Colonial Labor in Twentieth-Century Angola

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Abstract
For most of the twentieth century, Portuguese colonial rule in Angola relied on forced labor. The state acted as labor recruiter and ensured private enterprise a reliable supply of migrant workers. The line between coerced and voluntary labor was often an ambiguous one, though it is clear that slavery existed as late as the 1910s and that a migrant labor system without any coercion only emerged in the 1960s. Unfortunately, African slaves and forced laborers did not write about their experiences. We are fortunate, however, to have glimpses of how workers experienced labor in the form of several investigative reports. Angola differed from neighboring British and French colonies in central and southern Africa only in the extent to which colonial authorities relied on forced labor.

Introduction
Labor has been central to Angolan history since at least the fifteenth century when Portuguese traders bought the first slaves from the King of Kongo. A century later the Portuguese founded the colony of Angola in order to trade slaves. Slavery remained the most important economic activity until the gradual abolition of the trade and then slavery itself over the course of the nineteenth century. Estimates are that approximately forty percent of all slaves shipped across the Atlantic came from Angolan ports.¹

In the twentieth century, Portugal received widespread condemnation for the continuation of illicit slavery and forced labor in Angola. The condemnation came primarily from European critics who saw in colonialism a means to stamp out slavery and deliver European civilization to Africans. For critics, the rapacity of Portuguese rule in Angola mocked colonialism’s so-called civilizing mission. Portuguese officials responded to the charges with a combination of reform and nationalist outrage. However, it was not until the 1960s – as most Africans won independence – that Portugal got serious about reform and eliminated forced labor. The reforms of the 1960s and 1970s delivered significant improvements to African workers, but they were seen by Angolan nationalists as too little, too late.

If the experiences of the peoples of Portugal’s African colonies (Angola, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Guinea Bissau) differed at all from other colonized peoples in Africa it was more in kind than in substance.
Colonialism is by its nature exploitative; however, substantive differences did exist among colonial systems. Portugal invested relatively little in Angola or Angolans until the twilight of colonialism, and even that was a last ditch effort to maintain control. The Portuguese also made little effort to create viable institutions staffed, much less run, by Angolans. The chaos ushering in Angolan independence resulted to a large extent from this lack of investment and planning.

Mão de obra indígena (native labor)

Once Portugal decided to claim Angola’s interior in the late nineteenth century, colonial policy makers made gaining access to African labor – initially at least more important than gaining control over African land – the number one priority for making Angola profitable. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Portuguese officials in Angola assured a steady supply of workers – euphemistically called “serviços” (sing. “serviçal”) or “servants” – for the cocoa-rich islands of São Tomé and Príncipe in the Gulf of Guinea (henceforth “the islands”) through the old slave-trade channels still funneling people to coastal ports. At ports such as Benguela, government officials supplied a contract for each “serviçal,” stipulating length of service and salary. The catch was that between 1890 and 1908, very few (none were officially recorded until 1908) of the tens of thousands of serviços shipped to the islands on five-year contracts returned home. Critics charged that the contracts were a sham and that a “modern slavery” existed in Angola and the islands. Most leaders of the campaign against “slave cocoa” were British, though there were Portuguese and Angolans who decried the government’s unwillingness to end slavery in the colony. The Luanda-based newspaper, A Voz de Angola (The Voice of Angola), which included on its editorial board Angolan assimilados (Angolans of African descent who by virtue of speaking fluent Portuguese and appearing “civilized” received honorary citizenship) criticized the exportation of serviços. The paper’s editorialists described the serviços as veritable slaves who never returned to the mainland. A Voz de Angola also railed against the continued existence of slavery in Angola:

The current language among Europeans who have serviços in Angola is this: “I bought so many blacks. F sold me so many serviços. X has so many blacks to sell . . .” Just as among serviços . . . the current language is the following: “My boss bought me. My boss sold me. My boss wants to sell me.” Who ever contests this really was never in Angola.

A few courageous Portuguese officials also spoke out against slavery, however, it was not until the overthrow of the Portuguese Monarchy in 1910 that decisive measures were taken to fulfill Portugal’s treaty obligations to end slavery.

