

Review article

Continuity and change in Angola: insights from modern history

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A short history of modern Angola. By David Birmingham. London: Hurst. 2015. 256pp. Index. £55.00. ISBN 978 1 84904 514 8.

Les incertitudes de la nation en Angola: aux racines sociales de l'Unita. By Didier Péclard. Paris: Karthala. 2015. 368pp. Index. Pb.: £22.00. ISBN 978 2 8111 446 6. Available as e-book.

Political identity and conflict in central Angola, 1975–2002. By Justin Pearce. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2015. 184pp. Index. £58.50. ISBN 978 1 10707 964 9. Available as e-book.

Magnificent and beggar land: Angola since the civil war. By Ricardo Soares de Oliveira. London: Hurst. 2015. 291pp. Index. Pb.: £25.00. ISBN 978 1 84904 284 0.

Cubans in Angola: South–South cooperation and transfer of knowledge, 1976–1991. By Christine Hatzky. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press. 2015. 386pp. Index. Pb.: £36.95. ISBN 978 0 29930 104 0. Available as e-book.

The petro-developmental state in Africa: making oil work in Angola, Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea. By Jesse Salah Ovardia. London: Hurst. 2016. 246pp. Index. £32.00. ISBN 978 1 84904 519 3.

Angola may be entering a pivotal moment triggered by persistently low oil prices. José Eduardo dos Santos, the country's president since 1979 (the world's second longest serving president), signalled in March 2016 that he may step down in 2018. Will this result in continuity or change? There has been a timely deluge of books published on modern Angola, some ten since 2014—of which six are reviewed here—to assist readers' assessment of this moment's significance.¹ Angola is not an easy country to research: it is costly, contradictory, has a small but vocal opposition and a particularly shy government. It is a country that requires long-term interaction to unlock true insights. As the historian Christine Messiant observed: 'Here in Angola, even the past is unpredictable'.

¹ For an article covering a number of books on Angola not reviewed here, see Jeremy Harding, 'Apartheid's last stand', *London Review of Books* 38: 6, 17 March 2016, pp. 9–20.

David Birmingham first published a book on the Portuguese conquest of Angola in 1965, following his travels around the country, and has become since a leading historian of Angola, inspiring several generations of students (including Michael Dwyer of Hurst which published three of the books reviewed here). As a young man in the 1960s, Birmingham was the interpreter for Agostinho Neto (later to become Angola's first president) when he escaped from a Portuguese prison and arrived in the London office of Amnesty International as the organization's first 'prisoner of conscience'. Birmingham also coined the word 'Lusophone' to describe Portuguese-speaking African nationalists.

Birmingham's over 50 years of scholarship on the country are richly evident in his *Modern history of Angola*, which begins in 1820 with the rise of a colony covering a land area of half a million square miles. This book highlighting both historical continuity and change is essential reading for anybody interested in why modern-day Angola is as it is today. For example, a few years ago *Forbes Magazine* declared that Isabel dos Santos, the daughter of the current president, was the richest woman in Africa—worth \$3 billion. Birmingham reminds us that Dona Ana Joaquina da Silva, a highly successful Luanda-based business woman in the nineteenth century, probably became Africa's richest woman at the time. When in 1854 David Livingstone met Dona Ana Joaquina, he was impressed that she used slaves domestically rather than exporting them, the practice he so abhorred.

Birmingham also writes about watersheds in Angola's modern history. One example is the British Ultimatum of 1890 over the Portuguese plan to territorially join Angola to Mozambique—to create a new 'Brazil'—because of Britain's own imperial expansion. This forced the Portuguese to defensively deepen their territorial claims in the hinterland, ensuring that the shape of modern-day Angola was secularly defined. Another is the introduction of harsh colonial labour practices in cotton and coffee production which triggered the northern rebellion in 1961, the origin of the armed liberation struggle against Portuguese colonialism. Portugal's 'Carnation Revolution' of April 1974, which paved the way for Angolan independence, could also be added to this list.

