

# H-Net Reviews

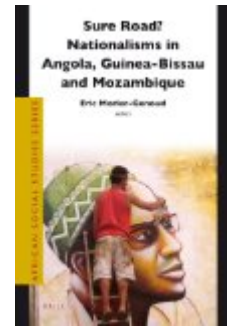
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Éric Morier-Genoud, ed. *Sure Road? Nationalisms in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique*. Leiden: Brill, 2012. xxv + 270 pp. \$95.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-04-22261-8.

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Commissioned by Philip J. Havik



## Nationalisms in Lusophone Africa

Democratic nation-building, patrimonialism and “plunder” nationalism in the former Portuguese African colonies since independence

This admirable book sets out to explain what nationalism and nationality has meant, and means today, for the people of the former Portuguese colonies of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. It is a multi-authored volume made up of papers delivered at a workshop in 2007 and, if the passage of five years and the different perspectives and styles of eleven authors suggest a volume that is blurred in focus and partially out of date, this is remedied by a masterly summary of the main themes by Gavin Williams and an introduction by the editor, Eric Morier-Genoud, which restores the contemporary relevance of what has been written. As might be expected from such an assemblage of distinguished scholars, the essays are alive with a multiplicity of ideas and interpretations but, for the most part, they reflect on the origins of nationalism, its development during the last decade of colonial rule, and on what happened as all three countries collapsed into civil war. What is largely missing, though Justin Pearce’s article is a notable exception, is any detailed analysis of contemporary ideas of the nation and the ideologies which guide the ruling elites today. This is not surprising as there is no African, native to any of the three countries, among the authors and therefore no one to explain from firsthand experience the ideologies that guide the rulers of these countries and how these are perceived by the population at large. The book is emphatically a compendium of Western ideas on Africa’s nation-

alism and presents a Westerner’s image of an idealistic nationalism cynically betrayed and in terminal decline.

It is now thirty-seven years since Portugal’s African colonies became independent and fifty-one years since the wars of independence broke out. For most people living in Africa these events are now only distant memories or tales told in the history books. And most of the Western scholars who write about them are also too young to remember. So it is well to be reminded that in the early 1960s exaggerated hopes were held out for the future of Africa. The new Africa would be inspired by an idealism that would shame the rest of the world and which would right the wrongs of fifty years of colonial rule. For many writers, particularly those on the left, the hopes were brighter still. Independent Africa would be shaped according to ideals that would breathe new life into a socialist creed tarnished by the excesses of the communist regimes.

The ideals of African natinalism were easily expressed—-independent Africa would espouse values that were nonracial, that would reject tribalism, that would prioritize improvement in the social and economic condition of the people. It was a nationalism that was self-consciously modernizing and would remedy Africa’s perceived backwardness and primitiveness. It would promote economic independence and it would seek a fairer society through the principles embodied in African socialism—the idea that traditional African society had been run on communal lines with resources fairly dis-

tributed among the population. As Philip Havik writes, the nationalists also used the language of religion— independence would demand sacrifices but would work miracles (p. 39). The leaders of the main independence movements in the Portuguese colonies enthusiastically adopted these ideas.

In the 1960s the new Africa was carried along on a massive tide of good will. No one wanted the new countries to fail and the ideals of African nationalism were widely supported by the international community. However, the nationalist evocation of a nonracial, nontribal, socialist-inclined Africa, was largely that of an educated elite and was designed to be acceptable to the international community and to ease the transfer of power. As Gavin Williams says, Frelimo MPLA and PAIGC knew how to speak fluently the language of national liberation, but carefully “displaced the demand for ‘national self-determination’ from the discourse of rights” (p. 237). African nationalism was in essence a concoction of Western ideas. Africa was being recolonized intellectually, just as it was being decolonized politically and, although there were prominent African writers and political thinkers (notably Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the PAIGC), the ideas of African nationalism continued to be largely defined and further elaborated by non-Africans. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s radical intellectuals in the West were increasingly concerned with feminism and all the questions surrounding the position of women in society. This concern was soon transferred to Africa and it must have come as a surprise to many Africans to learn that African nationalism had started to become a movement for the liberation of women from the “dual oppression” of colonial rule and male domination.

This “recolonization” was most obvious in the case of Mozambique. After Frelimo took power it pursued policies which explicitly reflected the ideas of radical Western intellectuals—socialist corporatism, the promotion of women, the suppression of traditional values, the proscription of traditional authorities—above all, Samora Machel’s obsession with creating the “homogenised new man” (p. 18) who would be in every sense inspired by, and oriented towards, modern (Western) ideas. Michel Cahen writes perceptively that “nation-statist ideology is always ... a paradigm of authoritarian modernisation” (p. 10) and that the founding of Frelimo resulted in a “deep disregard for African society” (p. 24). Indeed, from the start there was a profound contradiction between Cabral’s call for “a process of *re-Africanisation*,” enshrined in his contention that Africans had to redis-

cover their history because “a denial of history [was] a denial of culture” (Havik, pp. 38-39), and the practice whereby the liberation movements obliterated “the local and traditional dimension of national culture” (Basto, p. 125).