Two key factors behind Portugal’s change in policy after the 1910 Revolution included: the economic and political pressure exerted by the
“slave cocoa” boycott, and ideas current in the early twentieth century about “good” colonialism. The boycott began after William Cadbury, the owner of Cadbury Chocolate, concluded in 1909 that the cocoa plantation owners of the islands and the Government of Portugal had not undertaken sufficient reforms to eradicate slavery in the islands. The boycott remained in effect until 1916 when the British consul in Luanda described the reforms undertaken since 1908 of being “of such a magnitude that it is not an exaggeration to say that they constitute a revolution.”

The Republican Government feared that if Portugal did not institute “good government” in its African colonies, it might lose those colonies to more progressive, and more powerful, colonies such as Britain or Germany. The much talked about concept current among colonizing powers was the idea that colonialism ought to instill “civilization,” meaning of course western European ideas of civilization. The idea that slavery and colonialism were analogous would have made little sense among European supporters of colonialism. It was this pressure to clean up its act, to end the slave trade and slavery, and to implement its “civilizing” mission that the Government of Portugal instituted a series of labor reforms.

The man sent to Angola in 1913 to lead this effort was José Mendes Ribeiro Norton de Matos. Norton de Matos expanded government control in the central highlands – Angola’s most populous region – and in 1914 implemented an overhaul of labor law, including the creation of a Department of Native Affairs to inspect labor conditions, compile statistics, and study native cultures. On the ground, the 1914 labor legislation made colonial administrators responsible for labor recruitment. The reforms, in addition to creating a more substantial government presence, succeeded in ending the slave trade and slavery. However, colonial administrators then became labor recruiters for state projects and private employers. The legal obligation to work remained and policy makers and officials agreed that putting Africans to work – for colonial enterprises or the state – was the best way to facilitate Africans’ social evolution towards “civilization.” After the reforming Norton de Matos left Angola in 1916, officials dropped checks on settler and state control, and a system of state-sanctioned forced labor replaced slavery.

Large numbers of people resisted going to work for colonial employers, either through evasion or flight. Settler newspapers opined regularly throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century about the “native problem”; in other words, Africans’ resistance to working for settler or state interests. In 1920, colonial officials imposed an individual imposta indígena (native tax) on every adult African male, and began issuing cadernetas de trabalho (passbooks). In the words of one colonial administrator: “the principal objective is the control of how the native fulfils his work obligation.” Administrators, who were poorly paid, earned additional money from supplying workers to private employers. The system functioned like this: an employer contacted a government official, usually the chefe de posto (district chief).
officer) and specified how many workers were needed. The *chefé de posto* then required *sobas* (chiefs) and *seculos* (village headmen) under his jurisdiction to supply X number of workers. *Sobas* and *seculos* who did not comply faced a visit from *cipães* (African policemen under the employ of the *chefé de posto*), who would take workers by force. Non-compliance could also result in arrest. The intermediary position took a heavy toll on African authorities. For example, in 1920 *Soba* Mabongo of Huambo committed suicide because he was unable to supply the number of workers ordered by the *chefé de posto*. African authorities also faced popular scorn from the people under their jurisdiction for collaborating with the Portuguese.¹¹

Coerced labor was not unique to Angola; however, South Africa and neighboring British colonies such as Northern Rhodesia, offered higher wages and more attractive consumer goods at lower prices, which offered more incentive to African workers.¹² For these reasons, tens of thousands of Africans left Angola annually in the first half of the twentieth century to work in neighboring colonies. The migration out of Angola only abated in the 1950s and 1960s as forced labor ended, Angolan wages improved, and more plentiful and cheaper consumer goods became available.¹³

**African voices**

Historians of colonial Angola – like historians of most parts of Africa – face a paucity of sources reflecting Africans’ experiences and views. Historians must look for African voices in colonial archives, missionary reports, letters, newspapers, and photographs. For example, workers’ perspectives can be hypothesized from government statistics for the number of *fugido* (runaway) forced laborers in a given calendar year. *Fugido* statistics suggest dissatisfaction with the work, or resistance to forced labor, or the proximity of a worker’s home area, or a combination of all three. The draw back, of course, is that “reading between the lines” does not provide a history from the perspective of the subaltern.¹⁴ As Gyan Prakash points out for writing the history of Indian peasants, it is difficult to provide the perspectives of workers when they left no documents from which their voices could be heard.¹⁵

