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Introduction



In 2002, Virginie Mouanda Kibinde's first novel appeared on the shelves of Paris bookshops published by Éditions des Écrivains and bearing the title *Les Âmes de la forêt* (*Souls of the Forest*). Two years later, Éditions Transbordeurs, having corrected the occasional editorial error, published the same text in its entirety but titled *Au Soleil noir du Cabinda* (which we have translated as *Beneath the Black Sun of Cabinda*). Of course, any name change tends to arouse curiosity and can also point to questions of identity and belonging. What motivates such a modification? Virginie Mouanda herself states that it was, in fact, at the publisher's insistence and, in this case, the new title certainly provides us with a useful clue to a full reading of the text.



Cabinda on the west coast of Africa

Indeed, many readers of this English translation of Virginie Mouanda's first venture into novel-writing may only have heard Cabinda mentioned for the first time during the 2010 African Cup of Nations. In 2010, the tournament was hosted by Angola and the government of that country chose to use its northern enclave,¹ Cabinda, as a venue for football matches in the hope of improving the province's war-torn image and of driving investment. It was a hope that was to be dashed when, on 8 January 2010, three people on the bus transporting the Togolese football team from the Congo to Cabinda met their deaths at the hands of Cabindan separatists.

So what do we know of Cabinda and of activities there? It is a small jungle province but, crucially, it is home to much of Angola's offshore oil activity. It

1 It would be more correct to refer to Cabinda as an Angolan exclave since it is not connected by land to the rest of Angola.

has been at the centre of a long-running independence struggle led by various splinter groups of the *Front de Libération de l'Enclave du Cabinda* (FLEC or the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda). Despite a so-called peace deal in 2006, low-level insurgency has continued and there have been sporadic reports of attacks on members of the Angolan Armed Forces and some on Chinese and Brazilian nationals working in the province. Although Antonio Bento Bembe, a former FLEC leader who was made an Angolan government minister as part of the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding, had announced before the 2010 African Cup of Nations: “Cabinda is safe and security there is guaranteed”, he was later to add: “This is the Mayombe rainforest and where radical FLEC separatists have operated for decades. They number just several hundred but they can be disruptive, despite the large number of Angolan military and security deployed in the province.” The reader may wonder why s/he has been largely unaware of the insecurity in that area. It would appear that few of the attacks such as the one perpetrated in the case of the Togolese soccer players ever reach the headlines because of an ongoing clampdown on media activities in the province of Cabinda and the refusal on the part of the Angolan government to acknowledge the actions of FLEC.

Such an absence of recognition could well point to the reasons for these attacks and why they continue. Cabindan separatists argue for complete independence from Angola based on the premise that the three pre-colonial kingdoms of the enclave (Cacongo, Loango and Ngoio) share a common history, their own distinct identity and culture, and a common language, Cabindês. Whilst the preferred colonial language in Angola is Portuguese, literate Cabindans opt for French. The Angolan government, however, dismisses ethno-cultural differences as a basis for self-determination and argues that factionalisation² within the FLEC groups is indicative of the diversity that exists within what is now the northernmost province of Angola. At this point, and especially since the conflict between Cabinda and Angola is at the heart of *Beneath the Black Sun of Cabinda*, it may be useful to recall the turbulent colonial past³ of the region during which, like most contemporary African states, divergent groups were herded under one political system of governance.

Portuguese influence in the area dates back to the 15th century when a trading station was established in Ngoio, Cabinda. Although the British and French also set up trading centres in the region, since there was greater cooperation between

2 It would be true to say that the constant internal divisions have been exploited by the Angolan government.

3 We are indebted to historian Dr Chet Fransch for his insights into the colonial past of Cabinda, Angola, and neighbouring countries.

local leaders and Portuguese agents, the latter were given exclusive trading rights. The mighty Bakongo of Cabinda, in particular, favoured the Portuguese and formalised their working relationship in 1758. With the Portuguese being the only recognised foreign power, tension between the various other colonial powers ran high and gave rise to a series of negotiations. By 1884, Britain, in an attempt to curb both Belgian expansion in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo and French influence in Congo-Brazzaville, had signed the Treaty of Zaire with Portugal. That treaty recognised Portuguese sovereignty over Cabinda but allowed for certain trading rights to be relinquished to Britain. German exclusion, however, resulted in Otto von Bismarck's call for the 'Scramble for Africa' in which colonial powers agreed on how to carve up Africa. Indeed, the Conference of Berlin (1884-1885) formalised the colonial partition of the Congo but left local chiefs in Cabinda irate at having been excluded from the process. The Berlin Act of 1885 apportioned Cabinda to Portugal in exchange for territory along the northern bank of the River Congo which would secure access to the Atlantic Ocean for the Belgian Congo. However, the 1885 Treaty of Simulambuco which was signed between local Cabindans and Portugal, allowed for local autonomy and so the land of Cabinda became a protectorate and not a colony. From 1885, Angola and Cabinda were, then, administered in a different manner. Distinctions between the two areas were clearly visible and indeed remained so over the years, as can be seen, for example, with the 1933 Constitution of the Estado Novo.

