A SHORT HISTORY OF MODERN ANGOLA

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The history of Angola falls into three parts. In medieval times the region was ruled by kings who controlled the religious art of rain-making and the magic art of iron-smelting. The three ‘early modern’ centuries were dominated by Brazilian conquistadores for whom Angola was the ‘Black Mother’ which supplied millions of plantation slaves. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the rise of a modern colony covering a land area of half a million square miles. Between 1820, when the modern era began, and 1975, when the formal colonial era ended, Angola’s coast, and in time its whole territory, was administered by Portugal. This modern period is dominated by great flows of migrant peoples. In the nineteenth century over half a million Africans were taken from their homes as slaves, or as conscript labourers, to work the coffee estates of the newly independent empire of Brazil or the cocoa plantations of the little island-colony of São Tomé. The beautiful harbour-city of Luanda became the capital of a spreading Angolan colony ruled by governors appointed by the Saxe-Coburg kings and queens of Portugal. In the twentieth century the flow of peoples was reversed and up to half a million European migrants arrived in Angola. Many came from the back lands of northern Portugal, or the Atlantic islands of Madeira and the Azores, seeking prosperity in Africa. Others were later conscripted as foot-soldiers to resist the rising tide of anti-colonial nationalism which swept through Africa in the 1960s. Colonial governors from Portugal’s army and navy were appointed by republican dictators who ruled in Lisbon after the monarchy had been overthrown in 1910. In 1975 change occurred again and the white population of Angola flowed back to Europe leaving African nationalists to struggle for control of their rich but unequally shared economic heritage.

The kingdom from which Angola gained its name was initially ruled by the Ngola dynasty whose rocky fortress lay above the valley of the Kwanza River.
It was first described to the outside world by an early Jesuit mission established there in the 1560s. The wealth of the kingdom was epitomised by the coastal fisheries of Luanda Island which produced a regional shell currency. Spiralled shells were used in the Kongo kingdom for such social payments as bride wealth and for political taxes or judicial fines. The Ngola’s northern neighbour was the ruler of this larger and more powerful kingdom lying south of the Congo River estuary. The medieval customs and traditions of Kongo were recorded by Christian missionaries and by Jewish traders. The king received feudal-type tribute from half-a-dozen provinces whose governors soon adopted European titles such as marquis or duke. To the south of the Ngola’s domains lay the great Benguela highland, ruled by a dozen merchant kings, and a coastline of Atlantic fishing villages. Today these three regions, north, central and south, are part of the Republic of Angola.

The Atlantic shipping bridge which linked Angola to South America grew slowly when Portuguese colonies called ‘captaincies’ were established in Brazil in the 1530s and cane sugar became the world’s most valuable traded commodity. Initially Atlantic merchants bought their supply of Brazilian plantation slaves from the kings of Kongo. These kings, one of whom sent his son to Rome to be trained as a bishop, received European craftsmen and priests to build and staff churches which enhanced the prestige of their capital city, San Salvador. They paid for expatriate missionaries by selling black labourers. As this trade in slaves grew, a Brazilian-type captaincy was created in the 1570s at Luanda in Angola. This African estate was granted to the Jewish grandson of the Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Dias. His role as supreme lord-proprietor of Angola was later replaced by military captains appointed by the Habsburgs who came to rule Portugal, as well as Spain, in the 1580s. These conquistadores overran the Kwanza River basin, levied tribute in male and female slaves from local headmen, and gained wealth by selling their captives not only to the infant plantations in Brazil but also to Spain’s great American dominions.

The Atlantic trade was greatly enhanced by the Dutch development of modern capitalism and the invention of joint stock companies which gained a major stake in Portugal’s East Indies and later also in Brazil. Dutch shipping carried a significant share of Atlantic produce to northern Europe. In the 1640s the Dutch ‘empire’, which gained fortresses in both West Africa and South Africa, temporarily held the great Angolan fortress at Luanda from which it supplied slaves to rich sugar colonies which the Dutch had captured in northern Brazil. By the eighteenth century new discoveries of American
PREFACE

mineral wealth required ever more slave miners. Brazilian wealth grew in leaps and bounds with the discovery of first gold and later of diamonds. Angola’s slave catchers were driven to extend their commercial networks deeper into the interior of Africa. The old conquistadores were replaced as suppliers of slaves by Europeanised African merchants, sometimes referred to as ‘Creoles’. In Angola black, Portuguese-speaking, Creoles were predominantly traders who imported manufactured goods, particularly cotton textiles from Portuguese India. A more corrosive form of payment for slaves was the addictive supply of tobacco and rum from Brazil and of rough red wine from Portugal. From the early nineteenth century the commercial sphere of informal influence dominated by Portugal, and by the Angolan Creoles, gradually evolved into a formal colonial territory, albeit one with fluctuating frontiers which were not finally agreed to by rival European powers until the 1920s.

