

THE PORTUGUESE IN ANGOLA: COLONIAL THEORY AND THE POLICY OF ASSIMILATION

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Abstract

The issue of how Europe underdeveloped Africa is one that has received the attention of scholars. Portugal colonized Angola during the balkanization of Africa, and it was unable to develop Angola for some reasons. Her policy of assimilation include little or no impact since only about one percent of the local population were assimilated. This paper examined the Portuguese colonial theory and Policy of Assimilation and advanced reasons why they failed.

Introduction

Portugal's colonial empire, with a combined area of 2,657,947 square kilometres, or an area two-thirds the size of Europe, was the third largest after the British and French colonial empires. The total population was about 13,500,000, nearly 700,000 of which were Europeans. Portugal herself had an area of 91,000 square kilometres and a population of 8,600,000 in 1971. Its two big territories in Africa straddled the continent's southern stem and covered an area as large as western Europe.

The largest of these colonies (or overseas provinces as the Portuguese called them) was Angola which, with the enclave of Cabinda, is larger than Italy, France, and the United Germany put together. But with an area of 1,246,700sq.km (or 481,351sq. miles) and a population estimated to be 6.761.0 in 1976, it has a population density of about fifteen per sq. km. Angola is fourteen times larger than Portugal in area, sprawls below the Congo River along 1,760km of the western Atlantic shore.

The population before independence consisted largely of black Africans. The approximately 200.0 to 500,000 (estimates vary) whites were mostly Portuguese and were strongly concentrated in Luanda, and other urban areas. They also occupied the better agricultural lands. (Best & de Blij, 1977:325). But there was a large colony of German settlers - majority with a solid Nazi background - and Italians as well (Humbaraci & Muchnik, 1974:78). All the Africans speak closely related languages and in general are animists, only a minority having been converted to Christianity . Among the indigenes one finds the Bakongo in the north and the Ovambo in the south. The *mestizos* (half- castes) who were entitled to Portuguese nationality, were considered to be Catholics and were said to number around 25,000 (Humbaraci & Muchnik, 1974:78).

The capital of Angola, Luanda, with an estimated population in 1970 of 480,000. was founded in 1576 as a slave port and garrison by Paulo Dias de Novais. There were plans to shift the capital to Nova Lisboa in the interior before the collapse of the Caetano regime. The two other large towns are Huambo and Lobito. The urban population represents fifteen percent of the total population of the country. More than ninety percent of the European settlers lived in towns.

In two ways Angola is specially favoured by nature. Its coast has three excellent natural harbours. Luanda, Lobito, and Mocamedes, which can hardly be rivalled eslewhere on the west coast of Africa. Its rivers, especially the Cuanza and the Cunene, are well, suited to becoming sources of electrical energy for future industrial development, and as a means of supplying irrigation which could entirely change the state of the country (Times, 1954).

After the Berlin Conference in 1884 on the colonization of Africa, the Portuguese, who hitherto had been content to organize their relations with the indigenes on a basis of live and let live, were compelled to adopt new and more stringent methods. Moreover, the beginnings of development were taking place at a time when Portugal herself was at a low ebb. She was politically ' unstable, she lacked good administrators; and neither money nor credit was available for colonial enterprises. Financial collapse in Angola followed a short burst of prosperity after the First World War. The situation changed fundamentally after the formation of the Portuguese "New State" (*Nova Estado*) and the coming to power in 1932 of Dr. Antonio Salazar, who himself drafted the Colonial Act of 1931 - 1933.

Portuguese Colonial Theory

More than any other country with colonial ambitions, Portugal tried to justify its system of colonization and colonialism by means of ethical arguments, because there was a wide gap between the ideological justification and reality. At first glance, Salazar's Africa seemed a verdant paradise, for it appeared free of the ugly racist rules white men installed elsewhere. In Luanda, black Africans rode the same elevators as whites in the gleaming modern office buildings, and shared the same queues at post offices and bus stops. But these were "assimilated" Africans who were few in number. In reality, Portugal's formula for success in race relations was: keep the natives illiterate, keep them working, keep them scared (Times, 1961).

