. Witchcraft accusations and trials were prevalent among both sides of the protracted Angolan civil war (Brinkman 2003), and Bakongo residents of contemporary Luanda use the term *ndoki* to refer to ingestion or bodily internalization of poisons resulting from the secret actions of an absent or hidden mediator (Blanes 2017).



words, healers were able to make explicit that which for ordinary people would be left unsaid.

Anthropologists have long recognized that witchcraft can be a means to both comment on and intervene in the transformations accompanying modern capitalism. Far from a return to tradition, the invocation of witchcraft is a wholly modern way of understanding and acting in globalizing societies (Geschiere 1995). A vast literature has documented how supernatural, magical, or occult forces are increasingly invoked alongside processes of socioeconomic change (Taussig 1980). Witchcraft has been analyzed as a “situated moral discourse” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xviii) for critiquing predatory forms of accumulation and dispossession. Local people facing abuses of state power (Simmons 1980) or the disappointments of “development” (Smith 2008) are said to express conflicts and resentments obliquely, by reference to it. In encounters with new foreign actors, witchcraft becomes a language whereby wealthy or powerful outsiders are literally demonized, their privileged status understood by locals to result from spiritual manipulations (Masquelier 2008; McIntosh 2009). The complaint Francisco brought to his Chinese employers and the attribution of his physical ailment to *feitiço* could similarly be interpreted as a critique of structural violence and inequality. Like instances of spirit possession, documented among workers subjected to factory discipline (Ong 1987), this reported case of witchcraft could be read as a form of dissent or resistance, albeit an indirect one, in which responsibility is diverted to an “incorporeal agent” (Lempert 2012: 197; see also Scott 1990).

Indeed, the indirectness of the witchcraft is precisely what interests me here. In the events that followed Francisco’s initial visit to the company, both he and the Chinese managers chose to communicate “indirectly” about his injury and subsequent loss of employment. My analysis therefore does not focus on how witchcraft could be an idiom for demonizing foreign capitalists or critiquing socioeconomic transformations brought about by Chinese globalization.⁶ Rather, I am interested in how an embodied infirmity, initially said to be caused by witchcraft, was translated into an appeal for kindness from people positioned, structurally, to enact cruelty. The Chinese managers’ responses, indirect themselves, evinced a lingering sense of respect for their employee’s

dignity. However, ultimately, the translation failed, not because the Chinese managers failed to be courteous, but because they were structurally incapable of not exerting harm on Francisco. The spell had already been cast, perhaps long before he ever got sick.

The focus of much of the literature on indirectness has been on what Lempert (2012) calls “indirect performativity.” Unlike “denotationally explicit” direct speech, indirect speech employs techniques like “hints, insinuations, irony, and metaphor” to separate the implication of an utterance from its meaning at the word or sentence level (Searle 1975: 59). Thus, although Fourth Brother may have only stated to Yan the seemingly obvious fact that Francisco was “already pretty old,” Yan understood the intended meaning behind this statement to be that he should be let go. Lei’s suggestion to “tell him to go away,” then his correction, “Wait, we can’t tell him that. Tell him to go see a doctor,” indicates that he, and perhaps the other Chinese managers, thought that it was more ethical to speak indirectly and leave unpleasant truths unsaid.

In their study of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1996) classify “off-record” communication as one of several “super-strategies” meant to save face, or preserve the self-esteem, of an addressee: “A communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor leaves himself an ‘out’ by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations” (211). The authors frame this use of indirectness as a way in which a speaker could commit a “face-threatening act” without taking responsibility for it. By committing the speech act off record, the speaker leaves its interpretation up to the addressee. Similarly, in Wu Di’s ethnography of a Chinese community in Zambia, he notes that Chinese managers often employed indirect speech with Zambian workers, who were expected, if skilled at communication, to rely on contextual cues in order to respond appropriately (Wu 2014: 185). According to Wu, indirectness in these situations allows both speaker and addressee to avoid damaging harmonious social relations by opening a communicative gap, through which either party could evade responsibility for embarrassing the other (Wu 2014: 186).

