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To cite this article: Marina Padrão Temudo & Pedro Talhinhas (2019) Dynamics of change in a 'female farming system', Mbanza Kongo/Northern Angola, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46:2, 258-275, DOI: [10.1080/03066150.2017.1381842](https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1381842)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2017.1381842>



Published online: 10 Nov 2017.



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Dynamics of change in a ‘female farming system’, Mbanza Kongo/ Northern Angola

Marina Padrão Temudo  and Pedro Talhinhos 

The inhabitants of the Zaire Province of northern Angola, belonging to different subgroups of the Bakongo, offer an interesting case to study social and agricultural change in what Boserup would call a traditional ‘female farming system’. Since the 1930s, several factors have produced multiple dynamics of change – sometimes abrupt and other times gradual – in both livelihoods and the gender relations of agricultural production. Of these, the paper is going to highlight late colonial intervention, the anticolonial war, the long civil war, the economic boom after the end of the war and the recent economic crisis. While colonial interventions reinforced women’s role as food producers, the wars acted in the opposite direction by increasing the participation of (non-conscripted into the military) men in agriculture for those who took refuge in the then Republic of Congo. The economic boom that followed the end of the civil war opened income-earning opportunities out of agriculture for young men, but the recent fall in the international oil price reversed this trend, and agriculture – as a sole occupation or combined with casual off-farm jobs – became again a way out of hunger and poverty.

Keywords: gender relations of production; post-war reconstruction; livelihoods; reagrarianization; food security

Introduction

This contribution focuses on the non-linear, disparate and sometimes unpredictable dynamics of change in the gender division of agricultural work in Africa. Scholarly interest in the role of women in agrarian economic development has increased since the 1970s, thanks mostly to the work of Boserup (2011 [1970]). Boserup argued that ‘female farming systems’ dominated in Africa and were connected with land abundance, the practice of shifting cultivation and the use of the hoe. During colonial times, the role of women as food producers became enhanced by the imposition of cash crop production – mainly appropriated by men – and/or of men’s forced labour in road construction, plantations and mines (Boserup 2011 [1970], 7, 8). The progressive increase in population density would, according to her, force technological innovation, the adoption of permanent cultivation and the use of the plough. These changes would bring about an increasing participation of men in agricultural work and food production (Boserup 2011 [1970], 7, 8).

Boserup’s evolutionist view has been challenged by scholars who otherwise recognize her pioneering role in advancing gender studies (e.g. Benería and Sen 1981). Afonja (1981) and Wartena (cited in Bryceson 1995, 15) examined – among Yoruba and Fon groups, respectively – the impact of the slave trade in displacing women from food production

into trade and in creating a negative perception of agricultural labour. Through the use of a historical perspective in the analysis of agrarian change and gender relations in Africa, Guyer (1995, 2005 [1991]) concluded that agricultural work was shared by men and women in the cultivation of sorghum, millet, rice and yam. Since the sixteenth century, the introduction of cassava and maize resulted in a transformation of the farming systems associated with a feminization of agriculture; this change was then reinforced by colonial introduction of cash crops and conscripted labour (Guyer 1995, 2005 [1991]). But even in the case of cassava and maize adoption, exceptions can be found of societies where a 'symbiotic relationship' between men and women in the performance of agricultural work persisted (Hill 1978, 220). Conversely, 'male farming systems' underwent diverse trajectories of change (e.g. Afonja 1981; Linares 1992; Guyer 1995); in some of them men still use a hoe and never adopted the plough (Whitehead 1990). All in all, as Whitehead (1990, 36) pointed out, 'the blanket categorization of sub-Saharan African farming as female also serves to homogenize what is an area of considerable cultural and economic variety'.

While cassava and maize were integrated as food crops in traditional farming systems, after World War II other crops were adopted (or coercively farmed during colonial times) by African smallholders exclusively for the market. Despite the widely held assumption that cash crop production in Africa has benefited men to the detriment of women (e.g. Boserup 1970), studies conducted in different social, cultural and economic contexts have shown its varied impact on the sexual division of agricultural labour and women's access to resources (e.g. Bukh 1979; Bledsoe 1980; Guyer 1980, 1995; 2005 [1991]; Linares 1992; Bassett 2002; Schroeder 2005; Duncan 2010). Male migration, widowhood and divorce are also factors expected to adversely affect women's work burden, but they can increase their decision-making capacity too (e.g. Colson 1962; Hill 1978). Women's work burden has also increased – at the same time as their access to resources diminished – as a consequence of many development interventions (e.g. Carney 1992, 1998, 2004; Carney and Watts 1990, 1991; Schroeder 1999; European Commission 2003).

Criticizing widely held feminist assumptions, O'Laughlin (2007, 30) calls our attention to 'the possibility of a complementary gendered division of labour across different activities and both rainy and dry seasons'. Guyer recommends the use of a holistic understanding of the relation between social organization and cultivation practices, and the study of changes in the comparative value of men's and women's work as well as in labour time and rights to resources and products; she also mentions the need to analyse the interaction between local systems and the wider political and economic context (Guyer 2005 [1991], 109). Mostly triggered by structural adjustment programmes and other international market policies, processes of 'depeasantization' and 'deagrarianization' (Bryceson 2002a, 2002b) contributed to dramatically change rural societies, but the gender dimension of these phenomena remains poorly studied. Another driver of change – known to have a direct negative impact on both food and cash crop production – is armed conflicts; when only men are recruited as soldiers it is foreseeable, even in the so-called 'male farming systems', that women will become the sole/main people responsible for feeding household members (e.g. Spall 2014). But what happens when the war is over? In what ways do post-war economic conditions shape men's attitudes towards agriculture? And what has been the role of the recent rise in cereal prices and of the economic crisis in shaping the livelihoods and the perceptions of men in relation to agriculture? This paper makes a step towards filling these knowledge gaps. It zeroes in on a case study of the changing role of agriculture in the livelihoods of Bakongo women and men living in Northern Angola, namely in Mbanza Kongo and its surroundings, and the transformations in gender roles and dynamics brought about



