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Benedict Schubert’s *A Guerra e as Igrejas. Angola 1961-1991* was first published in German in 1998. Aptly so given its content matter, it has now appeared in Portuguese, in a translation by Roswita Schaffer. Although her name does not appear in any of the book’s credit pages, and only once in the Acknowledgements, I wish to draw attention to her role in making this work available to scholars working on Portuguese colonialism whose main working language is Portuguese. Despite the occasional stylistic oddity, Schaffer succeeds in making what must have read like a ponderous doctoral dissertation an interesting read. Schubert’s work, as he notes in the Abstract, was the result of a doctoral dissertation undertaken at the University of Basel, in Switzerland.

This work is an important contribution to Lusophone African studies, bringing to the fore some important new material on the position of the churches in colonised and decolonised Angola.[1] In particular, the book analyses the period between the start of the war of decolonisation, in 1961, and the signing of the peace agreement of Bicesse in Portugal, in 1991, one of a number of failed attempts to bring peace to Angola. The time span of thirty years allows Schubert scope for a detailed study of the complexity of the positions adopted by the various churches involved in Angola, both Catholic and Protestant (here seen in the broader sense of all other churches). In the context of Portuguese colonialism, as indeed elsewhere, the churches were always at the forefront of the colonial and anti-colonial projects.[2]

Traditionally the Catholic Church has been seen as deeply implicated in the colonising mission in Portuguese Africa, while Protestant churches have more readily been credited with participation in the struggle for freedom and independence in the former Portuguese colonies. This is a point Schubert also partly endorses (p. 219). But this was always a reductive view, however much the close links between State and Church in Antonio Salazar’s long dictatorship might encourage such assertions. Focusing in his study on the ambiguity of the positions adopted by the various religious organizations working in Angola, both pre- and post-independence, Schubert demonstrates that the situation on the ground in Portuguese Africa was far from being so neatly summarised. Moreover, as he also makes clear, although this was clearly the case in the period post-independence, already prior to 1975 there was within the Catholic Church some dissent on the merits of Portuguese colonialism, in spite of its 'Lusotropicalism'.[3]

One of the work’s strengths is thus the way in which the author is able to navigate deftly between the mutually contradictory roles played by the churches, the Portuguese regime and the various nationalist movements (later political parties) in Angola. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly—though I realise that given the motivation for his study, and the fact that Schubert came to it af-
ter a long period of residence in Angola, as a missionary, perhaps it should not be so—its the fact that the work paints a very bleak picture of the role the present Angolan government (a single-party semi-dictatorship led by the MPLA) has played in the perpetuation of the civil war in Angola. This is still an uncommon view, although increasingly supported by a greater number of scholars of Angolan politics. In his book, Schubert cites the occasion of a visit to Luanda by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who, much to his hosts’ displeasure, referred to the war between the MPLA and UNITA as a “civil war”. After years insisting that the war was simply the result of foreign interference, and of being able to silence most internal dissent on the issue, the Angolan government found itself unable to refute Tutu’s words. Anyone who has heard Tutu, the political animal, in operation, will know that he does not use bluntness loosely. Schubert himself cites, I take it approvingly, the words of Fola Soremekun, in Angola: The Road for Independence (1983): “the history of decolonisation in Angola is, first of all, a naked and brutal struggle for political power. Other probable motives were secondary” (161).

This angle, critical of both the MPLA and of UNITA, is one the book is at pains to endorse. For Schubert, the brutalisation of the Angolan people by political parties bent on attaining, and maintaining power at all costs, is the greatest indictment on the Angolan situation. At one point he uses personal reflections motivated by his own experiences during his residency in Angola to discuss the black markets, the state-sponsored corruption, the misery of a people caught between political ideologies left over from the Cold war and ethnic rivalries manufactured by colonial state making that continues to characterise life in decolonised Angola.

That at various times, over the full span of those thirty years, various (all?) churches have colluded by virtue of their silence, for fear of upsetting delicate machinations for influence within the government, is something the book deals with superficially. As a reader I was unable to consider Schubert’s deeply felt, engaging analysis, without at once hearing the ghost of Engels, reminding me of the opiate quality of all religion. The book’s closing words, with a long biblical citation, betray a motivation that I suspect few scholars will bring to the study of colonialism in Lusophone Africa. That said, A Guerra e as Igrejas certainly will ensure that any future readings of Portuguese colonialism in the context of missionary activity are forced to address the sordid nature of a relationship between State and Church. His critical but nuanced examination of the highly politicized pronouncements of Emilio de Carvalho, a man of the cloth, are particularly illustrative of the level of critical analysis to which Schubert subjects his material. In her sophisticated and ‘kindly-critical’ Introduction to the work, the French sociologist, Professor Christine Messiant provides another reason why this book will make indispensable reading for anyone seeking to understand the situation in the former Portuguese colony of Angola. Her sociological re-reading of some of the material collected by Schubert suggests some ways in which this book may be taken further by anyone willing to ask a different set of questions. For his part, Benedict Schubert meets his objectives by providing the answers he set out to find.

NOTES

[1]. I am wary of the classification in these terms, but equally so of referring to colonial and postcolonial Angola. Between a Soviet-backed MPLA, a pre-1994 South Africa-backed UNITA, and the support of a number of other minor African potentates, Angola has since 1975 wavered between different forms of neocolonialism much more than any genuine attempt to escape the shackles of 500 years of Portuguese colonial exploitation.


[3]. “Luso-tropicalism” describes for the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre the web of elements which determine Portuguese colonialism’s negotiation of its encounter with the Other. It proposed the view that as a “race” of people who had come about through a long, violent but ultimately invigorating process of cultural, political and sexual dealings, the Portuguese fitted in perfectly with the peoples and lands they encountered (The Mansions and the Shanties, Greenwood, 1980). See also Sergio Buarque de Hollanda. Raizes do Brasil (1962; Urs Bitterli, Cultures in Conflict (1989); Marc Ferro, Colonization: A Global History (1997).

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