The history of Angolan nationalism is one of deep divisions, which became important drivers for the four decades of (mostly) uninterrupted conflict from 1961 to 2002. These divisions were embodied in competing movements: the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA), Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA). Didier Péclard, in *Les incertitudes de la nation en Angola*, addresses how ethnicity and religion influenced the evolution of UNITA during the 1961–74 liberation war, but he also charts the broader processes that contributed to the party obtaining support, after 1975, in central Angola, especially among the Ovimbundu.² When serving as a UN election observer during Angola's first multiparty elections in September 1992, I remember seeing graffiti on walls in Luanda and Malanje stating 'MPLA steals, UNITA kills'; what Christine Messiant

² For a detailed review article on this book, see Michel Cahen, 'À la recherche de l'historicité de l'Unita: à propos du livre de Didier Péclard', *Social Sciences and Missions* 28: 3–4, 2015, pp. 373–83.

called the 'properly totalitarian' rule of UNITA versus the 'paradoxical dictatorship' of the MPLA.

However, in *Political identity and conflict in central Angola*, Justin Pearce argues that such sharp distinctions can distract from reality. Political loyalty and support were often more about survival or ambition than about ideology and ethnicity, and rural Angolans in particular shared a hazy sense of how a government ought to work. War sharpened perceptions. The graffiti I observed was prompted by UNITA's behaviour in the cities during the run-up to the 1992 elections and by its treatment of them during renewed conflict. This hardened opinions against UNITA in the towns, but both sides also regarded migration out of or into UNITA areas as an act of defection (p. 155). When I visited UNITA-occupied Huambo in 1993 (and successfully avoided having a 'Free Angola' visa in the shape of a Black Cockerel stamped in my passport), I observed that the rebels struggled to administer the city. Although they wanted to experiment with social projects to build up support, they had little experience of managing a city of over a million people and even less time to show results before having to abandon any dreams of being an alternative government and preparing to resist a new land offensive by government forces in late 1994. The government regarded all residents in areas controlled by UNITA as combatants, as the Vice Minister of Defence General Pedro Sebastião stated in May 1993: 'We don't waste our money bombing civilians'.³

Throughout modern Angolan history, personalities have played a critical role in the country's fortunes. David Birmingham's *A short history of modern Angola* is the best out of the books under review here at capturing their importance. Birmingham describes Agostinho Neto, the MPLA's first leader and the first president of Angola, as a typical product of the country's complex cultural history. He came from the Kimbundu hinterland of Luanda, spoke excellent Portuguese and wrote poetry in that language. Although a black African, he associated freely with creoles and mestizos in the colonial cities and married a white woman (p. 75). When Neto died from cancer in Moscow in 1979, he was succeeded by José Eduardo dos Santos, a Soviet-trained petroleum engineer, who has since built up a system of 'totalitarian presidentialism' according to Birmingham (p. 14). Unlike Neto and Jonas Savimbi, the founder of UNITA, Dos Santos is depicted as an undistinguished apparatchik and, according to Soares de Oliveira, he was 'the typical compromise choice: young and good-looking but quiet and apparently none too smart' (*Magnificent and beggar land*, p. 41). 'None too smart' might be unjust: Dos Santos has shown remarkable resilience and has developed, over four decades, a neo-patrimonial system which cleverly rotates those with influence or who obtain favour. Over time, Dos Santos has increasingly centralized power to himself; Angola became and remains a presidential state in which power mostly emanates from the palace.

UNITA's Jonas Savimbi, in contrast, was flamboyant and contradictory. David Birmingham writes that the key to Savimbi's survival from 1979 to 1991 was his alli-

³ Human Rights Watch, *Angola: arms trade and violations of the laws of war since the 1992 elections* (New York, 1994), p. 82.

