The Post-Colonial Angolan State and the Angolan Women, Part II: The Dilemmas of an Open Society

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The last issue of Social Science Across the Globe: Africa featured the first installment of a two-part series dedicated to the relation between the Angolan post-colonial State and Angolan Women. It was explained how such an over-enclosing category is in fact one of the many legacies of the colonial period. Furthermore, it was made plain how the set of values associated with the category of the population thus defined suffered a continuous metamorphosis until the present day. From being seen as the privileged partners of the Portuguese colonization to the rear-guard of the Angolan revolution, women in Angola for over a century now have been considered by the subsequent central administrations as a coherent whole. The obvious exception to this rule is to be found in the work of the colonial anthropologists who dealt with specific groups within the ethnic patchwork that is still being molded by the Angolan nationalists into a single national identity. In their ethnographies new categories were created, such as Bakongo Women, Tchokwe Women or Kikuyu Women, each one associated with the new ethnic communities being shaped. In their works, nevertheless, the main focus is on male costumes and male-dominated institutions, and as such the pictures drawn of women are more or less in compliance with the western-informed State discourse.

Nowadays, Angola is becoming more and more committed to the adoption of neoliberal principles as a way to keep up with the demands of its foreign investors and donors. The State hesitates between enforcing its own official discourse about Angolan Women and allowing the civil society to produce unaligned discourses of its own. Because of the opening of the Angolan State towards the international community, the official discourse about women in Angola is currently informed not only by the colonial legacy and the internal debate about which traditions to maintain, but also from new externally imported models promoted by international agencies and the United Nations. The discourses shaped by the Division for the Advancement of Women of the Secretariat of the United Nations, as well as by the United Nations Development Fund for Women, merged with the ongoing one

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newly imported neoliberal values were drawn into this root level debate.

One event that stirred the public opinion in this new era was the Miss Landmina Angola contest, first held in 2007. The pageant was the creation of a Norwegian artist Morten Traavik. Financed by the Norsk Kulturud (Arts Council Norway) and with the support of the National Intersectorial Commission for Humanitarian Demining and Assistance of Angola (CNIDAH), it seemed that the project had everything necessary to be considered a success in the new political era. But the discussion around it soon became bitter. Although the Angolan Government supported the event, and the First Lady of the country was present at the awarding ceremony in the second edition (2008), in the discussion that ensued the event some ghosts from the past surfaced, in the form of neo-colonialism accusations. Traavik dismissed the criticism coming his way by claiming that it resulted of the misplaced anger of old-school feminists that cannot accept beauty-pageants tout court. Nevertheless the polemic created by the contest ran quite deeper than that.

Once again in 2007, Angolan Women were being shown to the world, pictures taken of/from them to become icons, Traavik claimed, of strength, resilience and determination. The pageant was obviously meant for external consumption since Angola has thousands of landmine survivors scattered across the country, men and women of all ages, and the shock it intended to cause has no internal impact whatsoever. On the other hand, in a country where everyone knows firsthand the tragic reality of landmine mutilation, the claim that the pageant would sensitize Angolans to the values needed to cope with the hard life that comes after the disaster is preposterous: witnessing the daily life of the survivors is a much more pungent, albeit banal, way of doing so.

So the question came up: is this novel way of representing Angolan Women just a new take on an old way of exploiting women in Angola? Taking into account the pictures of these women being dressed and processed like mannequins and the fact that they would never be so much as able to buy the magazines where their images will be showcased the answer seems to be yes. The prize of the pageant in the 2008 edition also points in this direction. It consisted of an orthopedic prosthesis, $4500 USD, a television set, a motorbike, a stove, a fridge, a blanket and a bed sheet. Morten Traavik tried to showcase Angolan Women according to the new neoliberal set of values, but ended up exploiting them in order to export pictures whose shock value would only have currency abroad, turning them once more into commodities for external consumption.

