



RECENSÃO

*A Prophetic Trajectory. Ideologies of Place, Time
and Belonging in an Angolan Religious Movement,*
de Ruy Llera Blanes,
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The Tokoist Church, or, as its full name reads, the ‘Church of our Lord Jesus Christ in the World Remembered on 25 July 1949 by His Holiness the Prophet Simão Gonçalves Toco’, is one of the largest religious movements in Angola, and its ‘Universal Temple’, inaugurated in the *Golfe* neighborhood of Luanda in August 2012, is the largest church building in the country. Paradoxically, it is also one of the lesser known and studied Angolan religious movements, and it is hardly ever mentioned in comparative work on African independent churches or prophetic movements. This book, a multi-sited ethnographical, social, and historical biography of the church’s founder Simão

Toco and of his contested legacy, therefore fills an important gap, not only in the historiography of religion in Angola, but also in the wider comparative literature on African religious movements – both within the continent and in the diaspora.

Three main themes run through the book: remembrance (or memory), absence (or exile) and suffering. Remembrance is at the very heart of Tokoist theology since Simão Toco “did not *found* the church; in fact, he *remembered* it, returning to us the original church of the apostles that had been meanwhile corrupted” (p. 18, quoting a church elder – emphasis original). Simão Toco lived in forced exile during most of his time on

Earth. Born in Northern Angola in 1918 into the Baptist missionary community, he eventually moved to Léopoldville in neighboring Congo in the late 1930s after disagreement over wages with the (white) missionaries. It is in Léopoldville that he started his life as a choir master and a preacher, until the Holy Ghost descended upon him on 25 July 1949. Within a few months, the number of his followers grew rapidly, and he was eventually deported to Angola with 82 of his followers for allegedly creating disorder and “making politics” (p. 55), a complaint that apparently originated from Baptist missionaries. In Angola, the group was scattered in various parts of the country by the Portuguese authorities, Toco being eventually exiled to the *Baía dos Tigres* in the very South-West of the colony, and later (1963-1974) to a remote island of the Azores archipelago. Much of the church’s theology and practice, as the author shows, is thus based on the double experience of exile and absence, with Toco spending much of his time in the Azores corresponding with his followers in Angola.

The Tokoist community was also built on a history and experience of common suffering, first at the hands of the Portuguese political police, which saw the church as subversive and supporting anti-colonial rebellion. Then, in the immediate post-independence period, it was confronted by the anti-religious policies of the Marxist-oriented MPLA. After Toco’s death in 1984 the church went through a profound succession crisis which, adding to the narrative of

suffering, led to its division into various chapels and currents. The crisis was only partly overcome with the advent of a new leader in 2000, Bishop Afonso Nunes. Nunes, claiming to have been visited by Simão Toco who “returned from [H]eaven [...] in order to proceed with his vital trajectory” through him (p. 155), oversaw the massive growth of the church in post-war Angola, both in numbers and in public visibility. But the church remains divided since descendants from the group of twelve elders that Toco had built around him back in late 1940s in Léopoldville still refuse to acknowledge Bishop Nunes as Toco. The book carefully weaves these entangled histories into a narrative that follows the making of a “Prophetic Trajectory” in Congo, Angola, and Portugal and thereby revisits the role of time and place in the development of African Christianity.

The book is divided into two parts. In part 1 (chapters 1 and 2), we follow the life of Simão Toco and the making of a church in a hostile political environment. The author places the birth of the church in the context of religious effervescence in the Lower Congo of the 1940s, and shows how persecution on the part of Belgian and especially Portuguese colonial authorities had ambivalent consequences for Tokoism. The very suffering experienced by Toco and his followers was turned into the church’s spiritual cement. In addition, the hostile Portuguese policy of splitting the movement into several groups and exiling them in various parts of the country contributed to broadening its

social base from (exclusively) *Bakongo* to, potentially, pan-Angolan. Finally, the PIDE/DGS, Salazar's political police, which followed it very closely and produced thousands of pages of reports that provided the author with a rich archival base, constructed it as a movement that was not only spiritually emancipatory, but which came to be seen as advocating the liberation of Angolans from political and racial oppression as well, thereby turning it into an anti-colonial movement of sorts. The author is cautious not to make any direct link between the spiritual and the political when analyzing the issue, and he also recalls that Toco himself was ambiguous, shifting between emancipatory rhetoric and pro-Portuguese official statements (see for instance pp. 77-80). But whether or not the development of Tokoism should be read through the lens of "resistance" remains an open question that would have deserved longer developments. And if today "Tokoism is highlighted for its resistance and is often displayed as a spiritual, intellectual version of the liberation struggle" (p. 98), this does not imply that this was part of Toco's project at the time, or even that this is how his message was heard by his followers. Political repression did not stop with independence. Part I ends with the first years of MPLA rule, marked by fiercely anti-religious rhetoric and policies in an attempt on the part of the party to extend its control over Angolan society, which had negative consequences for the Tokoist church, as well as for its Catholic and Protestant counterparts (except perhaps

the Methodist Church, which built a close collaboration with the party).

Part II (chapter 3 to 5) concentrates on Simão Toco's successful yet highly contested legacy following his death, in 1984. The author shows how the tropes of suffering, exile and remembrance have been worked into the pillars of the church in Angola, and how they were at the basis of its extension into Portugal through migrant families. Struggles over memory and remembrance are all the more important in the development of the church due to Toco's physical absence throughout most of his life and to the division of the church in several rival currents. Of particular interest is the account of the rise of Bishop Nunes in this dissentious context (chapter 4). From the evidence brought by the book, the rapid development of the church as a pan-Angolan religious movement delivering a message of spiritual emancipation while remaining at a clear distance from the mundane and the political seems to be a perfect match with the regime's agenda of state- and nation-building in the post-war era. The church's 'new departure' under Bishop Nunes could thus stand as the spiritual mirror image of the regime's policy of consigning the war into oblivion and driving Angolan society toward accelerated modernization under tight social and political control by the party.

While it has a true theoretical ambition, the book is based on remarkable field- and archival work, both in Angola and Portugal, with a mix of oral testimonies and archival sources from within the church as well as from the

colonial political police. The author obviously managed to gain the confidence of the church and had access to unique sources and testimonies. Somewhat surprisingly though, the referencing system, as far as archival material goes, is regrettably loose, and although the archival files of the PIDE/DGS are listed in the bibliography, references made in the text to specific documents are very vague. Also, while the structure of the argument is clear, the book suffers at times from the use of unnecessary jargon that tends to obscure the author's reasoning rather than support it. Finally, some statistical data on the church and its followers, as hard as they may be to access in the Angolan context, would have been very

useful in order to illustrate and sustain some of the theoretical arguments made.

These few shortcomings notwithstanding, this is a highly original and solid study that opens up new ground for research on transnational and multi-local Christianity, and it offers the reference work that many had been waiting for on the history of the Tokoist church.

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