

«I escaped in a coffin».

**Remembering Angolan
Forced Labor from the 1940s**

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«Eu escapei num caixão». Recordando o Trabalho Forçado Angolano desde os anos de 1940

O trabalho forçado em Angola no período colonial era infame pela sua crueldade, mesmo entre os regimes coloniais em África. Como resultado da guerra civil, no entanto, pouca pesquisa tem sido feita que explore como os antigos trabalhadores recordam a sua servidão em história partilhadas e narrativas orais. Recolher essas memórias é crucial para a historiografia angolana porque a última geração de trabalhadores forçados (da década de 1950) está a morrer em números crescentes. Baseada num projecto extensivo de história oral, conduzido pelo autor nas províncias de Benguela, Huambo e Bié (Fevereiro-Junho 2006), este artigo analisa como os trabalhadores forçados angolanos recordam a sua servidão e recontam as suas diversas estratégias para sobreviver, incluindo histórias pessoais de fuga e a codificação da resistência em canções. Além de documentar e analisar modos de expressão comuns entre as suas memórias, este artigo argumenta que a natureza de género dos seus regimes de trabalho determina (e diferencia) as memórias dos homens e das mulheres quase um meio século depois.

As memórias do colonialismo são também complicadas devido ao sofrimento tremendo dos anos da guerra civil, e o fracasso da Angola independente realizar muitas das expectativas geradas pela independência. Este texto argumenta que as realidades actuais influenciam como e de que forma os trabalhadores recordam o trabalho forçado e o colonialismo português.

«I escaped in a coffin». Remembering Angolan Forced Labor from the 1940s

Forced labor in colonial Angola was infamous for its cruelty, even among colonial regimes in Africa. As a result of civil war, however, little research has appeared that explores how former laborers remember their servitude in shared stories and oral narratives. Collecting these memories is critical for Angolan historiography because the last generation of forced laborers (from the 1950s) is dying at increased rates. Based on an extensive oral history project conducted by the author in Benguela, Huambo, and Bié provinces (February-June 2006), this paper analyzes how Angolan forced laborers remember their servitude and recounts their various strategies for survival, including personal stories of escape and the encoding of resistance in song. In addition to documenting and analyzing common tropes among their memories, this paper argues that the gendered nature of their work regimes determines (and differentiates) the memories of these men and women nearly a half-century later.

Memories of colonialism are also complicated by the tremendous suffering of the civil war years, and the failure of independent Angola to meet many of the expectations generated by independence. This paper argues that current realities influence how and what former laborers remember about forced labor and Portuguese colonialism.

Introduction

The transition from slave-based economies, whether in the Americas or Africa, was never as simple as abolition implies. In many places former slaves served apprentice periods for years, and in others, sharecropping arrangements meant working conditions and the privileges accorded free persons eluded former slaves. Perhaps no part of the world better exemplified the muddy waters of this transition than colonial Angola. Portugal, like other colonial powers in Africa, abolished slavery, yet still wanted access to Africans' labor power. The most effective means to ensure access was the head tax, known in Portuguese Angola as the *imposto indígena* (native tax). By requiring all African men to pay this tax in Portuguese currency the government created a situation in which a large percentage of men in any given year could only earn the specie needed to pay the tax by going to work for a colonial employer. Of course, compelling people to work for low wages at undesirable jobs in distant locations from their homes and families required more than simply a law. The Portuguese constructed a network to enforce their requirements and to deliver labor. It was this network of colonial administrators and African policemen (*cipaes*; sing. *cipaio*) who enforced the system, often brutally, to ensure compliance. Women were not exempted, and in fact, it was women and children who built and maintained much of Angola's extensive road system.

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. Did, for example, these men and women have opportunities to resist? How did the system affect differently men and women? Due to the fact that forced labor was abolished in 1961, memories are filtered through a half century of life, including war, independence, and the official memory of colonialism. With these caveats, this paper argues that men and women have distinct memories based on their gendered experience of forced labor. However, former forced laborers, from across a huge geographical area describe the same basic network of oppression. Work songs lamented suffering and questioned the work regime, but so far as my interviewees attested, they did not directly challenge the system. The line between survival and resistance was often blurred as well. For example, a woman who agreed to sleep with a *cipaio* or *capataz* (foreman) in order to get out of grueling road construction. The only clear act of resistance was to flee (*fugir*). Contract workers commonly exercised this option, and often went to great lengths to re-locate to new districts and towns, in order to evade the authorities.