In most African countries these nationalist, modernizing ideas were adopted by an educated, elite of assimilated Africans—Leopold Senghor, who was a member of the Académie Française; Felix Houphoët-Boigny, who had been a French cabinet minister; Julius Nyerere, who had translated Shakespeare into Swahili. In the Portuguese colonies the leadership was also made up of educated *assimilados*, many of whom were creoles—mestizos with strong Portuguese ties, whites, and Indians—who constituted an alternative Portuguese ruling class determined to regain an ascendancy that had been lost since the nineteenth century. Both Agostinho Neto and Eduardo Mondlane had white wives, while Cabral was a creole whose major political objective was to unite Guinea with Cape Verde under the leadership of a Cape Verdian creole elite.

However, there were some awkward questions that were asked at the time, questions which became more insistent as Africa’s bright future changed rapidly into political chaos, economic failure, and an escalating social violence that far exceeded the worst violence of colonial rule. The narrative of a modernizing African nationalism had been so widely accepted that few people asked if it really represented the ideas and aspirations of the bulk of the African population. Those who did ask such questions were dismissed as reactionaries, enslaved by colonialist ideas and, at worst, creatures of sinister forces that wanted to exploit Africa’s primitiveness. But there was another narrative, though one that was largely unheard and unappreciated in the West. There were those who questioned the nonracial agenda, suggesting that this favored the new creole elites while most of the population believed that after independence Africa should be for Africans; others wanted the independent Africa to reflect traditional cultural ideas and institutions and, in many parts of the continent traditional authorities tried, for the most part unsuccessfully, to find a place for themselves in the new order; others questioned the perpetuation of the colonial frontiers, advocating a more explicit ethnic nationalism that would unite peoples of a common ethnicity. In the Portuguese colonies such ideas were strongly represented in the UPA/FNLA and later in UNITA in Angola, in the Makonde faction that disputed power within Frelimo and in the PAIGC before the purges of 1964. As Didier Péclard puts it, for UNITA “the true nature of An-

gola was to be found in its African, that is black, and rural heritage and not in the mestiço urban communities” (p. 152).

Everywhere, except in Guinea, the creole elites triumphed but it became increasingly obvious that the ideas that had been promoted to assist their rise to power, in particular the improvement in the social and economic condition of the population, were not being translated into practical policies. As the decades after independence passed, Western commentators became increasingly disillusioned with what was happening, particularly disillusioned because they had invested so many of their own hopes in the new Africa. This disillusionment can be seen in the vivid prose of David Birmingham’s article, while Jason Sumich describes “how an ideology that once promised a radical unity ... came to be a powerful symbol of social difference” (p. 128). He quotes Peter Fry, who pointed out that socialism was really a just new form of assimilation (p. 134) and he quotes Arthur Koestler’s epitaph on Stalinism—“revolution betrayed, tradition decayed and utopia, yet once again, delayed” (p. 147).

The rise of African nationalism and the modernizing ideal that it represented, is admirably charted in the essays in this book, as is its gradual descent into disillusionment. However, less attention is given to understanding the ideology that has arisen in its place. For make no mistake, there is a new ideology, one that has largely displaced the old nationalism, though it is an ideology that does not follow the norms of Western thought and makes no effort to locate itself in the paradigm of international values.

What is striking about the essays in this book is that, with the notable exception of Justin Pearce, none of the authors address the arguments advanced in a number of publications by Patrick Chabal and Nuno Vidal, though the latter has become one of the leading authorities on

the MPLA and its impact on modern Angola. Chabal and Vidal have argued that the ideals of African nationalism were always a “front”—*para os ingleses (e os europeos) ver*. Behind this front regimes were being fashioned that would systematically concentrate national wealth (including aid, mineral royalties, foreign exchange, land, housing, and industrial output) in the hands of a narrow ruling elite. The members of this elite would redistribute some of the benefits to sections of the population along strict clientelist lines. This patrimonialism, it is argued, is not just pragmatic but is rooted in the political and social cultures of Africa—in other words, in a “real” African ideology. To illustrate this point: Norway and Angola are examples of two relatively poor countries that have been endowed with vast wealth from oil. In Norway the ruling elites decided that this wealth should be utilized in ways which, according to the Human Development Index, make Norway the leading country in the world. Meanwhile, the same index shows Angola to be number 148 out of 187, among the lowest-rated countries in the world. The reason for this contrast lies, not in colonialism nor even in the decades of civil war but in the conscious decisions of the ruling elites of the two countries, conscious decisions that are governed by profoundly different ideologies.

Glimpses can be found in this book which show how this new ideology informs the African elites, how it is applied to policymaking, and how it defines the modern African nation—for example in Sumich’s observation that it is the conspicuous consumption of the power elite that now “expresses modernity” (p. 145) or in Birmingham’s observation that in Angola the “government dreams of Salazarian authoritarianism” (p. 221). However, this is an aspect of modern African nationalism only lightly touched on and one that needs further investigation—perhaps in another collection of articles of the caliber of those published in this book.

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