CHAPTER 3

“I Escaped in a Coffin”: Remembering Angolan Forced Labor from World War II to 1960

Some of the men sent to Cassequel as contratados in the 1940s and 1950s are still alive and remember their experiences. Men such as Mr. Tchimbe Ngucika described his work as a contratado at Cassequel in the 1940s:

The first time I entered Cassequel was in 1943/44, I worked on clearing out the irrigation canals and the planting of sugar cane. The work was by task, and if you did not complete your task for whatever reason you would be whipped (chicotada). Each time I went there the system worked the same: carrying cane by hand to the railway cars, cutting cane by hand with your cutlass, without any clothes except a loin cloth (chilambo) made of burlap.1

The post-World War II era ushered in a period of dramatic change for European colonial powers and their empires, but in Angola reforms of forced labor would not happen until the late 1950s and especially after the outbreak of the nationalist war for independence in 1961. In Article 73 of the United Nation’s Charter of 1945, member states committed to moving their colonies toward independence. In 1948, member states of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognized the right to self-determination. The two emerging superpowers—the United States and Soviet Union—committed themselves to anti-colonial platforms, and the emerging Cold War led both nations to look to African nationalist movements as potential allies. Portuguese leaders responded to these changing circumstances in 1951 by reiterating the integral relationship between the metropole and colonies, dropping the terms “Portuguese Colonial Empire”2 and “colonies” in favor of “overseas provinces” of a pluricontinental Portugal. The Estado Novo promulgated the idea that a unique type of Portuguese assimilation policy known as luso-tropicalismo would ward off demands for independence.3 Luso-tropicalismo stemmed from the writings of Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, who argued that the Portuguese had a

1 Author interview with Tchimbe Ngucika, February 21, 2006, Balombo.
special capacity as colonizers because they created multiracial societies and did not practice the strict type of racial segregation characteristic of British colonies. He cited racial mixing in Brazil as a leading example. Leaders of the Estado Novo, who on the political front were making alliances with the white supremacist regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia, touted the relative lack of an absolute color bar in Angola as evidence of assimilation.4 *Luso-tropicalismo* gave theoretical support to Portugal’s efforts to settle more Portuguese in Angola after World War II,5 and a commodity boom led by high coffee prices and increased government investment attracted tens of thousands of Portuguese to immigrate to Angola to make money.6 The growing settler population increased the demand for Portuguese exports and thus support among Portuguese manufacturers for the regime’s colonial policy.

During this period, the Espírito Santo Group expanded its portfolio beyond Cassequel into an array of colonial manufacturing and agricultural enterprises, including investment in 1944 in *CADA*, the Companhia Angolana de Agricultura (which produced coffee, palm oil, and coconuts), and in 1956 in the new sugar plantation Sociedade Agrícola do Incomati in Xinavane, Mozambique.7 These investments in colonial enterprises reflected Espírito Santo commitment to the idea of the Portuguese empire and the belief that colonial investment and development would further the interests of Portugal. In Angola, the Estado Novo moved gradually to phase out forced labor by the late 1950s, but essentially the reforms aimed to maintain the colonial status quo without conceding any significant self-determination to Africans.

The details of how Angolan forced labor functioned has been well documented by investigative commissions, missionaries, and Angolan reporters and civil servants. One lacuna, however, is how forced laborers themselves viewed the system. Investigative reports portray forced laborers as victims, but it is not clear whether these men and women resisted the system, and whether the genders experienced forced labor similarly. Fortunately, recent scholarly studies of Angolan labor—specifically Todd Cleveland and Jorge Varanda’s work on the workers of Diamang in the northeast, Linda Heywood’s work on the Ovimbundu, and

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