Vasco Martins’s *Colonialism, Ethnicity and War in Angola* invites us to reflect on an inconvenient subject in Angola: the role of ethnicity in the historical, political, social, and economic processes that created Ovimbundu identity. Beyond colonial history in the Central Plateau, the book analyzes the entanglements between ethnicity and the political party UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola/National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) and between ethnicity and citizenship in the present. The author is explicit throughout the book about the taboos surrounding ethnicity, UNITA, the Ovimbundu, the political instrumentalization of identities, and finally, the marginalization of ethnic groups in Angola.

The book is divided into five chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion). The first chapter, “Christianity, ethnicity, and modernity,” explores how Christian missionaries shaped Angola’s social landscape. It analyzes the introduction to Ovimbundu society of different forms of political and social organization through Christian (Catholic and Protestant) evangelization that became relevant in creating an African elite located on the Central Plateau.

Chapter 2, “Colonialism, Ethnicity, and Modernity,” expands upon the previous chapter by exploring how colonialism, besides the above-mentioned Christian missions, was relevant in creating a modern identity through indirect rule and the exploration of forced labor and migration. In addition, the chapter explores the roots of the creation of the stereotype of the Ovimbundu as a cheap labor force and passive colonial subjects. The third chapter, “Ovimbundu and the Liberation War,” discusses Ovimbundu nationalism and the challenges posed to the colonial state in the initial period of the liberation struggle. It is followed by an in-depth study (chapter 4, “Ovimbundu Political Ethnicity”) on how Ovimbundu nationalism can oscillate between the instrumentalization of ethnicity and culture by modern political structures while still being traditional and performed by the people. The chapter explores how UNITA campaigned to mobilize the population to create a political platform for the people of the “South.” Finally, chapter 5, “Ethnicity and Post-War Citizenship,” discusses how to promote national integration and reconciliation in a postwar country like Angola, considering the political, social, and economic consequences of belonging to a sidelined ethnic group and a region.

The “moral values of Angola’s ill-defined southern ethnic groups” (p. 1) and the search for the moral glue to unite the Ovimbundu are pervasive throughout the book and inform one of the main arguments developed by Vasco Martins: a
binary reading of Angolan liberation and civil war politics led to considering one part of the actors as monolithic and, therefore, ill-represented. At the very least, Martins argues, they are not represented in their full complexity.

The book argues against the notion that links tribalism to different factions of Angolan nationalism that fueled different types of discourses on the liberation war and the various movements/parties that emerged after independence. The author departs from existing historiography and scholarly production on the marginalization of the Ovimbundu in Angola. His main research interest is the creation and performativity of ethnicity as a modern, constructed concept. In this sense, the book invites us to revisit scholarly production on ethnicity, with John Lonsdale one of the essential references in considering the politicization of ethnicity.[1] Lonsdale's work is crucial to the development of the argument on the “mutations to Ovimbundu identity” (p. 74) resulting from negotiations and renegotiations between internal forces and external ones, both colonial and postcolonial. The book also invites us to revisit fundamental works on the history of Angola by authors such as Christine Messiant, Didier Péclard, Justin Pearce, and Maria da Conceição Neto. The author addresses gaps in this literature, namely the vision of homogeneity of UNITA as “an expression of Ovimbundu nationalism” (p. 3) and the overlooking of the ethnic issue relative to the larger puzzle of Angolan nationalism. For example, Vasco Martins builds upon Messiant's work on elite competition by delving into the popular understandings of the political divisions of Angolan nationalism, particularly on the “ethnic configurations manifested at the bottom due to the instrumentalization of ethnicity for political benefit” (p. 83).[2] Consequently, the main actors of the book are not the elites but the people.

The author creates a dialogue with this literature by suggesting that colonialism was vital in creating tribes, showing how European preconceived conceptions about ethnicity and the tribalization of social life in Africa were apprehended and how different paradigms were mobilized to develop identity platforms. In this sense, looking at the colonial construction of the “tribal” idea allows him to explain how UNITA's elites were socialized in Christian missions, how the movement and party explored stereotypes connected to migrant labor in the central highlands, and how this process appealed to an emotional bond connected to stories concerning the exploitation of the Ovimbundu people. The result was that the “moral discourse of the ‘tribe’” (p. 8) was projected onto UNITA by its elites and cadres, many of whom were Ovimbundu themselves. In this design, moral ethnicity is invoked as a form of accountability and defense against the outside world throughout the book. This outer world can be the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola/People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) or an assortment of hegemonic forces blocking people's participation in the public sphere, by underscoring that the Ovimbundu and UNITA remain circumscribed in processes of belittlement and thus never fulfill their public participation. Martins makes his case by resorting to the application of stereotypes, with regional, ethnic and political identities showing a clear hierarchy of power in Angolan society.

The author develops a bottom-up approach to ethnic relations in Angola, making agency a relevant concept in his framework of analysis. Martins mobilizes different sources, combining already published interviews or other documents produced by UNITA's elites (such as Jonas Savimbi or Jaka Jamba) with original interviews collected in Huambo, Bié, Luanda, and Lisbon, mainly with male interlocutors. Despite difficulties encountered during his fieldwork in finding people willing to discuss ethnicization and marginalization, the author's original data allowed for a rich exploration of ethnic and regional stereotypes, mostly dwelling on the construction of the Other and Otherness in relation to the Ovimbundu, and...
how their ethnic and regional identities can be used to compromise social mobility. Chapter 5 is where the author more extensively uses data from the interviews. In the chapter, we get a clear reading of the entanglement between ethnicity and citizenship in postwar Angola and how citizenship in Angola is managed by the MPLA and by what the incumbent party defines as inclusion and belonging.

