"Os Bons Colonizadores": Cuba’s Educational Mission in Angola, 1976–1991

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Both Angola’s achievement of independence from Portugal on 11 November 1975 and the first fifteen years of its postcolonial existence are inextricably tied to Cuban involvement in the country. The civil war for domination of Angolan national territory, along with constant international threat from South Africa and Zaire, can in retrospect be seen as one of the biggest proxy wars of the Cold War. It would have been unthinkable without the involvement of the Cuban military (about 450,000 soldiers in fifteen years). Over the past two or three decades, the history of this military conflict has been discussed and reviewed along the lines of the predictable Cold War dichotomies; but hardly any attention has been paid to date to the civil mission of about fifty thousand Cuban doctors, teachers, construction workers and technicians who provided reconstruction aid parallel to the military involvement.¹ In both its quantitative and its qualitative aspects (scope, intensity, and duration), this mission marked something quite new in African-Latin American history: it is, in fact, a unique example of a transatlantic South–South cooperation.

¹ The best post-Cold War publication on the topic is Piero Gleijeses’s Conflicting Missions and the Spanish translation published in Cuba: Misiones en conflicto. The latter contains an illuminating prologue of one of the main protagonists of Cuba’s Africa policy, Jorge Risquet. The publication ranges within the field of political, diplomatic and history of foreign relations; the civilian cooperation is only marginally mentioned. Unfortunately, it ends in 1976. In Cuba there exits very little published information on the civil mission, e.g. Risquet Valdes, 40 años de Solidaridad; Historia de la Colaboración; and unpublished García Pérez Castañeda, “El internacionalismo de Cuba.” In 2005, Edward George published The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965–1991, a very detailed but also a strictly political and military history; aspects of the civilian missions are likewise only marginally mentioned.
In this essay I will offer a multiperspective account of Cuban-Angolan cooperation in the educational field, in order to showcase the motivations, contact zones and spaces of interaction, as well as the mutual perceptions, dependencies, and dissonances of this entangled history. Education was one of the key socio-political challenges of postcolonial Angola. In 1976, eighty-five percent of the population was illiterate; it consisted, furthermore, of speakers of different Bantu and Khoisan languages. At the heart of the educational mission was the construction of a new society and the creation of a nation-state with a more uniform culture. The “new man” shaped by education was a necessary prerequisite to achieving these aims. Both the Angolan Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) government and its Cuban counterparts declared that the educational mission was an “internationalist and solidarity cooperation” between two partner nations that had the same interest, namely to create an independent nation with a socialist society in Angola. Their relationship, though problematic in many aspects, was hidden behind the pretence of a staged mutual friendship.

The starting-point for my account of this entangled history is 1975, the moment at which the close relationship between Cuba and Angola began. I will first consider the particular motivation of each country for initiating the cooperation. Then I will briefly summarize the situation concerning information and resources and explain my approach to this topic. Next, I will concentrate on the interactions and modes of cooperation, as well as their mechanisms and structures. Following that, I will examine the contact zones between Cubans and Angolans, which ranged in character and quality from close encounter and to a strict demarcation of identities. Then I will trace the dissonances of this asymmetric relationship. Finally, I will explain the shared silences about this joint history.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF AND MOTIVES FOR A TRANS ATLANTIC SPACE OF INTERACTION

The entanglement of the Cuban-Angolan history involved the invention of a joint tradition initiated by Cuba, specifically by Fidel Castro, who underlined the “blood” relationship of the countries through the slave trade, slavery, and the Cuban War of Independence. He, in effect, constructed a transatlantic space for interaction, the so-called “Latin-African” nation. This invented tradition implied a return of the former slaves under reversed circumstances (humanism, solidarity, internationalism) to fight together with the Angolan “brothers and sisters” against colonialism, imperialism, apartheid and racism. The issue of race was a central pillar of Cuba’s international policy. The engagement in the anti-colonial struggle in Africa was also a

2 See the address of President Agostinho Neto at the inauguration of the Literacy Campaign in the Textang factory in Luanda at the 22 November 1976, in Jornal de Angola, 23 November 1976, p. 2.
3 See García Márquez, Operación Carlota, which underlined this invention of tradition.
4 Castro first mentioned the Latin-African nation in his public speech at the closure of the first congress of the Cuban Communist Party on 22 December 1975; see Castro, Discursos, 141–152 (here 149) and Castro, Angola Giron africano.
significant contribution to the project of national integration of Cubans with African
descent.\(^5\) Beside the political aims of Cuba and its Angolan partner, the MPLA,
drafted in mutual agreement, there were additional and quite specific motivations for
cooperation on each side.

