
BY

DIDIER PÉCLARD
(Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Basel, & Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris)

Luanda, 19.10.1975: Holden Roberto has announced that he will enter Luanda today. He's asked the populace to remain calm. Yesterday his planes dropped leaflets, pictures of Holden with the caption GOD RULES IN HEAVEN HOLDEN RULES ON EARTH... 2

[Religion] is in everything. The movement cadres are steeped in religiosity, whether Catholic or Protestant. And not only those of the movement. Take any party. [...] A party is a church. So that is why you think those at the top should criticise themselves on their own, like the priest and the sacristan, who only in the sacristy are accused of stealing their lovers, because if they said it in public the believers would become sceptics. 3

The history of Angolan nationalism, like that of nationalism in many African countries, is closely tied to the history of Christian churches and missions. Angolan leaders such as Agostinho Neto, Holden Roberto and Jonas Savimbi all had, in one way or another, ties with the church. 4 Even more evident is the role played by the church as social and political institution during the colonial period. In this paper I examine the impact of the church on early nationalist feelings and later political movements in Angola. My object is not so much to trace the social trajectory of historical nationalist figures as to examine the various ways in which the church both encouraged and impeded the development of an anti-colonialist, at times nationalist culture. Prior to looking at the Angolan situation though, a few theoretical considerations on the relations between missions and nationalism will set this particular case in a wider perspective.
The missionary enterprise was ambiguous and diverse in the way it proceeded into the African continent, sometimes before, sometimes alongside, and sometimes after colonial powers. At the same time as it was a product of the Enlightenment, it developed in a context which led many missionaries to be very critical of their own society: what the latter sought to build in Africa was not a carbon copy of Western societies which many of them saw as corrupted by mammon and the delights of materialism, and which tended to lose their spiritual basis in the midst of heavy industrialisation, but rather a new 'Kingdom of God' in which Christian beliefs and practices would be respected. It would be misleading therefore to consider that the missionaries' first and foremost historical responsibility has been to reproduce the signs and symbols of colonial domination. Can we for all that consider them (or some of them) as the 'spiritual fathers' of African nationalism?

Missionaries and sorcerer's apprentices:

In an historical summary of the 'Igreja Evangélica do Sudoeste de Angola' (IESA), the church that stemmed from the 'Alliance Missionnaire Evangélique Suisse' (AME, former 'Mission Philafricaine en Angola'), Eliseu Simedo, its current president, touched upon the question of the succession of the mission. He argued in very strong terms that it was time for the mission to 'die' and give way to an autonomous church, or rather that it was time for the missionaries to realise that this dramatic change was irreversibly under way:

Autonomy is an inalienable fact [sic]. If missionaries do not implement it, it will be done without them. The missionary is no longer a pioneer who takes it upon himself to explore or conquer. It is rather the opposite: he must put on a humble spirit, and be a simple servant. If a mission has been successful and has founded a church, if its members have professed their faith, then it will have to fade away and die of its own will.6

One of the striking features of this short quote is that the issue of the transition between the mission and an autonomous church still seemed to be a matter for concern when the text was written, i.e. in 1982. But ten years earlier, Dr. Bréchet, head of the AME in Kalukembe between 1942 and 1972, had written about this question in quite different terms. For the missionary, the transition had been a smooth and successful process:

The maturity of the Church in relation to the sometimes heavy organism of the Mission is also a matter for gratitude. This autonomy was not acquired abruptly and was not imposed by any political factor. It was the fruit of the continuous