In the interviews, the author presents a rich set of data on how people felt abandoned by the state, the difficulties of restarting their lives after the war, and how narratives of belonging are politicized by a division between the peoples of UNITA, those who lost the war, and those of the MPLA, the victors. It becomes clear how hard it is to achieve reconciliation in a setting where the vast majority of the population is sidelined. In the book, Martins does not connect this identity construction process to how identities can be shaped by belonging to political parties after the end of civil war. The issue is not developed in detail, leaving room for future studies.

The book debates, especially in chapter 2, the interactions and networks established between different types of actors inside the colonial society and the social system that already existed in the plateau. For example, the author debates the “colonial paradox,” based on Philip Havik’s work, the way colonial powers used Africans, not by creating chiefs but more as a form of co-optation and reshaping systems of rule already in place.[3] The author discusses the impact of this indirect rule on the “ethnic makeup of the Ovimbundu” (p. 55), with new forms of land exploration, forced labor, and the dismantling of moral economies, which had an impact on the ethnic awareness of the population. He also shows how ethnicity and region of origin were politicized during the liberation war, which started in March of 1961, in a clear choice of a different narrative from the one assumed by the hegemonic forces in Angola. The attacks of the UPA (União dos Povos de Angola/Union of Populations of Angola) on plantations in March of 1961 were a turning point in colonial politics and in the politicization of ethnicity in Angola: ethnic distrust became all-pervasive in the country. The UPA was a key actor in building the image of the Ovimbundu workers as being in cahoots with the Portuguese. Ovimbundu elites were aware of the ethnic divisions in the country, and the creation of UNITA responded to the need for a movement that could “mobilise the untapped potential of the peasantry ... in the central highlands of Angola” (p. 102).

By showing how identities were created in Africa during the intense colonial history of the twentieth century, the author provides a rich and comprehensive account of Christian missions in the Plateau. Modernization and Christianity worked hand in hand in the Central Plateau and contributed to forming a new elite, as can be read in detail in chapter 1. The Savimbi family begin gaining recognition and protagonism in this chapter, with the stories of Loth and Sakaita Savimbi, father and grandfather of Jonas. Their status in colonial society is acknowledged, and how they were educated and managed their lives between the traditional and the modern society symbolized by the missions. The reader never loses sight of this family throughout the book.

Jonas Savimbi is presented in detail in his symbolism as an elder, with human and supernatural features crafted in a persona linked to the traditions of his population. He cultivated his virtues and the virtues of the people he stood for. The notion of the group and the collective during the war contributed to the creation of Savimbi not only as a freedom fighter but also as a critical actor in postcolonial Angola, a virtuous image of social and political morality fighting against a predatory state. In this sense, one novelty of the book is the interpretation of ethnicity as a discourse on citizenship and “civic virtue” (p. 122). According to the author, this is linked to the creation of alternative forms of inclusion and the delivery of ser-
services, as was the case with the education system in Jamba, the capital of UNITA. The author discusses Savimbi’s ideas on citizenship, inclusion, and access to services, but especially his African and traditional credentials, and a “morality” of UNITA’s people that was seen as legitimate, even though they were not integrated into the state, nor could they identify with the state power of the MPLA, of Luanda. The different notions of legitimacy of the two movements are explored between 1975 and the first multiparty elections in 1992, and again during the war in 2002. But for this period (covered in chapter 5), the analysis of the political consequences of being Ovimbundu goes beyond UNITA party membership and delves into the narratives and experiences of those who did not fully belong to the Angolan state due to their ethnicity and lack of civil rights. The marginalization of the Ovimbundu, a matter that can be perceived differently, emerges as one of the most significant consequences of the complex reconciliation process. In the book’s last chapter, discourses on marginalization and stereotypes occupy different platforms, from the streets and popular speech to political institutions like the National Assembly. One of the conclusions in the chapter is that ethnic and regional elements can be relevant when accessing jobs or other opportunities, alongside a more traditional rural-urban divide. It is evident how citizenship in Angola is linked to the MPLA’s construction of the nation and how the incumbent party painstakingly designs the postwar political order in Angola.

Vasco Martin’s *Colonialism, Ethnicity and War in Angola* analyzes how UNITA mobilized the Ovimbundu, how it gained support among the population, and how Jonas Savimbi combined the sense of belonging to a group with other rationales of adhesion to the movement. One of the book’s main conclusions is how relevant ethnicity was and is in political mobilization in Angola, a conclusion that is nonetheless reached by considering other variables, such as social inequality and popular memory. Ethnicity and a shared sense of belonging were and still are crucial in mobilization strategies. This is a book that sets a novel agenda for future research, not only on the mobilization and politicization of ethnicity but also on the new history and the new chapters of UNITA’s strategies, elites, and reconfigurations following the election of Adalberto Costa Júnior as president of UNITA in 2019.

Notes


