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The 27 May in Angola: a view from below

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More commonly, people who had incurred the displeasure of the Party simply disappeared and were never heard of again. One never had the smallest clue as to what had happened to them. In some cases they might not even be dead. Perhaps thirty people personally known to Winston, not counting his parents, had disappeared at one time or another.

Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell

On a hot, sticky morning in the middle of February 1999, I stood outside the pale pink seventeenth century Carmo Church in central Luanda, interviewing a group of perhaps twenty people who were on a hunger strike in protest against an increase in fuel prices. They were all members of the small but brave Party for the Support of Democracy and Progress in Angola (PADPA). At the time, I was worried I wouldn't be able to persuade my BBC editor that this was a valid story given the size of the protest, but the problem was resolved when the police turned up and arrested twelve people. I had my news-peg.

A few days later, another even smaller demonstration took place across the road from Carmo Church, outside Luanda's Provincial Government buildings. Again, it was dispersed by police. The day after that, on February 24, I attended a third demonstration, held, like the first, outside the pink Carmo Church. This had a slightly wider cross-section of people – including another opposition

party, the Front for Democracy (FpD) – but was, like the previous protests, small. At most, there may have been thirty or forty people. Ten were swiftly arrested by heavily armed police, including FpD leader, Filomeno Vieira Lopes, who I was trying to interview. A policeman shoved a rifle between us, tried (and failed) to take my recording equipment, and then marched Vieira Lopes to the police van. Within an hour of starting, the protest was over. I stood quite alone in the small grassy square in front of the church, wondering how such a small act of dissent could possibly have provoked such an outstanding reaction. I was also surprised that no other journalists had turned up to report on the event.

In the days that followed, some colleagues in the Angolan media brushed off my questions about their absence, saying the protests had been too small to bother with, or that the PDPA were just making a publicity stunt. A few admitted that they had feared being arrested. And then one slightly older journalist told me something remarkable: “The last time there was a protest in this country, they didn’t just arrest everyone – they killed the protestors and carried on killing for weeks after. Ever since then, people here have been very afraid.”

“When was this?” I asked.

“Nineteen seventy-seven,” he said, “and they killed thousands.”

This was my introduction to the 27 May. At that moment, it seemed incredible that an event which took place more than twenty years before could remain so firmly embedded in the collective conscience. More amazing, I thought, was the fact that such a significant period in the country’s recent history had been kept so well-hidden: I had never even heard about it. Back then, I was no expert on Angola’s modern history but I had read a few books by British and North American academics and journalists focusing on the period since independence. Why had they not mentioned the Nito Alves uprising, and the thousands who were killed? Were it not for the fact I was reporting on the Angolan war for two intensely demanding news agencies, I might have started to explore the subject there and then.

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As it was, I didn’t return to the 27 May for another six years. My investigations began in the British Library where I found one priceless item, a sixty-page publication from the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) Political Bureau.ⁱ It begins with the resolution of the Central Committee, made on 21 May 1977, in which the MPLA not only acknowledges the existence of what it calls ‘fractionism’ but goes on to explain its very character: “Que este fraccionismo apresentando-se com uma capa aparentemente revolucionária visa realmente dividir o MPLA e desviar consequentemente o Povo dos verdadeiros objectivos da etapa actual da luta: a Reconstrução Nacional e a Defesa da integridade territorial do País, contra o imperialismo.”ⁱⁱ Two men are named as the leaders of this group – Alves Bernardo Baptista, better known as Nito Alves, and José Jacinto

da Silva Vieira Dias Van-Dúnemiii – and both were thrown out of the Central Committee that same day, 21 May.

These two men, we are told, did not want to organise a simple demonstration: they wanted to carry out a coup in three meticulously planned stages. First, the complete infiltration of not only the MPLA but the entire State through a process which sounds like brain-washing. Racist views, promoting black Angolans over mestiços and whites, were fostered. As early as 1975, Van Dúnem recruited 200 men who would eventually help attempt the coup. He also used his links into FAPLA to infiltrate areas of the army, including the now infamous 9th Brigade. Apparently he and Alves were also using corruption to achieve their goals – although the document fails to provide any precise examples.

The next phase involved undermining more political and economic structures. The fractionists began discrediting the good name of President Neto and the Central Committee, accusing the leadership of being anti-Soviet and anti-Communist.iv They also deliberately sabotaged the national economy. By now it was becoming clear that Alves was not interested in the Angolan people but purely “uma anárquica e reaccionária actividade política, em que a demagogia, p palvreado, funcionavam como arma.”v He and his merry fractionists were managing to permeate the national unions and the MPLA youth and women’s groups (JMPLA and OMA), and even school teachers were promoting his work, poetry and fanatical ideas in class.

Phase three was the climax: the fractionists would take power. Up until now, the reader is under the impression that Alves and Van Dúnem were a highly organised and ambitious duo. But the truth, we learn, is a little different. They attempted to carry out a coup not once, not twice but three times. The first attempt was on the 20 May, the second was supposed to be on the 25 May, and the third was on the 27 May. Their strategy was to include killing several senior members of the MPLA (including defence minister Iko Carreira, secretary of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee Lúcio Lara, the head of the Information and Security services DISA, Ludy Kissassunda, and his deputy Henriques Santos ‘Onambwe’); imprisoning other senior members of the party, the army and the government; occupying the Luanda prison of São Paulo, the buildings of the state radio, Rádio Nacional de Angola (RNA) and the state newspaper, *Jornal de Angola*; and cajoling the masses on to the streets to help the army. Finally, the new government would be announced.