So-called «grey» memories emphasize materially better off times under colonialism; in the words of one interviewee, «at least in those days we had enough to eat». Many others voiced respect for Portuguese efforts to develop the country. And yet, in spite of all the hardship since independence—war, deteriorating infrastructure, and

extreme poverty—former *contratados* did not voice nostalgia for colonialism. In fact, nearly all dismissed colonial rule as humiliation, and remembered with pride the day they first heard about Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence leader.

Documenting Forced Labor in Twentieth-Century Angola

People subjected to forced labor did not, as a rule, leave a written record of their experiences; and thus it is very difficult to write a history from their perspective¹. However, two sources in particular provide access to how workers viewed forced labor. The first source is the investigative report, of which several were conducted in Angola over the course of the twentieth century. The second source, interviews with former *contratados* (contract laborers), reveals how participants remember the past. As historian Alessandro Portelli explains, «*the first thing that makes oral history different...is that it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning...the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure (unless it be literary ones) is the speaker's subjectivity...*»². Thus, memories of how forced labor functioned a half century ago help us to understand how former *contratados* remember their lives as *indígenas* (natives) under Portuguese law³.

In 1924 the American sociologist Edward Ross traveled in the interior of Angola for several weeks on behalf of the Temporary Slavery Commission of the League of Nations. Ross explains his methodology:

«...we visited the native villages in the bush, gathered the people together and, through an interpreter known to them and in whom they had confidence, questioned them as to their compulsory labor. In Angola nineteen villages were visited from three centres not less than two hundred miles apart. The facts as to many other villages were elicited from conversation with the chief, the native pastor or the native teacher. The statements were taken down just as they fell from the lips of the interpreter and such notes form the basis of this report»⁴.

Ross's method of collecting information is significant for the historical record because he questioned a reasonably random selection of people to recount their experiences. He questioned leaders—chiefs, pastors and teachers—but also ordinary people, including women. Ross's report is one of the few sources we have that provides a

¹ For an introduction to subaltern studies see Gyan PRAKASH, «Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism», *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, n.º 5, 1994, pp. 1475-1490.

² Alessandro PORTELLI, «The Peculiarities of Oral History», *History Workshop*, n.º 12, Autumn 1981, p. 97.

³ For an excellent analysis of the juridical status of *indígenas* see Mário MOUTINHO, *O Indígena no Pensamento Colonial Português 1895-1961*, Lisboa, Edições Universitárias Lusófonas, 2000.

⁴ Edward Alsworth ROSS, *Report on Employment of Native Labor in Portuguese Africa*, New York, The Abbott Press, 1925, p. 5.

space for ordinary Angolans to explain the effects of forced labor. A woman on the first Work Gang Ross encountered attested:

«Sometimes after the men are taken from the village, they take some of the women [to work on road maintenance]. Some men were taken to Catete on the railroad to work in the cotton fields. They may have to stay two or three years as contracted laborers. Some of them have been sent to work on sugar plantations for a six month's term, but under various pretexts the time may be prolonged to seven or eight months. The planter told them that he had «bought» them of the Government, that they were his slaves and that he did not have to pay them anything. They got only their food and a receipt for their head tax»⁵.

Withholding pay was another chronic abuse. Workers in different villages told Ross the same thing: that they worked, received food, a receipt for their tax, but no pay. According to Portuguese colonial labor law, employers were suppose to send approximately three-fourths of a worker's wages to the *chefe de posto* in the worker's home area. When the worker finished his contract, he would collect his wages from the *chefe de posto* in his home area. Workers reported that they rarely collected their wages from the administrators. For example, a worker explained to Ross that:

«Government recruited him in 1920 and "sold" him to the petroleum company. He worked for it seven months, at the end of each three months he got a pano worth three escudos. At the end of the seven months he was told that he had seventy escudos due him, which would be paid him at the station where he had been recruited. However, he got nothing there but the receipt for his head tax. He asked about his wages but was told there was nothing for him»⁶.

