

# BOOK REVIEW

**Vasco Martins. *Colonialism, Ethnicity and War in Angola*.** London: Routledge, 2021. 196 pp. Chronology. Index. Hardcover. \$136. ISBN: 9780367860868.

In *Colonialism, Ethnicity and War in Angola*, Vasco Martins engages with the historiographies of ethnicity, Ovimbundu identity, and the legacies of colonialism and war. The result is a nuanced, thoughtful study focused on “whether ethnicity had a role in the political organization of Angola or whether it had been an absent force in recent Angolan history” (3). Martins begins with an examination of the various explanations for Angola’s civil war (1975 to 2002). While acknowledging compelling aspects of explanations that highlight Cold War divisions and how elite power politics converged with those divisions, Martins focuses on ethnic configurations resulting from the instrumentalization of ethnicity. Interviews with dozens of Ovimbundu provide insights into the peoples’ experiences of colonialism, ethnicity, and war.

The book is organized into five chapters, along with an introduction and a succinct conclusion. The first chapter, “Christianity, Ethnicity, and Modernity,” examines the development of modern Ovimbundu ethnicity by looking at the impact of Christian missions in the promotion and shaping of ethnic identity from the early twentieth century until 1961 (the year when Angolans initiated their war of liberation from Portuguese colonialism). As Martins explains, missionaries—both Protestant and Catholic—served as intermediaries between the communities they served and the colonial state. Mission education, namely literacy in Portuguese, “produced modern Ovimbundu elites...avid to defy the colonial system that refused Africans any type of progressive social mobility” (48).

In the second chapter, “Colonialism, Ethnicity, and Modernity,” Martins discusses the immense social and economic changes that impacted the Ovimbundu during the twentieth century, from their loss of political independence at the start of the century to systems of forced and voluntary migrant labor and the development of colonial capitalism. According to Martins, “Ovimbundu ethnicity became more salient in contexts of migrant labor, when in fluid dialogue with colonial capitalism and, most importantly, African nationalist politics” (75). Martins explains that the start of mass migration of Ovimbundu

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laborers to the booming coffee-producing northern provinces of Angola coincided with the beginning of the liberation war in 1961.


Chapter Three, “The Ovimbundu and the Liberation War,” focuses on the non-involvement, for the most part, of the Ovimbundu in the early years of the war. Martins argues that their reluctance did not come from acceptance or support of the colonial regime, but rather a lack of monetary resources, state control of information, and great geographical distances, alongside the pressures of the colonial economy and the conservative nature of Christian education (86). Martins cites interviews to support his argument that colonial propaganda promoting a divide-and rule strategy, condemning the UPA (Union of Peoples of Northern Angola) rebels in northern Angola as terrorists and criminals (p. 91), succeeded to an extent, as many Ovimbundu feared the UPA rebels. An Ovimbundu-led liberation movement, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), was formed in 1964, after Jonas Savimbi and others resigned from the FNLA (National Front for the Liberation of Angola) and formed UNITA.

Martins argues in Chapter Four, “Ovimbundu Political Ethnicity,” that “the ethnicization of the Angolan conflict during the first years of the liberation war is important to evaluate the crucial relationship the Ovimbundu would come to have with UNITA upon independence” (106). Martins’ unique contribution to the historiography is the inclusion of interviews and speeches to support his argument that UNITA’s leadership used Ovimbundu ethnicity to appeal for support. As Martins explains, the “centrality of language in relationship between UNITA and the Ovimbundu masses is clear. The UNITA leadership was certainly aware of this power, in terms of both simplifying communication and appealing to cultural and affective ties” (113). UNITA relied on a common language and cultural affinities to attract support among the Ovimbundu population.

Interestingly, Martins argues that Ovimbundu and Angolan identities remained complementary and overlapping. As much as UNITA and Savimbi attempted to use language and historical grievances to essentialize Ovimbundu ethnicity, Martins found that interviewees spoke about wanting to feel included as full and equal Angolans: “Virtually all field data collected...is about inclusion, representation, citizenship, and civic virtue” (121).

In the final chapter, “Ethnicity and Post-war Citizenship,” Martins examines what it means to be Ovimbundu in post-war Angola (since 2002), where access to state resources is mediated through membership in the ruling party, the MPLA (People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola). As told to Martins in interviews, “A generic connotation with the ‘flag of UNITA’ was the most common issue to explain hinderances in social mobility” (149). One key challenge of contemporary Angola is to determine how people, in this case the Ovimbundu as the country’s largest ethno-linguistic group, achieve equal citizenship when their ethnicity is deemed “other” in the context of an authoritarian government which equates the nation with the MPLA political party.

Martins ends with a succinct, smart conclusion that makes a strong case for understanding ethnicity in its historical context. He argues that ethnicity played a salient, but not dominant, role in Angola's civil war and its post-war reconstruction. The inclusion of a list of acronyms and a map would have aided readers unfamiliar with Angola.

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