

Political and religious lines redrawn in post-war Angola

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Ruy Llera Blanes of LSE's Department of Anthropology and the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon looks at the evolution of the relationship between Church and State in post-war Angola.

In January 2011, I began a research project on religion in Angola, entitled *The Politics of Hope: Churches and the Weaving of Society in Post-War Angola*, coordinated by my colleague and friend Ramon Sarró (ICS, Lisbon). The starting point for the project was recognising that religion (especially Christianity) now has a central role in Angolan society which would have been inconceivable just a few years before the end of the war in 2002.

Luanda is among the African cities with the highest number of churches with religion becoming more and more prominent in the country. Mega cathedrals, public services and pilgrimages, media coverage, street preaching – all these are symbols of the 'religious proliferation' that exist in contemporary Angolan society.

I have included my previous anthropological research on the 'Tokoist Church' in this project. The 'Tokoist Church' is a Christian prophetic movement that began in the 1950s after a former Baptist Mission student, Simão Gonçalves Toko (1918-1984) set up his own church after a charismatic event in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) in 1949.

The Tokoist case is a model for the changing relationship between religion and politics in postcolonial Angola. In colonial times, the movement had been the victim of severe repression by the Portuguese authorities, persecuted because of reportedly being a 'terrorist movement'.

Toko and many of his followers were imprisoned, tortured and deported by the PIDE (Portuguese Political Police of the Estado Novo regime). It was a strategy that failed to prevent the religious movement's growth. Additionally, it fed into the church's memory and ideology of martyrdom.

After Angolan independence in 1975, the situation did not improve for the church. It suffered at the hands of the MPLA government –inspired by Marxist-Leninist anti-religious ideas and also suspicious of Toko's leadership, namely on behalf of the first Angolan president, Agostinho Neto.

Persecution continued when the prophet passed away in 1984, while a leadership struggle led to internal conflict within the church. As a result, the church was split into different factions. When the Angolan government adopted a more tolerant attitude to religious affairs in 1992, at least three different 'Tokoist Churches' were recognised.

The situation was partially resolved in the year 2000, when a man called Afonso Nunes, claiming to have been 'incorporated' by the spirit of Simão Toko, took over one of the main branches and operated a movement of reunion, expansion and public impact. His success was partial yet notable.

By proclaiming a 'new era' in the church which appealed to the younger generation, Nunes has transformed Tokoism from a clandestine, resilient church to a vibrant, public religious movement that operates on a



Simão Toko in 1962, before leaving for an exile imposed by the Portuguese colonial authorities Source: Arquivos Nacionais Torre do Tombo.

transnational basis, while being progressively identified as *the* Angolan Christian church.

Today, Nunes is a public figure in Angolan society, and can be seen, heard or read praising the memory of former President Agostinho Neto (*Jornal de Angola*, 19 September 2010), supporting the MPLA government (*Jornal de Angola*, 7 February 2011) and siding with its main social policies (*Angola Press*, 13 March 2011).

However striking this repositioning may seem, it is a reflection of the Angolan post-war social and political scene, where ideas and debates on reconstruction, progress and hope have become pervasive, crossing boundaries between religious and political spheres.



Bishop Afonso Nunes preaching in Luanda, April 2011. Photo: Ruy Blanes



Tokoist believer praying at the door of Tokoist temple in Luanda, October 2008. Photo: Ruy Blanes