



BOOK REVIEW

**Mariana P. Candido, *Wealth, Land, and Property in Angola. A History of Dispossession, Slavery and Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Pages xiv + 323 + figures 17 + tables 12.**

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This book presents research on the social and economic transformations ‘associated with the Portuguese conquest and occupation, the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade, the implementation of a plantation economy and the land rush along the West Central African coast from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century’ (p. 7). The strong empirical evidence and deep interpretation make this research a brilliant contribution to the knowledge about Angolan colonial societies, especially for the mid-second part of the nineteenth century. It also provides a solid foundation for posing new questions and undertaking further investigations. The author, Mariana P. Candido, an experienced historian and Africanist, interpreted a wide range of historical sources available in Angolan (*Arquivo de Angola* and *Arquivo judicial da Comarca de Benguela*), Portuguese (*Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*), and Brazilian archives. Wills, deeds, petitions, appeals, inheritance records, lawsuits, land register records, local official and non-official press, administrative reports, postmortem inventories, official and private letters were the primary sources that solidly anchored the book’s argument. Candido also enriches her narrative with many case studies, allowing the reader to understand the complex interactions and social dynamics that constituted the colonial situation in Angola during that period. Moreover, she explored with mastery the potentialities of the ‘colonial Archive’, either by analysing what it reveals or by calling attention to its selective nature and its silences.

The book also aims to challenge prevailing notions about African wealth and accumulation that originated from colonial narratives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which served to normalise colonialism and its violent aspects. One such notion is that the people of West Central Africa were unable to understand and exercise ownership rights because of their emphasis on ‘wealth in people’ (or ‘accumulation of dependents’) rather than ‘wealth in land or goods’ (p. 4). This, combined with the idea that individual property is a natural right ‘innate to human beings’ (p. 29) that Africans lacked but ‘had always existed in Europe and needed to be codified elsewhere’ (p. 81), led to the dismissal of African land regimes and the conclusion that Africa was a continent of vacant

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lands in need of private appropriation and cultivation. Some of these myths, the author tells us, were reproduced in later studies from Africanists and historians who used colonial narratives as sources.

These misconceptions flourished because the story that Candido tells in the seven chapters of her book was (deliberately?) forgotten. This is why the book makes an indispensable contribution to the decolonisation of our understanding of West Central African societies.

In the initial period (chapters 1–2), predating the nineteenth century, primary sources, according to Candido's interpretation, indicate that conflicts over land and occupation rights arose within a framework of legal pluralism, wherein 'the colonial state recognized the right of occupancy and jurisdiction of African rulers and their subjects' (p. 33). Several regimes of land rights coexisted, some shared by the West Central Africans and the Portuguese settlers. Title based on occupation and use rights, collective rights or oral agreements were valid for both parts.

In chapters 2–7, a reconstruction firmly grounded in empirical evidence reveals a series of changes, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century, that accelerated prior processes of land seizure, privatisation, and commodification. Three interconnected aspects drove these processes: the gradual decline of slave exports from West Central Africa, which encouraged investments in trade and cash crop production, intensifying competition for land and creating new labor force requirements. Concurrently, the dissemination of liberal ideas about law, property, and productivity established a legal framework that favored privatisation and expropriation. Liberal notions emphasising codified law based on natural rights rooted in what was interpreted as universal Reason supplanted the plural legal system of the pre-nineteenth century favouring the imposition of Portuguese legislation on land use and distribution. Inspired by liberal ideas that prioritised written evidence and individual rights over land, this legislation disregarded communal concepts of land use and occupation rights. Land was classified as vacant, traditional African rulers lost their authority to allocate land and mediate disputes to the Portuguese administration and most local West Central African populations faced expropriation and impoverishment.