Despite all their planning, the fractionists failed. A brief spurt of success, in which there appeared to be anarchy on the streets of Luanda, was followed swiftly by retreat. Supporters lost confidence, abandoned their arms and deserted the coup plotters. Beyond the capital, in Malange and Bié, fractionists were neutralised; meanwhile in Benguela, Lobito, Huambo, Huila, Kwanza Norte, Kwanza Sul, Uíge, Moxico, Cabinda, the Lundas, Zaire, Cuando Cubango, Mocamedes and Cunene, nothing of significance even got off the ground. Their only achievement – if you can call it that – was to burn to death eight MPLA members, six of whom were very senior, in the bairro of Sambizanga. This, according to the Political Bureau, was carried out under the orders of Alves.vi

Judgement was swift and, the document states, “corresponder ao sentimento nacional de castigar sem perdão todos quantos revelassem responsabilidades na sua organização e execução.”^{vii} At the end of the document, various calls are made to MPLA members and the public alike: “Viva a Unidade da Nação! Morte aos fraccionistas!...A Vitória é Certa!” A final call, on the very last page of all, reads: “Aplicamos a Ditadura Democrática Revolucionária para acabar de vez com os sabotadores, com os parasitas, com os especuladores.”

It is an extraordinary read and no doubt some of the information in it is true. Nevertheless, as I waded through page after page of allegations, my doubts about the truth of the Nito Alves uprising grew. There was something terribly familiar about the writing style: it was too excessive, too strong, too aggressive. I was reminded of the MPLA propaganda I had been fed as a correspondent in Angola during the war, all those unquestioned exaggerations and manipulations that were promoted through the state media. It raised too many questions: for example, if Alves and Van Dúnem had managed to scoop up so much support throughout the entire country, surely their opposition to President Neto’s government was based on real discontent. This version of the 27 May was gripping, but there was no doubt in my mind there was another side to the story.

The question was how to find it – particularly while based in the UK.^{viii}

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Halloween 2005: another grey, wet day in central London. I am walking down a cobbled street sandwiched between two rows of tiny terraced houses not far from Waterloo Bridge and the National Theatre. I’m about to interview British author, Michael Wolfers, one of the few to have published material about the Nito Alves uprising, and who was actually living in Luanda at the time.^{ix} I am nervous: he has enjoyed a long and healthy relationship with the MPLA and was offered Angolan citizenship by the former ambassador to the UK, Tony Fernandes. He has also translated some of Pepetela’s work into English. However, Wolfers is not popular with everyone. One of his critics advised me not to bother interviewing “that twit who has got to be the most biased journalist I have ever come across”. In London, some say he works for MI5, but a number of Angolans allege he is an MPLA spy and point to his vacillating presence at meetings of the small and rather incestuous British Angola Forum (BAF). They would do better to examine his relationship with the country, which goes back to the 1970s.

Like many other British socialists of that era, Wolfers is well-schooled, well-spoken and well-connected. He was a friend of the late British Marxist academic, Thomas Hodgkin, who himself enjoyed relationships with Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara. Wolfers went to Angola at the end of 1975 to witness the independence celebrations. It was then that he was asked to remain in the country and work as a trainer for journalists at RNA. He accepted, and became part of a small group of privileged Europeans working closely with the MPLA leadership on behalf of the ‘revolution’. Other devotees included: Augusta Conciglia, an Italian journalist for the French publication

Afrique-Asie who, says Wolfers, “lunched with Neto every day”; Jane Bergerol, a British freelance journalist who filed for The Financial Times among others and whose copy was said to be so biased the subs in London had to regularly delete chunks of text; and Margo Holness, also British, who worked as President Agostinho Neto’s aide in Dar es Salaam and translated his poetry into English.

Wolfers is what the English might describe as ‘posh’. A jovial and enthusiastic character with a touch of the mad professor about him, he is more interested in content than appearance. Greasy comb-over grey hair needs cutting and his bristly smiley cheeks, shaving. A large belly protrudes over his trousers and strains on tiny shirt buttons. Inside, his house has a similar appearance. Huge boxes of books and notes are piled up in the front room – “Sorry about the mess, it’s my Thomas Hodgkin biography”^{xi}, the carpet can’t have been cleaned for a good decade, and where the walls aren’t covered in interesting pictures they could do with a layer of paint.

We sit down on square, spongy sofas close to the floor in his front room. I pull out my notebook and pencil.

“I hope you eat meat?” he says.

I nod.

“Good, because I’ve got some foie-gras and toast for us to eat a little later.” He pauses briefly, then adds, “I’m afraid it’s duck, not goose.”

Wolfers is generous with his time and his material. He gives me a copy of a seven-page letter he typed in Luanda shortly after the 27 May 1977, and sent to a British comrade in Mozambique. It provides an interesting angle on the day’s events.

He woke at half-past six that Friday morning, to the sound of automatic gunfire. A little ruffled, he turned on his radio to reassure himself that nothing out of the ordinary was going on. From the ninth floor flat where he was living, around the corner from the RNA, Wolfers could see an armoured vehicle and people going to work. He drank a coffee and then set off to the radio. In his mind, he was thinking about a statement due to be broadcast that day – read by Lúcio Lara – exposing, ironically perhaps, the fractionists’ “tactics”. Wolfers was concerned that an attempt might be made to interrupt the transmission. Walking to the radio station, at about twenty minutes to eight, he saw people running from gunfire which seemed to be closer than before. He considered turning back, but such was his sense of duty to the MPLA he felt he must continue – so carried on walking. At work, he was greeted by his boss, Ilda Carreira, sister of defense minister, the late Iko Carreira. She told Wolfers the shooting was only in the bairros, and the two of them quickly settled down to translating Lara’s statement.

