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Introduction - Religions in Angola: History, Gender and Politics

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Introduction

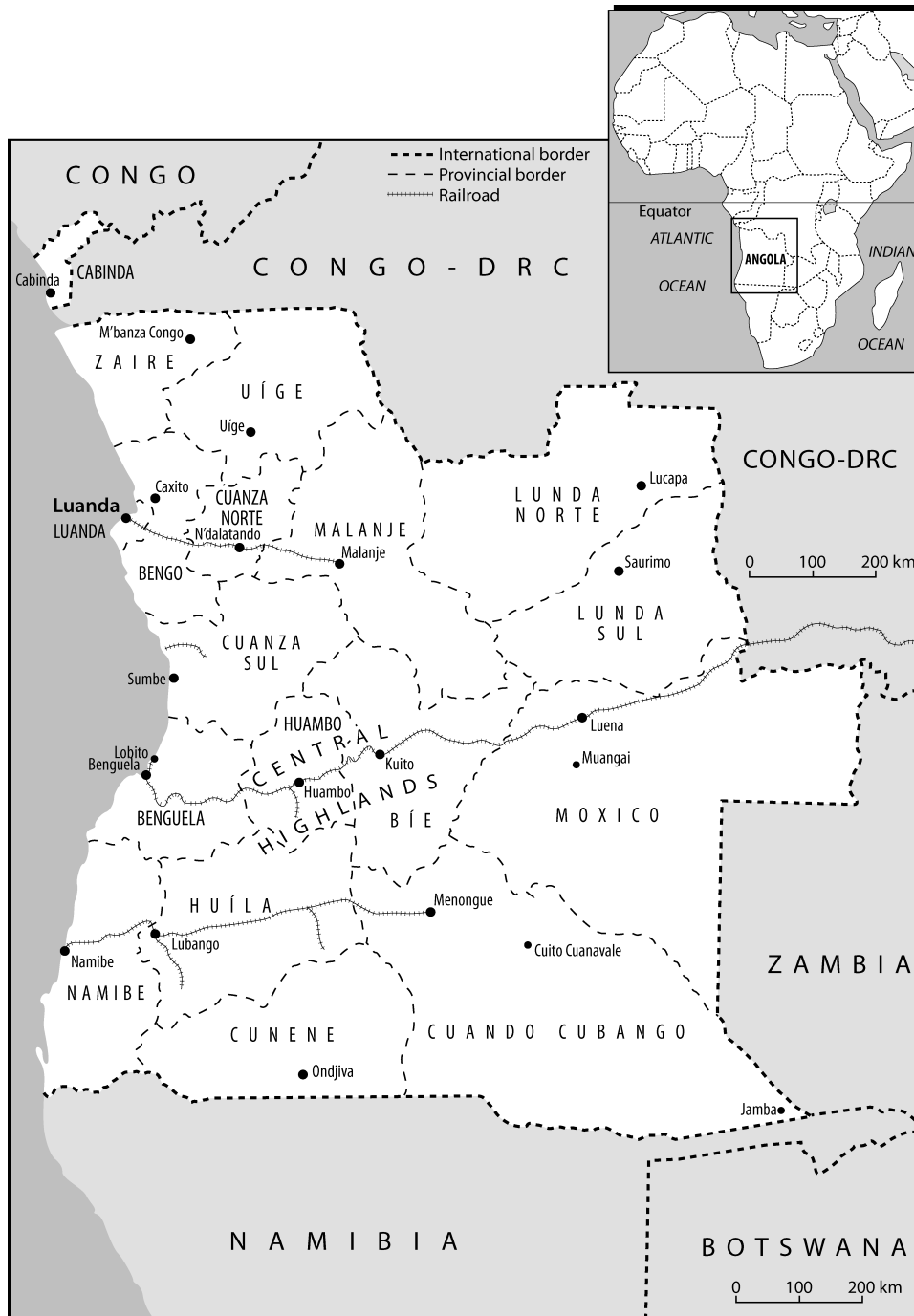
Religions in Angola: History, Gender and Politics