Unfortunately, by 1956, Portugal sought to reduce the cost of administering her overseas territories by placing Cabinda and Angola together under the jurisdiction of the same Governor General. This prompted the Vice-President of Congo-Brazzaville and Foreign Minister, Mr Tchichelle, to call for the independence of Cabinda at a 1960 session of the United Nations. It was likewise the administrative regrouping which crystallised the unification three years later of the various nationalist movements of Cabinda into the one organisation of the *Front de Libération de l'Enclave du Cabinda* (FLEC). In this way, the Freedom Movement for the State of Cabinda (MLEC), the National Action Committee of the Cabindan People (CAUNC) and the Mayombé Alliance (ALLIAMA) merged under the spirit of Angolan nationalism which developed in the 1950s and, in solidarity, resistance movements in Cabinda sacrificed their own independence movements for the greater Angolan anti-colonial struggle. During the Portuguese Colonial War (1961-1974), those nationalist movements fought against the dwindling armed forces of Portugal while struggling against pressure from communist Angolan elements.

Then, when the Salazar regime fell in the April 1974 ‘Carnation Revolution’ in Lisbon, independence was granted to all territories previously colonised by Portugal. That included Angola in August 1975. Cabinda, however, was not granted separate independence, and that despite the fact that a decade earlier the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) had placed Cabinda separately from Angola on the list of African countries that should be decolonised. With the end of the protectorate in 1975, then, members of FLEC were stung by what they perceived to be a blatant injustice and so they constituted a provisional, independent government for Cabinda. That, in turn, prompted an invasion by soldiers from the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), supported by Cuban troops. Annexed, then, by the army of Angola, Cabinda was absorbed by that country as the northernmost of her eighteen provinces. And so began the armed struggle to secure the independence of Cabinda from Angola that continues to this day. Since then, Angolan soldiers have been present on the soil of Cabinda. Indeed, according to Mr Rodrigues Mingas, the Secretary General of FLEC/PM (*Position Militaire* or Military Wing), reacting to the January 2010 attack on the Togolese football team, fifty thousand MPLA soldiers were at the time deployed in Cabinda and more than two hundred thousand Cabindan nationals had met their deaths at the hands of Angolan soldiers.

That, in essence, is the political context which provides the setting for Virginie Mouanda’s first novel. It is a context which gives her the foundations upon which to construct her narrative, develop her plot, and shape her characters. The events which her characters recount as they remember the past or live through new experiences, serve to inform the reader of certain social and political realities in the history of Cabinda. The author’s profound sadness is that the same sun which warms her beloved land, providing the inhabitants with everything that they need to survive in harmony with nature, also shines above the vast reserves of oil that lie beneath the Atlantic Ocean. She does not hide her anger that 70% of Angolan oil, amounting to one and a half million barrels per day, is extracted off the coast of Cabinda, the “Kuwait of Africa”.⁴ Nor does she avoid the taboo subject of oil lobbies and multinational interests in Cabinda. For Virginie Mouanda, fictional characters can inform readers of important political realities. In fact, in the case of *Beneath the Black Sun of Cabinda*, she does not limit her criticism to Angola but denounces Western powers, such as the United States of America, Portugal, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy, for placing their vested interests above the human rights of an entire nation and scoffs at the hypocrisy of the Cold War.

4 An expression that it is employed by Virginie Mouanda Kibinde on 6 June 2007 on the website www.pluricitoyen.com [Accessed: 15 August 2010].

Indeed, the reader is left in no doubt that Virginie Mouanda is motivated to place her creative talents at the service of a land which is largely ignored by international politicians and the media, and of which little is known. However, and although undoubtedly written with great crusading fervour, this first novel is much more than a simple political tract. It also recounts powerful love. The story opens, then, at a time when Cabinda, that small African enclave surrounded by Congo-Brazzaville to the north and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to the east and south, and separated from Angola by the Congo River,⁵ is plunged into the bloody war of liberation which we have sketched above. The conflict has condemned almost 90% of the population to an exile within their own land as hundreds of thousands of them – the “souls of the forest” of the first-edition title –, struggle to survive in the dense, tropical woodland. Right in the heart of Cabinda is the Mayombe rainforest, home to a group of guerrilla fighters whose very existence is to liberate their land from the terrors perpetrated by the Angolan army.