Come eight o’clock the atmosphere was beginning to change. A man Wolfers knew and who he describes as “very young and silly” was attempting to take over the studio. A few minutes later this “hothead” was still trying to interrupt transmissions but now with the help of three soldiers. It was

at this point, says Wolfers, that “the fractionists took over”, a fact confirmed, he alleges, by the presence of a man in the studio called Rui Malaquias. Nevertheless, the atmosphere inside the radio must have been quite calm: Wolfers and Carreira found time to make themselves a cup of coffee and choose some reading material from the library. The morning continued surprisingly uneventfully until about a quarter past eleven when the “liberating force” – a group of “well armed and... dynamic” soldiers, including some Cubans – kicked into action. Some fighting erupted, forcing Wolfers and others to hide from the gunfire in the basement. However, it was not long before the RNA was back under the control of the authorities.

Wolfers’ letter shows that he was deeply upset by the events which took place that confusing Friday thirty years ago. He admits finding it hard to write, and mourns the death of “really great comrades” like Saydi Mingas, then finance minister^{xii}. His unquestioning love and admiration for (Agostinho Neto’s faction of) the MPLA is clear. However, the level of his loyalty – “I was absolutely prepared to be killed” – raises important questions about his ability to understand the Nito Alves uprising beyond a very partisan and possibly rather naïve, pro-Neto prism.

For example, he writes of the Party’s “passionate reasonableness, as expressed in the leadership” and wonders how it could have been “so tolerant for so long”. To contrast, Wolfers describes Alves and his group as “the enemy” – “tawdry people” who were exploiting the anxieties and social problems among “the inadequate and insecure”, a group he also refers to as the “lumpen”. He admits to feeling deeply saddened by a clear racial bias in the make-up of the so-called fractionists, who he says did not include any whites or mestiços, and were opposed to “a non-racialist, socialist society”. Speaking of the assault on the RNA, he says that the people who turned out to be fractionists were “appalling” workers who would, soon, have been sacked anyway. At another point he writes them off as a load of incompetents who couldn’t cope with the work they’d been assigned, and simply fancied being “lord of the land” for a day. Eventually he concludes, “There was no sense or value in what they were doing.”

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I struggled with Wolfers’ assertion. How could an intelligent man – and friend of Angola – so easily write off the actions of thousands of people throughout the country? I thought back to that demonstration outside the Carmo Church in 1999: if the 27 May was simply about a lazy load of lumpen making an opportunistic stab at power, why do so many Angolans remain fearful of protesting or even simply expressing their political views to this day?^{xiii} And yet, apart from more defensive articles by Angolans who are alleged, or themselves claim, to have supported Nito Alves, nearly every piece of work I have read by a more independent author has nevertheless accepted the official MPLA version of events, or has ignored the day (and amazingly, what followed) altogether.^{xiv} Even respected critics of the regime, like David Birmingham, agree that it was undoubtedly a coup attempt.^{xv} Of course, they may be right. There is certainly much evidence to suggest it was, indeed, an attempt to overthrow the incumbents: the very fact that almost the entire

9th Brigadexvi of the Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola (FAPLA)xvii was supporting Nito Alves and, among other acts, broke into the prison at São Paulo in Luanda and briefly took control of RNA, offers ample proof of (at least, some of) the fractionists' desire to take power. However, there is also evidence to suggest that not all the Nitistasxviii wanted to carry out a coup.

Ironically, even Wolfers, who clearly loathed the fractionists, said in interview: "They didn't want much. They wanted the Nitistas in the big jobs. Basically, it was [to be] a reshuffle." We may never know if this is the truth – many of the key witnesses were killed – however it does imply that some basic questions about what really happened on the 27 May need to be asked if we want to try and get a more complete picture. For example, if they did want a coup, why didn't the alleged fractionist, Jacob João Caetano (known as Monstro Imortal), kill President Neto while the two of them were alone that very Friday?xix There are several possible answers to that question: perhaps they planned to throw Neto in prison, or expel him from the country, or keep him on as leader to lend legitimacy and stability to a new government. Or, perhaps, as was suggested to me by an Angolan man who witnessed the events of the 27 May, Monstro Imortal lost his nerve to slay the father-figure, the father of the nation, rather like the Shakespearean figure of Hamlet.

One man who has persistently questioned the official version of events is João Van Dúnem, younger brother of Zé. In his view, the fractionists did not attempt a military coup and moreover, that this reveals a serious blunder in the fractionists' strategy: "If they had wanted to kill Neto, they could have. Perhaps then, you could have said it was a military coup. And if Neto had been killed, things may well have been changed for the better in Angola. It was a miscalculation of my brother's. Right until the end, he defended the position that there should no spilling of blood."xx

He clearly places responsibility on his brother, not Alves. I have often wondered whether the vaunted unity of the fractionists' was, rather like the image of the MPLA presented to the outside world, a bit of a myth. It may have been that one side was gunning for a coup (possibly Alves and Monstro Imortal) and the other only wanted reform (Zé Van Dúnem), and this might explain why the younger Van Dúnem today regrets his brother's softer stance. Indeed, João Van Dúnem says the fractionists did discuss the possibility of seizing power through force – apparently there was a debate – but eventually all agreed with Zé, that a coup would be a mistake. He says his brother was respected by the other fractionists for his intellect, and was affectionately nicknamed 'le philosophe'. It was this reputation, as the brains if you like behind Alves' brawn, that convinced the fractionists' against attempting a coup.xxi

There will be some, no doubt, who will argue that it is academic, thirty years on, to be arguing over what really happened on the 27 May 1977, and whether or not the fractionists attempted a coup or not. I have been warned repeatedly against 'digging up the past'. Some have said that by merely writing about this moment in Angola's history could see me banned from re-entering the country for good. I hope not. My intention is really very simple: to try to explore the 27 May as objectively as

possible, speaking to all sides and representing as many views as possible. As mentioned above, most of the published material on the Nito Alves uprising relies heavily – often solely – on official MPLA material and gives no voice at all to those accused of factionism. It's not only the accused who have been ignored: most of the material I have come across relies on accounts from the political and military elite, ignoring with remarkable deafness the views and memories of the people beneath this stratum. Even among some of the surviving 'factionists' there is a view that the opinions of the common people do not matter. They have weak memories, I've been told, and can't be trusted. This remarkable attempt to silence the public is what I try to begin to chip away at here.