When speech is understood by both speaker and addressee to be indirect, and contextual cues are agreed upon, indirectness does not necessarily pose a problem for the transmission of meaning. In a situation involving multiple actors with conflicting aims, such as the negotiation between Francisco and the Chinese managers,

6. This has, however, been encountered elsewhere on the continent (see Braun 2015; Cunha 2015).



there was much greater risk for misunderstanding. This is not only because the two parties may have had diverging expectations of how courtesy or respect should be conveyed in speech (Sheridan 2018), but also because of the challenge of translating what is said when it does not correspond to what is meant.⁷ Although I could sometimes interpret, and report, what was meant rather than what was said, I was not always certain. Did the Chinese managers want me to tell Francisco to go away, even though they would not have wanted to say so themselves? Similarly, did Francisco already know that he had lost his job, and was his indirect speech, about witchcraft and through a translator, a polite tactic for demanding severance pay?

It was unclear, from the start at least, which actions and what kinds of negotiations would lead to either Francisco's reemployment or adequate compensation. My ethnography attempts to account for this uncertainty by attending to what Susan Reynolds Whyte has called "subjunctivity." The subjunctive mood, open-ended and uncertain, becomes especially salient in interactions such as that between Francisco and his Chinese managers. As Whyte has written: "Being implicated with a subject that acts upon you as you act upon it is an indeterminate business when you do not fully know that subject or what it is going to do. In that situation subjunctivity keeps possibilities open" (Whyte 2002: 176). This is how she understands her research interlocutors as handling people who they suspect may be "agents of misfortune" or "sources of affliction" (ibid.) For Whyte, the subjunctive is a mood of hope, directed at a specific problem, which is often wrapped up in the actions of other people. In the case examined here, a thread of hopefulness may have emerged at the end of Francisco's first visit to the compound, but, as we will see, the mood soon transformed to one of dread.

In Chinese Angola

Among the many African countries with which China has strengthened economic and political ties over the past two decades, Angola is an especially important case. Closely allied with the Soviet Union and Cuba after in-

dependence from Portugal in 1975, the ruling MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) received little financial, technological, or military support from Mao's China, in comparison with other postcolonial African socialist regimes (Monson 2009; Malaquias 2012). Following the 2002 declaration of an end to the 27-year-long civil war, Angolan political leaders sought international financing for a massive National Reconstruction Program. Unable or unwilling to accept the conditionalities of Western donors, the Angolan government instead turned to China. An agreement signed in 2003 stipulated that credit lines from China Export-Import Bank would be used to fund infrastructure construction. Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) would fulfill the contracts, and the loans would be repaid through regular shipments of oil (Corkin 2013). Over the next few years, Angola would become a primary source of imported oil for China and China's largest trading partner on the African continent (Alves 2013).

By the time I began an extended period of fieldwork in Angola in late 2013, around US\$16 billion in loans had been granted to Angola by Chinese financing institutions.⁸ Hundreds of Chinese companies had set up operations in Angola, and the regular estimate given for the local Chinese population was 300,000—a quarter of the entire continent. The extent of Chinese economic activity in postwar Angola was perhaps most visibly perceptible in the outskirts of Luanda. The *Auto-Estrada*, a semicircular highway that ran through several peripheral zones, was lined with Chinese construction company bases, restaurants, hotels, grocery stores, furniture and electronics retailers, dealers of trucks and machinery, construction materials wholesalers, auto repair shops, and Chinese-built housing complexes for Angola's new middle classes. Thirty kilometers outside of central Luanda was the famed Chinese-financed Kilamba project, a sprawling complex of 750 apartment blocks occupying 8.8 square kilometers (Buire 2017; Gastrow 2017). On the other side of the city, China International Fund⁹ and a number of Chinese subcontractors were building

7. There is thus another way in which indirectness appears in the interactions I narrate here, closer to what Lempert (2012: 187) terms "indirect addressivity," or the way in which a message reaches its addressee not directly from its speaker but rather through some other medium.

8. It has been reported that by 2018 Angola had received the most loans from China of any African country, totaling \$42.8 billion over 17 years (CARI 2017).

9. Alongside the Exim Bank credit lines, China International Fund (CIF), a private organization with close ties to the Angolan and Chinese states, provided additional loans and contracts for Angolan government projects (Levkowitz et al. 2009).



a new international airport; it was sometimes boasted that it would be the largest in Africa.

