

# Assessing State and Religious Institutions: A Comment from the Case of Angola

Written by Ruy Llera Blanes

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RUY LLERA BLANES, NOV 2 2015

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In a continent that has been recently described as the new demographic centre of Christianity and a stronghold of politically active Islamic movements,[1] Angola has become in recent years an interesting case study through which one might consider the complexities of the geopolitics of faith in the twenty-first century. As I will argue throughout this text, in Angola we observe two seemingly contradictory but nevertheless correlated phenomena in what concerns religious practice: the opening up of the local landscape for transnational religious circulation, for the most part occurring in its capital, Luanda; and the process of 'nationalisation' or 'Angolanisation' of religious activity.[2] The intersection of both dynamics has highlighted the role of the state—materialising, in the Angolan case, as the MPLA party[3] as main actor in the definition of religious activity.

### Historical Dynamics

From a historical point of view, Angola has been in many ways a classic example of religious transnationalism, long before the concept became part of the academic jargon. In a sense it is a reminder of the century-old presence of Christianity in the continent, following the arrival, in the fifteenth century (1482), of the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão in the Congo River basin, escorted by Italian missionaries. As historians such as John Thornton, Adrian Hastings, Richard Gray, Carlos Almeida and others have described,[4] the first contact was indeed one of mission and conversion, with the surprisingly successful adoption of Christian faith on behalf of the rulers and elite of the then kingdom of Kongo, which occupied a significant part of northern Angola. However, the region very soon became a stronghold of African Christianity, long before that was even a concept in the study of religions. Autochthonous expressions such as Kimpa Vita and the Antonian movement exemplified the intersection of Christian expansion from the Vatican and the theological autonomy of local expressions.[5] In the late colonial period (from, roughly, the 1885 Berlin Conference to Angolan independence in 1975) we observe two different movements developing: the increasing presence of Catholic endeavours in the Portuguese colony; and the emergence of Protestant missions of north European or North American origin—mainly Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Philafrican and evangelical—in the hinterland, engaging in proselytist and educational projects.[6] Despite differences in the state-institution relationship, both Catholic and Protestant enterprises can be seen as part of the 'civilizing mission' upon which the Portuguese empire embarked, which was mostly an outcome of an economic project of exploitation.[7]

This model of the relationship between church and state would set the template for what occurred after independence in 1975. As in other newly independent African countries, Angola experienced, by the hand of the ruling party MPLA, a process of 'sovietisation of the social',[8] by which religious activity was removed from the public space and, in some specific cases, actively persecuted. This policy, sponsored mostly by the cabinet of the first Angolan president, Agostinho Neto (1975–1979), eventually subsided into a more pragmatic policy, in which the mainstream religious movements progressively re-emerged as public partners of the state, playing an important role in sectors of social welfare and education.[9] In particular, after the 1992 elections, when significant changes were

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made to the country's political, juridical and financial systems (i.e. the introduction of a multipartisan system and a number of economic reforms), and despite the continuation of the civil war that continued to destroy Angola, the door opened for the arrival of a number of foreign churches, some of which were iconic representatives of contemporary 'southern' religious transnational geopolitics, such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God[10] and the Igreja Maná. These churches soon made a significant impact in the local urban scenery, especially through the construction of cathedrals and an active role in the public sphere.[11] Today, the urban landscape of Luanda appears pervasively punctuated by landmarks of religious architecture, as well as with recurring public displays (demonstrations, concerts, services, etc.) on behalf of these churches, which compete in the public space with other local Christian movements such as the Tokoist church. In such cases, one often observes multiple engagement with government-sponsored activities, such as aiding electoral registration campaigns and promoting health awareness or public safety policies.

From this particular perspective, the emergence and implantation of Brazilian-originated churches can be understood within wider socio-economic movements that have made Angola and Brazil strong partners in the Southern Atlantic area while retaining a strong tie to the idea of Lusophony. Within this framework it has been mostly churches with an evangelical-pentecostal background that have been able to successfully establish themselves in the local sphere, as an outcome of wider movements of expansion of such branches of Christianity throughout the world[12]. However, other movements of transnational religious flux can also be detected; for instance, the increasing presence of churches of Bakongo ethnicity originating in the DRC, not only in the continuum that connects Luanda and its northern border[13] but also extending southwards. These churches tend to be characterised by their informality and lack of public visibility, working mainly in the capital's *musseques* (slums). They remain transnational in their scope, and in most cases escape the second process I wish to highlight here: state control of religious activity.