Figure 1. Map of Angola, identifying the province of Zaire and the cities of Luanda and Mbanza Kongo.

by the political and economic events of the last 60 years or more. Mbanza Kongo is one of the oldest urban centres of Central Africa (Thornton 2000), particularly famous for having been the capital of the precolonial kingdom of Kongo, and is today considered one of the most important sites of cultural heritage of Central and Southern Africa (it has even been a strong candidate for a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site nomination since almost a decade ago). Despite a solid body of literature on the historical importance of the city (see Máximo 2017 for a thorough review), the galloping transformations it has suffered in daily livelihoods, especially owing to colonial pressures, anti-colonial war, civil war and postwar conditions (including the return of many farmers who had been living in neighbouring countries during the wars), are still largely undocumented.

A note on methodology

The research is based upon almost nine months of fieldwork (in 2014, 2015 and 2016) conducted by the first author in Zaire province (Figure 1). Bearing in mind the religious pluralism of the Angolan Bakongo (see Sarró [forthcoming](#))¹ and the difficulties inherent in applying a randomized sample procedure in the highly dispersed settlement of Mbanza Kongo, an opportunistic technique for the study of the importance of agriculture for urban livelihoods was adopted. After identifying the main churches (Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal and Prophetic) in each quarter of the city, the researcher started to present

¹The religious landscape in the region was, until recently, mainly composed of Catholics, Baptists, Kimbanguists, and Tokoists, together with many smaller prophetic churches linked to historical prophets of the Kongo. Today, Catholic and Baptist churches still dominate in the countryside, but in the urban centre of Mbanza Kongo religious pluralism is exponentially increasing and incorporating more and more prophetic churches (mostly arriving from the DRC), as well as Pentecostal ones.

the research plan to the church leaders and to request them to communicate to their believers who practiced agriculture her interest in interviewing them. During three months in 2014, 300 urban dwellers whose agricultural fields lay in the peri-urban area (between one and three hours' walking distance) agreed to participate and were interviewed. Considering that almost every Bakongo belongs to a church and that the leaders stated that the majority of their church members produced food, this sample provides a broad picture of the universe of urban households practicing agriculture. Quantitative research focused on the characterization of the households in relation to leadership (family and farm), demographics, religion, country of birth, main activity and secondary occupations, date of the last return from the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (hence DRC),² house ownership and sources of energy for cooking and light, land tenure status, farming techniques and agrobiodiversity, food self-sufficiency, crops produced and sold, animal husbandry, income sources, main expenditures and assets bought with agricultural incomes. Qualitative research was mainly done in 2015 and 2016 and included informal conversations, interviews with key informants, direct observation and visits to fields and forests, but also interviews with farmers in many villages around Mbanza Kongo. Besides small farmers, 48 taxi drivers (cars, motorcycles and tricycles) and one barber were also interviewed about their household relation to agriculture. No female market traders were interviewed – apart from rather relaxed informal conversations while buying products – due to their reluctance and the paucity of time to establish a close rapport with them. All interviews were conducted directly by the first author in either French or Portuguese, or in Kikongo (and sometimes in Lingala) with the help of a translator. Unless otherwise stated, all data results from field research. The first author designed the research, conducted field work and conceived and wrote the manuscript. The second author performed quantitative data analysis.

The history and politics of an agricultural landscape

Portugal was a weak empire, and only in late colonial times did the government start to invest in some of the colonies. Angola was one of them, though in the territory of the province of Zaire few investments were made (e.g. Waals 2011, 39–44). The region had few plantations (where the workforce was mainly constituted by southerners) and became a kind of labour reserve, contrary to neighbouring Uige province which developed into a centre of coffee production for export (Máximo 2017). The oil wealth of the region was not then exploited and only the neighbouring oil-rich Cabinda enclave and the diamond-rich Lundas were the focus of major natural resource exploitation (e.g. Soares de Oliveira 2014).

Oral tradition states that Bakongo settlements used to be very tiny hamlets located near water sources and forest patches. In the early 1930s, the colonial government, in an effort to expand its administrative authority in the whole territory of the colony, started to force villagers to abandon their lands and resettle (in villages grouping several hamlets) near the roads (see also Brinkman 2008, 203–04). These roads were built with forced labour (*peia*, in Kikongo) by both women and men. Resettlement from hamlets into bigger villages

²The DRC, independent from 1960, was first named Republic of Congo, and in 1971 renamed Zaire (thus sharing its name with the Angolan province of which Mbanza Kongo is the capital). It changed its name again, in 1997, to Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to distinguish itself from the other African country also called Republic of Congo (Brazzaville). To avoid further confusions, in this article we will only use DRC to refer to that nation-state.

near the road often meant that people from one hamlet were compelled to settle in other people's territory. As a consequence of resettlement, ancestors' graveyards – where many ceremonies must be undertaken – orchards and the most fertile land often became very far away from the new village. This move not only produced fewer rights to land for the forced displaced farmers, but also downplayed their former traditional authorities. But, while this land tenure change was of minor importance at a time when land pressure was low and commercial agriculture non-existent, the change in the structure of village authority became significant for the implementation of an effective, and clearly despotic, colonial rule.