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"Go to Sambizanga," someone said, "and you'll find plenty of elders to talk to you there."

An intimate network of family homes, small bars and the occasional shop are disguised in a complicated collage of wooden slats, large slices of corrugated iron, breeze blocks and orange mud which extends across the entire neighbourhood. Sambizanga is just beyond Luanda's inner tarmac circle, missing out on piped water and access to mains electricity however erratic supplies may be. I visited during the first quarter of 2007, in the thick of the rainy season. Turning left off a main road just north of the market at São Paulo, I immediately bumped into huge puddles and vast pot-holes which were rapidly becoming lakes. I was in a battered four-wheel drive which created waves of brown bubbles that lapped at the walls of low buildings as we passed, a motorised high-tide splashing pedestrians. Most people work their way through the area using a chaotic network of stepping stones, which depend on exceedingly good balance and legs long enough to make the stretch. I passed a very old lady, bent over in black, who was wading her way through the water barefoot, muttering something about a funeral she mustn't miss. Mud clung to her feet and ankles.

Sambizanga, despite its appearance, is famous. It was an underground cell in this neighbourhood which is credited with starting the liberation struggle against the Portuguese in 1961; President José Eduardo dos Santos was also born here; and, unwittingly, Sambizanga became the focus of activity both before, during and after the 27 May.

At forty-four years old, Lino Gracia Mateus looks like a tired old man. Quite tall and skinny, he holds his upper body in a stoop, his neck angled forward from the weight of his head. His rich breath confirms his own admission, that he swallows too much alcohol. But he has his reasons. Mateus describes himself as a war veteran who has never received a pension. To illustrate how many years he spent fighting on behalf of the MPLA, he tells me through bloodshot eyes that his own daughter didn't recognize him when he came back from the war. "My own daughter called me uncle," he says, breaking into a shout. Mateus also has a son, who in 1990 was kidnapped by the União Nacional pela Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) rebel group. By 1994, Mateus had lost hope that his son was still alive and so the family held a funeral. Ten years later, his son returned home to Sambizanga, by now a devoted UNITA fighter, and very much alive. That same son today is

a pension-less alcoholic veteran – just like his father. These events may help explain why Mateus seems oblivious to the notion of fear. When I ask if I can record our conversation and use his name, he snaps – “I don’t care!” – and flicks his hand at my small digital recorder. So I switch on the machine.

“Fractionism,” Mateus says slowly, “began as a sort of joke.”

In other words, it began as a game of football. The JMPLA in Sambizanga established one of the best football teams in the country. Progresso – also known at one time as JUBA, shorthand for Juventude Unida do Bairro Alfredo – won the first Angolan football league held after independence, and as a result, became instantly very popular. Every evening, at six o’clock, Mateus and his friends would go to the Progresso club meetings held at a local hall, Salão Faria. Initially, there were just the players plus a few fans, but as the weeks passed the meetings started to expand until so many fans were trying to squeeze into the hall – about the size of a basketball pitch – they couldn’t all fit. The other change was the subject of the speeches: they were no longer simply about football, but about politics.

“It was really something,” enthuses Mateus.

More often than not, Nito Alves, the president of the club, spoke.

“He said that illiterate whites should also be cleaning the streets, not just illiterate blacks. He said that if there were white motorists, there should also be black ones. He said that if there was a mulatto who hadn’t studied properly, then he, too, should end up on the streets, jobless. And he told us that Lúcio Lara and those other mestiços surrounding [President] Neto, were filling his head with the wrong stuff.”

Mateus says everyone knew Alves was recruiting followers – and they were more than happy to support him.

“Did you ever meet Nito?” I ask.

“Oh yes! I used to sit with him, here,” he points to the ground right next to where we are talking. “He was much better accepted and more popular than Neto, especially in these traditional bairros. He didn’t even have body guards. He just hung around with us, on his own.”

This isn’t the first time I am listening to someone praising Nito’s ability – some say, his preference – to be with people lower down the economic pile. A few days earlier, I spent several hours with a slightly older Sambizanga resident, a man in his fifties, who I will call Z because he was very nervous about being named. Like Mateus, Z was once a member of the JMPLA and also went on to fight for FAPLA. Unlike Mateus, Z’s life has improved. He has a large family, a good job and has managed to buy a small plot of land in a slightly less populated area on the other side of Luanda.

“Nito spoke very eloquently,” says Z with a wide smile, “and the masses liked his speeches because they were terra a terra. He would focus on the fundamental problems of the society, for example, poverty, equality of opportunity, and most of all, the problem of racism. ‘Why,’ Nito used to ask, ‘isn’t their equality between the races? If we fought against Portuguese colonialism in which whites exploited blacks, why is it, now that we’re independent, there isn’t equality?’ And one of the things that he said which I remember most of all was this –”

I already know what Z is going to say because I’ve heard this from so many people.

“– in Angola we will only be in peace when a white, a mulatto or a black is seen cleaning the streets, not just blacks.”

“But wasn’t he just playing populist politics?” I ask.

“No! It was true what he said. When it came to manual labour, it was only the blacks who did the work even though there were whites and mulattos who were also uneducated. And when it came to scholarships to study abroad, they always favoured the whites and mestiços – not the blacks.”

But I’m finding it difficult to beat back the cynicism: “Yes, but was Nito being sincere or was he simply trying to gather support for his own political ambitions?”

Z huffs, slightly irritated by my interruptions. “What you have to understand,” he looks me in the eye, “is that Nito was speaking about this openly – publicly – while the Central Committee was trying to crush this viewpoint because it was so delicate. But the country had to change, it simply had to change – and Nito cared about our suffering.”