ance with the United States, before, during and after the Reagan presidency. Indeed, for a while, UNITA became the second-largest recipient of US covert aid, after the Afghan *mujahideen*. Savimbi rejected the 1992 election result and ordered UNITA to return to war. He went on to capture Huambo city and almost succeeded in overthrowing the MPLA government. Gradually, the tide turned against UNITA and a second peace agreement, the Lusaka Protocol of late 1994, prevailed. There followed an uneasy peace monitored by the UN, but by 1998 President Dos Santos decided that only a peace through war strategy could guarantee an end to the cycle of armed confrontation with UNITA. In 2002, Savimbi was tracked down in remote eastern Angola by government troops, isolated and killed. That the war ended almost immediately demonstrates that ‘greed theories’, proposed by Paul Collier and others to explain Angola’s civil war, according to which the conflict was driven by a war economy of oil and diamonds, were overly reductionist.⁴ Thus, a key lesson from Angola’s modern history is that individuals matter: the death of Jonas Savimbi ended the conflict and Angola became ‘no longer a colonial fiction’, even if it led to a victors’ peace. Likewise, if President Dos Santos steps down in 2018, this will be transformative for Angola’s future.

Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, in *Magnificent and beggar land*, presents readers with a pessimistic book. His central thesis is that the current Angolan presidency has consciously impoverished the country, exerting control through the underdevelopment of state administration (p. 44). This is not entirely correct; parts of the Angolan administration can deliver, dependent on the existence of political backing and adequate human and financial resources. However, Angola does suffer from an acute skills deficit, a consequence, partly, of Portuguese colonialism and of the war footing the country had to maintain until 2002. One of the most regular complaints by investors today—other than bureaucracy and corruption—is that there is only a small pool of trained Angolan labour they can draw from. The government has relied on international business to provide training to compensate for the failing state system. Companies like the Brazilian firm Odebrecht have reluctantly stepped in to fill the gap left by poor state education and have trained tens of thousands of Angolans since the late 1980s.

The government has also spectacularly failed on other measures of development since the war ended in 2002, such as poverty reduction and improving health care. In the early post-conflict period of 2002–2005, international NGOs remained in Angola and the government relied on them heavily to support the poor and even to assist with the reintegration of ex-combatants. When Angola graduated to middle-income country status in 2004, western international donors cut their support across all areas, from health care to mine action. They assumed that the Angolan state had the resources to take full responsibility, but this did not occur. There is no better illustration of this than the poor response of the Angolan government to the public health crisis caused by the 2016 yellow fever epidemic.

⁴ For a critique of Paul Collier’s greed vs grievance theory at that time, see Arvind Ganesan and Alex Vines, ‘Engine of war: resources, greed, and the predatory state’, in Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Watch world report 2004: human rights and armed conflict* (New York, 2004), pp. 301–23.

Over the last decade, expatriates from all over the world have come to Angola to work.⁵ Soares de Oliveira writes that these ‘foreigners are not in Angola to change the Angolan way of doing things’ (p. 78). He argues that they have contributed to a deep ambivalence towards large-scale foreign presence, evidenced by a deliberately erratic visa regime and recurrent expulsions of illegal foreign workers. Like the Gulf monarchies, when oil prices were high, Angola could afford to pay for significant numbers of expatriates, including at least 100,000 Portuguese and even more Chinese. Since independence, the Angolan government has regularly drawn on foreign expertise and some of these partners have been listened to and their advice acted upon.

The drivers of change in Angola are complex, determined by personality, politics, geopolitics, prestige, solidarity, cost-benefit analysis and timing. The single greatest foreign influence on Angola might well have been Cuba’s ‘internationalist solidarity’, which saw troops and aid workers sent to Angola in support of the MPLA from 1975. This turned out to be a massive undertaking, mobilizing some 50,000 Cuban civilians and some 370,000 troops from 1979 to 1991—representing 5 per cent of Cuba’s population. Christine Hatzky’s book on the subject, *Cubans in Angola*, is a masterpiece and an important contribution to scholarship on Angola. Translating the 2012 German original into English was worth the effort by the publisher. The Cubans first seriously engaged the MPLA in the Congo through Che Guevara in 1965. In 1975, Cuba unilaterally intervened in support of the MPLA and it is clear that without Cuba, the party would not have been able to assert its power. Originally, Cuba had no interest in long-term engagement, but, cleverly, the MPLA was able to draw on Cuba’s foreign strategy of ‘internationalist solidarity’ to manipulate the country into supporting its ambitions. Even as early as 1975, with its back against the wall, facing attacks from the US-backed FNLA and apartheid South Africa-backed UNITA, the MPLA’s leadership was able to define solidarity on its own terms. Although initially Cuba supported the Angolan government for free, quickly this solidarity was codified through a contract, whereby Angola paid for the services it received in a mixture of foreign currency and local Kwanzas. Far from being a client-based relationship, this enabled the Angolan government to influence the process and locked Cuba into a longer commitment than it had initially anticipated.

Hatzky is the first scholar to assess the full impact of Cuban aid. Over 21 years, Cuban education touched 2,417,094 Angolans of whom 1,356,514 were women, and from 1977 to 2003 there were 13,858 scholarships for Angolans to study in boarding schools at Cuba’s Isla de Juventud, ‘Island of Youth’. The impact of Cuban teaching was patchy, for example it was more successful in urban areas, but by the mid-1980s the warring parties had systematically annihilated the modest achievements of the social development aid (in infrastructure, administration and health and education programmes) in the first few years of independence. Cuban

⁵ For a discussion of how dependent Portugal has become on Angola since 2002, see Jorge Costa, João Teixeira Lopes and Francisco Louçã, *Os donos Angolanos de Portugal* (Lisbon: Bertrand Editoria, 2014). For an assessment of the Portuguese diaspora in Angola since 2002, see Carlos Sangreman, Carlos Lopes and Maria Sousa Galito, *A diáspora portuguesa em Angola, 2002–2012* (Oporto: Fundação Portugal–África, 2015).

aid greatly benefited the MPLA government, as the conflict allowed it to extend its socialist-era centralized and undemocratic political structures (p. 282). Education became an instrument of maintaining MPLA power and today Cuban-trained Angolans hold important positions in politics, education, economics and even the Church. In a country that still has an acute skills deficit, this was an important developmental contribution. It was also the Cubans who, in 1976, recommended that the MPLA use the unitary slogan 'From Cabinda to Cunene' (referring to Angola's most northern and southern provinces).

The Cuban intervention in Angola may also provide insights into the much broader questions around the purpose of external support during civil wars and post-colonial conflicts. According to Hatzky, Cuban external support contributed little to reconciliation, as military strategy took precedence over civilian aid (p. 287). She does argue, though, that the deployment of civilians was well planned and coordinated, concentrating on strengthening state administration. Therefore Cuban engagement primarily focused on a political and military strategy to support the MPLA's position of power; it made no effort to encourage reconciliation.⁶ The driver for that came from declining oil prices in the mid-1980s and the knock-on effect of Cuba increasingly looking to reduce its exposure in Angola. These factors led the MPLA government to conclude that it had no choice but to try to negotiate with UNITA, opening the way for the New York Accords and resulting, eventually, in the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola under UN supervision, the independence of Namibia and Angola's first multiparty elections in 1992.

China had initially supported UNITA, and Maoist ideas, including those of self-reliance, informed Jonas Savimbi's strategy of mobilizing rural communities during the anti-colonial war. But the last visit to China by a senior UNITA delegation was in 1978, as Savimbi was lured away from the country by much more robust support from apartheid South Africa's Defence Force and the United States. Since 2004, China has become deeply involved with Angola and Beijing's original support of UNITA doesn't seem to have had a negative impact on this deepening strategic partnership. It is underpinned by Angolan oil, exchanged for loan credits for Chinese infrastructure investments—'Angola Mode', as this type of deal is now called by the World Bank. Chinese construction firms hit the jackpot, and by 2010, some 168,000 Chinese had come to Angola to work on projects across the country. Immediately after the end of the civil war, Angolan growth was buttressed by high oil prices, the economy grew by 15.5 per cent and new infrastructure mushroomed across the country—some good, some bad and some really ugly. But that the main import from China in 2010 was cement is deeply troubling and that much of the construction was carried out by Chinese contractors is doubly concerning in a country that needs to diversify its economy and build up its own skilled labour pool.