Angola is a land of contrast. A land of many riches and much potential as well as a territory burdened with a heavy past and with many challenges lying ahead.¹ This evaluation is valid for its religious world which is diverse, dynamic and rapidly changing yet traumatised, divided and facing an uncertain future. The historiography of religions in Angola has been very thin until the 1990s and this is why SSM has always wanted to do a special issue on this country. In the last ten years the literature on religion in Angola has grown significantly, even in English, with new research in the history, sociology and anthropology of faiths and faith institutions.² There remains much to be researched however, whether old issues not yet investigated or new questions which have been revealed by recent research. The collection of articles which follows aims at advancing our understanding of religion in Angola – as well as advancing other theoretical or conceptual questions.

This special issue is not as encompassing as we had hoped for originally. We tried to get, and almost succeeded in getting, a text on the new anti-liberal orientations of the Angolan state in relation to religion. We also had a proposal, which did not come through, for a text on Islam, a religion which has all but been banned in Angola since 2013 – the state denies this but the Islamic community says 50 of its 70 mosques have either been closed or

¹ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, *Magnificent and Beggar Land. Angola since the Civil War*, London: Hurst, 2015

² Among others, see Fatima Vieigas, *Angola e as Religiões*, Luanda: n/ed., 1999; Benedict Schubert, *A Guerra e as igrejas: Angola, 1961-1991*, Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2000; Ramon Sarró & al., “La Guerre en temps de Paix. Ethnicité et Angolanité dans l’Église Kimbanguiste de Luanda”, *Politique Africaine*, 110, 2008, pp.84-101; Ruy Llera Blanes, “Double Presence. Proselytism and Belonging in an Angolan Prophetic Church’s Diaspora”, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 4(3), 2011, pp.409-428; Tony Neves, *Angola. Justiça e Paz nas Intervenções da Igreja Católica, 1989-2002*, Alfragide: Texto Editores, 2012; Maria da Conceição Neto, “Igrejas cristãs e nacionalismo angolano: o paradoxo católico”, *Mulemba* (Luanda), 3(6), 2013, pp.185-202 ; Ruy Llera Blanes, *A Prophetic Trajectory. Ideologies of Time and Space in an Angolan Religious Movement*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2014; and Didier Péclard, *Les incertitudes de la nation en Angola. Aux racines sociales de l’Unita*, Paris: Karthala, 2015.



destroyed.³ Not getting these texts was unfortunate, but we cannot be all-encompassing and cover all interesting or under-researched topics and religious groups, especially when we are limited to 200 pages for a double-issue of the journal. The range of religious institutions and themes dealt with in the coming pages is still wide and it is by and large representative of the country's religious diversity and the latter's historical depth.

This special issue opens with a text which analyses the convergences existing in the religious and political imaginaries of Tokoist churchgoers in Angola today, looking in particular at their apocalyptic reading of the present social and political situation. A second article takes us back two centuries earlier to investigate a series of Catholic women's economic activities and analyse how they worked to ensure their inheritance passed on to the women of their choice. The third article is about the Congregationalist church at the start of the 20th century, looking at the transfer of American educational models and its after effects and heritage today. The next text focuses on a single American missionary and, through her writing, on issues of gender for her and some of the Angolan women with whom she worked. The fourth article examines the history of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Angola with special attention to the reasons for their repression. Finally, the last text is a long and engaged review of Didier Péclard's new book on religion, identity and politics in the *Planalto* from 1940 to independence.

These articles are all original and innovative in that they offer a view of religion away from the dichotomous political prism which has predominated the study of Angola for too many years. For one the articles do not focus merely on the colonial period, in particular the period of high colonialism of the *Estado Novo*, when the Catholic church was dominant and Protestants were marginalised. One article studies a much earlier period, another looks at the postcolonial period, and two articles look at churches rarely considered within this Protestant vs. Catholic model – the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Tokoist church. For another the articles in this issue are not about the politics of religion in the narrow sense of whether they were aligned with the colonial state or with the African nationalists – a classic in the discussions in Angola. Rather they look at the politics of gender, the heritage of earlier international missionary relations, and the parallels and transfers between religious and political imaginaries. Such themes are innovative *per se* and particularly innovative in the context of the study of religion in Angola.

