CHAPTER NINE

IS ‘NATIONALISM’ A FEATURE OF ANGOLA’S CULTURAL IDENTITY?

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In September of 2006 President José Eduardo dos Santos made a speech in Luanda to a conference on the national culture of Angola. In it, to the surprise of foreigners such as myself, he said ‘our national language is Portuguese’. African vernaculars are not ‘national’ languages in the eyes of the head of state. Not Umbundu which has been so widely used as the language of command in the rival armed forces. Nor Kimbundu which is the language of the historic heartland of Angola between Luanda and Ambaca. And certainly not Kikongo which, shock-horror, is spoken by aliens across the border in Congo. Not even the old imperial language of the Lunda spoken in eastern Angola but also – and here lay the president’s problem when searching for a pure form of identity – among foreigners in Zambia. When a Zambian football team arrived for a championship game in Luanda their local hosts were amazed to hear them speak to one another in Bemba rather than English, bush people using a barbarous tongue whereas Angolans spoke fluent Portuguese. And when some time later the Angolan football team was drawn to play Portugal in a world cup fixture they were not at all fazed to be facing the old imperial enemy. That is a fine encounter they said: these people are our cousins, we all speak Portuguese.

The problem which Angola faced in finding a language which would enhance its sense of national identity and national pride was not a new one. Kwame Nkrumah, Africa’s premier statesman, chose English and insisted that the language become the vehicle of education from the very beginning of primary school classes. Haile Sellassie, the imperial war lord

¹ ‘We must have the courage to assert that the Portuguese language, adopted as the official language of the country since independence, is to-day the mother tongue of one third of Angolan citizens and must therefore be confirmed as the national language of Angola.’ Speech on ‘cultural identity’ by Eduardo dos Santos addressing the Third Symposium on National Culture and cited in the Luanda week-end papers of Saturday 16 September 2006, for example Folha 8 (Luanda), p. 32. The president did go on to say that the Angolan vernaculars, hitherto known as ‘national languages’, should be preserved as part of the country’s historical heritage.
of Ethiopia, chose Amharic, the language of a northern aristocracy but one not understood by the peasants and pastoralists outside the wall of Addis Ababa. Julius Nyerere, the Christian proponent of social equality in Tanzania, chose Swahili, a language of the northern coast of Kenya which had been adopted as the language of high command during the thirty year rule of the country by Germany. And Eduardo dos Santos opted for Portuguese, a language initially introduced 500 years ago by conquistadores and merchants of blood. So emphatic was the decision to reinforce Portuguese as the language of the Angolan nation that several hundred members of the press were required to present themselves to the Catholic University of Luanda and take examinations to prove their competence in the ‘national language’. Journalists protested vainly but editors were scandalised to the point of incandescence at the indignity of having to sit on student benches beside their underlings and be tested for their fluency.

The question of language is far more than a question of efficiency, of having a *lingua franca* which will lubricate administration and commerce. It is not even to do with the rule of law in a country deeply enmeshed in the bogus legalism of Portuguese administrative practice. It is to do with status. It has been suggested, without good evidence in a country devoid of any reliable statistic and in which even the size of the population is quite unknown, that forty per cent of Angolans speak Portuguese as their first language. And virtually all descendents of the thirteen ruling family dynasties, and all associates of the kleptocratic élite, and most members of the administrative middle class, proudly bear Portuguese names, usually in the Roman style with a first name, a middle name, and a last name. Only the members of the old opposition, a rival group of middle class administrators and entrepreneurs once based on the rival highland kingdoms of the Ovimbundu plateau, pride themselves on having African names, Bantu names. To the sharply dressed citizens of Luanda the term ‘Bantu’ is one of disdain, a term almost as opprobrious in Angola as it once was among the white élite of South Africa.

The use of language, and the choice of names, is not the only sign that ‘national identity’ in Angola is rooted in imperial experience rather than in historic life styles. Ten years ago an international congress was held in the old Imperial Cinema at Luanda, by then smartly refurbished to house the parliament which had been elected in Angola’s one-and-only general election. At the end of the week-long debate a grand picnic to an historic site was laid on with executive jets and tureens of soup flown up from Cape Town. It was expected that the historic site would be Mbanza Kongo, medieval capital of a prestigious African kingdom. But no, the picnic was