

Language, culture and society in postcolonial Angola: introduction

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Abstract: This short article introduces the collected essays in this special issue of the *Journal of the British Academy*. It examines the contexts for the recent expansion of academic research and publication on postcolonial Angola, and the relative lack of scholars based in Angola involved in this production. It contextualises the political, economic and social frameworks which are associated with this situation as a way of understanding the distinctiveness of the collection. Finally, it considers the context of the production of the present edition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, as part of the structural frameworks which both condition and illuminate the collected essays.

Keywords: Angola, literature, gender, knowledge production, postcoloniality, civil war, Covid-19 pandemic.

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Modern Angolan studies have boomed in the West over the past decade (Moorman 2008; Pearce 2015; Soares de Oliveira 2015; Schubert 2017). A wide range of scholarship has assessed the history of the civil war and the construction of a postcolonial society under the aegis of the Popular Liberation Movement of Angola (MPLA), the Marxist revolutionary movement which then morphed into a clientelist state party in the 21st century. Many works have also been produced by Western-based scholars considering the significance of a wide range of Angolan literature, including work by José Eduardo Agualusa, Ondjaki, Pepetela and others (Leite 2012; Rothwell 2013; Leite & Owen 2014). In the context of the former Portuguese colonies in Africa, which attained independence following protracted guerrilla wars in 1974, there is no question that Angola has attracted the lion's share of scholarly attention.

For a variety of reasons, only a very small amount of the most widely read academic production on Angola in recent years has been produced by scholars based in Angola. The new scholarship from outside the country is well crafted and excellently researched, yet there is also an urgent need to attend to the perspective of Angola-based scholars. This can ensure that the academic and wider public awareness of themes so relevant to the culture and society of contemporary Angola is shaped at least as much by voices inside as outside the country. It can also draw attention to themes that are particularly important to the lived experience of Angolans, something which scholars based in the country are certainly best qualified to identify: this can thereby help to shape the global academic discourse on the country and frame the research questions that need to be addressed.

This special issue therefore brings together five scholars based in universities in Angola to present an Angolan perspective on a diverse range of themes relevant to postcoloniality in Angola. It highlights that adding to the complex legacy of precolonial Angola, nation and identity building as a process has been permeated with challenges for the Angolan subject and the various local communities. The analysis is approached with an interdisciplinary lens, which is critical in its appraisal of language, culture and society in postcolonial Angola, and creative in its focus ranging from literature to social sciences, language and cultural studies.

Angola covers 1,246,700 square kilometres of the western region of Southern Africa, and with a projected population of about 32 million (INE 2021) it is the second largest country south of the Sahara after the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Although Portuguese is the official language, there are approximately 100 different local languages spoken, of which Umbundu, Kimbundu, Kikongo, Tchokwe and Ovambo are the dominant national languages. The nation is of huge importance to global geopolitics as well as to the regional context of Africa, as it plays an influential role within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Community of Countries with Portuguese as an Official Language (CPLP).

Furthermore, Angola is the second largest oil exporter in Africa, after Nigeria, and the third largest economy south of the Sahara ([World Bank 2018](#); [OPEC 2022](#)).

Beyond its economic and political relevance, the nation also offers an interesting insight into important issues of global relevance ranging from the gender equality paradigm to questions of identity and culture. For instance, according to the 2014 census the literacy levels of women in Angola remain lower than those of their male counterparts, which in turn results in their over-representation in the informal sector ([MINFAMU 2017](#)). Thus, despite Angola having a National Strategy focusing on Gender Equality and Equity and committing to the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, which includes the objective of attaining gender equality, the World Economic Forum *Global Gender Gap Report* (2021) places Angola in 119th position out of 156 countries. This places Angola considerably lower than other countries in the region, such as neighbouring Namibia (6th) and South Africa (18th), thus highlighting interesting themes for comparative research.

Seen by some commentators as a rival to Nigeria, over the past decade Angola has wielded its continental influence in a variety of situations, including the troubled period of coups and military transition in Guinea-Bissau (2012–14). Nonetheless, outside the country, Angola continues to be viewed largely through the prisms of oil enrichment and elite corruption and control ([Soares de Oliveira 2015](#)), the impact of the civil war on the country ([Pearce 2015](#)) and in some quarters through the transnational influences brought to bear by the Cuban involvement in the country's civil war ([Glejjeses 2016](#)). Yet in all of this, the perspective of Angolans who are not members of the socio-economic elite is often overlooked.