Village authorities were integrated into colonial administration and made responsible for selecting people and providing the number requested each year by the local colonial administrators (*chefes de posto*) to be taken to forced labour, as workers in either infrastructure construction or plantations located in distant regions (e.g. Bhagavan 1986, 11; Cruz 2005). Men could be taken to work in Cabinda, Uige, Lubango (Huila) or Caxito (near Luanda), but also in S. Tomé and Príncipe – one more former Portuguese colony where cocoa plantations practiced a totally inhumane regime of exploitation of the imported labour force (e.g. Seibert 1999). Allegedly, the 'hired' men (*contratados*) would stay for six months working in a plantation, receiving a tiny remuneration in the end. However, some interviewees reported that they could be retained for several years and receive no remuneration in the end.³ Besides, according to interviewees, young men and even boys could be kidnapped and taken to faraway plantations. *Contratados* would then pay the head tax that every man over 24 years of age had had to pay since 1930 (e.g. Cruz 2005). Those who would not go to work on a plantation used to sell bush meat or peanuts to pay the tax, although some were helped by their wives in collecting and deshelling palm kernels to be sold.

Until the 1950s, agriculture based on the cultivation of cassava, yams, beans and peanuts was exclusively for subsistence, as in order to sell any surplus farmers had to head-load it and travel on foot to Mbanza Kongo. Besides clearing the fields, men spent much of their time hunting; fishing; collecting edible products such as mushrooms, wild fruits and insects in the forests; and tapping palm wine (see also Thornton 1998, 15–16). After the mid-1950s, Portuguese traders started to go to rural areas to buy cassava, peanuts and beans, and sell cloth, blankets, salt, soap, machetes, wine and sugar. Allegedly, men's engagement in agriculture started to increase, but a gender division of field ecologies persisted. Men slashed the forest to plant bananas, plantains, cassava, maize, beans and some fruit trees; women worked in the savannah fields and planted roots and tubers, peanuts, maize, pumpkins and calabashes, beans, green leaves and tomatoes. MacGaffey (1970, 177) – who conducted ethnographic fieldwork among the Bakongo of the DRC – considers that there is an association between women, grasslands and the hoe, and between men, forests and the axe.

Nevertheless, according to our interviewees, some couples helped each other in the performance of given tasks, such as women in sowing and men in the harvesting of cassava. Besides, and until today, boys used to help their mothers in all agricultural and domestic work and even learned how to cook; after marrying, however, they would only cook in

³In Kikongo, men and women often used the term *kinkole*, 'captivity', instead of *contrato*, to refer to forced labour. Many explicitly explained that from their point of view, there was no difference between our categories of 'forced labour' and 'slavery'. It was all part of the *Tandu dia kinkole*, 'the time of captivity'.

cases where their wife is ill or absent. Men and women did not used to pool the incomes from selling their products, although men were responsible for buying their wives and children clothes, and for providing the household with salt, meat and fish. Those who went to work on a plantation for six months used to return in time to do the clearing of fields and, when remunerated, they would buy cloth, salt and sugar to bring home.

The hard conditions under which women and men had to do forced labour in infrastructure building, and under which men had to work on the plantations, led to growing revolts (e.g. Freudenthal 1999; Máximo 2017) which culminated in March 1961 in Northern Angola (e.g. Mateus and Mateus 2011; Cruz 2005). During the uprising, rural people were backed by the Union of the People of Angola (UPA, which in 1962 fused with another anti-colonial party, becoming the National Front for the Liberation of Angola – FNLA). Many white settlers and migrant workers from other Angolan regions were killed (Mateus and Mateus 2011). The violent response of the Portuguese army prompted a sudden migration of the entire population of the province towards the south of the DRC (Brinkman 2008; Mateus and Mateus 2011).⁴ Families went to villages where they could find kith or kin. The DRC province of Lower Congo (*Bas Congo* in French) is also inhabited by Bakongo people and has, since colonial times, offered refuge to Angolan Bakongo either escaping adverse conditions (witchcraft accusations or fears, conflicts with village fellows, colonial oppression) or willing to improve their welfare conditions and to study (see also, Waals 2011, 31; Máximo 2017). Lower Congo inhabitants used to welcome Angolan Bakongo and to give them a place to settle and farm. When, owing to the anti-colonial war which started in March 1961, Angolan people started to arrive in the hundreds, their reception weakened and they were given wastelands that locals did not want to farm. However, no refugees' camps were ever needed.

To survive and later to be able to pay the tax to support FNLA war efforts, both men and women invested in agriculture as a joint venture. Contrary to their DRC Bakongo landlords – known for their trade skills – refugees started to produce large cassava surpluses which were transported by trucks to Kinshasa. Later on, the investment in agriculture became supported by the availability of hired tractors and state research and extension services, which provided farmers with technical advice, seeds and vaccines for domestic animals. As President Mobutu supported FNLA, refugees were given the same citizenship rights as autochthones in relation to access to free education, health services and even civil service jobs. Although FNLA – contrary to the other anti-colonial movements (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola [MPLA] and União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola [UNITA]) – did not incorporate women into the army, the war did not produce a gender bias in household composition of the labour force, mostly because forced conscription among the refugees started late and was oriented towards young boys.