The use of names in Angola presents a problem. Geographically the country’s southern neighbour, Namibia, was for about a hundred years known as South-West Africa. On the eastern border, Zambia was once called Northern Rhodesia, and Katanga was briefly known as Shaba. The territory to the north of Angola went through even more changes of name—the Free State, the Belgian Congo, Congo-Kinshasa, Zaïre, most recently the DRC. In this book it is referred to throughout as Congo. This needs to be distinguished from a French colony variously known as Middle Congo, French Congo, and Congo-Brazzaville. Another possible cause of confusion concerns the name of different ‘ethnic’ groups. I refer to the Kikongo-speaking people of the north as Kongo and the Umbundu-speaking people of the south as Ovimbundu. I have, improperly, called the Kimbundu-speaking people of the centre ‘Kimbundu’ rather than using the more correct ‘Mbundu’. Like every other historian of Angola I had great difficulty finding a term to use for Africans with a greater or lesser degree of Portuguese culture. I have controversially called them ‘Creole’ with apologies to all those who have tried to find alternatives. In the wider historical literature the term Creole has meant black in West Africa and white in the West Indies. It has sometimes been used to refer to the Luso-Africans of old colonial towns, to mixed-race Angolans with Portuguese genes as well as Portuguese culture, and even to the assimilado population which was legally assimilated into colonial citizenship. I have arbitrarily Anglicised the mixed-race term mestizo as mestizo, and not mulatto. Some Angolan towns changed their name for part of the colonial period but here modern names have been used—Ndala Tando, not Villa Salazar, and Huambo not Nova Lisboa or New Lisbon. São Salvador, or Mbanza
Kongo, has—quite illogically—somehow retained the sixteenth-century name, San Salvador.

The complex history of modern colonialism in Angola, and of the wars of liberation which followed, have been studied by an illustrious cohort of international scholars from a dozen countries. Pre-eminent among them was Jill Dias, a British historian married to one of Portugal’s most distinguished scientists. She devoted a life-time to meticulous research and to wide-ranging teaching. Although she published thirty-odd learned articles, including a 250-page essay on nineteenth-century Angola, her aspiration to write a fully rounded history of modern Angola was cut short in 2008. She suffered a cerebral stroke while sitting at her keyboard and a whole generation of young scholars from Angola, and indeed spread across the globe, was left bereft of her wise counsel. It would be impossible to reconstruct the history which Jill might have written, and for which she had collected so many original documents and historic photographs. These are now preserved for posterity in the archives of the New University in Lisbon. As a tribute to her scholarship, however, this book tries to present a very short history of modern Angola. Two very eminent historians who do survive in Angola are Arlindo Barbeitos, who published a Portuguese collection of my old essays under the title Portugal e África and Maria da Conceição Neto who translated my thesis as Alianças e Conflitos: Os Primordios da Ocupação Estrangeira em Angola 1483–1790. It was São who read a full draft of the present book and made many improvements, for which I am extremely grateful.