By the 1960s Luanda had become home to the second largest settler presence south of the Sahara, after South Africa, driven by the overseas settlement policy of Portugal's Salazar dictatorship and by its strong economic growth ([World Bank 2018](#)). Subsequently, the nation has experienced enormous transformations since independence in 1974. These range from the end of the Revolutionary war, through the entrenchment of MPLA rule in the face of South African and CIA-backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebel forces in the south of the country, to the troubled transition following the end of the civil war, the rise of the petro state and the impact of the oil economy both on members of Luanda's tiny elite and on the population as a whole. Until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the nation had also made significant progress in poverty reduction: according to the United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP 2020](#)), between 2000 and 2019 Angola's Human Development Indicator value increased by 45.2 per cent.

However, even throughout this period of growth, inequality remained high, with the Gini coefficient being 0.53 in 2018 and with a poverty rate of 19 per cent in urban areas and 58 per cent in rural Angola ([Tvedten et al. 2018](#)). Furthermore, the

Democracy Index 2020 classified Angola as an authoritarian regime and ranked it 117th out of 167 countries, highlighting the limited scope for electoral process and pluralism, low functionality of the government and low incidence of civil liberties ([Economist Intelligence Unit 2021](#)). Here again, although Angola is better placed than other Lusophone African countries such as Mozambique (122nd) and Guinea-Bissau (147th), it remains far behind other countries such as Cabo Verde (32nd) and its neighbouring nations, South Africa (45th), Namibia (58th) and Lesotho (64th).

The impacts of the economic and social collapse that has accompanied the response to the Covid-19 pandemic have certainly been devastating in Angola, as in most parts of the world. The sudden fall in demand for oil led to a steep decline in the value of the kwanza currency, from 482 to the US dollar on 1 January 2020 to 570 by May 2020, and then 645 by the end of the year, a decline of nearly 40 per cent.¹ With food imports constituting 20 per cent of national food consumption, this led to price rises which the poor could ill afford; meanwhile, border closures aggravated the situation, with ‘shortages of agricultural inputs’ occurring already by May 2020 according to a World Bank report, and a decline in the availability of irrigated crops for sowing.² By November 2020, the unemployment rate in the country was estimated at around 50 per cent, whereas it had been 31.8 per cent at the end of 2019.³ The devastating impacts of the pandemic response in Angola make the articles collected here all the more significant. The [African Development Bank \(2022\)](#) estimates that the country’s economy contracted by 5.4 per cent in 2020, and debt restructuring has already been widely called for.⁴

The experience of these hardships plunged people back into a situation which many compared to the civil war. Unrest grew. Large protests took place in October and November 2020, becoming increasingly regular in the first months of 2021 and culminating in a major protest on 20 March 2021.⁵ State repression and coercion quickly became associated with the rise of Covid-19 *confinamento* (lockdown) policies. Police fired on peaceful protesters in November 2020, killing one person;⁶ brutal suppression of protests was widely reported.⁷ State repression was related not only to protests but also to other levers of control over citizens. In one infamous case, a doctor died in mysterious circumstances in a police cell after being arrested for not

¹ For the May 2020 figure, see [UNDS & World Bank \(2020: 12\)](#). Following the war in Ukraine, the kwanza regained value and the exchange rate has reverted to 427 kwanzas to the US dollar at the time of writing.

² [UNDS & World Bank \(2020: 13\)](#).

³ [UNDS & World Bank \(2020: 15\)](#).

⁴ [Africa Report \(2021\)](#).

⁵ [Crisis24 \(2021\)](#).

⁶ [Human Rights Watch \(2020\)](#).

⁷ [DW Akademie \(2020\)](#).

wearing a mask in his car.⁸ Meanwhile, for children and young people, schools closed for an entire calendar year, and economic hardship meant there was a widespread increase in prostitution among young women. The devastating socio-economic situation was compounded by severe floods in April 2021 in Luanda,⁹ which followed a prolonged drought which had seen widespread hunger.¹⁰

This extreme situation makes the articles collected in this issue all the more timely and significant. Across the world, a generalised discussion is ongoing on the need to rebuild after the catastrophes of 2020–21. But what should the basis of this rebuilding be in a country such as Angola, which has experienced such a turbulent recent history – but which has the resources and infrastructure to create a prosperous society? The articles collected here offer some clues as to the answers.

Elsa Sequeira Rodrigues' article, 'Continuity and ruptures in the hegemonic model of femininity in Angola: an analysis of the experience of female lecturers at the Katyavala Bwila-Benguela University (Angola)' (2022), begins the issue with a focus on gender relations in postcolonial Angola and the experience of professional women, specifically university teachers in the central Angolan city of Benguela. Building on qualitative research methods and interview data, Sequeira Rodrigues explores the position of women in a modernising society which is built on 'traditional' patriarchal values. The construction of gender stereotypes, and the contribution of these stereotypes to promoting gender violence and inequality, is a key focus of Sequeira Rodrigues' research. Her interviews seek to reveal professional women's feelings of marginalisation and exclusion on the one hand, and the requirement to be all things to all people (colleagues, male partners, wider family) on the other. Without a frank exploration of these themes and their historical underpinnings, Sequeira Rodrigues suggests, it will be impossible for Angolan society to build an inclusive and shared postcolonial future.