The war lasted 13 years, during which some refugees in the Lower Congo had moved to Kinshasa, but the majority of those who migrated as adults were still working as farmers. The younger ones, as well as second-generation refugees, had been or were still studying; many finished high school and some got higher degrees. In 1975, when independence was declared, many sold their houses and returned home with whatever belongings they were able to transport. Others, however, either decided to stay in DRC or returned to Angola leaving behind a part of the family. A determining element in this decision was the growing tension among the three anti-colonial movements in relation to how power was going to be shared; another one

⁴Angolan refugees in DRC amounted to more than 100,000 people in June 1961 and over half a million in 1972 (Wheeler and Pélissier 1971, 187).

was the explicit advice of Holden Roberto – the FNLA leader – who told his followers to be careful and to maintain one foot in each country until the political situation became clearer. Power was taken by the MPLA party alone and, even before independence, a war started between the former anti-colonial movements FNLA, UNITA and MPLA (e.g. Waals 2011; Spall 2014). Some FNLA soldiers retreated again to their base in DRC (only demobilizing in 1980), some adhered to either MPLA or UNITA armies, and some gave up military life. In the case of civilian returnees, some returned to DRC, but many were too tired of having lost their belongings twice in their lives; they decided to stay in their own country, either settling in their former villages or moving to the cities of Mbanza-Kongo or Luanda. Nonetheless, the country's capital city of Luanda was the only place where men under 50 and young boys could hide and avoid conscription.

The migration history of Bakongo inhabitants of the Zaire province of Angola had been blurred since the start of the civil war, due to the complexity of people's movements across a porous border and the fact that no population census was conducted until 2014. Some people returned to Angola during the civil war, in periods of cease-fire. Others who had decided to stay in Angola could not bear the violent livelihoods to which they became subjected and again took refuge in the Lower Congo, either until the end of the war or during periods of intense strife (such as 1999). The return after the end of the war was also irregular, and some only came back as refugees expelled by the post-Mobutu Kabila regimes (Mobutu lost power to Laurent-Desire Kabila in 1997; in 2002 Joseph Kabila, the current president, succeeded his assassinated father). Again, the process of deportation was phased (2000, 2002, 2009, 2014) and an unknown number of Angolan Bakongo are still today living in DRC.⁵ Others came by free will as their livelihoods worsened due to the imposition of a tax on Angolans and their descendants born in DRC some years after Mobutu being overthrown. Several factors contributed to explain this haphazard movement, such as the better conditions in relation to education and health in their refuge country, the enduring stigmatization of Bakongo people promoted by some MPLA leaders – who associated them with the FNLA or the UNITA, and frequently labelled them as backward, conflictive and arrogant, prone to witchcraft, and even cannibals. Besides, few of those who studied are able to get their diplomas recognized (Angolan authorities, almost by default, suspect DRC diplomas in the hands of Bakongo are forgeries) and to continue the professional activities they were performing in DRC. Back in Angola, they then have to rely on urban odd jobs or agriculture to make ends meet.

During the civil war agricultural production was restricted not only by the conditions of insecurity, but also by the malfunctioning of the market. Nevertheless, some Mbanza Kongo inhabitants were able to produce food on the fringes of the city and in their (at that time large) home gardens. In the villages, smallholders maintained their houses near the roads where they would come during the day, but used to sleep in shelters located in the agricultural fields. Most of their stored crops and livestock were also kept there to reduce confiscation by soldiers, who used to come during harvest time (see Spall [2014], for the case of Huambo province). In sum, if during the anti-colonial war agricultural production in Zaire was nonexistent (with the exception of a few settlements to which the Portuguese brought smallholders from southern regions), during the civil war the area under production was also small.

⁵Interviewees stated that the majority of people still living between Makela do Zombo and Matadi are Angolan refugees and their descendants.

Making a living out of agriculture in post-war Angola

The war ended in 2002 with the unconditional military defeat of UNITA and the killing of its leader, Jonas Savimbi. The country soon boasted one of world's fastest growing economies due to the increase in oil extraction and the rising of its international price (e.g. Soares de Oliveira 2011, 2014). To gain political legitimacy, a part of the oil and diamonds wealth of the country was then directed towards infrastructure reconstruction, but few investments were made in education, health, agriculture, sanitation or drinking water provision (Soares de Oliveira 2011, 2014, 62). The country's economy became totally reliant on the oil rent, despite Angola's good agro-ecological conditions (Castanheira Diniz 1998, 2006), which during colonial times made it a major exporter of agricultural products in Africa (e.g. Sogge 1994; Neto 2005, 172, 173; Soares de Oliveira 2014, 28). Indeed, until 1975, smallholder agriculture guaranteed a large share of the marketed production of maize, cassava, beans, peanuts and potatoes, and a significant part of coffee, rice and cotton production (Universidade Católica de Angola 2015, 179).

Nonetheless, after the end of the war, even basic items such as dried cassava had to be imported (e.g. Neto 2005, 193–200; Soares de Oliveira 2011, 16). The paradigmatic example is rice, which is exported to Zambia, milled there and then reimported, due to the lack of a milling industry in Angola. The Angolan agronomist Fernando Pacheco (2014, 89–90) speaks of a process of deagrarianization and feminization of agriculture between 2000 and 2009 linked to rural–urban migration. He goes on to say that the government disregarded the Food and Agriculture Organizations (FAO) advice to support smallholders' food production – preferring to invest (unsuccessfully) in large-scale projects – and neglected rural areas in relation to the supply of basic goods and the marketing of agricultural surplus production; furthermore, he argues that between 2008 and 2014 there was a drastic reduction in the government's budget for agriculture (Pacheco 2014, 92–96).

In Zaire province, no support was given to smallholders to stimulate surplus production and ease their access to the market (see also Soares de Oliveira 2014, 59, 70, 71); soon the urban job opportunities and access to goods and services produced a massive rural exodus towards Mbanza Kongo and Luanda. This migration concurred with rural tensions and weak post-war reconciliation (see also Soares de Oliveira 2011, 292). At present, some rural communities seem anomic and the level of alcohol consumption is high. The vast majority of the almost 400 interviewees in rural villages mentioned having problems with their family and neighbours due to envy, hatred and/or witchcraft; some alluded to fears of being poisoned (and reported cases of people who had been), and a young entrepreneurial couple we interviewed had their house burnt during the night. The most immediate causes of the tensions in most rural villages had to do with the local political histories during the civil war (between UNITA and MPLA followers) and the fact that most of the post-war returnees had more skills, more education and a strong will to improve their well-being, even if at the cost of hard manual work.

According to interviewees, today many villages have less than half the number of households that were there until the end of the civil war, despite the return of the refugees. In sharp contrast, the capital city of Mbanza Kongo experienced a dramatic expansion in consequence, with the creation of a land market⁶ and the conversion of former peri-

⁶Important factors in the creation of a land market around the city and along the main roads that link it to Luanda and to the DRC border are the ongoing appropriation of large tracts of land by members of the political and military elite, and the application of Mbanza Kongo for nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

urban agricultural fields and rural villages into ‘rurban’ landscapes. Many men were able to get jobs in construction (roads and buildings), and as night guards, taxi drivers or even public servants. Women became traders in the urban markets, snack producers/sellers, and potable water itinerant (head-loading) providers. Some men and women, though, continued to practice agriculture (as a main or secondary activity) in the peri-urban landscapes, but those who had other income-earning sources preferred to hire casual labours to do the heaviest tasks and to keep to themselves just the harvest work done on Saturdays.

Somehow, gradually, according to interviewees, the number of urban odd jobs started to diminish in this province, and the Chinese⁷ companies which now became the main sources of work opportunities outside agriculture are considered to provide very bad working conditions (see also Soares de Oliveira 2014, 77). The economic crisis and the government will to diversify the economy did not bring about more state support for smallholder agriculture. Farm-gate prices are very low, the price of transportation is high for local standards of living, the fields are far away from main roads and farmers have to head-load the products – because there are no rural secondary roads or trails to allow the circulation of bicycles and tricycles – all the work is done manually and losses due to pest (mainly rodents, antelopes and wild pigs) attacks are high; some farmers even complained about the difficulty to buy certain seeds (vegetables and some grain legumes) and tools, due to either their scarcity or their high price. State agricultural services only support farmers organized in cooperatives connected to the state apparatus, but even these do not have reliable access to hired tractors. In any case, tractors only work in the collective fields and not in the individual fields of each member. The main collective fields in the region are the ones connected to a church, where members work once or twice a week in order to generate an income mostly sent to the church headquarters. The only non-governmental organization (NGO) supporting agriculture in the region under study is the international Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture (CNFA), whose mission is ‘to stimulate economic growth and improve rural livelihoods in the developing world by empowering the private sector’; but to empower the powerful and politically well connected (e.g. the owners of the biggest local supermarkets) is a less-needed intervention in a country still riddled with abysmal economic differences.

The economic crisis, provoked by the fall of the international price of oil, fell upon the city in a way that – although not seeming to reduce rural–urban exodus – created a new interest in agricultural production. The households analysed in the study – which, as previously said, can be considered representative of the majority of urban households practicing agriculture – can be divided into three groups in relation to the gender division of household and farm leadership (see Table 1). The first group comprises the full male-headed households (including eight households constituted by single, divorced or widowed men) in which the husband spends the same or more days/week working in the field, compared to the wife (38.3 per cent). The second group includes households composed of single, divorced or widowed women who are both the head of the household and the farm manager (30.0 per cent). This household type is usually the most destitute – with the highest proportion of dependent members (Table 2) – especially when the fields are far away and the households are composed of old women and their young children and/or grandchildren. The third group includes households composed of couples, but in which the man has a job outside agriculture and his wife is then the farm manager (31.7 per cent).

⁷China is the main economic partner of Angola and, since the end of the war, a ‘resources-for-infrastructure deal’ was made between the countries (Soares de Oliveira 2014, 56).

Table 1. Main activity of men and women by household type.

Households	Agriculture as main activity					
	Type	No.	%	Both man and woman (%)	Man only (%)	Woman only (%)
Man is head of family and farm	115	38.3	78.3 (n = 90)	12.2 (n = 14)	5.2 (n = 6)	4.3 (n = 5)
Woman is head of family and farm	95	31.7	0.0 (n = 0)	0.0 (n = 0)	94.7 (n = 90)	5.3 (n = 5)
Man is head of family and woman is head of farm	90	30.0	27.8 (n = 25)	0.0 (n = 0)	68.9 (n = 62)	3.3 (n = 3)
Total	300	100	38.3 (n = 115)	4.7 (n = 14)	52.7 (n = 158)	4.3 (n = 13)

Table 2. Dependency ratio by household type.

Household type	Average actives/dependents ratio
Man is head of family and farm	1.2
Woman is head of family and farm	0.8
Man is head of family and woman is head of farm	0.9

Table 3 illustrates key differences among household types in relation to access to labour. Women-headed households face major constraints in relation to labour, being able to farm fewer person-days per week, hiring fewer casual workers to support in peak times (which illustrates their reduced access to capital) and also engaging less in mutual aid groups. They also have a less-intensive use of the land (only 29 percent of female-

Table 3. Households access to labour.

Household	Access to labour						
	Type	No.	Total days of family work per week		All household labour force	Family only (%)	Also hired (%)
Man head of family and farm	115	4.27	3.38	8.43	53.0 (n = 61)	31.3 (n = 36)	24.3 (n = 28)
Woman head of family and farm	95	0.00	3.59	4.18	64.2 (n = 61)	25.3 (n = 24)	17.9 (n = 17)
Man head of family, woman head of farm	90	1.84	4.00	5.79	28.9 (n = 26)	50.0 (n = 45)	47.8 (n = 43)
Total	300	3.45	3.81	6.29	49.3 (n = 148)	35.0 (n = 105)	29.3 (n = 88)

Table 4. Access to land by household type.

Household Type	Access to land			
	Offered (%)	Lent		Bought (%)
		Permission to plant trees (%)	No permission to plant trees (%)	
Man head of family and farm	53.0 (n = 61)	21.7 (n = 25)	25.2 (n = 29)	2.6 (n = 3)
Woman head of family and farm	33.7 (n = 32)	26.3 (n = 25)	38.9 (n = 37)	2.1 (n = 2)
Man head of family, woman head of farm	36.7 (n = 33)	22.2 (n = 20)	40.0 (n = 36)	3.3 (n = 3)
Total	42.0 (n = 126)	23.3 (n = 70)	34.0 (n = 102)	2.7 (n = 8)

headed households sow three times per year, against 66 percent of male-headed households and farms and 42 percent of the households headed by men whose wives are the farm managers). Despite all these constraints, 'agriculture is what makes us go forward' as Isa, one of the female head of household interviewees, put it. In general couples seem to be less vulnerable, although men with a well-paid job outside agriculture often have more than one wife and numerous children. Their income is then seldom enough to properly provide all of them with a house, clothes, and money to pay education and health expenses, a burden which thus falls on the shoulders of women. On the contrary, monogamous and some polygynous men who have a job outside agriculture frequently give their wives money to hire casual labourers to do the hardest tasks (50 percent); and many also help their wives during weekends (54.4 percent), at least in the cassava harvest and in transporting the agricultural products home. In rare cases (only 13 out of 300 households), both husband and wife (or only the woman in female-headed households) have agriculture as a secondary activity (Table 1).

This renewed interest of the poor inhabitants was coupled with the discovery of agriculture by the urban middle and upper classes as a complementary source of income. The political and military elite are already grabbing large tracts of land, either for economic speculation or for agriculture, along the roads linking the city of Mbanza Kongo to Luanda and to Luvo/Kinshasa. As a consequence, urban dwellers' access to land became more difficult and the location of their fields farther and farther away from their houses. In order to guarantee land tenure security, one has to get a plot in the village of one's descent group, where both men and women have full usufruct rights over their clan land. Both also possess rights to harvest fruits of the trees planted in their ancestors' villages land (called *zumbo* in Kikongo and *abandonado* in Portuguese). However, according to interviewees, when one is close to relatives, one is also close to witchcraft attacks and the 'evil eye' of people who do not like others' hard work ethics and the way they are trying to improve their wellbeing. Although, in their perception, the best option is to buy a piece of land, few managed to achieve that goal (Table 4). Sometimes, too, the land of the ancestors is far away from the city and the most one can get is usufruct rights to a plot of land on which to sow fruit trees (Table 4). Less lucky people can only sow annual plants and cassava, but not the highly profitable plantain, safou (*Dacryodes edulis*), avocado or citrus trees.

Table 5. Age of the farm head.

Household Type	%	Age of farm head			
		≤ 34 (%)	35–49 (%)	50–64 (%)	≥ 65 (%)
Man head of family and farm	38.3	10.4 (n = 12)	32.2 (n = 37)	47.0 (n = 54)	10.4 (n = 12)
Woman head of family and farm	31.7	8.4 (n = 8)	27.4 (n = 26)	55.8 (n = 53)	8.4 (n = 8)
Man head of family, woman head of farm	30.0	24.4 (n = 22)	36.7 (n = 33)	30.0 (n = 27)	8.9 (n = 8)
Total	100	14.0 (n = 42)	32.0 (n = 96)	44.7 (n = 134)	9.3 (n = 28)

Table 4 allows us to see that couples have better access to land (53 percent have full usufruct rights) than do female-headed households. Qualitative data makes us prone to think this is probably due to the fact that couples can afford to work in faraway fields – frequently offered by friends with no kinship relation – and sleep there if necessary.

But is age a factor commanding urban dwellers' choice of agriculture as a livelihood option to escape poverty? And is the practice of agriculture important because it is subsistence-based, market-oriented or both at the same time? Indeed, younger people tend to run away from agriculture (Table 5). The highest percentage of farm managers below 34 years of age is found among women whose husband has a job outside agriculture. Almost 50 percent of household managers are between 50 and 64 years old, and again this is especially true for female-headed households (55 percent of them).

For the majority of the interviewees, agriculture is extremely important to make ends meet, both in terms of food self-sufficiency and as a source of cash income (Table 6). As previously stated, women-headed households are the ones facing more challenges to make a living out of agriculture. Nonetheless, the only households of our sample that did not achieve food self-sufficiency were the ones that had started to practice agriculture less than three years ago. Almost all the interviewees sold cassava – fresh, peeled and dried, ground into flour or cooked as *kikwanga* or *n'tolola* – and any surplus of the many other crops they usually produce. Several factors contribute to this, including the favourable distribution of the rain – which allows them to produce annual plants twice a year – and the multitude of water courses which favours a third production of vegetables, beans, sweet potatoes and maize by farmers who have a field that can be irrigated or that has a high water table.

However, despite the economic potential of agriculture, in what way is the financial crisis impacting urban men and women's job choice and the positive value some attribute

Table 6. Household type according to self-sufficiency in food and the sale of surplus.

Household type	Food self-sufficient (%)	Sales agricultural surplus (%)
Man is head of family and farm	93.9	94.8
Woman is head of family and farm	88.4	83.2
Man is head of family and woman is head of farm	94.4	90
Total	92.3	89.7

to agriculture as a livelihood opportunity? In rural villages, many men consider that they do not have a job, as being a farmer is not valued as a profession by them (see also Hill 1978, for the case of Ghana). The difficulties they find to sell and the poor prices they get for their agricultural products are also factors contributing to the perception of agricultural work as non-economic. In the city too, some interviewees complained about the lack of industries and companies and prefer to engage in poorly paid odd jobs in construction. Frequent comments highlighted the toughness of agricultural manual labour; as one interviewee put it: 'it would be different if you did not need to work with your hands, if the government provided tractors'. Urban casual workers received much less pay than a casual worker in agriculture and sometimes the manual work could be even more painful; nonetheless, some men manifest an interest in agriculture only if they have a regular job whose salary would provide them with the money to pay for others to work in the fields or to hire a tractor.

