



Along an African Border: Angolan Refugees and Their Divination Baskets (Contemporary Ethnography)

Sonia Silva

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The divination baskets of south Central Africa are woven for a specific purpose. The baskets, known as *lipele*, contain sixty or so small articles, from seeds, claws, and minuscule horns to wooden carvings. Each article has its own name and symbolic meaning, and collectively they are known as *jipelo*. For the Luvale and related peoples, the *lipele* is more than a container of souvenirs; it is a tool, a source of crucial information from the ancestral past and advice for the future.

In *Along an African Border*, anthropologist Sónia Silva examines how Angolan refugees living in Zambia use these divination baskets to cope with daily life in a new land. Silva documents the special processes involved in weaving the baskets and transforming them into oracles. She speaks with diviners who make their living interpreting *lipele* messages and speaks also with their knowledge-seeking clients. To the Luvale, these baskets are capable of thinking, hearing, judging, and responding. They communicate by means of *jipelo* articles drawn in configurations, interact with persons and other objects, punish wrongdoers, assist people in need, and, much like humans, go through a life course that is marked with an initiation ceremony and a special burial. The *lipele* functions in a state between object and person.

Notably absent from *lipele* divination is any discussion or representation in the form of symbolic objects of the violence in Angola or the Luvale's relocation struggles—instead, the consultation focuses on age-old personal issues of illness, reproduction, and death. As Silva demonstrates in this sophisticated and richly illustrated ethnography, *lipele* help people maintain their links to kin and tradition in a world of transience and uncertainty.

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