Workers expressed the opinion that employers paid and that it was government officials who pocketed the money. Ross summarizes:

«In practice forced labor works out as follows. A laborer works for the coffee planter and at the close of his term of service the planter says, "I can't pay you anything for I have deposited the stipulated wage for you with the Government; go to such and such an office and you will get your pay". The worker applies there and is told to come around in a couple of months. If he has the temerity to do so, he is threatened with the calaboose [jail] and that ends it. It is all a system of bare-faced labor stealing. They think that the planter has really paid for their labor, but that the official does them out of it»⁷.

Ross summarizes his findings as a collective condemnation of Portuguese colonial practice. He describes the labor system as «virtually state serfdom» that does not allow Africans adequate time to produce their food. Workers rarely received the bulk of their pay, which was embezzled by colonial officials. Africans had no recourse to colonial law for protection. The hut tax and obligatory labor for public works caused a heavy burden. Women, with only rudimentary tools and no pay, were forced to build roads, causing them to abandon their fields, and thus impacting negatively on

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

food production. Ross's conclusions serve as a useful measure to weigh against future reports and oral history conducted in 2006.

A second investigate report from 1947 does not cite African interviewees, but is rather an analysis of Portuguese colonialism from a high-level Portuguese civil servant named Henrique Galvão, a former inspector for the colonies and governor of Huíla Province in southern Angola. Galvão, like Ross, identified forced labor and poor working conditions as undermining Portugal's long-term goals to develop Angola. Colonial officials, according to Galvão, became labor recruiters who sent workers to employers who paid bribes and stole salaries from workers whose interest they were supposed to protect. These conclusions mirrored those made by Ross twenty years earlier. According to Galvão, the practice of colonial officials forcibly recruiting workers for particular employers and receiving payments from employers and a cut of worker salaries was «*required in confidential circulars and official orders*»⁸ Galvão concluded that the system was crueler than pure slavery, an opinion also expressed by Africans interviewed by Ross in the 1920s. Mortality rates as high as thirty-five percent for forced laborers reflected the poor conditions under which they lived and worked.

Salazar's government made no effort to enact reforms as a result of the Galvão Report. Increasingly disillusioned, Galvão decided to make a public condemnation of the corrupt and incompetent colonial administration in Angola. On the floor of the National Assembly in 1949 he charged that the discrepancy between law and practice made the colonial administration a «*colossal lie*»:

«*This lie, that attempts to deceive the country and hides its own mediocrity and incompetence from our Government... has thrown Angola into a political, economic, and moral crisis without precedent in her troubled history of the last hundred years*»⁹.

Definitive change did finally come on May 2, 1961, when Salazar's government, in the wake of an uprising in northern Angola, abolished forced labor and made all Angolans citizens. In fact, the government began to phase out forced labor in the mid-1950s. The government put pressure on colonial employers to ameliorate work conditions and focus on policies to attract voluntary workers. Large employers, such as the Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel in Catumbela, built new housing and medical posts for employees.

Manuel Espírito Santo, president of Cassequel's board of directors in Lisbon, summed up the policy shift in a letter to the company's administration in Catumbela:

«*The labor problem is without a doubt of maximum importance for our business... the most desirable solution to the labor problem would be a voluntary work force, not only at present, but principally in the future given the native labor policy that the Governor General of the province plans to follow.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ Session of 24 February 1949, Caixa 48, n. 10 «Henrique Galvão,» Arquivo Histórico-Parlamentar, Assembleia da República.

Hence, everything ought to be done to settle native families around our properties... so that the native is convinced of the advantages represented by the assistance that will be supplied to his children and wife and others that will be able to live in an environment of greater resources, free from the contingencies of bad agricultural years that bring hunger, and with a greater guarantee of income. A more intensive missionary action among our workers will result in their Christianization, which accords with our objective»¹⁰.