Alves didn’t just discuss racial inequalities. According to Z, he also criticised the growing number of political prisoners who were being jailed simply for their political opinions. The public, says Z, appreciated this because many people were privately deeply angry about the diminishing space for free expression.^{xxii} Alves also spoke about high-level corruption among some of President Neto’s close associates, pointing the finger at defence minister, Carreira, for alleged dirty dealing.^{xxiii} This, says Z, is why he and people like Mateus, would go with thousands of others to the football meetings. They wanted to hear Alves talking. He gave them hope.

“So what happened?” Z asks rhetorically, itching to give me his opinion. “A shadow leader started to appear: there was the formal leader, Neto, and the informal leader, Nito Alves. And you know what happens with an informal leader, don’t you?”

I start to feel as if I’m in a classroom. “No,” I say on cue.

Z nods knowingly, “Well, he becomes very popular with the public, with the crowds, and he gets many followers. There is a sort of usurping of power.”

“You mean Nito was starting to usurp Neto?”

He nods again: “This caused some consternation within the MPLA, up to and including Neto himself because Nito didn’t just have the support of the masses; he was also gaining the support of the military. This is when the situation started to get quite heavy-going.”

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One particular section of the army will always be associated with the events of the 27 May. It was armoured vehicles from the 9th Brigade that broke down the doors of São Paulo prison and released hundreds of men. The involvement of this division is why, according to many people, there are so few 9th Brigade veterans alive today to give their side of the story. Many of them were killed in the aftermath.

But not all.

José Júlio is a handsome man with a proud posture. We meet on a hot Saturday morning in April 2007, at the main bus-stop at Bairro Rangel Triangle, a scrambled junction of heavily pot-holed and dusty roads in this run-down Luanda suburb. He has a wide-rimmed straw hat planted firmly on his broad head, and has the air of a man with a good sense of humour. Shorts down to his knees, a loose shirt and sandals complete his weekend look. He takes me to a nearby bar, behind a small modern government building encircled in razor wire. As we enter this simple joint, a young man passes in front of me, swinging a huge goat head by one of its large looping horns, the bloody stump of the animal’s neck dripping blood across the cement floor. I imagine chewing on grilled goat as we chew the fat of the 9th Brigade – but the rest of the beast’s body is still to be skinned, boned and sliced.

“In those days I was known as Lightning [Relâmpago],” says Júlio with a chuckle. “It was my nome-de-guerre.”

He places a metal badge on the table. It’s the shape of a soft arrow-head in red, black and gold detail. Across the top in black letters it reads ‘9a Br.I.M’ which stands for the 9th Brigade Motorised Infantry. Beneath that is a large gold star and beneath that, a small gold tank. Júlio hands me his FAPLA identity card. A small black and white photograph shows the young Lightning, barely fifteen years old, looking confidently into the camera.

“You were so young,” I say, “you had everything to live for. What went wrong?”

In a slow deep voice, he begins with a reminder of the military situation of Angola in 1977. The MPLA was fighting for its survival, battling against UNITA and the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA). Young men like Júlio were terrified – “We’d been fed this propaganda that the FNLA were killing their enemy and eating the flesh” – and were keen to join FAPLA. But disillusion soon set in.

“The country was completely debilitated,” says Júlio. “There was no food and the level of discontent within the armed forces was huge. We were eating mukwaxxiv for months on end. We had nothing!”

“So is that why the 9th Brigade wanted to carry out a coup?” I ask.

“It wasn’t a coup, it was a military uprising.”

He watches my brow furrowing, confused by the distinction, but I let him go on. “Look,” he says, “it was like this. We, in the military, we knew that these guys were diamond traffickers. Things had to change. We couldn’t let it go one like this. We had to get rid of these guys at the top.”

“Right,” I say smugly, “so you were going to stage a coup?”

“No. It wasn’t a coup: we didn’t want to take out Neto. We just wanted Lúcio Lara and Iko Carreira. We wanted to replace them with other men.”

And then he raises the racial issue: the whole point of the 27 May demonstration was to stop Angola becoming another Rhodesia. Júlio insists that neither Lara nor Carreira were “genuine Angolans”, and claims their parents were from Portugal. He calls them “outsiders” who were using Neto as a black figurehead. The other problem, he says, was alcohol.

“Neto drank a lot you know. So they’d get him to sign important documents when he was drunk.”

I have heard this allegation repeatedly – that President Neto was a boozer. Chivas Regal, say many, was his favourite tippie. Some interviewees have shown me pictures of the late President insisting that the signs of his alcoholism are evident in his eyes, but his thick glasses make it hard to get a close look at signs of a true drunk. I can’t say I’m not tempted to believe the gossip – it’s always a delight to find weaknesses in powerful men – but I have no proof. Moreover, I regularly return to one observation of my own: many Angolan men I know drink a hell of a lot. Why should Neto be singled out?

But possible motivations for the Nito Alves uprising weren’t simply race, whisky, a lack of food or disappearing diamonds.

“There was this problem with an oil contract as well,” claims Júlio. “In 1976, there were these secret accords in which Lara, Carreira and Neto signed up to an oil deal with the Americans without the Central Committee knowing about it,” he pauses dramatically. “We were supposed to be Marxists! And we signed an agreement with the Americans! I mean, how can this be?”xxv

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Back in Sambizanga, Mateus remembers the 9th Brigade as being pivotal in preparations for what he calls the demonstration. Late on the night of the 26 May, hundreds of young soldiers came to distribute stacks of guns to Alves’ supporters. Many of the civilians were frightened by the sight of the weapons, and couldn’t understand why they would need them if they were only going to march. But the soldiers warned the men not to panic but to stay awake, ready for the signal – a knock on the door – early in the morning. And sure enough, before the sun had even started to rise, the

soldiers returned. As civilians started to emerge from their homes, they were instructed to march either to the radio or the presidential palace.