As in its relationship with Cuba, the Angolan government called the shots, deciding on which projects should go ahead and paying for the services it requested:

⁶ This is not entirely correct. Cuban doctors in 1992 and 1993 intervened to save captured UNITA leaders and ensured they were well treated and received proper health care. See Human Rights Watch, *Angola*, p. 67.

during the boom years, the Chinese provided what the government requested in exchange for oil. Also like the Cubans, the Chinese have found themselves overexposed and have been looking to reduce their Angolan engagements. For example, low oil prices, high production costs and other management problems have forced Chinese national oil companies to reappraise their portfolios. In March 2015, auditors sent by China's National Audit Office to screen the financial statements of the state-owned oil company Sinopec's overseas investment arm, found that billions of dollars invested in five Angolan oilfields had underperformed. Sinopec has suffered a net loss of \$1.6 billion in three of these oil blocks and has asked to extricate itself from opaque joint-venture deals. In a repeat of the oil crash of the mid-1980s, which acted as a catalyst for Cuba to review its engagement with the country, low oil prices helped Beijing reappraise its Angolan exposure. Many of the Chinese construction workers have left Angola, although China remains Angola's primary crude oil export destination and still provides the government with new financial loans.

Angolan politics is addicted to oil rents and the state oil company, Sonangol, was the centrepiece of a parallel system. The problem of implementing structural transformation in economies dependent on exporting primary commodities such as oil is not unique to Angola, but is faced by a number of Latin American and African countries whose economies had been structured by the logic of colonialism. Jesse Ovadia, in *The petro-developmental state in Africa*, bravely tries to determine if a petro-developmental state can take hold in Angola and Nigeria. Ovadia looks at potential avenues for reform and incentives to shift elite accumulation, from old-style rentierism to new state capitalism, particularly through local content policies. The oil industry in Angola does not directly employ many staff—64,677 in 2009—and Ovadia rightly focuses on the increasing pressures for 'Angolization' of staff and local content requirements for service industries and supply chains. Angolans working in the oil industry clearly feel that change is far too slow and that many of these efforts essentially empower those who are already in positions of power rather than incentivizing development. A 2010 internal survey of Angolan staff found that 64 per cent were dissatisfied with the pace of 'Angolization' in BP. Angolan officials have been looking to international best practice: for example, the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate has been helping the government create a 'roadmap for Angola' on local content and Angolization, based on the Norwegian and Brazilian experience (p. 48). It seems that Sonangol listened to this advice and in 2010 insisted that Total hire a local oil service company to support its efforts in oil block 17.

Ovadia argues that since the end of the war in 2002, Angola's political elite has become more confident about the future, moving away from short-term profit seeking and investing more in the country. For now, only a few big families and businesses support the economy, but he concludes that 'it is likely that more and more Angolans will begin to view value production as more profitable than rent seeking' (p. 130).

Angolan oil production supported the Portuguese colonial military's efforts against the nationalists. It was also the prime source of revenue for the MPLA, used to maintain its military efforts against UNITA and to repel incursions by apartheid South Africa during the Cold War. The first global oil shock in 1985 forced the Angolan government to rethink its politics, introducing economic reforms and beginning to negotiate with its enemies. This pattern has been repeated several times and is visible again today, with oil prices hovering around \$50 a barrel. Birmingham concludes that little has changed over the last 40 years. The economy had shifted from dependence on the unpredictable price of coffee to dependence on the equally fluctuating price of petroleum, and politics is as unresponsive to public opinion as it had been in 1970, 'though the dictator who balanced the powers of several factions of the property-owning class was now a member of Luanda's home-grown elite' (*A short history of modern Angola*, p. 118). Wealth is as sharply polarized as it had been in late colonial times, but the slums have grown far worse despite Angola's oil wealth.