In 1959 Portugal ratified the 1930 Forced Labour Convention, which came into effect twelve months later. Within a few months, on February 25, 1961, Ghana filed a complaint against the Government of Portugal for alleged violations of the Forced Labour Convention. According to the Convention, «each Member of the International Labour Organization which ratifies this Convention undertakes to suppress the use of forced or compulsory labour in all its forms within the shortest possible period»¹¹. After a series of hearings in Geneva, a three-member mission of inquiry spent a week in December 1961 investigating conditions in Angola. The ILO concluded that because of the part played in recruitment by colonial officials and chiefs, the employment of recruited labor in the African colonies had «been alleged to constitute, and has in the view of the Commission in certain cases constituted, forced labor»¹². Still, the ILO voiced optimism that the recent abolition of the *Estatuto do Indigenato*, and the commitment of the Portuguese government to reform, signaled an end to forced labor. Indeed, a follow up investigation by the ILO in 1970 concluded that contract labor in Angola did not involve coercion¹³.

Men's Memories of Forced Labor

Nearly a half century since the end of forced labor, former *contratados* still have vivid memories of their servitude. Working in conjunction with the Oral History Project at the Angolan National Archive, Manuel Domingoes, and I interviewed approximately 150 people over the course of five months between January and June 2006. We visited several key former recruitment districts on the Angolan central plateau: Bocoio (formerly Vila de Sousa Lara), Balombo (formerly Vila de Norton de Matos), Bailundo, Chinguar, and Quilengues. Upon arriving in each locale we contacted the local District Administrator to explain our project and to request assistance

¹⁰ «Letter from Manuel Espírito Santo to Administration in Africa», (March 10, 1955), in *Cartas Recebidas, 1950-1955*, Coleção da Sociedade Agrícola do Casseque, Arquivo Histórico do Banco Espírito Santo (AHBES), Lisbon. For a comparative case of improving labor conditions in order to attract workers to the sisal plantations of southern Tanganyika see Alpers, «To Seek a Better Life», p. 375.

¹¹ International Labour Organisation, *Conventions and Recommendations, 1919-1981*, Geneva, International Labour Organisation, 1982, p. 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 245.

¹³ «Report by Pierre Juvigny, Representative of the Director-General of the International Labour Office, on Direct Contacts with the Government of Portugal Regarding the Implementation of the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)» in ILO, *International Labour Conference*, 56, 1971, p. 7.

in contacting the local *Regedor* (head *soba*) to identify and coordinate visits to *mais velhos* and *mais velhas* who worked as *contratados*. We then interviewed men and women in groups of no fewer than five and no more than twenty. Roughly 70% of interviewees were men, and 30% women. Men were, in fact, the vast majority of *contratados*; however, women and children served as forced labor for roadwork. Nearly all of the interviews were conducted in Umbundu.

There was certainly an element of theatre involved in the group interviews. In nearly all the villages we set up a table, on which sat the tape recorder, and chairs. I often thought about «*what it means to stage oral histories?*»¹⁴. Did the performative aspect of the group interview presuppose how interviewees would answer? To begin we always explained, in Portuguese and in Umbundu, the objective of the group interview: «*to learn about migrant labor from the 1940s and 1950s*». I explained that we were working with the National Archives in Luanda, and that I had written a dissertation on the subject of labor in colonial Angola. As my dissertation was passed around, I told of my research in the National Archives and pointed out several reproduced photographs of *contratados* taken at the Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel in Catumbela in 1961, just weeks before the 2 May 1961 abolition of the *Estatuto do Indigenato*. These photos, such as the one below, jump-started our conversation. I asked interviewees their reactions to the messages on the banner being held by *contratados* in the *guia* from Chinguar: «*My land is Angola. Angola is a part of Portugal, hence I am Portuguese. My fatherland is Portugal*». Most people simply laughed and shook their heads. The photo was then usually passed outside the immediate circle of *mais velhos* to younger men and women sitting on the outside the circle to hear their elders speak of the past.



Chinguar *Guia*. Sociedade Agrícola do Cassequel Collection, Arquivo Histórico do Banco Espírito Santo (AHBES), Lisbon.

¹⁴ Della POLLOCK (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, see in particular pp. 2-3.