Virginie Mouanda, 2009

Although (or perhaps because) this is her first novel, it is Virginie Mouanda’s talent as an African *conteuse* or oral storyteller which comes to the fore as she presents us with a mix of morality and entertainment. It may come as no surprise that against a grim backdrop of gruesome massacres and devastating deforestation, it is a picture of impossible love which is painted in *Beneath the Black Sun of Cabinda*. By blending together historical facts, political militancy and universal human emotions, Mouanda creates a triptych. Its panels depict the poignant love of the principled, young doctor Albino for the country lass Maria, the redemptory love which his ailing, ruthless grandfather Santos is surprised to feel as death approaches, and the love of a people for the land of their birth.

5 The north bank of the Congo River is DRC territory.

Together these panels of the triptych form a whole and are inextricably linked. It is not just that each has as its backdrop the political situation of Cabinda but, more than that, the three love stories are infused with the fate of the former Portuguese protectorate and ache with fear for the future of a people dispossessed of all that was theirs.

So who is this author whose prose combines political rhetoric with a lyricism that evokes pastoral delights, much like the outpourings of a Romantic poet? Virginie Mouanda Kibinde's ethnic origins can be found in Cabinda. She was born in 1966 at Pointe-Noire in Congo-Brazzaville where her family had fled to escape the war in the land of their birth. Some of her childhood years were spent close to Tchitanzi, in the small border village of Mbouss-NKale, where successive waves of women refugees, fleeing the bloodshed in Cabinda, were taken in by her grandmother, who brought Virginie up and encouraged her in her studies, first at Pointe-Noire and later Brazzaville. She joined her mother, a militant with FLEC/OMC (*Organisation des Femmes Cabindaises*, an associative movement of women from Cabinda) and together they travelled through the Mayombe forest, visiting those areas which were the stronghold of the resistance movement. Indeed, some of her male relatives were guerrilla fighters, a fact which is echoed by the dedication in the 2004 French version of the novel: "To my Uncle José Ngome, FLEC freedom-fighter" (2004:5). Alongside the fear and uncertainty which accompany guerrilla warfare, Virginie Mouanda Kibinde has also experienced the tranquil sameness of traditional African rural life. The African tales that she absorbed at her grandmother's knee have undoubtedly nourished many of her published writings including her novel for children *Concerto en forêt tropicale* (Éditions Klanba, 2005) and her illustrated short story *Madiye, Princesse des savanes* (Tropiques Éditions, 2007). They have surely also been at the heart of her involvement with the Centre des Arts du Récit en Isère (Isère Centre for the Art of Story-Telling), most particularly her creative writing and traditional African story-telling workshops and performances which have become a regular feature of the calendar of Grenoble, where she resided for more than twenty years before moving to the outskirts of Paris.

This English translation of *Au Soleil noir du Cabinda* is the refined version of work undertaken by Ms Paige Dorkin and Ms Jennifer van Dorsten in partial fulfilment of their Honours degrees at the University of Cape Town. What was the motivation behind the choice of Mouanda's first novel? Why involve students in such an enterprise? Readers will be familiar with the considerable body of literature written by African authors in response to the European colonisation of their continent, often with the aim of denouncing its destructive effects, occasionally in an attempt to seek healing through truth, or at times

to grapple with the cruel realities of oppressive, post-independence regimes. François-Xavier Verschave writes in his Preface to the 2004 *Transbordeurs* edition: “For any people, the worst denial of justice is not only to be crushed but also to be almost obliterated from universal memory by a hegemonic propaganda which relegates them to the rubbish bins of History. [...] Until the beginning of this century I believed in the tales told about Cabinda: ‘part of Angola’.” He adds: “When Virginie Mouanda submitted her manuscript to me, she enabled me to understand that I was wrong or, to be more accurate, that I had been deceived by three decades of insidious consensus” (2004: 7). The aim of this English translation is, then, to afford Anglophone readers the opportunity to reflect on an area of Africa of which they may have scant knowledge. It is so that another voice may sound above the silence, a voice which also has a story to tell of Africa; it is a voice which cries out to be heard.⁶

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6 This voice can also be heard in Virginie Mouanda Kibinde’s second novel *Mémoire d’une colline* (Acoria Éditions, 2009) in which she reacts to decades of bloodshed in Cabinda.