“But we did not take the guns,” Mateus shouts, “We did not take our guns.”

Meanwhile, news was spreading that hundreds of prisoners had been freed. Many were political prisoners accused of factionism in the preceding weeks, but many were common criminals. “This was the Nitistas’ biggest mistake,” Z told me emphatically. “They said it was going to be about freeing political prisoners but they freed robbers and thieves and no-gooders too. There was no criteria for freeing people. They just opened the doors and let people out. And then they were mobilized to go and demonstrate at the palace.”

As the sun rose over Sambizanga, gunshots were fired and young people with megaphones began calling to people to come out of their homes and demonstrate. Z and Mateus remember many people choosing to follow the crowds towards the centre of town. Mateus was one. But others, like Z, who supported Alves, were terrified because they knew the authorities would target factionists. So they stayed at home, doors barricaded, fearful of what might happen next. Z remembers burying his copy of Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book in the back of his garden. “It must still be there, deep in the earth, proof to this day that I supported Alves,” he says proudly.

Closer into town, it was becoming clear that the demonstrations were not going to be a success. “We went to talk to Neto,” recalls Mateus. “We made a peaceful demonstration, and we were met with Cuban bombs.”

Crowds fled in all directions. Some managed to get away, some were killed in the streets. Even the 9th Brigade didn’t stand a chance against the Cubans. “We only had armoured vehicles,” Júlio told me. “They had great tanks!” And they used the tanks to great effect. By early afternoon, the whole of Sambizanga was surrounded.

“You could barely breathe,” says Mateus.

I ask him about the deaths of the senior MPLA figures, the eight men mentioned in the MPLA document. “Nito Alves didn’t order these deaths,” he’s shouting. “What happened was an individual act, a moment of anarchy. It’s true they were killed, and some of our football players from Progresso did this. But they did it because they were trapped here. They were scared, that’s why they killed them. They could see there was no way out. The men from the football team killed them. They panicked.”

I asked Z the same question. “It was a mistake,” he admits. “This was the error of the factionists because one of the men who died was from Sambizanga, someone very dear to us, someone very young. This was Commander Bula. He should not have died. He did a lot for this country. And look, Bula was black.”

It was too late. President Neto had made his now infamous speech in which he declared: “Não vamos perder tempo com julgamentos, não haverá mais perdão.”

In Sambizanga, hundreds of Cubans soldiers were sent in to clean the place out. Both Mateus and Z spoke of absolute terror. One move and the army would shoot. They both believe the Cubans were told to fire at lots of people simply to frighten the population and bring the situation under control. It was, says Z, “a persecution of man against man”.

And it was to get worse. Mateus remembers the 28 May as one of the worst in his life. “The tanks came into Sambizanga and cleaned up the whole place. They destroyed more than 100 houses here,” he points to a row of low ramshackled buildings in front of us, “They just drove their tanks straight over these – for years, no one would build here, it was known as the sinister area, and was just abandoned – and then the Cubans started their hunt for the football players.”

He remembers one player in particular, Kiferro.

“The Cubans couldn’t find him. Wherever they looked, he would disappear. They thought he was a *feiticeiro**,” Mateus is laughing. “He would be here with us one moment, and when the soldiers arrived, he’d disappear. When they realised they weren’t going to catch him they started killing other people instead, members of his family, brothers, nephews, friends, even people they thought looked like him.”

Eventually, Kiferro came forward. The Cubans took him and he was never seen again. Him, and many others. Both Z and Mateus estimate that every family in Sambizanga lost at least one or two members. “It’s like the war,” comments Z. “Do you know any family that wasn’t affected? It’s the same with fractionism.”

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“But those people who killed in the war, they are easier to forgive because it was a situation of war, it was a question of survival. What makes the 27 May different is that they just came to people’s houses and without any explanation, took them and killed them.”xxvi

In the Spring of 2006, I meet L in Portugal, at her home, a short train-ride from Lisbon. She is an anxious figure, and spends much of the interview tearing at white paper tissues that are soaked in her tears. She fled Angola in September 1977 with her four-month old baby daughter. She was petrified. Her husband, a white Portuguese man who was devoted to the MPLA, had been taken by DISA agents from their home in Luso (now Luena), Moxico, on the 27 May. A senior member of staff at the local branch of the Banco Pinto e Sotto Mayor, he had been sent home early that day – along with every other worker in the town. No one knew why.

L went through weeks of insufferable anguish. She had been told her husband was being held at the local prison. Then she was told he’d been sent to Luanda. So she flew to the capital. There, a senior policeman advised her to get the hell out of the country – “They’re killing everyone” – and so she

made plans to go. L was, relatively, lucky: her daughter was half-Portuguese so she was able to secure support from the embassy which helped her prove that her husband was dead. Today, she has documents prepared by the Portuguese authorities stating that her husband was killed by the son of Commandante Dangereuxxxvii in Moxico in the aftermath of the Nito Alves uprising.xxviii

In Portugal, for many years, L denied her own existence. If fellow Angolans stopped her in the street – people she knew – she would insist she was Mozambican and not the person they thought she was. “I carried so much hatred. I hated my mother. I hated my father. I even hated myself for being an Angolan,” L breaks down and weeps into another paper tissue. I wait for her to calm down a little before asking if she was able to share her grief with anyone, perhaps her family.

“No!” she snaps. “No one. Never! It’s taboo. You don’t speak about this subject.”

L believes that her parents never mentioned the subject because they wanted to protect her. They didn’t want her to relive the experience. Even today, she says, they are scared of upsetting her. But what about her late husband’s family? Surely they must have wanted to know what happened in Moxico?

“No,” says L. “They’ve never asked, and we’ve never spoken.”