**Labor reports**

In twentieth-century Angolan history, one type of source that sheds light on how African workers and families experienced colonial labor is the investigative report. As a result of Portugal’s reputation as a particularly exploitative colonial power, the international community instigated a series of investigations beginning with the “slave cocoa” reports in the 1900s and followed up by investigations in 1925 and 1961. At the heart of the charges against Portugal was the distinction between what critics described as “good colonialism” and “bad colonialism.” The “good” kind delivered development: schools, churches, hospitals, roads, and “civilization.” The
“bad” kind exploited people for profit and failed to deliver any of the benefits of development. Portugal was routinely cited as an extreme case of “bad” colonialism.

In 1925, an American sociology professor named Edward Ross investigated labor conditions in Angola and Mozambique on behalf of the Temporary Slavery Commission of the League of Nations. Ross interviewed scores of Africans, most through the auspices of Protestant missionaries, and provides a window into how at least some Africans experienced colonial labor. For example, Ross cites the testimony of a worker in Bailundo, in the center of Angola, who explained that:

Government recruited him in 1920 and “sold” him to the petroleum company. He worked for it seven months, at the end of each three months he got a pano [cloth] worth three escudos. At the end of the seven months he was told that he had seventy escudos due him, which would be paid him at the station where he had been recruited. However, he got nothing there but the receipt for his head tax. He asked about his wages but was told there was nothing for him.

Stories such as these, documenting the non-payment of promised wages, were common in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. In his conclusion, Ross argues that Portugal has met none of the stated aims of its civilizing mission. Medical care for Africans was practically nonexistent. He describes the labor system as “virtually state serfdom” that does not even allow Africans adequate time to produce their food. Workers rarely received the bulk of their pay, and as indígenas (natives) they had no recourse to colonial law for protection.

The next major report documenting the labor system came from a high-level official in the Portuguese Government. Though the official, Henrique Galvão, did not cite the testimony of individuals, he did have a long experience in Angola, where he served, among other positions, as chief inspector between 1936 and 1946, and from 1946 as one of three delegates chosen by Portuguese Prime Minister Salazar to represent Angola in the National Assembly. Galvão’s report, delivered to an in-camera session of the Committee on the Colonies of the National Assembly, in 1947, was immediately confiscated by Salazar to suppress any information deemed embarrassing to the government. The report would not be published until 1961, when Galvão fled Portugal as a political refugee because of his opposition to Salazar.

Galvão calls his government to task in the report, arguing that the discrepancy between law and practice made the colonial administration a “colossal lie.” In particular, Galvão warned of a severe demographic loss as African workers – men and women – opted to migrate to neighboring colonies rather than work under oppressive conditions in Angola. Galvão argued that forced labor caused the massive exodus: “Only the dead are truly exempted from the compulsion to work . . . work conditions aggravate the problem, and lead to a reduction in numbers and quality of workers.” Galvão argues further that the practice of colonial officials forcibly recruiting workers for particular employers and receiving payments from employers
and a cut of worker salaries was “required in confidential circulars and official orders.” Galvão concluded that the system was crueler than pure slavery, an opinion also expressed by Africans interviewed by Ross twenty years earlier.

In the 1950s, as African nationalism increasingly challenged colonialism, the Government of Portugal refused to negotiate independence for its African colonies. In November 1959, Portugal ratified the 1930 Abolition of Forced Labour Convention as part of a diplomatic offensive to check the increasing sentiment in support of African independence. A few months after the Convention took effect Ghana filed a complaint against Portugal for alleged violations of the Forced Labour Convention. As part of its investigation of the complaint, the International Labour Organization (ILO) sent a three-member mission of inquiry to Angola for a week to interview workers and colonial administrators, in order to determine whether Portugal had met its obligations under the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention.