The main thesis of the Portuguese ruling class was that Portuguese colonialism started from a basis different from that of the colonial activities of other countries. While other forms of colonization, and particularly the Anglo-Saxon form, might be considered as purely commercial operations, the Portuguese effort was ethically motivated. Portuguese colonialism, it was maintained, has always favoured the most civilised forms of commercial interchange accompanied by racial mixing and the exchange of moral and religious values. Together with his trade the Portuguese colonist had always sought to give the African the benefit of his anti-racist views, his penchant for hard work, his Christian faith and all the values which accompanied it. It was hoped that a day would come when the African Portuguese and the metropolitan Portuguese would form one single people, for the greater good of mankind (Humbaraci & Muchnik, 1974:94 - 95; Duffy, 1962:172). According to Mallet (1974:107).

Our whole policy has been and continues to be to improve the cultural, economic and social level of the Negro, to give him opportunities to drag him from his ignorance and backwardness, to try to make of him a rational and honourable individual, worthy of the Lusitanian community.

But the reality of Portuguese colonialism differed from the myth. The theory was designed to square uneasy consciences and uphold the myths cherished by the Portuguese ruling class, and it did not appear particularly original when compared with other already existing systems of colonialism. All the colonial governments had always declared that they were pursuing ethical motives of some sort. The only point on which Portuguese attitudes differed radically from those of the other colonial powers was in the institution and continuation of the practice of forced labour until the end of colonial rule.

The Portuguese also emphasized the multi-racial or lion-racial nature of their colonialism. In fact, none of the colonial enterprises were deliberately racist at the start, yet they all became so. The Portuguese boasted of the large number of mixed marriages in their territories. But Adrian Guelke, in a study on the myth of Portuguese non-racism, wrote in the *New Statesman* of 20 July, 1973, that with more Portuguese women having emigrated to the colonies since World War II, mixed marriages had diminished and the proportion of mulattoes to the total population in both Angola and Mozambique had declined sharply. Mixed unions were increasingly placed beyond the social pale (Humbaraci & Muchnik, 1974:94-95).

Even the Portuguese Church did not prove particularly eager to convert the Africans to Christianity. In Guinea there were less than one percent Christians and virtually no African priests; in Mozambique around five percent of the population were Christians. Admittedly, in the north of Mozambique and above all in Guinea, there was considerable competition from Islam, but there is a paradox: the spread of Christianity in the Portuguese colonies was far less-marked than in other African countries where the colonisers appeared less troubled by religious considerations and where Islam was even more strongly entrenched. The Portuguese authorities in Angola, who did not have Islam to contend with, put the number of Christians at about twenty percent of the population, a figure which is considered exaggerated (Duffy, 1962:172).

The rise of Salazar's New State rekindled interest in carrying out Portugal's "historic mission" - the transformation of Africans into Portuguese. The blueprint for this mission was contained in the *indigenato* system incorporated in the New State's colonial policy. Ostensibly intended to protect the interests of Africans, the *indigenato* system explicitly set up a regime of social and political inequality by dividing the population into two separate juridical categories: *indigena* (uncivilised, unassimilated or native), which included all Africans and *mesticos* not adjudged to be civilised; and *nao-indigena* (or civilised) which included all whites and *assimilados* (*mestieos* and Africans considered to be civilised (Bender, 1978:149-150). The *assimi/ado* was an African or *mestico* who had

fulfilled certain educational, financial, and social requirements that entitled him to equal "citizenship" with the Portuguese.

Under this system, more than ninety-nine percent of the African people were subjected to a special set of laws which stripped them of every vestige of political, economic, intellectual and social freedom. Not only could not the vast majority of Africans speak freely or vote - "luxuries" even the citizens forebore - but they could not travel, work, buy, sell, plant, harvest, feast, dance, or go out of their houses at night without the specific permission of their *administrador*; the Portuguese version of the Great White Chief (*Saturday Review*, 1959). Only the *assim/ado* had the right of unrestricted movement within Angola. All other Africans required permission of the *administrador* to leave their *circumscricao* (district) (Best & de Blij, 1977:328). In a shrewd move the Portuguese promulgated a new constitution which turned all the colonies into provinces of Portugal. This meant that Portugal would not have to submit reports to the bodies of the United Nations on her actions (*New York Times*, 1952).

Portugal's answer to the Angolan rebellion of March 15, 1961 was the proposal of sweeping constitutional changes in the administrative structure of the colony. Angola was to receive economic, fiscal and administrative autonomy. It would have a resident minister with Cabinet rank instead of a Governor-General closely supervised by Lisbon. Lisbon would retain responsibility for defence and foreign relations.