## Nationalising Religion

Apart from the overarching narrative of transnational religious circulation described above, one can also observe in Angola what could be called a process of 'nationalisation' of religion, a state-promoted strategy of not allowing religious creeds to claim any kind of economic or political allegiance to territories outside of Angola. This policy, as we can already pick up from the above description, has become increasingly present since Angolan independence in 1975. The country's constitution defines the state as being laic and recognising religious freedom 'as long as [the churches] do not undermine the Constitution and public order, and conform to the law'.[14] However, although it is not specifically stated in the Law of Religious Freedom, religious institutions in Angola are inserted within the specific post-reform and post-war political and economic environment of Angola, where the MPLA government defines, supervises and centralises all sectors of business and enterprise but where capitalist models also are encouraged in what has been described as 'business Angola-style'.[15]

One particularly relevant case in point is that of the Muslim community in Angola, which has been object of intense debate in both national and international media. The Comunidade Islâmica de Angola (CISA) has existed in the country for several years[16] and has unsuccessfully tried to have its juridical status recognised by the government. Despite recurring complaints on behalf of local leaders in the media, the government has rarely, if ever, made a public statement on the issue. It was recently forced to deny its prohibition after several media reports denouncing the forceful closure of mosques[17]. However, in my conversations with people close to government or involved in religious affairs in Angola, this comment recurs: considering the Muslim allegiance to Mecca and the transnational networks and circulations with which it is composed, the government will not (or 'should not', depending on the interlocutor) recognise Islam in Angola because it would challenge the country's 'Christian identity'. This statement, although historically speaking seemingly contradictory, characterises the current sentiment in present-day Angola, where, as previously mentioned, the key word is 'partnership'. In any case, the media interventions of local Muslim leaders always point towards a narrative of integration and legitimisation, which in turn is not recognised by the government.

Considering the portrait above, it appears that Christianity enjoys a situation of supremacy in Angola. And indeed, it is demographically hegemonic and intrinsically connected to the country's colonial and postcolonial history. However, a closer look will reveal complexities that distinguish between certain Christian institutions and insert other, non-

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religious elements into the equation beyond the nationalist imagination, i.e. economic and political/ethnic factors.

## Pluralism and Competition

This last point becomes evident when we look at the evangelical and Pentecostal field in Luanda, where we can distinguish four major groups in terms of geographical origin: 1) historical evangelical movements, the outcome of nineteenth and twentieth-century missionary projects originating in Europe and North America; 2) transnational, southern Atlantic churches, mostly of Brazilian origin and frequently close to a Neo-Pentecostal model; 3) Bakongo-based 'Holy Spirit' churches, frequently originating from the Democratic Republic of Congo and loosely associated with the blending of evangelical and 'traditional' elements;[18] and finally 4) locally initiated churches, sponsored by Angolan leaders who may or may not have belonged to other, originally foreign churches.[19]

The result of such a diverse scenario is the competition of multiple, diverse perceptions concerning evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. For instance, in my interactions with religious folk in Angola, I noticed that there is a perception of foreignness regarding Brazilian churches that combines a certain suspicion with the acknowledgement of their entrepreneurial capacities—an idea that is undoubtedly associated with ongoing south-south economic connections between Angola and Brazil, involving business interactions (in the resources and construction sectors) as well as cultural and media exchange (music, soap operas, etc.). This combination may also be a by-product of the strategic silence that these churches promote in terms of public commentary on internal political affairs, making them either 'good partners' or 'accomplices' of the state (depending on the political positioning of each interlocutor).

This view contrasts with the more ambiguous (and in any case negative) image of Bakongo churches, which are frequently accused in the local media of illicit behaviour—from witchcraft to adultery, smuggling and exploitation, etc. This, in turn, is associated with the complicated position of Bakongo ethnicity in Angolan culture, often framed as 'foreign' to Angolan interests [20]. Such an environment may explain why many such churches remain, voluntarily or involuntarily, within the informal sector and in neighbourhoods with a predominantly Bakongo ethnicity (Cazenga, Palanca, etc.). In such neighbourhoods it is a hard task to keep up with the continuous emergence of movements and institutions that emerge around prophetic and charismatic figures, some of them French-speaking—such as the famous Combat Spirituel church, led by a Congolese couple and well known for its deliverance sessions that take place in the Cazenga neighbourhood. On the other hand, many local evangelical churches—such as the Assembleia de Deus Pentecostal do Makulusso—have initiated their own processes of transnationalisation, working through the Angolan diaspora outside Angolan territory, with representations in other corners of the Lusophone Atlantic, for example Brazil and Portugal. They represent part of what we have called elsewhere 'prophetic diasporas'. [21]

Such a plurality becomes even more complicated when we attempt to make sense of the denominational histories of these churches. As noted by Angolan researchers [22], there is a history of dissidence, proliferation and innovation within most major churches that challenges the classical distinctions between religious institutions and makes any map of their journey into a labyrinth. From this perspective, the delimitations that identify evangelical and Pentecostal churches from other Christian movements are in most cases difficult to perceive, rendering them virtually useless in many cases. The result of this is a complex mosaic of churches that respond diversely to the process of 'nationalisation' mentioned above.

Churches equipped with significant economic and infrastructural resources are able to establish fruitful partnerships with the government and collaborate with its agenda of nationalisation while establishing themselves as part of the local scenery; smaller churches seek public legitimation through a process of applying for official recognition. Other movements prefer to remain on the margins of the system, developing their own informal transnational networks.

## Notes

[1] See Philip Jenkins, 'The Next Christianity', *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2002); Yushau Sodiq, 'Islam in Africa', *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell).

[2] See Ruy Llera Blanes, *A Prophetic Trajectory* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2014). This text recaps and

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expands ideas developed in a recent chapter called 'Politics of Sovereignty: Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity and Politics in Angola', published in Simon Coleman & Rosalind Hackett (eds), *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

[3] The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) was one of the movements that staged the liberation wars against the Portuguese colonial authorities (1961-1975) and is today the political party that has ruled Angola since its independency in 1975.

[4] John Thornton, 'The Development of an African Catholic Church in the Kingdom of Kongo', *Journal of African History* 25:2 (1984), 147-167; 'African Religions and Christianity in the Atlantic World', *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Richard Gray, 'A Kongo Princess, The Kongo, Ambassadors and the Papacy', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29:2 (1999), 140-154. Carlos Almeida, 'Entre gente "aspra e dura" - advertências de um missionário no Congo e Angola (1713-1723)', *Revista Lusófona Ciência das Religiões* 13-14 (2008), 463-483.

[5] John Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[6] Didier Péclard 1995, 'Ethos Missionaire et Esprit du Capitalisme. La Mission Philafricaine en Angola 1897-1907', *Le Fait Missionaire* (Cahier 1) (1995), 1-97; 'Religion and Politics in Angola: The Church, the Colonial State and the Emergence of Angolan Nationalism, 1940-1961', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28:2 (May 1998), 160-186. Christine Messiant, 'Protestantismes en Situation Coloniale: Quelles Marges?' *Lusotopie* (1998), 245-256. Benedict Schubert, *A Guerra e as Igrejas. Angola 1961-1991* (Basel: P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2000). Iracema Dullely, 'Notes on a Disputed Process of Signification. The Practice of Communication in Spiritain Missions in the Central Highlands of Angola', *Vibrant* 5:2 (2008), 75-99.

[7] David Birmingham, *Empire in Africa: Angola and its Neighbors* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2006).

[8] Ruy Blanes and Abel Paxe, 'Atheist Political Cultures in Independent Angola', *Social Analysis* 59:2 (2015), 62-80.

[9] I am referring to churches such as the Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, the Angolan Baptist Church (IEBA) and, more recently, the Tokoist Church (see Blanes 2014). In some cases, such as in the IEBA, they appeared at this stage as 'national versions' of former missionary institutions.

[10] See e.g. Paul Freston, Paul, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); 'The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God: a Brazilian Church finds Success in Southern Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 35:1 (2005), 33-65.

[11] See e.g. Clara Mafra, Claudia Swatowski and Camila Sampaio, 'O Projeto Pastoral de Edir Macedo. Uma Igreja Benevolente para Indivíduos Ambiciosos?', *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 27(2012), 81-96.

[12] Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 2nd Edition). Coleman & Hackett, *The Anthropology of Global Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism*.

[13] Luena Pereira, 'Os Bakongo de Angola: Religião, Política e Parentesco num Bairro de Luanda', PhD diss., University of São Paulo (2004).

[14] Instituto Nacional para os Assuntos Religiosos, *As Religiões em Angola. A Realidade do Período Pós-Independência (1975-2010)*, (Luanda: INAR, 2010). My translation.

[15] Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, 'Business Success, Angola-Style: postcolonial politics and the rise and rise of

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Sonangol', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45: 4 (2007), 595-619. One exception, for historical reasons, is obviously the Catholic Church. Although it may appear somewhat subsumed in this text, the Catholic Church is a central player in Angolan post-independence history. See e.g., Tony Neves, *Angola: Justiça e Paz nas Intervenções da Igreja Católica* (Lisbon: Texto, 2012).

[16] As a federation, the CISA exists formally since 2007, as a merger between several previous smaller, unrecognized associations. But there are records of Muslim presence in the territory since colonial times.

[17] See e.g., Aristides Cabeche and David Smith, 'Angola accused of "banning" Islam as mosques closed', *The Guardian*, November 28, 2013. Accessed November 30, 2013.

[18] These are usually referred to as *Mpeve ya Nlongo* (Holy Spirit) churches, an umbrella term that covers several different religious expressions that combine Christian beliefs with local healing practices. But there are also more 'mainstream' Pentecostal churches of Congolese origin in Angola. Perhaps the most visible and established one in Angola is the Igreja do Bom Deus (Church of the Good God), founded by pastor Simão Lutumba in Angola in 1981.

[19] Within the proliferated scenario of Angolan Christianity, obviously this systematization does not encompass the totality of the evangelical and Pentecostal universe. For instance, the Assemblies of God are known to have been present in the territory for several decades. Furthermore, during my research in the past years I recorded the presence of Portuguese evangelical missions in the territory, mostly structured around NGO-type work such as the construction of schools, health posts, etc., in rural areas.

[20] See e.g. Jean Michel Mabeko-Tali, 'La Chasse aux Zairois à Luanda' *Politique Africaine* 57 (1995), 71-84; Luena Pereira, 'Os Bakongo de Angola'.

[21] Ramon Sarró and Ruy Blanes, 'Prophetic Diasporas. Moving Religion Across the Lusophone Atlantic', *African Diaspora* 2:1 (2009), 52-72.

[22] Fátima Viegas, *Angola e as Religiões* (Luanda: Edição de Autor, 1999); *Panorama das Religiões em Angola. Dados Estatísticos 2007* (Luanda: Instituto Nacional para os Assuntos Religiosos, 2007).

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## About the author:

**Ruy Blanes** a Spanish anthropologist, who is currently working at the University of Bergen, Norway as a postdoctoral researcher. He is also Associated Researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, Portugal, where he received his PhD (2007). His current research site is Angola, where he investigates religion, mobility (diasporas, transnationalism, the Atlantic), politics (leadership, charisma, repression, resistance), temporalities (historicity, memory, heritage, expectations), knowledge and gender. He is currently Project Leader of the Collaborative Research Project Currents of Faith, Places of History: Diasporas, Connections, Moral Circumscriptions and World-making in the Atlantic Space, funded by the HERA consortium. He is Co-editor of the journal *Advances in Research: Religion and Society* and Associate Editor of the journal *HAU—Journal of Ethnographic Theory*.