I had chosen Yan's employer, Northwest Construction,¹⁰ as a focal point for my field research on Chinese investments in Angola, and in exchange for the chance to observe everyday life and work at the company, I provided help with translation as needed. Very few Chinese employees of the company spoke Portuguese beyond the most basic level, though Chinese and Angolan staff would often communicate with each other in a mixture of Portuguese and Chinese. It was common at the time of my fieldwork for Chinese construction companies in Angola to hire young Chinese bilinguals to work as full-time interpreters. The majority by far were women, who, like me, were the only, or one of very few, female employees.

Although I lived and worked primarily alongside Chinese staff at the company, I was also of a different nationality and gender, spoke Portuguese, and was never in a position to give direct orders to Angolan workers. I tried to establish friendly relations with the Angolan staff who lived at the same compound as I, and I asked questions that would have indicated my interests were different from those of their Chinese supervisors. However, it is possible that Francisco would have perceived me as occupying a managerial-level position. I had never met Francisco before that morning, and the only biographical fact I learned about him later from Yan was that he had been born in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Yan, I had spent much more time with. He had worked for many years as a driver for high-ranking managers of Northwest Construction's domestic operations before coming to Angola, and I often caught rides with him to run errands around the city. He did not have a college education. Yan was considered hard-working by his colleagues and superiors, and in my observations, he knew very well how to behave politely and respectfully toward the "leaders." When he was not busy, he could often be found in his dorm room with a group of friends, Chinese workers or technicians, all of them chain-smoking, watching movies or playing cards. He had not seen his family since coming to Angola three years earlier; he said he needed to earn more money before going home.

Although I employ ethnographic storytelling in the vein of Adam Ashforth's (2000) *Madumo*, my positionality in relation to Francisco differs from Ashforth's

intimate friendship with his primary interlocutor. Our relationship was much more distanced, "professional" in the sense that we only encountered each other on the grounds of the company and in the context of my being asked to mediate in his negotiation with the Chinese managers. I was not completely disinterested, however. I wanted the best possible outcome for Francisco, and I tried to assist him, without surpassing the unstated and unclear boundaries of my role as a translator. Alongside Francisco and Yan, I also worked in a subjunctive mood.

Old workers

The morning after my first encounter with Francisco, he came back to the company and appeared in front of my door just as Director Deng, the most senior-level manager at the compound, was passing by. "*Chefe!*" Francisco shouted after him, eager to speak directly with the big boss. Feeling compelled to explain the situation to Deng, I told him that Francisco had "gotten sick" and that his treatment had cost more than what the company had given him; moreover, he was upset that he had been replaced. While I was speaking, Francisco sat on a concrete ledge in front of my door to roll up his pant leg, and once I was finished, he pointed at his still-healing wounds. "Boss! Before this was very *kufala!*" Deng asked me to ask Francisco if he had recovered completely. After I translated, Francisco stood up and, just as he had the day before, stomped his leg in a display of fortitude.

"Tell him," Deng said, "that because he was not around while he was sick, we had to find someone to do his work, but now that he is better, we can arrange a position for him! I'll talk to his boss later." Deng's voice resounded with solidarity and optimism, and having finished making his official decision, he began to walk away.

But just as the conversation seemed to have been resolved, Fourth Brother, second-in-command to Director Deng, showed up. Referring to Francisco, he scoffed, "He's already so old! What do we need him for?"

Deng replied by repeating in earnest what Lei had said half-jokingly the day before: "We can't say that to him."

Fourth Brother retorted with the same solution Lei had offered: "He's sick! So send him to see a doctor!"

I tried to explain to Fourth Brother that Francisco said he was ready to work again, but I was interrupted by yet another voice—it belonged to Jia, a young assistant manager and favorite of Director Deng, who offered a new solution: "Tell him to go get a Certificate of Health."

10. I use a pseudonym for this organization, as well as any individuals named.



“Right,” said Deng with finality, “Tell him this is Angolan law.”

The Certificate of Health (*Atestado Médico*) was a document Manager Jia and I had recently discovered while researching legal requirements for Angolan employees at another division of the company. It was not something that the company had previously required of its employees, and certainly not one that manual laborers like Francisco, who were generally hired without any contract and paid by the day, would have been asked for upon their hiring. Still, I could not see a way to dispute the management’s decision, so I told Francisco he would have to go to a hospital and get the certificate.

