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Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues, O ***Trabalho Dignifica o Homem :*** ***Estratégias de Sobrevivência em Luanda***

Lisbon, Edições Colibri (« Tempos e Espaços Africanos »), 2006, preface by Y.-A. Fauré

Jeanne Marie Penvenne

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Cristina Udelsmann Rodrigues, *O Trabalho Dignifica o Homem : Estratégias de Sobrevivência em Luanda*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri, 2006, preface by Y.-A. Fauré (« Tempos e Espaços Africanos »)

Texte intégral

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1Even within the broader context of large scale and rapid urbanization throughout early twenty-first century Africa, Angola's concentration of population in and around Luanda is extraordinary. Both Luanda and Maputo absorbed war-affected and displaced populations in the decades following independence in 1975, straining urban infrastructure that was basically designed for settler elites. Although no one is really sure exactly how many people live in Luanda, or even what territory should today be considered part of Luanda, estimates are that between 3 and 4 million of Angola's total population of between 11 and 13 million people now live in Luanda. New generations were born to families who took refuge in the city's *bairros* and *musseques* during Angola's intransigent conflict. Unlike the situation in Maputo, Luanda's population is totally out of proportion with the rest of the country, and a voluntary return to rural areas appears unlikely given the continuing challenges of uncharted mines, ruined infrastructure and enduring insecurity.

2The question in both Angola and Mozambique, however, is how increasing numbers of peri-urban families manage to survive and protect themselves and their families with bleak prospects for employment and very limited municipal or state social services. In a series of studies published from 2001 to 2003 Rodrigues and Ana Bernard da Costa compared family survival strategies in Luanda and Maputo. In 2004 Rodrigues completed a doctoral dissertation based on research in Luanda, *Trabalho Assalariado e Estratégias de Sobrevivência e Reprodução de Famílias em Luanda*. This book is a revision of her dissertation completed at the Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa (ISCTE).

3The book has a preface by Yves-André Fauré, a brief introduction and conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix that includes maps of three Luandan bairros and organizational charts for two of the four enterprises explored in the text. The main text is divided into four chapters ; an introduction to the sources, methods and locations of the study ; a chapter on the growth and socio-economic transformation of Angola in general and Luanda in particular ; a theoretical introduction to waged labor and its specific conditions in Luanda ; and, finally a consideration of family strategies in theory and in practice in Luanda. The conclusions return to the arguments made in chapters three and four.

4The maps in the appendices and elsewhere, referenced to Salvador (2003). are particularly good, so it is frustrating that the reference is not included in the bibliography. One assumes it is Cristina Salvador, but that is left for us to guess. The book's other frustrating shortcoming is its binding. The first twenty pages

basically fell out as I turned them. Such small items aside this is a broad and careful study that raises important questions and contributes both insights and an impressive base of evidence to support the arguments advanced. Implicitly the book promotes strategies for urban economic development that take advantage of cultural and socio-economic practices in lieu of those that ignore or seek to undermine them.

5Although Rodrigues is broadly interested in waged labor, labor associations, and the status that she argues accrues to waged employment in the formal sector, she is careful to help us understand how the small waged labor sector of the urban population interfaces with the much larger group that works, but not for wages. She also elaborates on gender, generation, prestige, and inter-dependence among extended family members and neighbors ; illustrating the complexities and ironies of both the *musseque* and formal sector economies.

6She illustrates that waged workers may be able to count on a fixed and secure income, but that income is seldom sufficient to support their families. Wage earners sorely need to leverage their earnings in order to make ends meet. Wage earners, like workers in the informal sector, develop multiple strategies to enhance their limited earnings. Wages provide capital for family members to invest in a myriad of petty service and market initiatives that add value to the wage package. Those who hold status because they earn formal sector wages are clearly dependent upon less prestigious family members who invest their wages in the informal sector. Informal sector workers at the same time depend upon the wages of employed family members for periodic infusions of capital.