For the Angolans, the starting point of the cooperation was the military weakness
of the MPLA against rival liberation movements such as the Frente Nacional de
Libertação de Angola (FNLA) and União Nacional para a Independência Total de
Angola (UNITA), as well as the threat of the South African military intervention
from the south and from Zaire in the north. That is why the leader of the MPLA,
Agostinho Neto, asked Cuba for military and financial aid in the spring of 1975. In
fact, the predominance of the MPLA could be achieved only through a massive
Cuban military intervention at the beginning of November 1975. For this reason
alone, the MPLA was able to lead Angola to independence. Angola also urgently
needed civil help for reconstruction to stabilize the country because of the massive
brain drain: ninety percent of the Portuguese population left the country in the
months before independence. Neto, now the first president of independent Angola,
turned again to Cuba for help. But why Cuba? In spite of many difficulties in the
relationship, a kind of political friendship of like-minded people existed between
some figures of the revolutionary Cuban government and some leading figures of the
MPLA, reaching back to the 1960s.\(^6\) This friendship explains the MPLA’s faith in the
military, political, and organizational abilities of the Cubans. Additionally, as a leader
of the Non-Aligned Movement, Cuba could guarantee a certain political
independence from the socialist power block. Cuba’s paradigm of an egalitarian
society, moreover, appeared as an appealing solution to the fundamental problems in
Angola. Finally, Cuba offered a foreign aid proposal, with apparently ideal conditions
that were tailored to Angola’s specific war situation. Even so, Cuban support became
more and more of a necessary evil in the following years.

Cuba’s motivations for its Angolan intervention included, first of all, the
possibility of extending the influence of Castro’s government, both domestically and
externally. The venture held out the prospect of becoming a regional power base as a
counterbalance to Soviet superiority. On the other hand, it could strengthen the
power of the Fidelistas within the Cuban government in a period of political
institutionalization of the Revolution.\(^7\) Additionally, it opened up the prospect of a
partnership with a sizable country, rich in many mineral resources. Cuba had already
gained experience in Africa by exporting weapons, military advisers, and civil aid to
African liberation movements and their governments since 1960.\(^8\) Furthermore, the

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\(^6\) Mabeko Tali, *Dissidências e poder de estado*, 128ff (Vol. 2).

\(^7\) The process of institutionalization of the Cuban Revolution culminated in December of 1975 with the first
congress of the Cuban Communist Party. This congress can also be seen as an intention to embrace the Castro
regime under Soviet rule. Castro took the opportunity of demonstrating the autonomy of Cuban foreign policy
and announced the broader political, military and civil engagement in Angola; see *Informe del Comité Central
del PCC*, 219ff.

\(^8\) Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 30ff.
Angolan assignment offered the possibility of transferring their particular model of society to Africa: the so-called “internationalization of the revolution.” Angola also served as a “revolutionary cadre school” for the generation born during the revolution, and served as a space for disciplining these young people. This said, the Angolan assignment had a dynamic of its own: neither its duration nor its complexity was planned or even foreseen at the beginning of the venture.9

A decisive stimulus behind individual Cubans’ participation in international missions was a curiosity to know the world. Most of them believed in the idea of internationalism and found the idea of a heroic task (“ser como el Che”10) appealing. Additionally, the prospect of career advancement, or, conversely, the fear of professional stagnation, should they reject involvement, played an important role. From a personal perspective, the mission in Angola offered some of them an escape from complicated family situations or from the monotony of everyday life in the restrictive 1970s.11 Furthermore, many were also attracted by the possibility of acquiring Western consumer goods abroad.12 But the reasons for participation in the international mission in Angola might have changed during the whole period. For the first who went, political conviction and a kind of “Che-nostalgia” might have played a major role, whereas the later participants were already informed through hearsay of the difficult conditions of the Angola Mission.

From a military, political, social, and cultural point of view, Cuba was the stronger partner in the relationship from the beginning. Angola required help and Cuba was the helper in the emergency. Or, to take my example of the educational mission as a useful trope, the Cubans were the teachers and the Angolans their pupils. This asymmetry was also reflected in the statements of my Cuban interviewees, who, for the most part, felt culturally superior to the Angolans—even if they expressed themselves very respectfully. The perspective of an Angolan interviewee confirmed this attitude. He notes that Angolans, unaware of the geographical realities, at first assumed that Cuba was a huge, powerful, and developed country, able to provide schooling for Angolan pupils, since it was able to send so many people to Angola to fight against the South Africans and at the same time resist the power of the United States!13

**Information, Resources, Methodology**

Angola, Cuba, Portugal, and the United States were points of references for my research. Though the conditions for research were sometimes very difficult, I was able