“No,” he protested, thinking I had misunderstood, “This was not treated at a hospital! It was at the *kimbandeiro!*” He grabbed some leaves from the ground and pretended to rub them on his leg, to indicate a curing process involving medicinal plants.

“I understand,” I tried to reassure him, “but you still have to go to the hospital and bring back a document to show the bosses.”

Finally resigned to this next step, Francisco turned to Deng: “I will come back in three days.”

Deng easily fell into a paternal role: “Ok, now go to the hospital.”

Francisco thanked Deng, and, as the other managers dispersed, he smiled at me and said, “I know the big boss (*grande chefe*) is going to help me. Thank you, my sister.” I watched, filled with unease, as he limped away once again.

Obtaining an official document would not change the fact that, in Fourth Brother’s eyes, Francisco was too old to work, nor would sending him to see a doctor change the fact that he had already been replaced. The appeal to Angolan law seemed to serve more as a means to deescalate tensions and end the conversation, rather than solve the fundamental problems behind it. Was this an example of “politeness,” a way for Deng and the other Chinese managers to avoid responsibility for Francisco’s harsh dismissal and save face for themselves? It was unclear whether Deng truly intended to arrange a job for this employee he had never seen before, or whether he was simply saying something that sounded reasonable, which, as one of the highest-ranking leaders in the company, he would not be held accountable for implementing. Disregarding the potentially conflictual intentions of the Chinese managers, I again translated only their words, holding out hope that if Francisco did as they had asked, he might also have a chance to get what he said he wanted.

The tension between Fourth Brother, who insisted Francisco was too old to work, and Director Deng, who automatically said they would create a job for him, points to a major contradiction in company operations. Northwest Construction competed with other firms on the Angolan market by fulfilling contracts quickly and cheaply, which included paying as little as possible for Angolan labor. Chinese staff were highly aware that a racialized division of labor was crucial to their company’s business model. Whether they were formal employees of the SOE, or temporary workers hired on two-year contracts, they all received monthly salaries much higher than the combined day rate of Angolan workers, and they were entitled to benefits like housing, food, and health-care, which Angolan staff received only in exceptional cases. The Chinese employees I knew were aware that this arrangement was unjust, but they also accepted it. Lei, the technician who had laughed when he suggested we simply tell Francisco to go away, had explicitly used the term “exploitation” when describing the company’s business model, but as an economic, not necessarily a moral, term: “Construction is actually the most primitive (*yuanshi*) way of making money,” he’d explained, “because it relies entirely on cheap and efficient labor power. It is a kind of exploitation (*boxue*.” He and other Chinese employees of the company regularly invoked Marxian concepts to explain their company’s expansion in Angola, which they spoke of as inevitable and necessary.

Labor relations at the company did not, however, correspond neatly to a capitalist model, since it employed several elderly Chinese workers who seemed to add little economic value to its operations. Fourth Brother was a case in point. Already in his fifties, nearing the official retirement age for men at SOEs, he had worked as a taxi driver for many years before leveraging family connections to secure a low-level position at the company’s headquarters in China. When his brother-in-law assumed leadership of the company’s subsidiary in Angola, he had been brought over under the title of Deputy Director, one of the highest posts in the organization. I’d once asked Jia how the company could afford for Fourth Brother to spend most days drinking tea and smoking cigars in his dorm room. The answer I received was that although Fourth Brother was not educated enough to perform administrative tasks, he was very good at socializing and therefore had skills that were useful for the business. Besides, I was told, the company had an obligation to care for its “old workers” and repay them for their service. Thus, I surmised, the company



would find ways to recognize value in certain long-term Chinese employees even if they were economically unproductive, and it would continue to pay them wages even if they did not contribute to increased profits.

Managers like Deng would therefore have been aware that old age or illness should not be sufficient grounds for laying off a worker. In practice, Angolan workers were treated very differently from Chinese staff, and even contract employees would not have been accommodated in the way that Fourth Brother, with family connections and a permanent role, was. Whether this *should* be the case, however, remained an open question. The managers were aware that one of the most searing criticisms of Chinese companies in Angola was that they mistreated their workers. Moreover, although Chinese employees of Northwest Construction sometimes mocked government slogans like “China–Africa friendship,” cynically declaring that they were only interested in making money, they also knew that the legacy of Maoist anti-imperialism was supposed to differentiate Chinese interventions in Africa from those of “the West.” Asking for a document, one that they could claim was required by Angolan law, simplified the problem. It allowed them to bypass an ethical conundrum and go on with their work.

