

BOOK REVIEW

John Spall. *Manhood, Morality and the Transformation of Angolan Society: MPLA Veterans and Post-war Dynamics*. Rochester: James Currey, 2020. xiii + 224 pp. List of Illustrations. List of Abbreviations. Bibliography. Index. \$115.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1847012500.

Manhood, Morality and the Transformation of Angolan Society: MPLA Veterans and Post-War Dynamics by John Spall is an anthropological study of Angolan war veterans grounded on ethnographic methodologies, in particular the collection of life stories in Huambo city. Spall uses the concept of moral economies to escape the “predominant framing of much work on war veterans in terms of political economy” (62), focusing instead on those fundamental issues of life and death, morality and peril, virtue and regret. He notes that, more than sharing stories and memories, veterans debate the morality of individual conduct in a world torn apart by colonialism and war. Critically reading the masculine world of MPLA (the ruling party Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) war veterans in Huambo, Spall calls attention to the complex historical, political, and social processes that shaped the people of the central highlands of Angola, who for much of the twentieth century were torn between Christianity and Ovimbundu custom under colonialism, a struggle later confused by the political nature of post-independence rule.

In a book divided into six chapters, each organically building upon the previous, Spall focuses on three men whose stories seem to encapsulate the social and economic experiences of veterans in Huambo. He organized his data in social styles, identifying three epithets that condense the identities of veterans: the Christian, married, and church-going man, the traditionalist influenced by Ovimbundu custom, and the self-professed womanizer (150). Through these identities, veterans discuss “the moral chaos threatened by the decline of deference towards elder men; the rise of money as the basis of social status and authority; the shame and immorality of a man’s wife earning more than him and disrespecting his authority; the deceptions, dangers and broken promises of formal politics” (11). Masculine ideals are explored from the perspective of the role of men in family and society in a country that equates age and masculinity with wisdom and respect. Men’s notions of success and failure are tied to their moral position with regard to their

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suspicion of the political world, the feeling of betrayal by the state after the civil war, and their dedication to religion and church. Within this dichotomy, a syncretic mix between Ovimbundu tradition and Christianity emerges as the central cultural and social tenet guiding their agency.

Many of the veterans Spall worked with sought in the bible the very sources of moral and ethical behavior to keep them away from doing “stupid things” (102), which usually meant alcohol consumption and a predatory behavior toward women. One case in point is domestic violence, which albeit not the norm was hardly the exception, with some of Spall’s veterans expressing pride in never having beaten their wives. The book takes a somber turn when it discusses the conduct of veterans during the war, a danger to be survived not only physically but morally (27). Acts of violence had moral consequences veterans would have to live with for the rest of their lives, acts which could easily deprive them of the moral respect associated with age and wisdom and turn them into “useless elders” (55). The promise of reintegration into civilian life after the war fed the men’s struggle to maintain a sense of moral integrity that would define their social role as male elders. Nevertheless, readers should not find the apparent lack of violence in a book about war and veterans to be inconsistent, although Spall could have underscored it more emphatically. Alongside the notion these men have of absent social mobility due to the way the civil war has dictated their fate, it is clear that trauma feeds rash decision-making and a loss of sensible conduct. This is especially noticeable when Spall writes about veterans’ experiences regarding the corrupting allure of money amid the total irrelevance of merit in the face of economic power (Chapter Three), an issue that has plagued solidarity and confused morality between Angolans since the economic boom after the war.

This book is an important contribution to the social history of Angola that now finds its way into our bookshelves, written by an author who is an authoritative voice in what concerns the post-war experiences of war veterans. It is a must-read for everyone with an interest in Angola, particularly the younger generation looking to complete the national picture beyond the capital city of Luanda.

Vasco Martins 

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra
Coimbra, Portugal

vascomnsm@gmail.com

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