Memories of how the forced labor system functioned were consistent throughout the region, though with some variation in mechanisms for control. *Sobas*, who answered to the local *chefe de posto*, delivered specified number of men to serve as *contratados*. If a *soba* failed to fulfill the request he faced disciplinary action, including being beaten. João Ndamba remembers, for example, a *soba* from Chibungo who received 200 *palmatórias* (whippings), divided equally between his hands and feet, and as a result spent nine months in bed recuperating¹⁵. Men from distant areas describe similar consequences for *sobas* who failed to fulfill their labor quota. Augusto Katchilele from Chinguar remembers his *soba* receiving «matapalos», an Umbundu term for *palmatórias*, because he arrived at the government post with thirty men rather than the fifty the *chefe de posto* demanded to work on the roads¹⁶. Mr. Katchilele says those beatings explain why *sobas* «abducted men without rest»¹⁷.



Interview, Bocoio, 16 February 2006. Photo by the author.

Most interviewees use the word «*okukwatu*» («to abduct») to explain how they were selected for forced labor. There was no choice in whether or not to accept, or even to where one would be sent for the next year. João Kutakata explains:

«In 1940 when I was abducted, I had no notion of where I would be sent, and I received no explanation, nobody would take the time to explain to you that you will be sent here...what options does a prisoner have?»¹⁸.

In response to whether *contratados* exercised any choice in employer, Félix Alberto Satuala responded: «Not at all because the term *contratado* signified slave... nobody had the right to stand next to a white to say his name, much less to voice a preference [for employer]»¹⁹.

¹⁵ Interview with João Ndamba, 17 February 2006, Monte Belo (Benguela).

¹⁶ Interview with Augusto Lopes Katchilele, 18 April 2006, Chinguar (Bié).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Interview with João Kutakata, 21 February 2006, Balombo (Benguela).

¹⁹ Interview with Félix Alberto Satuala, 18 April 2006, Chinguar (Bié).

The best explanation as to why men in particular remained for long terms (anywhere from six months to eight years) as *contratados* without fleeing was that once a person's absence had been noted a message would be sent to the *chefe de posto* in the area of recruitment, who would then relay a message to the *soba* of the *fugido* (runaway). The *soba* was then expected to supply a replacement worker from the family of the *fugido*; thus, fleeing often carried a price for one's family. This practice also explains the importance administrators attached to compiling statistics at the time of «recruitment»: age, *sobado* (village), and names of parents. In Quilengues, which is an area where most people focus on cattle keeping, the *soba* held a man's cattle as collateral to ensure that he fulfilled his period of service. A *contratado* who fled thus risked forfeiting his family's collective wealth²⁰. The fact that men from Quilengues had more to lose helps to explain their reputation (borne out by statistics) to rarely flee forced labor. Still, even in areas without cattle, the penalties suffered by families served as a major disincentive to flee.

For *contratados* who did flee, returning to one's village was out of the question. A *fugido* had to move to a new area and begin a new life. Some went to cities, others to neighboring agricultural zones. According to Alfredo Domingos, himself a *fugido*:

«For many of us who fled it was not possible to return here [to Monte Belo, Province of Benguela] and we had to move to other villages. There were men who fled who abandoned their families, wives, children, and parents»²¹.

Workers who fled generally walked for great distances, on back roads, and relied on the generosity of others for sustenance. A few came up with inventive plans for escape. In the 1940s, for example, several *guias* fled the Cassequel Sugar Plantation by claiming to the *capataz* that one of their members had died. Then, 8-10 men gathered to make up the funeral procession, with two live «corpses» in the coffin, they went in the direction of the cemetery, and never returned. According to Justino Patrício, «this system worked like magic, and when it was discovered, a good part of some groups had already fled»²².

The consequences for men caught fleeing their contract obligation were severe. First, the man would be arrested and put in prison, and usually beaten. Next, the *fugido* would be contracted to a new employer for a longer period of service. Often, caught *fugidos* were sent to São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea. São Tomé was the most feared destination for *contratados* because of its great distance and the fact that periods of service lasted years, and many never returned—some as a result of death, others were simply never heard from again.

A person caught without his *guia de circulação* (passbook) was also liable to be sent to São Tomé. In the 1940s, for example, a young son of an important Umbundu *soba* was apprehended far from home without his *guia de circulação*. Normally *sobas* and

²⁰ Interview with Manuel Seguro, 9 May 2006, Socobal (Quilengues).