The article by Botelho Jimbi and Dinis Vandor Sicala, 'The construct of "national" languages in independent Angola: towards its deconstruction' (2022), and by Nicolau Nkiawete Manuel, 'Language ideology, representation and nationalism: the discursive construction of identity in postcolonial Angola' (2022), bring an important focus to the question of language. Both are concerned with the way in which Portuguese has been promoted as an official and vernacular language in Angola, leading to the marginalisation of indigenous precolonial Angolan languages. Manuel argues that this marginalisation followed a policy conceived and implemented by the Creole elite of Angola, who benefited from the favouring of the Portuguese language. However, the

⁸ Bloomberg (2020).

⁹ Al Jazeera (2021).

¹⁰ VOA (2021).

resultant discourses about nation and identity perpetuate disparate social representations and hierarchies and enforce marginalisation: without a reframing of language policy and ideas, a unified postcolonial nation will be difficult to construct. [Jimbi & Vador Sicala \(2022\)](#), in turn, explore how these differences have been enshrined in law and offer a proposal for reform through the legal re-categorisation of Angolan languages which recognises precolonial languages as national languages: this reform could lead to a more widespread adoption of national languages in pedagogical settings, if the so-called national languages are recognised as official.

Sabino Ferreira do Nascimento's article, 'Reflections of orality in the contemporary narrative of Angolan literature: readings in Boaventura Cardoso' (2022) is in close dialogue with those of Jimbi and Vador Sicala and Manuel. It also begins from the framework of indigenous Angolan discourses and the ways in which they interact with official and elite discourses. However, Ferreira do Nascimento's research addresses literature and the interaction of oral and written forms of literature in postcolonial Angolan writing. His focus is on the oeuvre of Boaventura Cardoso, one of Angola's best-known writers and a major cultural and political figure in the country. Ferreira do Nascimento shows how discourses of orature enable the powerful expression of Angolan realities and, in an analysis of Cardoso's work, shows how the oral interacts with the written discourse in the presentation of postcolonial Angolan society.

The final article in the issue, by Fernandes Wanda, 'The political economy of *partidarização* within the postcolonial state in Angola' (2022), places these socio-cultural questions within their full political context. Wanda analyses the construction of political party identities in postcolonial Angola with special reference to the MPLA. This is an important but under-researched topic, and it enables Wanda to explore transformations in the political scene as they affect and have been affected by civil society. The article shows how the co-optation of people through the MPLA served as a vehicle to entrench established interests. After the end of the civil war, this co-optation became a mechanism for President Dos Santos to assert personal control over the MPLA and the Angolan state. However, this contributed to his removal from office and the appointment of President João Lourenço in 2017, as calls for reform from civil society grew.

Taken as a whole, the articles present an important intervention by Angolan scholars regarding how the country can and should be rebuilt from the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic and the catastrophic response to it. Without a focus on asserting indigenous discourses and ideas, through language and literature, it will be hard for the country to overcome the enormous disparities of wealth and opportunity that plague it. Without a focus on the most fundamental inequity of all, that of gender, Angola is also unlikely to fulfil its true potential. And without political reform, this potential will most likely remain unrealised.

Finally, the editors would like to acknowledge that the articles in this collection are testament to the British Academy's long-standing commitment to questions of knowledge production and location. Questions of location of knowledge production, and of the need to ensure that Global South voices contribute to global conversations, have never been more current in academic life (see Coetzee 2019; Cardoso 2020). These articles derive from two British Academy-sponsored Global South Writing Workshops, which the editors both assisted in organising, the first at the Universidade Agostinho Neto in Luanda in October 2018, and the second at the campus of Universidade Lurio in Mozambique Island in November 2019. Of the many contributors to the Luanda workshop, four also attended the subsequent year's workshop in Mozambique, where the questions posed in the first session were interrogated and developed further.

From these, and from discussions with other scholars in the country, this special issue has emerged. The editors would also like to acknowledge the dedicated work and commitment of the authors to this edition, all of whom worked ceaselessly amid the extremely difficult conditions which this Introduction has discussed to produce this issue in spite of the difficulties, restrictions and sadness associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the response to it.

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To cite the article: Mendes Borges, A. & Green, T. (2022), 'Language, culture and society in postcolonial Angola: introduction', *Journal of the British Academy*, 10(s6): 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/010s6.001>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk