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9 See George, *Cuban Intervention*, 115.
10 “To be like the Che.”
11 Many of my Cuban interviewees who worked as cooperants in Angola expressed the mixture of curiosity to know other parts of the world combined with a deep feeling of internationalist duty. But all of them had also personal motivations, expectations and illusions.
12 While on duty in Angola, Cubans had the right to buy consumer goods in special shops such as domestic articles, radios, tape recorders, fans etc.; see interview 1, Luanda, Angola, 10 February 2006.
13 Interview 18, Luanda, Angola, 1 April 2006.
to retrieve sufficient information to characterize this part of the Cuban-Angolan history. My approach is multiperspectival: I connect different levels, including the official, the unofficial, and the personal. Firstly there is the level of the official discourses of both governments, which could be found in the public media, such as newspapers and magazines. These discourses are framed by what I have already characterized as “internationalist solidarity.” A second level is the internal communication of both parties, in this case the communication between the respective ministers, state secretaries, or department heads of the Angolan Ministry of Education (MED) and the Cuban representatives in Angola. This information is included in the files of the Angolan MED. In these files the hierarchies, as well as the asymmetries of the partnership, can be clearly recognized. My interviews with experts or political actors, who set the general framework for cooperation (from Angola, Cuba, Exile-Cuba, and Portugal), also belong to this level. They helped me to decode and understand the internal documents. The third level is the micro-historical, the life histories, the voices of those Cubans and Angolans who met on the spot and which I have recorded in about a hundred interviews. These voices belong to the pupils and teachers, students and professors, advisers and “advised.” In my interviews I learned about sacrifices, disappointments, culture shock, misunderstandings, and prejudices, as well as about identity and demarcation, about pleasure and gratitude, self-assurance and self-invention. I also heard that the history of success that Cuba created (political and military victories, the independence of Namibia, the defeat of the Apartheid regime) did not necessarily affect everyday life. Instead of jubilation and fraternalism, demarcation and disillusion prevailed. A comparison of these three levels illustrates that the Cuban civil cooperation in Angola was and still is determined by an extremely complex network of interests, propaganda, symbolism and power.

INTERACTION: AIMS, STRUCTURES, AND COMMUNICATION

The dual task of fighting illiteracy and, at the same time, replacing the elitist colonial educational system with a system open to everyone stood at the

14 For Cuba there are mainly the newspapers Granma and Juventud Rebelde, as well as the magazines Verde Olivo, Bohemia, Colaboración; for Angola, it’s mainly the Jornal de Angola.

15 The files of the Angolan Ministry of Education (MED) are still not classified; nevertheless, I obtained authorization from the Minister to do my research using these unclassified documents. In particular I reviewed the files of the Department of International Cooperation (Gabinete de Intercâmbio Internacional) that cover the educational cooperation with Cuba from 1976 to 1991.

16 Among them figure the former Angolan Vice Minister of Education, Artur Pestana (“Pepetela”); the first Premier Minister after the Angolan Independence, Lopo do Nascimento; the former Angolan Foreign Minster, Paulo Jorge; the leading Angolan educationalist Pedro Domingo Peterson; the former director of the Department of International Cooperation of the Angolan MED, Manuel Teodoro Quarta; the current Angolan Minister of Education, António Burity da Silva; the former Cuban Minister of Education, José Ramón Fernández; the former head of the Cuban Civil Mission, Jorge Risquet; the former Cuban ambassador in Angola, Rodolfo Puente Ferro; the former Cuban ambassadress in Angola and former director of the Cuban State Commission of Economic Collaboration (Comité Estatal de Colaboración Económico, CECE), Noemi Benítez de Mendoza.
beginning of the cooperation. (In retrospect, we can see that this aim was too ambitious to achieve from the very beginning, and couldn’t be accomplished in fifteen years under condition of war). Education in this context—as in every social context—was not “neutral,” but subject to the ideology of the new state, and was also a strategic instrument that served the purpose of conquering and ruling the whole territory of the state using a network of educational institutions. Education should also help to gain the control over the space and its people. The Cubans possessed the know-how for these techniques of power and domination and the experience and the (military) power to enforce and to transfer them to Angola.

At the beginning, the advisers became the most important issue of cooperation due to Angola’s lack of know-how. These advisers were active in the campaign for literacy, the concept and organization of the educational system, in the pedagogical research or the preparation of curricula. Initially there were political advisers at the ministerial level; in 1977, however, they were demoted to a mere technical level on the initiative of Angola. Angola wanted to determine matters of education policy for itself.\(^\text{17}\) Finally, the training of Angolan teachers—who were in big demand—and also the provision of thousands of Cuban teachers and students, became the biggest instances of cooperation. These Cuban instructors were predominantly employed in natural sciences, geography and history, and stayed in Angola for two years on average.\(^\text{18}\) Because of the language barrier, Portuguese lessons were taken over by Angolans, or teachers from Portugal. Several hundred Cuban university professors were employed at the Angolan university, predominantly in the natural sciences and engineering, but also in economics, history, and geography.

