

BOOK REVIEWS

Property, Power, and Imperialism in Angola

Wealth, Land, and Property in Angola: A History of Dispossession, Slavery, and Inequality

By Mariana P. Candido. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 288. \$110.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781316511503); \$34.99, paperback (ISBN: 9781009055987); \$26.00, ebook (ISBN: 9781009052986).

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In *Wealth, Land, and Property*, Mariana P. Candido explores the history of dispossession, consumption, and inequality in West Central Africa, more specifically in the region of the Portuguese colony of Angola known as the Kingdom of Benguela and its interior. Drawing upon European and African sources, Candido interrogates the scholarship that claims that Africans had no concept of ownership and land tenure. She shows that jurists and colonial officials penned this idea to justify the expropriation of land by Europeans. Thereafter, scholars incorporated the argument without questioning the intent behind such formulation. In this process, the perspective of indigenous peoples on wealth, accumulation, and rights became ‘invisible or exoticized in the scholarship as primitive, backward, or simplistic’ (1). Candido reviews the transformations of the concept of land use, occupation, and possession from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century by examining how people in West Central Africa exercised land rights and control and displayed wealth. She questions the argument that there was a surplus of land in the continent and a scarcity of people, which means that wealth was accumulated through dependants rather than land.

Candido clarifies that for communities that inhabited West Central Africa and its interior, land rights had been based on the principle of first occupation, meaning that land belonged to the groups who arrived, occupied, and used it first — whether for cultivation or animal husbandry. Some areas were also reserved for religious purposes, understood to be occupied by spirits of ancestors, and were therefore unavailable for cultivation. She demonstrates that land rights were collective and kinship guaranteed access to it by living and deceased members. Individuals belonging to the same lineage had rights of use and occupation that were transmitted to future generations. Candido highlights that individual property rights over land did not exist in Portugal when conquistadores arrived in West Central Africa either. Nevertheless, the Portuguese disregarded indigenous understandings of land rights because recognition that West Central Africans had land tenure regimes would have questioned the whole principle of colonialism based on land occupation and exploitation of natural resources.

Candido’s argument has far-reaching implications, given the prevailing view that land was abundant in the continent and thus less important to political action than elsewhere on the globe. Candido demonstrates that, to the contrary, land was not easily accessible in West Central Africa and was therefore highly valued by inhabitants. Given that the region was a major supplier of captives to the transatlantic slave trade, the indigenous populations were constantly vulnerable. They



faced raids, warfare, and, critically, the destruction of their fields. Endemic political instability restricted where people could cultivate crops, thus focusing attention on the value of arable and secure land.

Candido demonstrates that West Central Africans had clear understandings of land regimes, based on occupation, transformation of the landscape, and burial of ancestors. She shows that since the seventeenth century, indigenous rulers known as *sobas* produced documentation to reinforce land rights, settle disputes, and claim inheritance rights for descendants. Chief Caputo Cazombo, for example, produced records setting territorial boundaries and claiming lineage inheritance rights of land for his descendants in the interior of Angola (45–6). And it was not just land. Candido shows how rulers and commoners alike accumulated wealth in movable and immovable goods that were considered individual property prior, during, and after the era of the transatlantic slave trade. Considering wills and postmortem inventories to demonstrate that those who could accumulate wealth also acquired items produced elsewhere — such as alcohol, weapons, and luxury goods including clothes, jewelry, teacups, hats, and shoes — Candido boldly questions ‘if wealth was solely expressed in the accumulation of dependents, it is difficult to understand the economic motivation of rulers to sell their most prized investment’ (50–1).

This is a dynamic history. During the 1800s, legal changes related to the expansion of liberal ideas in Europe and the end of the transatlantic slave trade altered the value of and the relationship with land across the continent. The pressure to expand plantation economies across West Central Africa accelerated competition for land, eventually consolidating the dispossession of individuals who could not prove occupation rights. In this process, the Portuguese colonial state classified land used for grazing and occupied by spirits as *terras baldias* (uncultivated land) and distributed it to private individuals — mostly immigrants — interested in expanding commercial agriculture, exploiting minerals, and helping advance the civilizing agenda. In an era of expanding bureaucracy and paper culture, local populations had no choice but to embrace written evidence as proof of ownership, even though by doing it they unintentionally helped to erode collective rights and legitimized European ideas regarding ownership and land tenure (96).

By the mid-1800s, the written document took precedence over any other form of proof of occupation. Candido shows how, in the aftermath, occupation of indigenous land was normalized, and local inhabitants became invisible in the colonial records. Although some African-born men and women — especially those living in urban centers — made use of writing to engage colonial legal codes and courts to petition for land and protect their property, they were in the minority. Most Africans faced land expropriation and had no choice but to sell their labor to newly established plantations devoted to the cultivation of crops such as cotton and coffee for North American and European markets.

Wealth, Land, and Property makes a significant contribution to historical debates on land tenure, slavery, and gender in Africa. In this provocative book, Candido challenges the concept of ‘wealth in people’ as a paradigm for understanding West Central African economies and processes of wealth accumulation. She successfully demonstrates that wealth in things, including land, and wealth in people were connected and part of the same system that valued social and economic stratification. Future research may question the applicability of the concept to other parts of the African continent and reveal indigenous tenure regimes obscured in colonial sources.

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