In a July 2016 interview, President Dos Santos acknowledged that Angola was 'struggling' and that revenues were 'barely enough' to repay its debts. In June, the President had fired the board of Sonangol and put his daughter, Isabel, in charge. Sonangol has been stripped by decree of its non-core functions, leaving it with responsibility only for managing and monitoring oil contracts—a new 'agency' will act as a regulator alongside the oil ministry. The reform of the oil industry is long overdue. For some time, Sonangol has not been the efficient centrepiece of a parallel system that Oliveira and Ovidia had assumed it was, ensuring investments came in and oil flowed out. Sonangol has been in crisis and has accumulated big debts. The costs of extracting oil in a lower oil-price environment have got international oil companies reviewing their Angola investment plans. Without a diversified economy, the Angolan government needs oil to flow and so reform of the industry has become partly about longer-term party survival. Reforms of deep-water offshore oil have been under way for some years and greater transparency in this sector has gradually been allowed, to encourage international investment.

But openings for reform come and go, depending on political expediency. The government's decision in June 2016 not to request financial support from the Extended Fund Facility of the IMF is partly due to improved oil prices—up 35 per cent from early 2016—but also to the government's reluctance to meet the IMF's financial conditions, including more transparency—the Angolan government wants greater fiscal flexibility as it enters an electoral cycle.

The MPLA's overarching objective is, still, to maintain its grip on power through managing gradual change under party control. This mentality differs little from that of fellow southern African nationalist liberationist parties of government that portray themselves as the political aristocracy of the region, having earned their legitimacy to govern in perpetuity through armed struggle, as Roger Southall has highlighted.⁷ Most are in crisis today, becoming in effect 'ordinary' political parties and grappling with how to provide for impoverished electorates. In Angola's case,

⁷ Roger Southall, *Liberation movements in power: power and state in Southern Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2013).

there have been periodic reforms since 1975—and some of these have survived—but it's a slow and frustrating process, with many bumps and setbacks. The mood of the *musseques* (shantytowns), where an estimated 90 per cent of Luandans live, has become a major preoccupation of the MPLA in recent years, as the party has been unable to significantly reduce urban poverty. Angolan youth, in particular, are growing impatient and yearn for change. There won't be a return to civil war, but urban protests and pressures for change will increase.

It is within this context, and in the absence of an obvious political successor to President Dos Santos, that his daughter Isabel was appointed to lead the reforms at Sonangol. This is to protect the country's main wealth generator, but also the first family's interests, during this transitional period. Angola has always been less tolerant of political nepotism than its northern central African neighbours. Some have suggested Isabel might be being groomed for the presidency: a possibility, but difficult to execute as she is mixed race and was born outside Angola. Race and ethnicity have helped determine in the past who became president and will probably do so again. The successor to Dos Santos is likely to be the MPLA's vice-presidential candidate for the elections in 2017—number two on its party list. José Eduardo dos Santos was re-elected in August 2016 as the MPLA's president and therefore number one on its party list for the 2017 national vote. This makes him the de facto presidential candidate as Angola's electoral system does not allow for a presidential vote, so the leader of the winning party becomes head of state.

Most observers expected Dos Santos to be re-appointed as Angola's president, finish a new mandate and retire in 2022. He has signalled, several times since 2001, that he was considering retirement, but used these occasions to smoke out competitors for the presidency and stunt their aspirations. If Dos Santos steps down in 2018, this would signal that Angola is moving back to the model espoused by dominant southern Africa liberationist parties that debate and choose their presidents, and away from the central African path, where many presidents seek to rule indefinitely.

Dos Santos's legacy is ending the war and ensuring that Angola's first postwar decade has been marked by peacebuilding instead of large-scale violence. After a decade of peace, though, war is no longer a valid excuse for some of the government's failings. Soares de Oliveira rightly concludes that 'Angola's political economy remains a hostage to the elite's slow, evolving understanding of where their enlightened self-interest lies' (*Magnificent and beggar land*, p. 164). Throughout modern Angolan history, external shocks have proved to be catalysts for reform. Maybe an era of lower oil prices will incentivize Angola's elite to support long-term structural reforms and usher in a new post-Dos Santos era? The year 2018 could provide one of those watershed moments. But will Angola's elite embrace modernizing reforms that truly improve the lives of the Angolan people or rather will it choose to muddle through and try to maintain the status quo as best it can to protect its privileges? History will be the judge of this, and whether this moment merits a new chapter on change or merely a new paragraph on continuity in future books on Angola.