Within Southern Africa, Angola belongs to the Lusophone group of countries which was colonised by the Portuguese state and have kept Portuguese as their official language after independence. Angola is Catholic in its majority – the second most Catholic country in Southern Africa after Lesotho – but it also has a strong Protestant presence. African “traditional” religions are supposedly very weak (if this is true) and the country would therefore be more than 90% Christian – see statistics below. During colonialism, Catholicism was favoured and actively supported by the state administration while Protestantism was marginalised if not repressed. The Congregationalist, the Methodist and the Baptist churches managed to have an important social and political role

3 António Cascais, “Encerramento de mesquitas em Angola gera polémica”, *Deutsche Welle*, 28 November 2013, online at <http://www.dw.com/pt/encerramento-de-mesquitas-em-angola-gera-pol%C3%A9mica/a-17259658> (accessed 9 September 2015)

nonetheless, if from the margins.⁴ After independence, the state became very anticlerical due to its ideological commitment to scientific Socialism, and repression ensued, with the Catholic church suffering most because of its past and predominant position.⁵ Between repression and a civil war which began with independence in 1975, religious institutions could do little more than survive and offer basic services to their followers during the 1970s and 1980s.

Table: Size of Religious Group, ca.2010

Religion	Percentage of population
Catholics	55,0%
African Christians	25,0%
Protestants	10,0%
Brazilian evangelicals	5,0%
Muslims	0,5%
Traditional African religions	0,5%

Source: Instituto Nacional dos Assuntos Religiosos (INAR) as cited in *Relatório de Liberdade Religiosa Internacional 2009*, Washington, 26 October 2009 (online at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/132897.pdf> (accessed 9 September 2015))

Since the end of the civil war in 2002, the landscape of religion, and *for* religion, has changed significantly in Angola. For one, charismatic, evangelical and Pentecostal churches have grown fast under the impulse of Brazilian, Nigerian and Congolese missionaries and they have started to remake the religious landscape of the country. This dynamic begun concomitantly with the political liberalisation of the late 1980s, possibly linked to the party in power's own transformation as suggested by Pepetela in his perceptive novel *Generation of Utopia* (1992), but it has accelerated dramatically in the 2000s. For another, the state's mediation of religion has undergone a new transformation. After a short liberal opening in the 1990s, the state has toughened its control of religions and, in recent years, engaged in a fight against “religious proliferation” and non-Christian faiths. The National Institute of Religious Affairs (INAR) registers institutions very selectively (only 83 by 2015) and merely tolerates the institutions not registered or refused registration (1,200 institutions according to INAR).⁶ In early 2015 the state interaction with religious institutions took a turn for the worse when the police repressed violently a millennial sect called *A Luz do Mundo*, (a scission

4 Christine Messiant, “Protestantismes en situation coloniale: quelles marges?”, *Lusotopie: Des protestantismes en 'Lusophonie catholique'*, Paris: Karthala, 1998, pp.245-256

5 Didier Péclard, “The ‘Depoliticizing Machine’. Church and State in Angola since Independence” in P. Manuel, A. Lyon and C. Wilcox (eds.), *Religion and Politics in a Global Society. Comparative Perspectives from the Portuguese-Speaking World*, Lanham (MD): Lexington Press, 2012, pp. 139-160

6 Agência Angola Press, “Identificadas mais de mil igrejas ilegais no país”, online at: http://www.portalangop.co.ao/angola/pt_pt/noticias/sociedade/2015/3/17/Identificadas-mais-mil-igrejas-ilegais-pais,ece9342f-6112-4934-a054-6456d4810f81.html (accessed 15 September 2015)

of the Adventist church) leading to tens of deaths.⁷ While this latter case may prove an exception, it remains clear that the religious landscape of Angola is undergoing significant transformation and that the state intends to keep a firm hand in shaping it.

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editor-in-chief

7 The best report is Rafael Marques de Morais, “Ai, Kalupeteka”, *Maka Angola*, online at: http://makaangola.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11564:ai-kalupeteka&catid=28&Itemid=231&lang=pt