7Although the prestige order might suggest patron-client relationships, Rodrigues describes household economic relationships as more symbiotic and mutually reinforcing than hierarchical, but prestige still mattered. When the ill-paid staff at wealthy Harvard University organized for better pay and treatment they sported t-shirts that read : “You can’t eat prestige !“. You can’t, but status and appearances are important, and a family’s ability to keep up appearances may directly secure the necessary status for access to powerful and potentially lucrative political and economic opportunities. Rodrigues takes her title from precisely that point : “*O trabalho dignifica o Homem. É por isso que trabalhamos, não é pelo salário.*“ (p. 175)

8This large project was conducted in several parts. One part combined focused interviews among families (n = 80), administrators (n = 12) and leaders (n = 46) in three diverse neighborhoods in greater Luanda with a broader survey inquiry among residents of those bairros (n = 557). The other part focused on wage earning laborers, technicians and managers who worked in urban enterprises. Fifty four people who worked in a range of positions were interviewed in four different locations. The combined research generated perspectives from waged workers in a work place and a variety of people living and working in the city’s neighborhoods.

9Interviews reveal that wage earners not only invest their earnings in their family members'informal activities but sometime are themselves informal entrepreneurs after hours – a teacher by day and mechanic by night and weekend (p. 46). In colonial era Mozambique such informal sidelines were called “biscates“. They were ubiquitous and illegal. The Native Affairs Office outlawed them because they were assumed to cause the kinds of ‘problems’Rodrigues mentions, like high workplace absenteeism, and workers investing more in their or their families ‘biscates’than their waged jobs. Rodrigues’s careful study raises a great diversity of experiences and multiplicity of strategies among Luanda’s families. Taken together it might be read as analytically unwieldy, but that is precisely the point.

10The study generated a good deal of statistical information and made good use of existing statistics, while at the same time acknowledging that any claim to exact findings is probably nonsense given the constant movement of populations, particularly among the poorest families. Rodrigues also usefully documents the diverse character of newly formed and older *bairros*, and the rhythms, gendered and ethnic qualities of the formal and informal economies in the different *bairros* and *musseques*. She is as careful to disaggregate her material as she is to aggregate it.

11Fortunately Rodrigues is similarly sensible regarding her interest in the tricky concepts like modernity and tradition. She confirms that people adopt, adapt, alter and accept an astonishing range of postures in virtually all arenas. Their choices are shaped in part by generation and gender but also by class, education and their proximity to power centers. Measurement and analysis is closely overlaid with observations about vitality and variety.

12Rodrigues associates use of the Portuguese language as a measure of Luanda’s modern, urban character. It is clearly a vehicular language in the formal sector, but her statistics on mother tongue strongly suggest that people are not moving toward Portuguese language use in their homes. More than seventy percent of the people who responded to that inquiry said Kimbundo or Kikongo was their mother tongue ; whereas only around five percent said it was Portuguese (p. 109). That suggests that about ninety five percent of urban household communication takes place in languages other than Portuguese. Rodrigues does not go into particular detail about the gendered nature of communication in vehicular Portuguese, market women probably conduct most of their business in Kimbundo or Kikongo.

- 1 A. GAMITO *et al.*, A Family of the Musseque: Survival and Development in Postwar Angola, Washington, (...)
- 2 V. AGADJANIAN, “Men doing ‘women’s work’: masculinity and gender relations among street vendors in (...)

13This book adds nicely to our appreciation of the complexity and diversity of family composition and combined economic strategies to survive amid conflicts

and dilemmas to live another day (p. 207). Given the composition of the waged labor force, this is predominantly a study of masculinities. Rodrigues could have more explicitly and consistently confronted the gender dynamics embedded in her data and analysis. The tensions that arise when women enter male dominated “offices“ as waged labor and when men enter female dominated “street sales“ in the informal sector are many and famously difficult. Rodrigues conveys Gamito *et al.*'s¹ judgment that “the musseques economy is a women’s economy“ (p. 238), but does not explicitly explore the de-scripting and re-scripting of gender relations that takes place when poor and recently arrived migrant men have to undertake street vending of the kind historically seen as “women’s work“. Nor does she make much of Angola’s socialist-era state efforts to promote women’s equality and standing in offices and factories. Victor Agadjanian’s research along these lines in Maputo suggests they are fruitful². That is certainly asking too much from an already full study, but based on this study I am confident that Dr Rodrigues’s consideration of these questions would be both clever and competent.

17 July 2007

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Notes

¹ A. GAMITO *et al.*, *A Family of the Musseque: Survival and Development in Postwar Angola*, Washington, Africa Policy Information Center, 1996.

² V. AGADJANIAN, “Men doing ‘women’s work’: masculinity and gender relations among street vendors in Maputo Mozambique,” *Journal of Men’s Studies*, X (3), Spring 2002.

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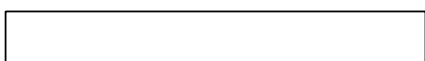
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