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It is this silence – this very private insistence on maintaining the secret of the Nito Alves uprising – which is so intriguing. L is by no means the only relative of a victim of the 27 May who has told me about this censorship imposed within the family unit by the family. During the past year or so I have often wondered how and why Angolan people have somehow colluded with the regime, almost erasing from existence those accused of fractionism.xxix George Orwell’s notion of an ‘unperson’ regularly comes to mind: the idea of someone who is removed from history, whose name is not mentioned, and indeed to mention their name is a ‘thoughtcrime’. Although this article may give the impression that people have volunteered information happily, the truth is more complex. I have met many Angolans who have been too scared to speak. Even when offered anonymity some have been convinced that I am an MPLA spy, while others were sure we were being spied on during interview. This has been the case both inside Angola and beyond, in Europe. One potential interviewee decided not to speak to me for fear that doing so would affect his/her career. This person actually said, “I should not even be thinking about this, let alone talking about it in front of you.” A clear case of thoughtcrime.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that some individuals have experienced great relief in talking to a complete stranger with no personal interest in the rights and wrongs of the 27 May. Years of holding in so much grief has finally been allowed to flood out, often leading me to wonder whether as a journalist – not a counsellor or psychotherapist – I am really the right person to be doing the questioning.

With so much emotion involved, and so much time elapsed, I have also worried about failing, ailing and false memory. How do I know that what people tell me is the truth? How do I know that they aren't exaggerating? Simply, I don't. There is no guarantee of absolute truth – but that is the case with any piece of research and any interview. What I can say about the 27 May is two-fold: on the one hand there is a remarkable consistency in the types of stories people tell and how they remember that day, and the weeks and months that followed; more importantly perhaps, what is critical for Angola today is how people remember the 27 May because it is that which shapes their political behaviour and their relationship to the (still) ruling MPLA. And it is this which initially brought me to know about the Nito Alves uprising: people's behaviour today, and the fact they are reluctant to demonstrate.

So, for all the private and the very public silence about the 27 May, the Angolan people remember: they remember the dead and they remember to a greater or less extent what happened. And that remembering is demonstrated in their private and public lives to this very day. As Z said: "The same families who lost their sons still live in Sambizanga. These are people who are completely unhinged now, people with psychoses, people who are depressed."

And Mateus, who showed me where the Cuban tanks came in and mowed down people's homes, said: "Today, the Angolan people are completely tranquil and quiet – they watch, they see and they say nothing. This is purely because of what happened in 1977. People remember this. They cannot forget. That is why so many people here drink: we want to forget what is in our heads."

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I began this essay with a reflection on my own personal introduction to the 27 de Maio, which was shortly after a public demonstration in Luanda in 1998. From here, I acknowledge the official MPLA interpretation of the event – an attempt to carry out a coup – followed by the views of an eye-witness and firm supporter of President Neto, Michael Wolfers. Both provide convincing evidence to show that the fraccionistas did indeed intend to take power by force. This is promptly denied by João Van Dúnem, younger brother of Zé, albeit with a tinge of mild regret. Beyond these more elitist, and perhaps privileged perspectives, we then hear from Angolans who were not decision-makers in 1977, but followers and members of the public who witnessed and participated from 'below' as opposed to 'above'. It is clear from the testimonies of the eye-witnesses in Sambizanga and elsewhere that, from their perspective, the 27 de Maio was to be a demonstration and an opportunity to talk to President Neto about what they viewed as problems in the country. Although I quote from less than a handful here, I have interviewed many other Angolans about this topic and their views confirm this perspective, that the 27 de Maio was not an attempt to seize power.

Clearly, there are many memories of that day, and many different versions of the truth. Each interviewee is as convinced as the next of their experience of that day, and each text I have read is as convincing as the next. What is extraordinary is the fact that 30 years after the event, the memories

and opinions and truths of the Angolan public are still being censored, and so many questions about the 27 de Maio remain unasked, let alone unanswered. This essay has only touched on the day itself, and has not explored many other crucial issues, such as the extent of Soviet support for Nito, the depth of Cuban involvement, the possible business interests that added fuel to the fire of the Nitistas and 'Netistas', the possibility of CIA involvement, the number of people who were killed after the 27 de Maio and so on. Many people – Angolans and otherwise – have advised me against this research, arguing that it is 'still too early' for the truth of the 27 de Maio to come out. I disagree.

ⁱ *A tentativa de golpe de estado de 27 de Maio de 77*, Informacao do Bureau Politico do MPLA, 12 de Julho de 1977, Edicoes "Avante!"

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 9

ⁱⁱⁱ Hereon Nito Alves will be referred to as Alves unless referred to directly by interviewees as Nito, in which case I have left the original quotation as such. José Van Dúnem will be referred to as Van Dúnem, unless mentioned as Zé by interviewees.

^{iv} Many allege that the fractionists were supported by at least a faction of the Soviet Union leadership. For an excellent insight into the extent of the relationship between Nito Alves and the Russians, see chapter 6 of Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2005. It is intriguing that Westad, who has otherwise enjoyed excellent access to the Moscow archives, has, since 1996, been denied access to all the files relating to Angola 1976-1980.

^v *ibid.*, p. 25

^{vi} p.46, *A tentativa de golpe de estado de 27 de Maio de 77*, Informacao do Bureau Politico do MPLA, 12 de Julho de 1977, Edicoes "Avante!"

^{vii} *ibid.*, p. 50

^{viii} My intention was to return to Angola at the beginning of 2006. However, the great quest for that elusive Angola visa took a good ten months, and so I didn't return to Angola until February 2007.

^{ix} Together with Jane Bergerol, Wolfers wrote *Angola in the Front Line*, Zed Press, London, 1983

^x Wolfers was once a correspondent for *The Times*

^{xi} *Thomas Hodgkin Wandering Scholar: A biography*, by Michael Wolfers, published by the Socialist publishers, Merlin Press Ltd, April 2007

^{xii} Mingas was one of the senior MPLA figures allegedly burned to death by fractionists in Sambizanga on the afternoon of the uprising.