In chapter 6, Candido links the 'consolidation of land ownership in the hands of colonial settlers, foreign merchants, immigrants, and a few wealthy West Central Africans' to the 'perpetuation of the commodification of people, sometimes in new guises' (p. 199). Landless population, enslaved individuals, and freedmen with ambivalent legal status (*libertos*, *serviçais*) were compelled to work in the new colonial enterprises. Candido demonstrates that the commodification of land coexisted with the commodification of human beings, the latter involving an amount of violence that challenges another preconceived idea according to which slavery in West Central Africa was 'a milder or less-violent institution than that established in America' (p. 157).

This book is about 'Dispossession, Slavery, and Inequality'. The readers can hear the voices of dispossessed West Central African populations by reading it, because Candido surmounted the invisibility and silencing effects produced on them by colonial records. However, most of her text is not about them or their agency, despite the rich information it provides about the unsuccessful efforts of enslaved and freed people in employing abolitionist norms and institutions to assure freedom.

What the book profusely illustrates is the agency of those who were the agents of social and economic transformations: colonial officers, settlers, missionaries, and an elite of African men and women. Living within colonial urban spaces and embracing written culture, they could take advantage from colonial courts, law and bureaucracy to contest and assert property rights over land and human beings.

The role played by this group highlights that, while facilitating the expropriation and impoverishment of most Africans, the Portuguese liberal regime created opportunities for colonisers but also for an elite of locally born individuals who 'could be classified as Black or mixed race'. This was due to a color-blind legal framework that allowed these individuals to benefit from the individualism and the market's liberalisation. The documents founded by Candido lacked, as she notes, any reference to skin color or a potentially detrimental past, contrasting with early modern exclusions based on religious, ethnic, or 'blood purity' criterion. Additionally, it provided certain local groups the opportunity to escape local systems that denied them their rights, such as women and young people, both before and after the decree that extended the general application of Portugal's first Civil Code of 1867 to Portuguese overseas colonies in 1869. This decree recognised the validity of primarily non-Catholic local groups' 'practices and customs', while also allowing individuals from these groups to choose to follow the Civil Code, thereby mitigating the discriminatory effects described by Candido (chapter 6, p. 220–1).

By telling histories of this elite Candido demonstrates that West Central African men and women were not passive agents of colonisation and globalisation, as they acted 'as global consumers, interesting in accumulating goods, solidifying the supremacy of private property' (p. 231). On the other hand, their existence challenges '(...) the supremacy of the concept of wealth in people as a paradigm for understanding West Central African economies and processes of wealth accumulation' (p. 233).

We cannot but agree with Candido that the opportunities resulting from liberalism were limited to those with access to colonial bureaucracy and were not intentionally designed to include colonised local people. More contentious is to label these African elites as 'still colonial subjects'. This classification overlooks the self-perception of these groups in the nineteenth century and the intricate nature of the divide between the colonised and the colonisers, particularly in a 'liberalised' colonial society. The members of these elite were deeply interested in private property, benefited from land transfers, owned plantations and human property, and engaged in the trade and consumption of global commodities, including human beings. They identified themselves as part of Portuguese colonial society and sought to distinguish themselves from the majority of West Central Africans who could not afford imported goods ('They avidly consumed imported products, spoke Portuguese and Umbundu, dressed in Western fashions, and asserted their belonging to colonial elite', p. 234). Can historians impose them the historiographic classification of 'colonial subjects', devaluing their own perceptions?

Finally, it is essential to assess the extension of detrimental impact of the 'rise of global liberalism' and its legal framework on the very circumscribed West Central African territories under Portuguese conquest and administration in the nineteenth century. This evaluation should underscore aspects that are not absent from the book but deserve greater emphasis. Namely, the short and limited Portuguese

presence in West Central Africa in the concerned period, or the extent of compliance with colonial legislation. The non-observance of this legislation disadvantaged enslaved and freed West Central Africans who could have otherwise benefited from the protective aspects of abolitionist laws, as noted by Candido. However, it may have also shielded part of the African populations from the predatory effects of formal law and institutions. These considerations are particularly relevant for territories outside the colonial urban centres (Luanda, Benguela), which are less described by the documentation, or for parts of the territory that were only minimally influenced by a limited and fragile colonial administration (p. 107, 207, 244, 247–8).

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