

Preface

Angola's imperial age spanned five centuries, from 1500 to 2000. In some respects the experience resembled Hispanic colonization in America, with battalions of conquistadores and cohorts of mission friars and pastors bringing European customs and beliefs to Angola's peoples. In other respects, as outlined in the eleven essays presented here, Angola's experience was closer to that of its African neighbors. The Portuguese influence spreading out from the cities of Luanda and Benguela paralleled the Dutch influence in the south, where settlers created urban enclaves that rippled out into the countryside, coopting local herdsmen, craftsmen, and concubines. Two centuries later, Portuguese colonial practice came to resemble the practices of French and Belgian neighbors in the north as financiers were given a free hand in carving out giant land concessions complete with untrammelled rights over the resident populations of potential conscript workers. On the eastern shore of Africa, imperial experiences in Mozambique linked the Portuguese closely to the British as the railway age opened up an era of mine prospecting, which saw ambitious foreigners and teams of migrant navvies flock to Angola.

Among the themes of modern imperial colonization, one of the most influential and lasting was the impact of Christianity on societies that—unlike some of those in northern, western, and eastern Africa—had little or no previous experience of external world religions. In this book, reference will be found not only to the way empire-builders used the Catholicism of the Portuguese

colonizers of Angola and of their Belgian neighbors in Congo, but also to the role of American Methodists, British Brethren, and Swiss Presbyterians in creating empires. Each of these evangelizing traditions inspired and educated some of the African men and women who inherited the colonial territories from the imperial conquerors and carried forward the religious legacy of empire.

A second overarching theme of empire was the introduction of currency transactions, including coins and banknotes, into a broad range of economic activity that had previously been governed by barter exchanges measured in assortments of trade goods. The changes affected not only the old long-distance marketing of salt and iron, but also the new commerce in coffee and sugar, in rubber and ivory, that linked Central Africa to Europe and America and became the economic grounding of empire. The exchange principles affecting commodities were, however, slow to affect the African labor market. In Angola and the neighboring territories, labor recruitment took forms of compulsion, coercion, and conscription that were distressingly similar to the practices utilized by pre-colonial slave traders. Violence as a means of driving men and women to work ceaselessly for foreigners continued to be prevalent throughout most of the colonial period.

Military might was another means by which empires in Africa were created. During the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, columns of white imperial soldiers and black colonial conscripts imposed foreign rule. The legacy of warfare was particularly lasting in the Central African empires, and it was soldiers who captured the nationalist agenda in the 1960s. Thereafter, for a full generation, their officers profited from neocolonial extractive economies. Even where the departing empire builders had created integrated economies, with urban consumers supplied by local industries, the new postimperial rulers tended to revert to the old colonial practice of raw extractive plunder. They concentrated their attention on diamond washing, copper mining, and petroleum drilling.

Empire in Angola and in the neighboring territories was essentially the creation of men—entrepreneurs, engineers, colonels,

and merchants. A few colonial settlers sent home for white brides, and pioneering preachers were often wedded to an ascetic lifestyle. Most other imperial immigrants adopted a predatory masculine attitude to the ill-defended female half of the conquered population. In Angola, white migrants fathered mixed-race children whose ambiguous identities were akin to those of the “coloured” population of South Africa and the “mestizo” population of South America, and Afro-Europeans in the Central African territories experienced the same contradictory mix of racial disadvantages and racial privileges experienced by the Anglo-Indian population of the British Empire in Asia.

The most potent legacy of empire—to use the term in its loosest sense—was the oil revolution of 1973. In Angola, much as in Nigeria and other Atlantic-basin territories, this revolution made the country’s soldier-politicians the dependent clients of the Texan oil giants. The corrupting lure of petroleum made an equitable and democratic future hard to grasp when independence arrived in 1975. Warfare, both civil and intrusive, was the first bitter harvest of the imperial age. In the longer term, however, the new wealth may hold out a promise of hope for Angola’s vibrant people. Ingenuity and energy have enabled some of each rising generation to survive during Angola’s hundred years of foreign plunder and thirty years of civil conflict. With better education, better sanitation, better statesmanship, better friends, Angola’s people have rich potential in an impoverished land.