PÉCLARD Didier. — *Les incertitudes de la nation en Angola. Aux racines sociales de l'Unita*

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- 1 The Central Highlands of Angola for many years represented, in the words of the historian René Pélissier ¹, a « blank spot » on the geopolitical map. This was the consequence of a historiography of Angolan nationalism that remained captivated by events in the first months of 1961: a prison break, in Luanda, and revolts on the coffee and cotton plantations of northern Angola, which together marked the first stirrings of violence against the colonial state. As Didier Péclard notes in his study of the formation of social and political consciousness in the Central Highlands in the twentieth century, the events of 1961 had little direct impact on that region. Due to a tendency to equate African nationalism with anticolonial struggle, the standard narrative of Angolan nationalism therefore begins with Luanda and the North. Such an approach dislocates from Angolan history the Central Highlands, a populous region that is home to the country's largest ethnolinguistic group, the Ovimbundu and which, as a centre of agriculture and manufacturing, was of crucial importance to the economy of the colonial state. What is more, as Péclard reminds us, the Central Highlands in the twentieth century became a centre of learning, thanks to Protestant and Catholic missions.
- 2 Only five years after the uprisings of 1961, a nationalist movement—Unita—emerged with a largely Ovimbundu following. Yet, in the first years of its existence, Unita was

prevented by the vigilance of the colonial state from operating in the Central Highlands and gathered its principal support among Ovimbundu migrant workers in the North. Unita's relationship to the formation of a political consciousness in that region is not immediately obvious: such a lack of understanding about Unita's social roots contributed to the flourishing of a view of Unita after 1975 as principally the puppet of South African and American interests. Although Péclard includes among his intentions explaining how "l'Unita, qui ne compte au moment de la signature des Accords d'Alvor que quelques centaines de guérilleros, se transforme rapidement dès l'indépendance en une force militaire et politique capable de tenir tête au MPLA" (p. 25), his approach is not deterministic. In his search for "les racines sociales de l'Unita," at no point does Péclard suggest that a politicised nationalism (Unita) was the inevitable outcome of the processes of identity formation that he traces.

- 3 Instead, his approach is to trace the formation of *Gemeinschaft*, used in Weber's sense, of a subjective feeling of community, grounded in this case in shared values, norms and practices associated with the missions of the Central Highlands. He takes issue with the eminent historian of the Central Highlands, Linda Heywood, in arguing that the Protestant missions and the broader Protestant *Gemeinschaft* were not "construites [...] contre l'état colonial" (p. 239) but rather that the missions, at times, enjoyed a collaborative relationship with some parts of the administration. He differs also from Heywood on the question of whether the formation of political consciousness at the missions can be read as a specifically Ovimbundu response to colonial rule. For Péclard, following the defeat of indigenous states in the Central Highlands in 1902, a common Ovimbundu identity did not precede evangelisation, but was "forgée avant tout au sein des missions protestantes" (p. 240).
- 4 Rather than assuming political consciousness to be a reaction against a monolithic colonialism, Péclard places at the centre of his analysis the social and political changes in the late colonial period including the oscillation between strategies of repression and of co-optation that provided opportunities but also imposed constraints. The ideology of lusotropicalism left its mark in the sense that it replaced "l'altérité ontologique de l'indigène" characteristic of other European colonial ideologies with a tendency to "nier les différences entre 'le Portugais' et 'l'indigène'" (p. 39). Nevertheless, the colonial state offered almost no opportunity for material advancement and lusotropicalism served, above all, to mask the true nature of racial domination in the Portuguese empire. The second chapter is dedicated to demystifying and problematising the relationship between churches and the Portuguese state. If Catholicism is conventionally viewed as a pillar of Portuguese colonial ideology, Péclard provides evidence of a more complex and less consistent relationship, which changed most markedly with the transition from the First Republic to the Estado Novo, but which was also subject to shifting power relationships and political and economic exigencies during the Salazar years. Similarly, official disdain for Protestantism only disguises what Péclard shows to be a pragmatic and varying relationship between the colonial authorities and the European and American Protestant missions in the Central Highlands.
- 5 Building upon this analysis of colonial knowledge production and church-state relations, the central chapters of the book address the question of the formation of subjectivities among the communities associated with the Christian missions of the Highlands. As Péclard makes clear in his introduction, his work is situated within a

body of scholarship that has moved beyond the view of missions as an instrument of colonial domination to recognise the opportunities for advancement that they presented. For the people of the Central Highlands in the mid-twentieth century for whom the promises of advancement through assimilation were made meaningless by a late colonial state oriented to the needs of new white settlement, “[l]es missions [...] représentent pour les indigènes presque la seule voie d’accès [...] à la société coloniale portugaise et le seul itinéraire d’accumulation sociale dans un système fait pour les exclure” (p. 171). Whereas Pélissier privileged the “modernist nationalism” of Luanda over the “ethno-nationalism” of the Central Highlands and of northern Angola, Péclard demonstrates that the nationalism that emerged from around the Central Highlands missions was nothing if not modern. The outstanding contribution of this book is to demonstrate that the “blank space” observed by Pélissier on the Angolan geopolitical map was a reflection not of the absence of nationalism, but of hitherto incomplete cartography. The depth and breadth of the source material cited by Péclard is immediate testimony to the intricacy of the detail that he adds to the map. In so doing, he grants the Central Highlands its rightful place at the centre of Angolan history.

NOTES

1. Voir, entre autres, R. PÉLISSIER, *La colonie du Minotaure. Nationalismes et révoltes en Angola (1926-1961)*, Montamets-Orgeval, éditions Pélissier, 1979.