²¹ Interview with Alfredo Domingos, 17 February 2006, Monte Belo.

²² Interview with Soba Justino Patrício, 23 February 06, village of Cayengue-Mbola Kavulo.

their families were exempted from forced labor, but without proof of identity, the young Augustinho Kachitopolola had no right to an exemption. That young man, who would later return home and eventually become king of Bailundo, served nearly nine years on the São Tomé cocoa plantation *Boa Entrada*. King Augustinho Kachitopolola explains:

«That work on São Tomé was slavery. I did not want to go, but because of the white [government official] I was sent to São Tomé for not having my passbook... on that plantation [Boa Entrada] I planted cocoa, bananas, coconuts, and later harvested each one, with sufficient whippings [chicotata] mixed in... I also had to dig holes in which to plant the cocoa trees, this was surely the work of slaves... as were all of those who were sold in Catumbela and sent to São Tomé, and I was one of them. I worked roughly eight years and seven months until an order came down to liberate all of the slaves, all those who had been sold as slaves, now had to be returned to their lands of origin. Thus the government sent ships to carry us home»²³.

Based on the King's age and estimated service as a *contratado* between the ages of 17 and 26, he must have served his time in the 1930s. It is true that the government occasionally put pressure on the plantation owners to return *contratados* to their home districts, which would corroborate the King's description of events. The general practice, of course, was to return *contratados* to their port of embarkation, so that a *contratado* from Bailundo would be returned to the coastal port of Benguela, and then expected to make his own way home, up the escarpment and across several hundred miles²⁴.

Other *fugidos* carved out a space in one of Angola's growing and relatively anonymous cities. For *fugidos* from the central highlands, the coastal cities of Benguela and Lobito were favorite destinations. Bento Somuvuango fled a coffee *fazenda* (farm) and ended up spending three years as a domestic servant in Benguela. He avoided returning to his home and family in Bailundo because he feared being sent back to the coffee *fazenda* by his *soba*²⁵.

Across the board, *contratados* remembered their salaries as «virtually nothing». Men talked about working simply to pay their tax, which remained with the government administrators who «recruited» them:

«I received 40\$00 per month and when I arrived here [Quilengues] I received 600\$00 after 15 months, from this salary they took out 300\$00 to pay my taxes, leaving me with only 300\$00. In that time we worked for the chefe de posto... who paid us that unjust salary, whilst the rest of the money remained with him. Hence, one time I asked the administrator why if we worked, the money to be paid to us remains here [with the administra-

²³ Interview with King Augustinho Kachitopolola, 12 April 2006, Bailundo.

²⁴ In 1917 the English Consul in Angola visited a group of men near the port of Benguela who had been «recruited» for service on São Tomé in what was then the British colony of Rhodesia, east of Angola. «Ano de 1917 Distrito de Benguela Circunscção Civil do Bailundo, Autos de Investagação» Bailundo, Caixa 5647, Arquivo Histórico de Angola.

²⁵ Interview with Bento Somuvuango, 14 April 2006, Bailundo.

tor] ? *The Administrator thought about it, and said, «When you have a dog... and this dog goes hunting a brings home an animal, do you give the meat or the bone to the dog? We said, "I give him the bones". "Hence," the Administrator said, "you are like the dog, because you go to work"»*²⁶.

Work for *contratados* at the Port of Lobito loading and unloading cargo paid similar wages to *contratados* in the 1950s. João Ndamba remembers being paid 400\$00 after 15 months of service, from which 150\$00 was subtracted to pay his tax, leaving him «*only with a few crumbs that did not solve any of your problems, much less those of your wife and children*»²⁷. Describing his work as a *contratado* at the Cassequel Sugar Plantation, José Inácio explains: «*You were not able to buy cloth for your wife with what we were paid, much less a shirt for your child. It was obligatory work, we did it not because we wanted to, but because they wanted us to, hence it was not good*»²⁸. One interviewee became exasperated when asked if during his service as a *contratado* he had a small garden to grow food: «*My dear son... this is an absurd question because our work was the work of a prisoner, difficult work, a work without equal, hence it would be difficult for a slave to have a vegetable garden, no?*»²⁹.

