

1

A user cites an article that declares the "horrors" of the conflict "untold". Hashtags link to posts in English about ghost cities in the coastal province. The ghost cities are Chinese. The coastal province is African.

2

There are speculations that new development complexes four hundred kilometers south of the coastal province, Cabinda, will remain intentionally uninhabited until climate catastrophe. The development complexes are in Luanda, the capitol city of Angola. The climate catastrophe is projected for a string of coastline cities on the Chinese Pacific. The popular fantasy circulating on a video-sharing site envisions typhoons and earthquakes forcing mass relocation. The relocations are from financial nodes like Shanghai. The future urban centers are on the West African Atlantic coast in provinces like Cabinda.

3

Internet posts in English use the adjective “shimmering” to describe the conflict between Angola and Cabinda. In speaking of the shimmering conflict, some of the internet posts refer to Cabinda as an “exclave” of Angola, others call it an “enclave.” Documentaries about the Cuban invasion of the region, and advertisements circulated by the Angola ministry of tourism, are in Portuguese. The news about mercenaries trained in the Mediterranean to fight in Angola, is in Italian.

4

A tribunal in Milan finds a group of thirteen free masons, in the region of Benevento, guilty of coordinating illegal training for a private militia of thirty Italian soldiers. The soldiers had been sent to Angola by the free masons from Southern Italy, to join the conflict on the side of Cabinda. The plan allegedly disrupted by the tribunal, was for the Great Independent Lodge of Italy to become partners with the Freedom for Cabinda Confederation. Comments exchanged on social networking services confirm that twenty-first century conspiracies are usually blood-for-oil narratives. In records of the North Italian tribunal there is documentation that the shimmering conflict between Angola and Cabinda, at one point involved two fraudulent non-profit organizations and the former executive of an Italian multinational gas and oil company.

5

An oil rig worker is suspended over the Atlantic in a harness. From the whites of his eyes, there is purple gloss in a black dot rushing over the horizon: is it a cape shag preparing a dip for sardines? Or is it a Falcon, an Italian unmanned aircraft, in patrol from the Ivory Coast to the Congo. An article published by the corporate media claims such patrols are run on behalf of an international organization to promote economic development. The oil rig worker is a painter assigned the task of coating the rig's sides with protectants against saltwater corrosion. At the precise moment the painter perceives the flash in purple-black, a Portuguese interlocutor in conversation outside the Paris office for the Free Republic of Cabinda, calls the coastal province a "hangnail on Angola".

6

There are accusations in French that the Portuguese have betrayed an agreement signed with a Kingdom called N'Goyo. The agreement is referred to as the Treaty of Simulambuco. The definition of N'Goyo referenced on the internet's authoritative free encyclopedia is provided by a link created with a free website builder. According to the link, the Ngoyo kingdom was historically based in the south of Cabinda. The accusations in French outside the Paris office and in the streets of Geneva, assert that Portugal did not maintain its promise to preserve the integrity of territories protected under its sovereignty.

7

Meanwhile, a law student at a university in the northwestern United States publishes a study of "superpower silence". In the published paper, the student grants the customary thanks to wife and editors, then gives the chairman of the Cabindan National Movement the alias Joseph n1. The student is fond of firmly making his point with descriptive adjectives. The office of Joseph n1 in Paris is, therefore, in a district called "Algerian"; Joseph n1 is said "huddled" at a desk called "small". His room is in a hotel described as "rotting." Joseph n1 passes his time writing missives called "fruitless". All the while, the painter at the offshore oil rig is suspended. He hangs off the sides of the floating unit in a harness, covering the body of the rig with anti-corrosives to prevent the growth of salt blossoms.

8

Only a free encyclopedia entry, last modified online in the month of February, is capable of moving sveltly from political acronyms like FLEC and MPLA, to ancient African kingdoms and the colonialist scramble to partition the continent. In fact, the free encyclopedia that many internet users reference as an authoritative source, begins its genealogy of a former leading slave port with the origins of the N'goyo kingdom: the earliest settlers in the South of Cabinda called the nfumu nsi or lords of the earth.

9

The investigative probes of the news agencies are limited by fact-checks, sponsors and formats: their hindsight vision is thirty years. This is made evident when international media outlets report on alleged attacks by Cabinda activists against a Togo soccer team. On the offshore oil rig, the painter, the deckhand, the roustabout, the toolpusher and the roughneck may have tuned in to the Radio Nacional accounts of the incident in Bantu. Among the comments trickling through the social media networks are posts in Romanian that define FLEC -- the Front for Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda -- as a terrorist group.

10

The reception is choppy. If the oil rig workers are listening to the Radio Nacional programming in Bantu, interference is clipping at the broadcasts in static intervals. The roustabout and the toolpusher exchange rumors. Material assistance offered to Cabindan refugees in the Congo has been documented as an act of corruption. At the office of the Freedom for Cabinda Federation in Paris, there are activists who may even have spoken of that material assistance as an act of seduction in the service of enemies.