But the Portuguese continued to delude themselves about their relations with Africans after the rebellion had begun. They said that the troubles had been organised by agitators from the Congo who exploited both political dissatisfaction and economic hardship among the Africans caused by low world coffee prices. In particular they blamed economic hardship among the coffee-growing Africans of the Congo districts and the cotton-growing Africans near Malange as the reason for the uprising (*New York Times*, 1961).

They maintained that the visitor would find whites and blacks living in harmony equalled nowhere else. They said no barriers prevented Africans from enjoying all the fruits of Portuguese civilisation. There was no clamour for freedom in Angola, they added, because Africans there already had their rights (*Look*, 1961).

In reality, the Portuguese were now in the classical position of decision-makers trying to reconcile reality to their original beliefs. Even before the rebellion and the consequent reforms, Angola could not boast truthfully of being an example in multi-racial living. Instead of being bias-free, Angolan society was rigidly stratified, topped by over 200,000 whites and a handful of *assimilados*. At the bottom were four million Africans, exploited and powerless (*Look*, March 28, 1961). Instead of the "civilising mission" by which the Portuguese said they were advancing a primitive people, there was exploitation. Africans were torn from their families and forced to labour under conditions that often lacked even the most elementary humanity. Portugal avowed a policy of racial equality. Yet it sent thousands of white immigrants to Angola to settle on choice land from which Africans had been uprooted.

When the Portuguese government realized that guns had clearly failed to quell the rebellion after six weeks of heavy fighting, it tried words. It announced the repeal of the native statute which divided the population of the colonies in Africa into "civilised" (that is Europeans and the few educated natives) and "noncivilised" categories/ all inhabitants of the colonies would be granted citizenship "without distinction of race, religion or culture" (*Times*, 1961).

Citizenship did not automatically mean the right to vote. Like the metropolitan Portuguese, Africans must first pass a literacy test and prove they had paid an annual head-tax of at least seven US dollars. Few could meet these requirements. But they obtained, for the first time, the rights to judicial trial and full protection of the law. The government removed some of the bloom from this offer by adding that Angola and other African territories would receive greatly increased immigration from Portugal, including "the young men now doing their military service there." Thus whether the draftees liked it or not, he was an immigrant. In short, the Portuguese solution to the colonial problem was more colonization (*Times*, 1961).

Assimilation In Theory And Practice

One characteristic of Portuguese colonialism as formulated by Dr. Salazar was the distinction drawn between the “natives” and “assimilados.” In theory, any native who met a certain number of requirements could become assimilated or “civilised”, and enjoy the same rights as an ordinary Portuguese citizen. The edict passed on May 1954 defined the status of a native in Article 2:

Natives of the provinces of Guinea, Angola and Mozambique comprise individuals of the black race or their descendants born or habitually residing in those territories who do not yet possess the education or the individual and social habits which are a prerequisite for the application of the full public and private rights of citizens. And to be considered as natives are those individuals born of a native father and mother in a place outside these provinces, where the parents are temporarily residing (Humbaraci & Muchnik, 1974:109).

Since one was born a native and had to deserve the status of a Portuguese, there were certain conditions laid down by the Edict of May 20, 1954 in Article 56:

An individual might lose his status as a native and acquire citizenship if he could prove that he satisfied cumulatively the following five conditions:

1. That he is over eighteen years of age.
2. That he speaks the Portuguese language correctly.
3. That he exercises a profession, art or skill from which he can derive sufficient income for his own subsistence and that of persons of his family or persons dependent upon him, or that he possesses sufficient property to fulfil the same purpose.
4. That he is of good behaviour and has acquired the education and habits which are prerequisite for the application of the full public and private rights of Portuguese citizens.
5. That he has not been noted as objecting to military service or declared a deserter.

If the prospective applicant for Portuguese citizenship had to meet all these conditions. But the final judgement lay in the hands of the colonial authorities who were on the look out for future allies or functionaries of the regime from among the native population.

The first clause concerning age meant that citizenship could not be passed on from father to son. Thus the son of a man who was “Portuguese by adoption” would still be a native. With regard to the second clause, only the state schools were recognized as being able to teach the language correctly. As a result it was insufficient for an African to learn to speak Portuguese in one of the elementary schools organized by the Catholic Church. Moreover, it was not sufficient to have attended a state school because the final word was left to the administrative authorities to judge whether the aspiring citizen spoke the language correctly or not. The third clause reminds one of the electoral system prevalent in Europe during the 19th century. Only a property-owner with a vested interest in the colonial system could be considered for citizenship. The fourth clause required that the candidate for European status had to be sponsored by a Portuguese administrator or two Europeans of good repute. A searching inquiry was made into his education and way of life. Polygamy and animism were equally forbidden. In practice the candidate was usually a Christian (*New York Times*, 1954). The certificate of assimilation was finally revoked.

In the Portuguese context assimilation meant that the African must be taught and protected as if he were a child, but accepted as an equal once he came up to European standards. While the colour bar had all but vanished officially, a sharp distinction was still made between “civilised” and “uncivilised” Africans. The former enjoyed European status while the latter suffered all the disabilities inherent in an intensely paternalistic system. By 1950, the number of “civilised” Africans had reached 30,112 (*Look*, 1961). Between 1950 and 1960, 30,000 more - 0.7% of the population - had won *assimilado* status. But no one knows the true figure for certain, since embarrassed officials stopped issuing statistics on them after a while.

Since the children of whites and mulattoes got first call on the limited school space available in Angola, less than one percent of its African population attended primary school. This explains why only about 0.7 percent of Angola’s Africans were assimilated. The requirement that an African must be liberated to become a Portuguese citizen, incidentally contrasts with the fact that in 1962 only about fifty

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percent of Angola's white population could read and write, roughly the same percentage as in Portugal itself (*Look*, March 28, 1961:42). Thus the African had to be better than the average Portuguese to become a Portuguese citizen.

The assimilated African exchanged his *Cadmecla* for a *Bi/ctc de Identidada* which served precisely the same function but had more prestige. But his costs went up for now he paid his health, legal documentation and other fees himself. In return he would be permitted to enter cinemas, restaurants and public conveniences barred to him hitherto, when he was "uncivilised".

The leaders of the New State believed that the assimilation process would take centuries. Colonial Minister Dr. Armindo Monteiro speaking in June, 1933, warned the First Colonial Governors' Conference:

We don't believe that a rapid passage from their African superstitions to our civilisation is possible. For us to have arrived where we are presently, hundreds of generations before us fought, suffered and learned, minute by minute, the most intimate secrets in the fountain of life. It is impossible for them to traverse this distance of centuries in a single jump (Bender, 1978:150).

Since the implantation of modern civilisation in Portugal was incomplete after centuries of contact with the western world, it was not surprising that Dr. Monteiro and others could believe that the same process would take at least as long in Africa, if not longer.

As *assimilados* were not subject to be contracted, there was a clear incentive to attain this status, but it was not uncommon for local administrators to deny "qualified" Africans the *assimilado* status in order to maintain a large reserve of potential contract workers. Furthermore, *assimilados* were subject to higher taxes and military conscription, which Portuguese officials and scholars indefatigably offered as the explanation for the low number of *assimilados*. The principal reason for the small number of *assimilados* in Angola in the 1950s was that few Africans had access to the institutions, which could impart Portuguese civilisation. Ironically, assimilation required the satisfaction of conditions and possession of skills and habits, which could only be acquired after one was already considered as *assimilado* (Bender, 1978:150 - 151).

While the *indignato* system was juridically based on cultural and not racial criteria, its application was strictly racial. Legally, any *mestizo* who did not live like "an African in the bush" and all whites were automatically considered civilised. In contrast, Africans who could read and write Portuguese, were Christians, wage-earners, and dressed in a European manner were not classified as *assimilado* if an official believed they manifested a few traces of their ethnic identity (Bender, 1978:152).

Few Portuguese officials or citizens viewed these legal and social distinctions as indications of racial prejudice, exploitation or discrimination. On the contrary, the exertion of special institutions and laws for Africans was interpreted as magnanimity - proof of the Portuguese altruistic recognition of the need to provide special protection for those judged to be inferior. Fervently believing in the superiority of their own civilisation, the Portuguese held that it was in the African people's best interests to change completely every aspect of their lives, including their social, economic, and political organization, religious beliefs, clothes, food cosmology, habitat as well as agricultural techniques. From these premises, it followed that anything which broke down traditional African institutions, beliefs and practices - including forced labour to inculcate diligence and a work ethic - was positive since it took Africans further away from their own cultures and closer to the Portuguese way of life (Bender, 1978:153).

Conclusion

From the foregoing it can be concluded that Portugal was unable to develop Angola to any appreciable extent because she was hampered by her own underdevelopment and internal weaknesses in the form of shortage of human and natural resources. It was therefore no surprise that her colonial policies were essentially failures. Moreover, her policy of assimilation made little or no impact since only about one percent of the local population ever became assimilated during the long years of colonial rule.

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