Women's Memories

Both men and women were obligated to perform annual roadwork, usually of a relatively short duration of a week to two weeks. However, forced labor without pay on the roads is remembered as one of the most onerous and resented experiences of colonialism. In addition to the work being excruciatingly difficult—repairing holes created by rain and landslides by carrying baskets full of dirt by hand—it was usually women and children who performed the bulk of the work, though men also contributed. Selection for roadwork mirrored that for *contratados*, the *chefe de posto* sent word to a particular *soba* that x number of people would be needed on a particular stretch of road. The government provided no food or salary. Workers carried with them their own food. In order to ensure compliance with such hated instructions, *cipaios* were sent to enforce a disciplined work regime.

Memories of roadwork a half century later universally describe it as «slavery» and «*work beyond the imagination*». Verónica Chilomba, for example, explains salaries for road work: «*If there wasn't even food for us, we certainly were not paid, we worked worse than slaves because a slave has a right to a cup of water*»³⁰. Cristina Vatchia explains:

«I went to work on the roads at a very young age, and I saw the suffering. When we arrived, the first thing to do was to construct a shelter. We were like monkeys living in the

²⁶ Interview with Luis Massuna, 10 May 2006, Mussanji (Quilengues).

²⁷ Interview with João Ndamba, 17 February 2006, Monte Belo.

²⁸ Interview with José Inácio, 17 February 2006, Monte Belo.

²⁹ Interview with José Samuel, 21 February 2006, Balombo.

³⁰ Interview with Verónica Chilomba, 21 February 2006, Balombo.

rocks, running from one side of the road to the other like ants, our heads carrying huge baskets full of dirt...»³¹.

Women suffered especially due to sexual assaults from *capatazes* and *cipaios*. As a *mais velha* in Balombo explains: «We were humiliated, our suffering as women passed all boundaries because white men had no shame. We did not have the protection of our husbands because they were also under the thumb of the whites... we were easy targets... it was really incredible how the colonists mistreated us»³².

In fact, it was not only whites who sexually assaulted women, but also black *cipaios*, who regularly chose concubines from among roadwork crews and in villages. In fact, this sexual abuse is documented as far back as 1924 in Edward Ross's *Report on Employment of Native Labor in Portuguese Africa*: «In the village where the *cipaio* sleeps for the night, he takes whatever woman he fancies and no one dares say him nay»³³. Similar practices continued up through the end of forced labor in the late 1950s. Justina Kalumbo remembers: «The women considered beautiful to the eyes of men served the *cipaios*, and some of exceptional beauty were reserved for the *capatazes*... it was not important if she was married or not»³⁴. When asked if women ever initiated sex in exchange for exemption from hard labor, all but one of the interviewees said no. They insisted that women were chosen and that they could not say no because it would mean severe reprisals, including beatings and increased work burden. As one interviewee explained: «If you did not consent you would be beaten as if you were an animal, or any other instrument to be used. The women were used with tears and with pain [on their faces], with violence, it was an act without equal, when you arrived home you looked at your husband with tears and sobs, ashamed at the same time»³⁵.

The one interviewee who said she knew of women offering sex in exchange for exemption from forced labor, explained that women who did so ran the risk of receiving a beating: «... if the *cipaio* was not interested, you ran the risk of receiving *chicotadas* [whippings], because each one of us was so dirty to be unrecognizable»³⁶.

Women forced into sex generally received support from their communities, including their husbands, because as Bernarda Kabyndo explains:

«... though she [a woman raped during road work] arrived [back in the village] timid with her husband, and full of shame, she was not discriminated against by the community because in that time it was not only women who were violated, but also our husbands. When the whites said to do something, even if it was to parade around naked in a public street, you did it. It was not only women who had to comply»³⁷.

³¹ Interview with Cristina Vatchia, 13 April 2006, Bailundo.

³² Interview with Joaquina*, 21 February 2006, Balombo. [*Some interviewees declined to give a second name].

³³ Edward Alsworth Ross, *Report on Employment of Native Labor in Portuguese Africa*, New York, The Abbott Press, 1925, p. 31.

³⁴ Interview with Justina Kalumbo, 13 April 2006, Bailundo.

³⁵ Interview with Cipriana Nduva, 13 April 2006, Bailundo.

