Title: “The Colossal Lie”: Forced Labor on a Twentieth-Century Angolan Sugar Plantation

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This monograph is the first in-depth study of one of the most written about and controversial subjects during Europe’s colonization of Africa: forced labor in Portuguese-controlled Angola. Portugal’s reliance on coercion contradicted European justifications that colonialism was a civilizing force. For reformers, the solution was not to abolish colonialism, but rather to improve it, starting with the Portuguese colonies. During the first decade of the twentieth century reformers launched an international boycott of cocoa grown by forced labor transported from Angola to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea. In 1924, and again in 1961, the international community investigated and documented forced labor in Angola. A prominent Portuguese civil servant dubbed the labor system in Angola a “colossal lie” because the reality so contradicted the good intentions of the law. This study analyzes the international response to forced labor in Angola, and it is the first of its kind to contextualize the reforms of the late colonial period, 1961-1975. The study focuses on Angola’s largest sugar plantation, the Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel (Cassequel), as a case study. For most of its history, Cassequel’s largest shareholder was Portugal’s Espírito Santo family, owners of the Espírito Santo Bank, and one of Portugal’s wealthiest and most powerful families. Whereas studies of Portuguese colonialism usually end in 1961, the year that the nationalist war for independence began and Portugal instituted reforms in an effort to maintain control, this study follows the history of Cassequel beyond the civil war to its nationalization in 1976 and closure in 1990. Specifically, I explain the political and administrative decisions made at Cassequel after the nationalization of the plantation in 1976. The explanation for the plantation’s deterioration and eventual closure in 1990 offers an analysis of independent Angola’s economic policies and the role of Cuban ‘cooperantes’ [collaborators] towards the creation of independent Angola.

The analysis of how Cassequel’s management made and executed labor policy comes from the company’s own—and hitherto never before accessed—archival record and draws extensively on the memories of former workers (both voluntary and forced) to make conclusions about the labor practices of the company and the colonial Portuguese government. Explanations among former workers, administrators, and local residents reflect diverging memories of Angola’s divisive independence as well as the effects of independent Angola’s economic and political system. The study is also unique because
interviews with former workers provide valuable insights into how the forced labor system operated on the ground, including workers’ various strategies for survival, personal stories of escape, the encoding of hope in song, and how workers remember their servitude. There is no monolithic Angolan memory, though clearly alternative visions are accorded little to no space in official memory. I argue that national memory consists of many, often conflicting, recollections. I argue that the gendered nature of their work regimes determines (and differentiates) the memories of these men and women nearly a half-century later. I include, as well, memories of former voluntary workers and Portuguese Angolans.

This monograph is based on a wide range of archival and oral history research conducted in Angola, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In Angola, the author accessed and catalogued nearly six decades of Cassequel’s letters and annual reports, photographs, and medical records, all of which were un-catalogued in a walk-in safe. There have been few detailed studies of individual companies in colonial Africa. This lacuna is significant because of the vilification of such companies in the run-up to independence, and, in Angola, subsequent nationalizations justified by purportedly exploitative labor policies and collusion with colonialism. This study supplies badly needed details about one such major company and in the process sheds light on the nature of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola.

This study has implications for Angolan historiography because virtually nothing has been written about how Angolans remember forced labor. As members of the last generation of forced laborers die, these memories will be lost. The interviews I conducted in central Angola in February to June 2006 document in detail how the system of forced labor operated in the 1930s-1950s. The interviews also record how forced labor is remembered. The memories of former forced laborers differ significantly from those of voluntary workers and Portuguese Angolans. Taken together these memories reflect divergent realities and understandings of the past.

My monograph would fit well with Ohio University Press’s “Social History of Africa” series in that it provides a case study for a significant gap in Africanist historiography: how expatriate firms operated on the ground in Africa. An assessment of colonial business and labor based on empirical evidence is of particular interest to current debates about the legacy of colonialism. Since my book deals with issues of forced labor and memory it will be well-suited for course adoption in several classes on topics such as colonialism in Africa, the history of the Portuguese Empire, business and labor history, and the Cold War.

The outline of the book is as follows:

Chapter One, “Reports of Forced Labor,” explores several international and national reports and investigations into forced labor in Angola. This chapter presents the exhaustive documentary record of forced labor and analyzes how the Portuguese
responded to the charges in order to demonstrate the lack of serious reform until the outbreak of the nationalist war for independence in 1961.

Chapter Two, “Sugar cane, aguardente and the founding of Cassequel Sugar Plantation, 1899-1914,” examines the founding of Cassequel in 1913 on the margins of the Catumbela River. This short chapter explains why Portuguese capitalists invested in a sugar plantation in Angola and how they went about securing workers to produce sugar.

Chapter Three, “‘We Came as the Children of Ants’: Labor and the Workers of Cassequel,” analyzes the politics and practices of labor procurement. Company and colonial documents demonstrate how a protected market for colonial sugar and access to forced labor made Cassequel profitable.

Chapter Four, “State, Capital, and Labor, 1926-1958,” discusses the economics of colonial sugar and the evolution of labor policy under Portugal’s Estado Novo. By the 1930s the colonial system rested on a finely tuned system for delivering forced labor to individual employers. This chapter focuses on two sets of primary sources: company records (mostly letters and reports to the head office in Lisbon) and memories of former contratados (forced laborers).

Chapter Five, “Cor-de-Rosa: Labor & Reform 1958-1974,” details the shift from forced to voluntary labor in the late 1950s. Workers’ memories of the differences and similarities between trabalho forçado (forced labor) and trabalho voluntário (voluntary labor) inform how workers experienced the shift in labor regime. Correspondence among Cassequel’s administration, the board of directors in Lisbon, and colonial authorities provide insights into how and why policy makers decided to end forced labor.

Chapter Six, “‘At least in those days we had enough to eat’: The End of Colonial Rule and Independence, 1974-90,” argues that the chaotic transfer of power at independence—exacerbated by the Cold War—led to ideological extremism and war. At Cassequel, nationalization led to shortages of skilled employees and the gradual deterioration of machinery. Production declined and workers regularly failed to receive their salaries. In 1990, the government decided to close the failing sugar plantation. This chapter draws extensively from interviews with former employees as well as reports and letters located in the company archives and the Portuguese and American national archives.

The Conclusion explains what happened to the Cassequel/Primeiro de Maio sugar company after its closure in 1990, and considers memory in the postwar period. Who now owns the land? What happened to the thousands of employees and their families? The descendents of former workers often work as laborers for big farmers in a system known as “tchinhango”. The standard payment is one kilogram (two pounds) of fuba (maize meal) per day, which is not enough to feed a family. Poverty and the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few begs the question: did the revolution deliver a better life?