For some men, lack of tractors was merely a constraint to scaling up production and increasing their earnings – as they had been able to do while in DRC. But others – some of whom were trained specialists (e.g. mechanics, drivers, masons, painters and even teachers and nurses) – however, decided to engage with agriculture as a way to improve their wellbeing and feed the family. As Graça's husband (age 35 and working as a night guard in a company, but going with her to the field during the day) told me: 'The field is where I earn a lot ... there is no company where I can earn that much'. Indeed, he was working on the farm as many days per week as his wife, and the fruits of a single banana plant would provide him with a larger income than his salary.

The interest in agriculture may be only temporary and triggered by the economic crisis, though. Facing no support from the government, for either production or the marketing of agricultural products, smallholders working in resource-poor areas will soon be displaced from the market by the competition of large-scale plantations (which do receive government support and are located in the better endowed locations). Besides, most young men and women refused to help their parents or grandparents in the fields, although they were being fed, dressed, educated and sometimes healed with money coming from agriculture. Some women whose husbands have regular incomes and can provide for them and their children prefer to stay at home, or to be traders and sit in the market all day waiting for clients. Similarly, some men whose wives have fields and are quite capable of feeding the family refuse to help them, despite the fact that most of the time they are unable to find casual work and stay idle.

The case of couples whose husband was both the head of the household and the farm manager constituted more than one third of the sample, which means that even in an urban area men's role in agriculture has increased since colonial times. But what perception do they have of it? In what follows we shall present some of these men's voices and brief personal histories.

Álvaro (age 45) returned from DRC after independence and in 1992 he was conscripted into the army, becoming a soldier until the end of the war. He refused the army pension as he 'did not want to receive blood money anymore'. In 2005 he did an agricultural training provided by FAO, but then he went to Luanda where he worked as a mechanic. In 2010 his wife returned to Mbanza Kongo with some money to invest in agriculture, and in 2012 he decided to come back home too. He does agriculture but, when he needs quick money, he also does casual work; this means that some months his wife works more days in the field than he does. In his own words: 'Agriculture is the mother of everything! I advise my children to do agriculture, but when they'll become adults, it is with them to decide'.

A different experience was reported by Nsiku (age 43), who returned from DRC in 1999 with no previous contact with agriculture. There he worked as a builder, painter, carpenter

and driver, but after returning he progressively started to face difficulties in finding work; one day he realized that some neighbours who practiced agriculture were living much better than he did. At present he is the head of a household and the farm manager, working more hours than his wife.

It was rather easy. When I saw I liked it, I asked for help to some friends. They taught me and now I'm a specialist! I had to buy some seeds in the market, but my friends gave me sprouts of cassava, sweet potatoes, yam and taro. In agriculture you find more security than in a company. In a company you receive 15,000 or maximum 30,000 kwanzas, but with agriculture I earn much more than that and I'm the boss, while in the company I'm a worker. The ones that run away from rural areas, and leave agriculture because they consider it a backward job, suffer from lack of reasoning.

Contrary to Álvaro and Ntsiku, Pedro Samuel (age 42) studied education in DRC and became a teacher. At the same time he helped his wife in the fields, as he soon discovered 'the value of agriculture in relation to a poor salary'. He returned for the first time to Angola in 1992 (during the peace agreement), but he was not able to have his diplomas recognized and decided to go back again to DRC. Finally, in 2012 he returned for good to Angola with his eldest brother, who gave him courage to stay and make a living out of agriculture. He now works full time in agriculture and goes to the field more days/week than his wife. The worst problems he encounters are the frequent destruction of the crops by large pests (e.g. wild pigs, antelopes, rodents, etc.) and the lack of support, as 'the government promises to provide agricultural tools and seeds and then nothing happens! ... the people that came to do the [population] census made many questions and promises, but nobody came again until now'.

Like Pedro, Watontoa (age 33) also got a degree in DRC where he worked until being expelled in 2009. There he was a nurse but, as his wife had a field, he used to help her on Saturdays. Until the present he had been unable to get his diploma recognized, 'because one needs to pay lots of money [bribes]'. Accordingly, he has been living out of agriculture – which he does together with his wife – odd jobs in construction and making and selling mud-bricks for house construction. With the income of these last two activities he bought a TV and a radio, but it was with money from agriculture that he built his house and bought a generator. Though these non-agricultural activities are mostly done during the dry season, through the year his wife works more days in the field than he does.

Álvaro's story, as well as the following ones of Grandão and João Pedro, exemplifies the case of couples who pool their efforts and diverse incomes to successfully improve their lives. Grandão (age 27) was born in Kinshasa, but after the death of his mother – during the civil war – he returned to Angola. There he finished high school, while also helping his aunt in her field and making a field of his own so as to be able to buy his clothes and school supplies. When he was a little boy he developed a taste for the art of hair cutting and started to learn it by observing a professional barber and by trying to reproduce the job on the heads of his friends. Eventually he became a skilled hair stylist and was able to open his own atelier, but he never stopped doing agriculture – despite his friends' criticism – because 'it helped to balance the household economy'. Happily, according to him, his wife also used to do agriculture with her mother, because 'many women when you speak about having a field are going to tell you countless [unpleasant] things'. She also makes cookies to sell at home, and by pooling the incomes from these several sources they were able to buy two urban plots, one for agriculture and another for building their own house. They both go to the field only on Saturdays and he usually hires casual workers in peak times.