11

It is lunchtime on shore, and at the palm oil processing plant six hundred kilometers north, the operators of the batch presses in Gabon are on break. An animated sequence of text reading "Cabinda Star" flashes on the refectory's color television screen. In a white sleeveless midriff and jeans cuffed at the knees, a woman on the roof of a high-rise has her back to the camera. She is pumping her hips up and down to a beat that the television box monitor mutes. The chairs stacked in the refectory dining hall are not folding chairs. They do not wear white polyester covers that only fit them unfolded. They do not wear covers bought by customers who want the ideal silhouette for a chair that can collapse flat on a pivot.

12

A batch of soap boxes, four balls of second hand clothes, two motorbikes, a giant screen, an electrical generator and a motorized pump; a batch of fifty ten kilogram tins of salted fish. It was the twenty-eighth of twenty-eight total days when this selection of objects called a death threat was presented as a gift -- or rather, when this gift was represented as a death threat. It was said to have been offered to Cabindans, who had fled the Angola conflict for asylum in the refugee camps of the DRC.

13

A few weeks later, the painter and the toolpusher are on a boat to shore for one of the rig's periodic crew changes. The painter passes his water bottle to the toolpusher. They banter in Ibinda. Food and drink concessions are never sold on the transit vessel, and the toolpusher had finished his last drop at the fourth hour of their voyage. Since last month, when the two were in prison for striking, they had become friends. Not just the painter and the toolpusher, but all twenty striking workers may have been allowed back on site after negotiations. Their floating rig, which produces and stores crude from block four slash zero five, is a joint operation, and the Norwegian affiliates had wanted to appear generous.

14

When the rapid interveners came sliding down their ropes, the painter may have called out from under the air-chop of the propeller. The gear of the intervention was anti-riot. The toolpusher was caught under the scaffold they had dragged to the helipad for obstruction. He could not even perceive his own feeble attempts to free himself, let alone heed another's cry of warning. In that instant, both the painter and the toolpusher may have been reminded of the time one of the roughnecks lost seven fingers to a top drive that came down on his hand. If this comes off you lose this, if this comes off it can kill you: these were the instructions all the oil rig workers had received during training. They had been reassured that the possibility of losing a finger, a limb, a life, was why they were paid so generously.

15

Helicopter lifts were usually reserved for foreigners like the Bulgarian who had been missing since the Perro Negro Six sinking. Everyone else had to rough the eight-hour ferry. Working conditions did not improve after the action. But the twenty striking workers, including the tool-pusher and the painter, may have made their first trip back to land from the rig in a helicopter that day.

16

The most-likely-scenario indicates that the operators of the palm oil presses did not know about the event organized in the refectory twenty-five years earlier. There was no way for them to know about it until its documentation was uploaded to a video-sharing site twenty-five years later. Once this happens, a Cabinda activist goes to an internet point in Geneva, and is tracked as one of three hundred and thirty nine views of the upload titled Cabinda International Conference in Gabon 1986. The video of the event is marked with a thumbs-up for a “like” by a former oil rig worker. At one of the two cybercafés in Cabinda, the roughneck who counts only three digits on his two hands, navigates the video-sharing site with his little finger.

17

Twenty five years earlier, the representatives of various groups in support of Cabinda's independence are sitting behind place cards in a large hall. The tables are draped generously in linens that appear white on black-and-white VHS tapes. In those years, the refectory had no banquet chairs that needed wide satin sashes – orange or burgundy; there were no table overlays acquired in pink at clearance prices. The digitized video makes the conference proceedings appear as though they are held under effervescent water. The still presence of color is always a time happening somewhere else. The three-fingered user of the video-sharing site notes that the only other similar event uploaded took place twenty-five years after the International Conference in Gabon. The similar event was organized in the UK and its audio is copyrighted. The user opens the video, but the speakers only mouth their words with lips like the Chinese goldfish his barber kept.

18

A covered folding chair. Polyester over aluminum, galvanized. The closeable seat is warmed with a cover that keeps it unfolded. Screwed to it are tube legs rusting in resistant hinges. Its seat is a sitting surface worn from seatings. Under cover, its silhouette is ideal for a chair. Its uneven feet on concrete or linoleum are without their rubber tips. They retain the memory of their loudest screech: listeners had risen to acknowledge a speaker who would speak, the one among many to speak of independence. It was to the hymn of a microphone playing background singer with high-pitch feedback. A reverberant hiss hovered over one empty folding chair unfolded for independence, but without a sitter. It is the same folding chair that will later be covered, then uncovered, then irreparably shut and dumped.