One other contest, this time with the considerable final prize of $20,000 USD, was to cause an even more heated debate. In June of 2009, while I was still conducting fieldwork in Luanda, the final competition of the Bumbum Dourado (Golden Buttocks) pageant was to take place there.
At the last minute the competition was prohibited by the Direcção Provincial da Cultura de Luanda (Provincial Direction of Cultural Affairs of Luanda), urged by a group of women from Luanda, under the claim that the event would be a harsh humiliation of Angolan Women. The semi-finals of the competition had already taken place in other Angolan provinces, such as Benguela, Namibe and Huila, where the prizes consisted of $10,000 USD. The only rule of the pageant: contestants would exhibit their buttocks in the most “alluring way.”

After the pageant’s prohibition advocates of the recently acquired freedom of speech found themselves in a hard spot, while condoning a competition they saw as culturally debased some defended that, even lacking in any merit whatsoever, the pageant should have been allowed to take its due course. The event was legal in every sense, and the interference of the State to protect an ideal of Angolan Women was seen as a dangerous slippery slope. The age when the State could dictate its official discourse on women taken as a whole was over, they claimed, so the civil society had to be allowed a sporting chance to promote or discourage democratically all the competing discourses that stream from its members.

Significantly, in the provinces where the pageant was allowed that democratic process was precisely what transpired. In local medias different opinions where expressed. Some people saw the whole affair as a legitimate business operation rightly aimed at earning profits. Others tried to convince their fellow Africans not to participate in the continuation of myths externally produced concerning their own sexuality. The last ones often base their claims in anthropological work conducted in Angola before the independence, claiming that in traditional societies the lack of a taboo associated with the female body would render this kind of competition absurd. As such, this fetishization of a female body part is portrayed as a foreign import and a threat to the national identity. These two events marked the opening of a debate that was for too long postponed: is it legitimate for the State to maintain an official discourse about a monolithically reified section of the population, such as Angolan Women? In the coming years the Angolan civil society has the arduous task of answering this question and taking the due actions. Such an official discourse will certainly influence the way the state regulates wages, taxation, social security benefits and access to healthcare and education, so it is only fair that the main interested can organize in nongovernmental organizations and have their opinions heard. In the debate that will surely ensue, the contribution of historians, anthropologists and social scientists will be vital. Be it in the questioning of colonial and post-colonial myths (women as partners of the colonization or rearguard of the revolution), or in the deconstruction of the male centered anthropological discourses about women produced during the colonization. New discourses, finally produced in a plural and democratic society, will surely count with the opinion of women that for so long were deprived of any agency whatsoever.

ENDNOTES
2. For the bibliographic references of the most important colonial anthropologists working in Angola consult the June issue.
3. For an early critique of the representation of women in classical or colonial anthropological consult one of the articles that marked the dawn of the new anthropology of women in the early seventies: Edwin Ardener’s “Belief and the problem of women,” part of the work “Perceiving Women,” edited by Shirley Ardener. In it Edwin claims that women in classical anthropology were “effectively missing in the total analysis or, more precisely, they were there in the same way as were the Nuer’s cows, who were observed but also did not speak.”
4. As opposed to male citizenship, that usually comes with no strings attached. For a brief commentary on the historical nature of dual citizenship requirements consult Oyèrónkè Oyèwumi’s The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses.
5. Illustrative of this point of view is a recent interview with Isabel Massocelo, the director of the Central Hospital of Luanda, in it she is asked a series of questions, dealing with her own experience as a woman in a top position, and with the need to provide good health care for women. Although being quite acute in her analysis of the main obstacles to gender equality in Angola, she still considers that it is essential to provide good healthcare and education to women not only because they are equal citizens, but because being healthy and alphabetized they can better provide for their husbands and children. This expectation is not symmetrical, and men are expected to partake of the benefits of the social state just because they have the right to. Jornal de Angola on-line, 2010, Mulher é crucial para o progresso. Here.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
23. For a comparison between the situations of Women versus the State in different forms of State organization see chapter 5 of Henrietta Moore’s Feminism and Anthropology, entitled Women and the State. In it the author also does a brief reappraisal of the history of the anthropological analysis of the State.