In 1914, the British consul to Angola visited Cassequel Sugar Plantation, which had been founded the previous year by a Portuguese entrepreneur and colonist named António da Costa backed by Lisbon-based investors. Consul Hall undertook the journey to the south-central-coast port of Lobito and the neighboring sugar plantation at Catumbela, to see for himself whether the Portuguese authorities had, as they claimed, ended the practice of a system of forced labor that critics described as akin to slavery.

Consul Hall traveled the ten miles inland from the port of Lobito to Cassequel aboard the Benguela Railway and disembarked at the Catumbela station, nestled among verdant sugar canefields. At the plantation, he met António da Costa and presumably other Portuguese and European managers and engineers busy at work in the new factory. His interactions with workers confirmed what his hosts had already told him: the workers at Cassequel work voluntarily and are under no compulsion. The consul reported that management kept track of workers’ hours on a piece of cardboard. The description is worth citing at length not only because of its detail, but also because it is one of the few extant descriptions of payment to voluntary workers at an Angolan sugar plantation in the 1910s.

Each of them carried on him, either hung by a thong round his neck or tied up into some part of his clothing, a small cardboard ticket, along the top edge of which was written a number, corresponding to a number in the register, and his name; the rest of the card was ruled into squares, thirty-six in number, representing six weeks of six working days each. About midday white officials go round the plantation putting a mark in a square to represent half a day’s work done, and making a similar note in a book for the purpose. At the end of the day each laborer presents his card at the office and the date of the day is written in the square already marked. I saw both these operations going on. When the card is filled, or at shorter intervals (on this point I did not get exact information), the owner receives the corresponding wages and has a new card, with his original number on it, issued to him.1

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According to Consul Hall, voluntary workers enjoyed leeway over the number of days worked.²  

The Consul’s descriptions of the flexibility afforded to voluntary workers, known locally as voluntários, reflected one modus operandi with local workers in 1914 during a period when Cassequel’s managers struggled to find a sufficient number of workers to meet a growing need for labor. And yet, unknownst to Cassequel’s British visitor, forced labor did persist on the plantation. Although voluntários made up a significant percentage—generally as much as half—of Cassequel’s workforce, plantation authorities also used other sources to meet the labor demands of tending, collecting, and processing two bimannual sugarcane harvests. This source was government-supplied forced laborers, known as contratados, or contract workers, because of the “contract” each worker agreed to at the government post in the interior where he began his term of service. Because of the complexity of the situation at Cassequel, which consisted of diverse labor categories (including voluntary and forced African workers as well as skilled foreign workers) one must consider the political, legal, and economic factors influencing labor decisions at Cassequel and in colonial Angola before 1914.

Before Cassequel’s founding in 1913, the sugar processed from Catumbela’s verdant sugarcane fields went toward the production of aguardente [rum]. Aguardente production dates to the eighteenth century, when it became an important product for the lucrative trade with independent Umbundu³ kingdoms of the interior.⁴ This trade in locally produced aguardente boomed during the nineteenth century; in 1892 the colonial governor of Benguela described aguardente production as the most valuable industry in his district and one of the most important trade items used by colonial merchants in barter trade with the trade caravans of the Ovimbundu that carried rubber to the coast.⁵ The Umbundu kingdoms of the Benguela Plateau controlled the nineteenth-century trade routes from the interior to the coastal ports of Catumbela and Benguela. The Ovimbundu consolidated into twenty-two kingdoms in the eighteenth century, and by the late nineteenth century three of the largest—Viye, Bailundo, and Ciyaka—dominated trade with the coast. In the 1890s

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² This arrangement may have been common during the 1910s but seems to have ended sometime in the following two decades.
³ A note on orthography: Ovimbundu (pl.) is the name of the people (sing. Ocimbundu). Umbundu is the name of the language, of the culture, and the form of the descriptive adjective.
⁵ Francisco de Paulo Cid, Relatórios dos Governadores das Províncias Ultramarinas, Districto de Benguella, 1892 (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 1892), 23.