³⁶ Interview with Bernarda Kabyndo, 18 April 2006, Chinguar (Bié).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

In addition to performing obligatory roadwork, women shouldered the burdens of carrying for families during men's absence for contract labor. When a man left to spend six months or more on a far away plantation, his family received no financial compensation. Indeed, Portugal's forced labor system, like those in place in neighboring British and French colonies, shifted the costs of family maintenance to rural areas, thus freeing colonial employers from the financial responsibility of supporting the family unit. Sr. Jacinta Cahomas explains: «*our husbands never sent anything during forced labor, with luck when they arrived home they would buy you a pano [piece of cloth] and some clothes for the kids, but the rest went towards the tax. Many had to return to forced labor because they were unable to pay the next year's tax*»³⁸.

Grey Memories of Colonialism

The horrors of the civil war that engulfed Angola for most of the twenty-seven years between independence in 1975 and the assassination of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002, accentuated for many Angolans the more positive aspects of colonialism such as: stability and access to consumer goods. Salomão dos Santos remembers that after the initial honeymoon when everything seemed «*like a bed of roses*», the situation quickly deteriorated into a brutal war without reason or end³⁹. UNITA, in particular, captured young people from the fields and took them to the bush to be forcibly turned into soldiers. It was during this period that people remembered «*how we lived with the colonists, that in spite of having to pay our taxes, the suffering was nothing like now. We had food, clothes, drinks, etc., but now we have nothing, neither food nor clothes, and only war. What kind of independence is this?*»⁴⁰. One interviewee described the civil war as a kind of football game, in which ordinary people were kicked back and forth between warring elites. Paulo Sapeque describes the intense poverty caused by the civil war:

«*We had hunger, all over people went about naked because they had no more clothes. Villages were destroyed, the beautiful houses of the colonists were destroyed, bridges were blown apart... UNITA stole whatever they wanted, wherever they went they massacred, raped, and killed*»⁴¹.

Following his explanation of the horrors inflicted on the region of Bailundo by the war, Paulo Sapeque commented that «*the presence of a North American historian here in our midst is a good signal that we are in peace*»⁴². In fact, my presence as a «European» or a «white» was referred to several times by the *mais velhos* as a sign of both change

³⁸ Sra. Jacinta Cahomas, 21 Feb. 2006, Balombo.

³⁹ Sr. Salomão dos Santos, 21 Feb. 2006, Balombo.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Sr. Paulo Sapeque, 14 April 2006, Bailundo.

⁴² *Ibid.*

and peace. In Chinguar (Bihé) Senhor Benedito Chitumbo remarked: «*it is a pleasure to see a white here in our midst conversing with our elders, in the past this never would have happened*»⁴³. Senhor Chitumbo remarked that «*the Portuguese presence in Angola was a good thing in respect to development,*» however, «*one never feels any nostalgia for someone who mistreats you, the negro was an instrument, or even better, a machine of labor*»⁴⁴.

Conclusion

It is clear from men and women's memories that Angola's forced labor regime affected men and women in distinct ways. Though exempt from forced contract labor, women carried the burden of maintaining the family while their husbands fulfilled their labor obligation away from home. It is not an exaggeration to say that women subsidized the profits of colonial businesses, as their husbands' wages were never intended to support a family. In many respects women shouldered a more onerous burden than their menfolk because it was primarily women, and children, who maintained the road network without pay. Women also faced the added humiliation of sexual exploitation at the hands of road foremen and police. As a result of their responsibilities to children and elders, women also had even fewer options for resistance than men. Women rarely exercised the option of fleeing because of their commitments to maintain children and elders. Men, on the other hand, frequently absconded onerous forced labor and settled far from home secure in the knowledge that their wives would maintain the homestead.

Conducting oral history interviews in rural Angola impressed upon me the importance of oral memory, especially in societies with relatively few written sources. In every village we visited, generations gathered to hear their elders «*making history in dialogue*», and giving this interviewer the sense that the occasion of the interview was truly momentous⁴⁵.

⁴³ Sr. Benedito Chitumbo, 18 April 2006, Chinguar.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Della POLLOCK (ed.), *Remembering Oral History Performance*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, p. 2.