Hope and dread

Three days later, I woke up, got dressed, and walked outside to find Francisco sitting on a ledge just beside the door to my room. “I’m waiting for the *chefe*,” he told me. I assumed he meant Director Deng, but a few minutes later, Yan walked by. He asked me to check whether Francisco had brought his health certificate. When I asked, Francisco produced a dirty, crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. It was a kind of official form, at the top of which was written “*Justificação Médica*,” slightly different from the wording for Certificate of Health, *Atestado Médico*. The date on the form preceded Francisco’s first visit to the compound, when I had initially been called upon to translate, by two days. Moreover, it stated that he had been treated for *paludismo*, malaria. Even taking into account the wide range of ailments frequently classed under this label in Angolan popular discourse, it seemed implausible that the sores on Francisco’s leg would have been diagnosed as a symptom of malaria. This document was not what his Chinese bosses had asked for.

I explained to Francisco that the paper he had brought would not do; he needed a formal certification,

not a record of medical diagnosis. He protested that he had tried at the hospital, but “they were asking for money for that.” Then, he changed his story slightly, saying the doctors had told him they had run out of the forms. Perhaps overstepping my bounds as a translator, I offered to make a copy of another employee’s Certificate of Health for him, thinking that he might take it with him to wherever he would go to get his own, and thereby increase his chances of obtaining the correct document. That morning, Yan was supposed to drive some other Chinese employees to the company’s construction materials store, so we could make a copy of the certificate there.

Yan agreed, reluctantly, and had Francisco sit in the back of his pickup truck with two other Angolan employees as he drove us down the road. When we reached the gate of the commercial center where the store was located, Francisco climbed down and sat on a curb to wait. “*Eu aqui sentar!*” (I sit here!), he shouted to Yan in unconjugated Portuguese. When we reached the store, I quickly photocopied one of the Angolan sales clerks’ Certificate of Health and ran back to the truck.

As we exited through the main gate, Yan shouted to Francisco, who limped over as fast as he could. Reaching out of the truck window, I showed him the photocopied document, trying to make sure he saw the official seals on it. Impatient, Yan barked at me: “Give it to him!” I handed the paper to Francisco just as Yan aggressively peeled away.

We made our way to one of the company’s construction sites, where Yan had to drop off some materials. He drove at a rapid, almost reckless, speed along the narrow streets, in between housing developments built by Chinese contractors in the style of Texas suburbia, barely slowing down when the pavement faded into a bumpy dirt road. In the passenger seat beside him, I bounced violently, nearly hitting my head on the roof of the car. “Dizzy yet?” Yan joked, apparently enjoying the ride. I wondered how the two Angolan workers sitting in the back were able to hold on.

Yan’s frustration was palpable that day, and I wondered if I had actually made things worse for both him and Francisco by intervening so actively, as if getting the correct document would actually make a difference. Thus, Francisco, and I, continued to operate in the “subjunctive,” but instead of “hope and desire” (Whyte 2002: 176), the mood was increasingly one of dread and desperation. If Whyte et al. have shown how the truth of an idea is only revealed through experience over time



(2018: 97–8; see also Beisel et al., 2018), in Francisco’s case, the truth—whether his injuries had been caused by witchcraft or by a documentable medical problem—was not as important as the explanation’s effectiveness in getting him the material assistance he needed. What mattered was not a diagnosis that would solve the problem of not knowing, but one that would give him a chance to survive.

Being heard

Over a week went by before Francisco returned to the compound. He looked thinner than when I had seen him last, and he continued to walk with difficulty. “Hello, my sister. Good morning,” he said when I approached him. “I have not been doing very well these days. Actually, I have been feeling very bad. I couldn’t get out of bed for several days in a row. Each time I tried to get up, I would fall back down again. My body has been *very weak*. I went to the doctor,”—this time he used the term *médico* rather than *kimbandeiro*—“and he told me I caught this disease because I worked at the oil depot, breathing all those fumes. I worked there for five years, and I never wore a mask.”