The year of the ILO’s visit to Angola was momentous. On February 4, 1961 about 200 people, many of whom were aligned with the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), attacked Luanda’s São Paulo prison with the objective of freeing political prisoners. The ILO commission arrived in December that year. The late 1950s and early 1960s also saw a concerted effort by the Portuguese Government to reform colonial labor. The ILO recognized the reforms being undertaken by the government, including a new labor law outlawing forced labor (adopted in 1962). However, the ILO found that Africans in Angola exercised little control over the terms of their existence and had been oppressed to such an extent that their lives were “a series of conditioned reflexes which are less than human.” The Commission concluded further that because of the part played in recruitment by colonial officials and chiefs, the employment of recruited labor in the African colonies had “been alleged to constitute, and has in the view of the Commission in certain cases constituted, forced labor.”

Cognizant of the growing international and domestic opposition to its presence, Portugal pushed ahead with reforms. In April 1962, the Government passed a comprehensive labor reform, the Código do Trabalho Rural (Rural Labor Code) for the subjects of the African colonies and East Timor. The law abolished indígena status and made all people in the colonies Portuguese citizens for the first time. The law itself demonstrates the extent to which Africans were second-class citizens prior to 1962:

the present law corresponds to an evolution characterized by the following: any distinction between ethnic or cultural groups is ended . . . no form of compelled work is legal; no penal sanctions for not completing the terms of the labor contract are allowed; there does not exist any paternalistic tutelage of workers; no recruitment of workers by the authorities is permitted; there is not any involvement in the formation of work contracts by the authorities; different treatment for men and women is not allowed . . . It is hoped that guaranteeing
the freedom of work and its just remuneration will ensure better work conditions and social security, labor will go [to the market] spontaneously, the economy will prosper, national production increase, and there will be confidence and harmony between bosses and workers.\textsuperscript{21}

In October 1970, the ILO sent a follow up team to Angola to investigate whether the government had enacted any of the reforms recommended after its 1961 visit. The ILO found that contract laborers interviewed faced no compulsion. Thus, by the 1970s, labor in Angola was relatively free from coercion.\textsuperscript{22}

Conclusion

For most of the twentieth century, Portugal’s political and economic elite used Angola and Angolans to aggrandize and enrich Portugal. Portugal cloaked its conquest in the rhetoric of the “civilizing” mission, but perhaps even more than other colonial powers in Africa, the reality rarely matched the rhetoric. A key component of the profitability of colonial business enterprises was the government-run system of forced labor. The system ensured that employers could rely on access to cheap labor. Investigative reports and international pressure helped to reform the most egregious abuses, such as the slave trade in the early 1910s, but it was really not until the nationalist war for independence began in 1961 that Portuguese officials took decisive steps to end forced labor and implement qualitative reforms on the ground.

Notes


\textsuperscript{3} Over 95 percent of Angolans received the classification “\textit{indígena},” equivalent to the legal designation “native” in British colonies. According to a 1913 report: “\textit{Indígena} is the individual of color (black or mulatto) that satisfies all of the following criteria: a) was born in the province; b) does not speak correct Portuguese; c) has the habits and customs of a native.” Legally \textit{indígenas} had none of the legal rights of a citizen. For a terrific study of legal classifications in Portuguese colonialism, see: M. Moutinho, \textit{O Indígena no Pensamento Colonial Português} (Lisboa, Edições Universitárias Lusófonas, 2000).

\textsuperscript{4} See, for example: “\textit{A drenagem do elemento indígena},” \textit{A Voz d’Angola}, May 23, 1910, no. 21, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{5} “\textit{A Questão dos serviços},” \textit{A Voz de Angola}, October 4, 1908, no. 42, p. 1.


9 See, for example: Dr. F. Diniz, “Protecção e assistência às populações indígenas da província de Angola,” Boletim da Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa, 33 (1), 1915, p. 295.


12 Since the mid–1970s there have been several studies of plantation and migrant labor in Southern Africa. See, for example: C. van Onselen, Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900 –1933 (Johannesburg, Raven Press, 1976); W. Worger, South Africa’s City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867–1895 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987); Vail and White, Capitalism and Colonialism in Mozambique.


15 Ibid., p. 1480.


20 Ibid.


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