^{xiii} The author has, since 1999 up to the present, interviewed numerous Angolans who say they want to protest about various aspects of their life but are too scared to do so because of what they remember or have been told about the aftermath of the Nito Alves uprising. See, for example, 'Angola: worlds in collision', 11 April 2007, at openDemocracy: http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/angola_collision_4514.jsp

^{xiv} The best examples include the highly respected British historian-journalist Basil Davidson, 'Questions of Nationalism', in *African Affairs*, Vol 76, No 302, 1977; also Paul Fauvet, 'Angola: the rise and fall of Nito Alves', in *Review of African Political Economy*, pp.88-104, No 9, May-August 1978. Although impressive for its detail on the elite politicking of the MPLA, Jean-Michel Mabeko Tali's *Dissidencias e Poder de Estado: O MPLA perante si proprio 1962-1977* Luanda 2001 nevertheless clearly leans quite overtly in favour of President Neto's faction of the MPLA and is also an overly top-down view of the 27 May 1977.

But the ultra-loyalists have bought into the official MPLA version of events with such gusto that they do not even mention the event at all, despite writing books that clearly cover the period: the most striking example is British journalist, Victoria Brittain's self-declared partisan work on Angola, *Death of Dignity: Angola's Civil War*, Pluto Press, London, 1998, which begins in 1975 two years before the Nito Alves uprising. However, in an interview in December 2005 in London, when questioned about why she did not mention of the 27th May 1977, she told this author: "I wasn't really covering that period... It just wasn't that important." Also Piero Gleijeses' otherwise superb text, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, Pretoria*, University of North Carolina 2002. Worth mentioning too is Ole Gjerstad's *The people in power: an account from Angola's Second War of National Liberation*, Oakland, California 1977, which focuses on the MPLA during 1975 and 1976. Although he could not have covered the uprising itself, it is intriguing that a fully translated interview with Nito Alves available in the first edition, has been switched to a fully translated interview with Lúcio Lara in the second!

^{xv} David Birmingham, 'The Twenty-Seventh of May: An Historical Note on the Abortive 1977 "coup" in Angola' in *African Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 309 (Oct., 1978), pp. 554-564.

^{xvi} The 9th Brigade consisted of hundreds, some say thousands, of men and was said to be an elite force within FAPLA. An in-depth account of the role of the 9th Brigade in the 27th May 1977 is due to be launched in Luanda on 27th May 2007. Entitled, *Nuven Negra: o drama do 27 de Maio de 1977*, it is written by Dr Miguel

Francisco, a former soldier in that brigade who was held in a concentration camp for four years in Moxico province between 1977 and 1981.

^{xvii} FAPLA was initially the armed wing of the MPLA but later became Angola's official armed forces when the party took power at independence. In 1991, following the Bicesse Accords – a peace deal between UNITA rebels and the MPLA – Angola's armed forces were renamed the *Forças Armadas Angolanas* (FAA).

^{xviii} Nitista is also used to describe the fractionists, and is obviously taken from Alves' nickname, Nito.

^{xix} Interview with João Van Dúnem, London, 23 November 2005.

^{xx} João Van Dúnem, then a FAPLA soldier, was based in Cuba at the time of the Nito Alves uprising. In November 1977, he was sent back to Luanda where he was arrested and imprisoned on arrival.

^{xxi} Indeed, João Van Dúnem told this author that a few days before the 27 May 1977, President Neto asked Zé to speak to the 9th Brigade and discourage them from attempting a coup. At this stage, Neto was clearly aware of a desire among certain fractionists to overthrow Neto's 'fraction' of the MPLA. The younger Van Dúnem says his brother respected Neto's wishes and went to talk to the Ninth Brigade.

^{xxii} It is ironic – or simply hypocritical – that Nito Alves was defending freedom of expression, given his own role in arresting hundreds of Angolans on the hard Left – esquerdistas – when he had been minister of internal administration.

^{xxiii} Two interviewees told the author that Carreira had a stake in a Portuguese company called Soluang, which was allegedly selling army uniforms to both FAPLA and UNITA in the 1970s. Carreira was also involved in smuggling diamonds out of Angola, according to these same sources who asked to remain anonymous.

^{xxiv} The fruit of the baobab tree.

^{xxv} Júlio was amazed when I told him that, according to Chevron, the Malongo oil complex in Cabinda continues to be protected by a thick border of landmines laid by the Cubans in the 1970s. Notably, the relationship between the MPLA and Gulf Oil didn't only upset Angolan Marxists. Similar tensions existed beyond Angola's borders, with New Right groups in America and members of the US administration trying to force Gulf Oil to abandon its oil operations in Cabinda. The US group, the Heritage Foundation, alleged that Gulf was paying the MPLA US\$5 million a day in royalties, money they claim was being used to pay the Soviet Union and Cuba for arms. See George Wright, *The Destruction of a Nation: United States' Policy Toward Angola since 1945*, Pluto Press, London, 1997. Also John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story*, WW Norton, New York, 1978

^{*} Someone who practices witch-craft, a sorcerer or witch-doctor.

^{xxvi} Interview with L, 14 March 2006, Portugal.

^{xxvii} Commandante Dangereux was one of the eight men burned to death in Sambizanga. He was from Moxico and it is widely understood that this is why retaliation killings occurred in Luso. However, the author has so far found no evidence that the Commandante had a son at that time who would have been old enough to carry out any act of murder.

^{xxviii} The author has photocopies of all these documents and has seen all the originals and they appear, to all intents and purposes, to be genuine.

^{xxix} For an insight into the complete breakdown of the legal system during this period, see Ildeberto Teixeira's *E Aos Costumes Disse Nada*, published by the author in Lisbon in 1988.