Francisco now attributed the cause of his ailment to chemical poisoning and described a workplace health hazard supported by medical testimony. This new diagnosis echoed a common practice from colonial times, when people would often (mis)translate the term for magic as *veneno*, poison, when reporting to colonial officers. According to Estermann, this was done for various reasons, including (1) that they wanted to make more easily comprehensible a mysterious cause of death, (2) they knew witchcraft did not constitute proof of a crime in the justice system of whites, so they used the label “poison” to be able to bring a case to court, or (3) attempting to behave in a way that would be interpreted as “civilized,” they felt ashamed of appearing as “savages” who would seem to still believe in spells (Estermann 1983: 347). In other words, as Iracema Dulley has written, victims of witchcraft, who knew colonial officers would not believe them if they described their cases in terms of sorcery, used terminology that would allow them “to be heard” (Dulley 2010: 65). Whatever the stated cause, Francisco’s symptoms continued to correspond with what have been classically described as effects of witchcraft: “a slow wasting disease” (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976: 14).

I asked Francisco why he never wore a mask, unsurprised by the nonetheless disappointing answer I re-

ceived: “Because they didn’t provide any!” He held his hands in front of his face. “The doctor told me the disease entered my body through here. Then it spread down until it reached my leg,” he said as his hands swept down the front of his body, reversing the initial direction of the disease’s progression. “Now, I need to pay back the person who I borrowed money from for my treatment. They have been bothering me a lot. They even come to my house, to bother my wife! I need to repay my debt.”

Jia had come out of his room and stood where Francisco and I were speaking. I reminded Francisco that the Chinese managers had asked him to get a health certificate, and I asked if he had it now. He handed me a folded piece of paper, which I showed to Jia. Jia looked at the paper, upon which was printed “*Atestado Médico*,” Certificate of Health. Then he asked me, “Where is his identity card?”

From his experience with other Angolan employees, Jia knew very well that many of them did not have identity cards, and that obtaining such a document could be a difficult and expensive task.¹¹ I asked Francisco if he had one, and, as expected, he said no.

“Tell him to come back when he has his identity card,” Jia ordered me, in a stern tone.

I could not help arguing back, “Why does he need an identity card? I thought you said he only needed the Certificate of Health?”

“I did,” Jia retorted, “But from now on all of our employees must have identity cards.”

I complained that Jia had not told me this previously, and therefore I had not translated for Francisco, so he could not have known. I felt somewhat responsible for the situation now, and I worried that Francisco would be sent away yet again, to waste more time in bureaucracy, only to return to the company later on and be refused work, in an endless cycle of repeated deferral, until he gave up.

But perhaps because he too had tired of this game, Jia stopped the legalistic charade and said frankly, to me, “We can’t have him work for us anymore. He’s too old to work. Look at him.”

By this time, Deng had also emerged from his office to see what the commotion was, and Francisco snatched the opportunity to speak with him directly. He repeated the new explanation for his illness, which I translated,

11. Difficulty and expense, partly due to the demands of bureaucrats at all levels for gifts or favors, were common features of many administrative processes in Angola at the time of my fieldwork (see Schubert 2017: Chapter 4).



but as the pitch of his voice rose higher and higher, and he began to repeat what he had said many times before, I stopped speaking. Holding up his hand, he nearly shrieked, “I worked here for *five years!* I *never* stole anything! Francisco is not *alibaba* (a thief)!”

Neither Deng nor Jia interrupted. Instead, they watched quietly, with pained expressions, while the frail old man gestured frantically and shouted in desperation. They may not have understood his words, but they certainly received the message behind them, and in any case they already knew that he had been working in dangerous, unsanitary conditions, with little pay, for the past five years. When Francisco was finished, he stood still, panting and exhausted from the exertion of trying to make himself heard. Deng frowned, and Jia stared at his own feet. Finally looking up, Jia said to me, “Ok, we will give him 30,000 kwanzas, but then it’s over. He cannot work here. Please explain this to him.”

I told Francisco, who thanked me, this time without smiling. Then we sent him to Yan, who would give him the money.