My credentials for writing about modern Angola are varied and eccentric. The hundred-odd items in the bibliography were not electronically selected but are books which happened to be on my own shelves. One of the most imaginative of Angola’s historians is the novelist Pepetela from whose works I have gained many insights. I have also visited all the provinces of Angola, even Cabinda, with the sole exception of Kwando-Kubango, the ‘land at the end of the earth’, to which some black intellectuals were banished in colonial times. One famous intellectual, who never was banished there, was the poet, doctor, and statesman Agostinho Neto for whom I acted as interpreter when he escaped from a Portuguese prison and arrived at the London office of Amnesty International as a ‘prisoner of conscience’. While living in Dar-es-Salaam I coined the word Lusophone to describe Portuguese-speaking African nationalists. In 1963 my first travels around Angola were supervised by a tourist agent who worked for Portugal’s fearsome political police. He allowed me to travel up to the diamond mines in the cockpit of an old Dakota and back again
on the famous Ambaca railway. I also rode the brass-handled Benguela Railway to Bihé, re-named Silva Porto after a backwoods trader. Ten years later I visited the most famous of the Holy Ghost missionaries, Carlos Estermann, in his little house on the Huila plateau in the deep south. In Zürich I read the multilingual correspondence of Héli Chatelain, the nineteenth-century founder of the Swiss mission on the Benguela highland. I was able to explore the old coffee estates of the Amboim plateau where one of the most virulent of anti-colonial protests had taken place in 1917. I was, improbably, dining with international bankers in the Reform Club in London when, a few days before the Lisbon coup of 25 April 1974, I was quietly advised that Portugal’s government was about to be toppled. I happen to have been in Luanda one April night in 1975 when a returning exile was ‘welcomed’ by hostile hot-heads who attempted to shoot down his plane but instead punctured holes in a South African passenger jet coming in to refuel. I later revisited the south in the austerity year of 1987 when Russian military advisers were propping up the bar of the Grand Hotel while South Africa’s French fighter jets were circling overhead. A report I wrote at the time on the functioning of the informal economy was used as a planning paper by members of the Angolan cabinet. In the Luanda archives I studied the local records both of the northern coffee district of Cazengo and of the southern farming district of Caconda. My attempt to visit the Kongo city of San Salvador, and its eleven ruined churches, was abortive but I did take a boat ride along the Congo River from the oil-haven of Soyo. In 2003 I travelled to the Zambian border with two British members of parliament, stopping en route to see the place where the civil war had ended when Jonas Savimbi had been killed a year before. We later crossed the headstream of the Zambezi by canoe to visit a leper colony. Of such accidental adventures is the life of an historian composed. My travels were enthusiastically supported by my wife Elizabeth, and we lived for some months in Angola with our children. The text of this little book has been rigorously revised by my colleague Doreen Rosman. It is dedicated to the memory of Jill Dias.

David Birmingham, Canterbury, January 2015
TIMELINE

1483  Portuguese sailing caravels reach the west coast of Central Africa
1506  Afonso gains the throne of Kongo as a Christian king
1560  The first Jesuit mission established in Angola in the Luanda hinterland
1571  A donation charter for Angola assigned to Paulo, grandson of Bartholomew Dias
1617  Benguela established as the second colonial city on the Angola coast
1648  A Brazilian navy expels the Dutch from Luanda Bay
1665  Portuguese conquistadores defeat the king of Kongo
1770  Pombal, dictator of Portugal, confiscates the Jesuit plantations
1820  The Portuguese monarchy is restored in Lisbon after the Peninsular Wars
1822  Brazil proclaims its independence under Emperor Pedro I
1834  Portuguese revolutionaries limit the powers of the church and the crown
1842  An Anglo-Portuguese treaty outlaws inter-continental slave trading
1850  The Brazilian slave markets close under British pressure
1884  The Congress of Berlin restricts Portuguese influence in northern Angola
1890  A British ‘ultimatum’ bars Angola’s road to the east
1902  The Bailundu War brings permanent colonial domination to the highland
1910  Portuguese republicans overthrow the monarchy
1912  The railway town of Huambo, later New Lisbon, founded on the highland
1917  North-eastern Angola granted to the Diamang diamond company
1926  Roman Catholic generals seize power in Lisbon
TIMELINE

1930  Salazar’s dictatorship plans a new colonial charter
1961  Three rebellions break out in Angola
1974  Salazar’s New State is overthrown by army captains in Lisbon
1975  Angola’s independence is declared on 11 November
1977  Young radicals led by Nito Alves attempt a coup in Luanda
1987  One of the longest battles in Africa’s history begins at Cuito Cuanavale
1992  A civil war truce allowed a general election to be held in Angola
2002  Jonas Savimbi killed and the civil wars end
GLOSSARY

Ambaquistas  Merchant families from the town of Ambaca near Luanda

Apartheid  Racial segregation

Assimilados  Africans who were legally absorbed into colonial culture

Carbonari  A working-class anarchist movement which felled the Portuguese Monarchy in 1910

Creoles  A controversial term which in Angola tended to refer to predominantly black Africans with Portuguese culture

Dash  a gift or bribe

Gastarbeiter  migrant labourers

Luso-Africans  people of mixed Portuguese and African race and/or culture

Mestizos  persons of mixed race (also mestiços)

Museque  a Luanda slum

pidgin  a mixed language

Pombeiros  peripatetic commercial agents in the Angolan hinterland

Serviçal/Serviçais  an indentured conscript labourer or labourers