19

An unfolded folding chair, now covered in polyester, is dressed for a haunting. It is kept from serving its ultimate function of making the refectory dining hall multipurpose. Just one unfolded folding chair, now propped against a wall that has been sanded and repainted. No generous linens, no dull silk ties, no cuff links and wide bright collars in the new cultural center funded by the Belgian palm oil processing factory. No hands resting on a table, fingers curled on themselves over sheets of paper in the refectory; no pointing, up and down, up and down over a pumping fist for independence.

20

The folding chair folded, cover removed, is brought outside the cultural center. It is the last side-x folding chair to be disposed of as a folding chair folded. Its seat stares up at a group of palm oil press operators who stand over it during their break: a face, two crescent shaped lids and an exuberant mouth where the pale gray had been buffed dark by mostly trousered backsides; backsides sliding off and on the seat in an accumulation of gatherings, of discussions, of conflicts always almost resolved that eroded the seat of the chair anthropomorphic.

21

A dent to the horizontal tube that once kept the two back legs of the chair from buckling: it assumes the look of a frustrated frown. Is it a mark from a strong toss against the wall with two hands? A sign of refutation? Is a dent necessarily a mark, necessarily a sign? Or was it simply an imprint acquired over time by the mundanity of a folding chair kicked open daily for an overeagerness to convene. The world around the operators of the palm oil presses lives in an eternal present: the press operators stand over the chair, but of course they can no longer really see it. They are tired of meetings and convenings. The pumping hips of a woman in the silence of a muted music video relaxes their tired eyes.

22

In the old dining hall of the refectory, the caterer, the janitor and the event manager who oversaw the conference proceedings in Gabon, had only been expected to handle preparation and consequences: the folding and unfolding of chairs, the line-drying of polyester covers, the washing of the table linens, the trash cans, the loose papers, the table settings, the platforms of electronics, a television box monitor on a wheeled stand, a VHS player, stacks of amplifiers and speakers, mixers, the sorting of wires and adaptors, forks and knives, the unknotting of cables.

23

At the Cabinda International Conference, the caterer, the janitor and the event manager observed without observing: the quality of the voice was the principle concern, not its content. Did the speaker need two microphones? A second was handheld while the first was adjusted. The steadiness of a camera: a zoom in, a zoom out, an elbow supported by the forearm of a volunteer. Were there enough tubers? Another large pot of boiling water and a pan of palm oil for more slices of fried cassava.

24

The operators of the palm oil presses could not have known that the folding chair folded -- abandoned on its back in front of the refectory windows of the new cultural center twenty-five years later -- had been the only empty chair in the lecture room in nineteen eighty-six: the year the Cabinda International Conference was convened in Gabon to discuss the independence of Cabinda. Cabinda, the coastal province that would come to be known as a "hangnail on Angola".

25

Initially, the fated empty chair was part of a pair of seats without sitters in nineteen eighty-six. A late arrival dressed in a suit that appeared white on black-and-white VHS tape, found his seat in the inner aisle. He sat in the center of ten rows of folding chairs, next to a large plant. He faced the long tables draped in linens, whose hemmed edges three of the speakers may have been rubbing between their fingers in nervous anticipation of turns to talk. Perhaps the late arrival studied those around him from the corners of heavy-lashed eyes. It was his attempt to discern who was really listening. He had the face for a close-up, but the cameraman only captured the large pores on the back of his shaved head.

26

Yes, three of the speakers waiting to talk were talkers waiting to speak: with the hems of the table linen in their fingers, they anticipated shifting through loose papers of the speech they would give. They were not listening, they were attending to rhythms. They were waiting for the punctuating statement that would indicate it was time for the next to rise: to walk to the left and assume an impressive stance in front of the photographers lamps, behind the microphone stands, amidst the soundmen.

27

Behind the buzz of the microphone, damp in sweat from a hot lamp, proclaiming, denying, then adjusting a ring that held a metal cone firm, shifting it up and down depending on whether the larger or the slighter in stature. A downward pull was always most disagreeable because it was the gesture that threatened to leave the amplifying sphere pointed at the throat after ten minutes, the grip on the stand loosened to the point that the speaker would have to bend his knees slightly to level his words for amplification.

28

Twenty-five years later, the last of the side-x folding chairs is disposed of at the new cultural center. It is irreparably shut; permanently collapsed flat. After several people pick up the chair thinking they might use it for something, it ends up in a scrap metal yard near a digital dumping ground. The soundmen at the conference had always wiped the heads of their microphones down with an alcohol rag at the end of a day's work. At clean up, one of the soundmen rests his booted foot on the chair while removing the sour skin of spit accumulated from a day of recording. In the humidity, a smell that stung the nostrils was refreshing. It is the twenty-eighth of twenty-eight days: the shifts at the palm oil plants are reordered, and workers are in rotation for a crew change at the oil rigs off shore.