Francisco was finally being compensated for his medical expenses—a sum of roughly US\$300. However, he had not only lost his job, but, through the directness of this final confrontation, in which even mediation through a translator became useless, both he and the Chinese managers had lost any pretense to politeness. In his first visit to the compound, both Francisco and the Chinese managers had evinced signs of mutual respect, but after sending him away multiple times, with different excuses, the managers’ actions became more and more difficult to interpret as acts of kindness. Finally fed up, Francisco had exposed their cruelty with an explanation of his suffering they could not refute: a scientific story of workplace injury supported by the testimony of a medical doctor. The translation of his narrative thus moved in the opposite direction of most anthropological accounts of witchcraft and capitalism. Instead of translating material inequality into the work of occult forces, thereby leveraging an implicit critique of accumulation (McIntosh 2009: 90), Francisco’s account of witchcraft was translated into a biomedical diagnosis that directly implicated his employers and rendered his recognition of their exploitative practices explicit.

Remarkably, the increasingly tense situation only resolved itself once the face-saving gestures were abandoned, intermediaries and translators were pushed aside, and communication was reduced to a direct exchange of

crude words and raw emotions. What was left to perform the commensurating act was money, the universal mediator (Simmel [1900] 1978). Although the amount decided was not equivalent to what he had requested, it was not an arbitrary sum either. The price that the Chinese managers finally paid for Francisco to leave them alone was a culmination of the preceding negotiations, a composite of their profit motives, the cost of his treatment, and the need to express appreciation to a loyal worker unjustly left to suffer (Guyer 2009). Although the negotiations had appeared to be about obtaining documentation for employment, they were ultimately about what to give and how to give it. In the end, Francisco left with more than nothing, but sociality was broken, and everyone lost face.

Later, when we were alone, Yan said to me, as if saddened by the ordeal, whose outcome he nonetheless could do nothing to change, “He didn’t pay attention to his own hygiene. I told him many times to wash his clothes. He wouldn’t listen.”

Traitorous translation

Translations are notoriously unfaithful; they always involve both omissions and embellishments (Benjamin [1923] 2004). Thus, as Hanks and Severi have pointed out, “the process of successive failed translation may be our best tool in discerning what is specific to any object” (2014: 2). The object in question would traditionally be a text, a language, or a more or less bounded socio-cultural system. In this case, I have focused on a relationship, between an Angolan worker and his Chinese employers. If understood as a microcosm of China–Africa relations, the question of translation might be about choosing an appropriate descriptor: neocolonialism or South–South solidarity? This is the opposition many observers of “China in Africa” have chosen as their analytical framework (French 2014; Mohan et al. 2014). Francisco’s dispute has shown, however, that such overarching labels occlude the possibility of Angolan labor and Chinese capital being caught in relations of *both* kindness and cruelty, in which individuals strive to treat each other ethically while also ensuring their own livelihoods within a system predicated on exploitation.

The events I have recounted here involved not so much the failure of translation between two languages, Chinese and Portuguese, but the failure of translating harsh realities into polite words, of maintaining a level of indirectness that could preserve sociality. Francisco wanted his job back, or at least to be properly compensated,



and he knew there was a chance he could get these things because he knew his supervisor cared about him. At the same time, the Chinese managers, including Yan, knew they could not avoid exploiting Angolan labor. The prolonged negotiation therefore involved not only Francisco's critique of injustice, sometimes left implicit, and his struggle for retribution, but also the Chinese managers' struggling to be proper capitalists, structurally positioned to inflict harm, even if sometimes reluctant to do so.

The kind of translation I have undertaken here, as an anthropologist, has therefore not been an attempt to make visible what was previously hidden, but, rather, to show how something could be seen and known, but not stated, by my interlocutors. In doing so, I have tried to evoke the difficulty of saying, to consider why certain statements could not be uttered. I have also endeavored to understand why I, as translator, became caught in the masked speech of the Chinese managers, unable to transmit to Francisco the cold, hard fact that, no matter what he tried, he would not be allowed to work again. I could have behaved differently; I could have given Francisco the money he needed out of my own pocket. Instead, I implicated myself in the apparent hypocrisy of the Chinese management, and in the process, I was made aware of a seemingly unresolvable problem, for Chinese companies, of how to treat African workers. This I heard only through the pained mixture of sympathy and indifference in Yan's endless deferrals, the silence in response to Francisco's distress.

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