Grandão's testimony gives us a hint that many women do not want to engage in agricultural activity as well. Indeed, after the government ordered the closure of the main market in central Mbanza Kongo in mid-2016 (opening an alternative one several miles away from the city centre, to which many people objected), most women traders turned to the smuggling of petrol into DRC to make a living. Despite the difficulties created by government control, two female interviewees even laughed when asked if agriculture would not be a good alternative. A different view obtains in the following statement by João Pedro (age 22), which sheds some light into the stories of many destitute women accepting the burden of feeding their idle husbands and children or having partners with multiple wives without providing for any of them or their children. Women, as much as men, cannot be seen as a single entity, with only one voice, one aspiration, or one worldview.

João Pedro went with his family to Luanda many years ago. While still in Mbanza Kongo he finished the ninth grade, selling fuelwood to pay the school fees. In the capital, he worked as a painter and builder and married a Luandan woman. Because finding casual work became more and more difficult, he decided to come back to Mbanza Kongo and combine agriculture with odd jobs. His wife, however, stayed in Luanda, where she sells the crops sent by him. He has, then, a multi-sited household, but he is the farm manager.

Luanda women work much more [than Bakongo ones], and if you'll give them money they are going to make profit. They demand much more from their husbands. Here a man can be a bandit but the wife is not going to demand anything!

All these stories talk to each other in diverse ways and provide a multi-faceted view of the livelihood options of urban dwellers with different skills, ages and backgrounds. While agriculture is a source of food and income to pay for health, education and daily expenses, and to build a house for most, for some it is also a 'project'. This concept became part of the government's jargon after the end of the war and was adopted by ordinary people to express the tactics they use to achieve upward mobility. Either as a couple or individually, some Mbanza Kongo urban dwellers have large fields of cassava, beans, green leaves, tomatoes or other crops they like, aside from the fields they have for household consumption; but, differently from the latter, a 'project' (e.g. of cassava) is oriented towards a more ambitious goal, such as buying a TV and a generator, another plot in which to build a house to rent, a car to be used as a taxi, a milling machine to make cassava flour, etc.

'To work for the belly is different from working for a "project"': conclusions

The Angolan population continues to be one of the poorest in the world (Soares de Oliveira 2014, 5) but, as David Sogge put it, the country 'has never been a land of walking skeletons' and this fact must be attributed to poor people's resilience through the use of 'social ties, productive techniques and ingenuity' (Sogge 1994, 93). In a province characterized by a traditional female farming system that was devastated by many decades of war – which mostly decimated men – it would be expected that this resilience was essentially due to women's role as food producers. Against all odds – and with the exception of households headed by widowed, divorced or single women – this contribution showed the importance of men in agricultural production, though women are still the major component of the labour force in Mbanza Kongo. For some men, food production is a last resource, a coping strategy to face the lack of non-farm jobs. For others, though, agriculture is now

perceived as a way to go forward and improve one's wellbeing – it is a 'project'. The former role of agriculture during the anticolonial war, the high price of food and the recent economic crisis strongly contributed to this positive assessment of agriculture – an activity which is more efficiently conducted as a joint husband-and-wife endeavour, especially when combined with trade and/or odd jobs. As other scholars revealed (e.g. Guyer 1995; Linares 1992), only a long-term, holistic, culturally and geographically embedded analysis could unveil the complex way different forces interact to shape past and present gender roles in agriculture. While female-headed households show more difficulty gaining access to agricultural labour and capital, not all farms managed by women face problems; indeed, some husbands help their wives during weekends and give them money to hire casual labour. Besides, when husbands' main activity is agriculture, they spend more time on the farm than their wives do, so that the wives can perform domestic work. This means that, as Guyer (1980) reminded us, we need to look closely at individual agency and at the way husbands and wives interpret their own society's traditional sexual division of labour, rights to each other's resources, and the allocation of household responsibilities.

A reagrarization process of Angola's abundant and productive land could be achieved provided there was the political will. The government, however, would have to recognize the potential of smallholder agriculture for the diversification of the country's economy, and start taking steps towards improving rural roads and transportation networks, poor people's access to mechanization, to credit and to the market, and guaranteeing their land tenure security. Special attention should be given to female-headed households, which need an urgent and more sustained approach. This could be a first step towards dropping the label of 'magnificent and beggar land' (Soares de Oliveira 2014), moving away from the shadow of civil strife by building a more equitable and reconciled society.

Acknowledgements

In Angola we would like to thank Professor Fátima Viegas and Paulo and Carlos Monteiro for their support, our translators Lando (Grandão) and Blaise Matondo, Frei Danilo of the Capuchin mission, and all the people who kindly accepted to collaborate in this research. A draft of the paper was presented at the 'VII Conference of Gender and Development', Lleida, Spain, 28–29 November 2016, and received insightful comments from Albert Roca, Bridget O'Laughlin, Faranina Rajaonah and Rokhaya Cisse. Comments were also made by Ramon Sarró, Deborah Bryceson, Ana Novais Carlos Cabral and the three reviewers of *JPS*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Research in Angola was conducted within the framework of the AHRC project 'Heritage and landscapes transformation in Northern Angola: between the value of the past and the value of the land', partner of the Joint Research Programme 'Currents of faith, places of history' and funded by the EU consortium HERA (Humanities European Research Area) in 2013–2016. CEF and LEAF are research units funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia I.P. (FCT), Portugal [UID/AGR/00239/2013 and UID/AGR/04129/2013, respectively].

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