A tremendously important contribution was the establishment of Angolan boarding schools on the Cuban Isla de la Juventud funded in 1977, where several thousands of Angolan children received (and still receive) a free primary and secondary school education, and bursaries to Cuban universities.\(^\text{19}\) Cuba, which deployed more than ten thousand people in its civil mission over the entire fifteen years, became the most important partner for cooperation in education. The assignment of about 2,500 student-teachers between 1978 and 1986 in the so-called “Destacamento Pedagógico Internacionalista ‘Che Guevara’” was due to the

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\(^\text{17}\) I gathered a great deal of information about the advisors’ system from my interviews with the former Vice Minister of Education (1976–1981), Artur Pestana, in Luanda on 27 January and 17 March 2006, as well as with Pedro Domingos Peterson, former director of the National Institute of Investigation and Development of Education of the Angolan Ministry of Education.

\(^\text{18}\) Ordinary teachers used to stay two years; some of the very young student-teachers stayed only one year. Some of the advisers and the university professors tended to be committed to stay only for between one and two years.

\(^\text{19}\) Information about the International (Angolan) Schools on the Cuban Isla de la Juventud exists in various internal documents of the Angolan Ministry of Education. In 1987, five Angolan primary schools existed with almost three thousand students. I also interviewed two former students, two Angolans teaching at the International Schools, and the former Cuban director of the International Schools, as well as gathering information from a unpublished document of the Cuban Ministry of Economic Cooperation (Ortega et al., Estudiantes Extranjeros).
great lack of trained teachers in Cuba.\textsuperscript{20} Furthermore, the Cuban teachers worked in rural areas where neither Angolans nor other foreign cooperators wanted to settle.\textsuperscript{21} There were additional cooperative ventures in education with the GDR, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, as well as with Western countries (Portugal in particular) and African countries (the Cape Verde Islands and Congo-Brazzaville, among others).

My Cuban interviewees confirmed directly or indirectly that the mission in Angola also had the effect of a personal experience of internationalism: of a sense of solidarity with and selfless sacrifice for a like-minded people. The mission filled many cooperants with pride, because they were the chosen ones serving the revolution and the patria. But Cuba’s civil mission seems to have been somewhat self-serving, directed towards its own political, social (and also economic) interests, rather than solely towards the needs of the receiving country. The political intention behind the organization of the delegation of Cuban youth was ultimately to offer those who were born during the revolution—the generation whose parents had experienced the Literacy Campaign and the Bay of Pigs—a revolutionary mass experience, one that would educate them to become revolutionaries and patriots. One of my interviewees summarized it pointedly: “It was . . . all that we didn’t experience, Girón [Invasion of the Bay of the Pigs, 1961], Moncada [assault on the Moncada barracks, 1953], the Literacy Campaign, the harvest of the ten million tons, those things that had something of heroism . . . this thought was shared by many, many people, at least my generation.”\textsuperscript{22} This goal was partly reached. Many participants of the educational mission today hold important positions in the Cuban system of education. Angolan documents on the other hand often reflect the deficiencies of the action force of inexperienced student-teachers, who were between seventeen and twenty years old: “The teachers of the DPI [Destacamento Pedagógico Internacionalista ‘Che Guevara’—the brigade of student-teachers] totally ignore the Angolan reality. Their pedagogic and scientific preparation is weak.”\textsuperscript{23}

The civil cooperation was based on a scientific and technical skeleton agreement, dating from July 1976, which was signed on the occasion of Agostinho Neto’s first

\textsuperscript{20} The history of the “Destacamento Pedagógico Internacionalista Che Guevara” is of course more complex and will be highlighted in a forthcoming article. Apart from this, one of the leading Cuban educationalists explained to me the great difficulty of supplying enough trained teachers for Cuban secondary schools until the 1980s (interview 10, La Habana, Cuba, 15 June and 22 June 2006).

\textsuperscript{21} The highest concentration of Cuban teachers, students and University professors occurred during the years 1981–1983, when around two thousand cooperants per year were actively involved in teaching in Angolan primary and secondary and high schools in almost all provinces of the country (except for the war zones, like the southern province Kunene) and in the Agostinho Neto University in Luanda and its dependencies in Huambo (province of Huambo). Documents from the Department of International Exchange of the Angolan MED provide a wealth of statistical material such as numbers, distribution, and specialties of the Cuban teachers.

\textsuperscript{22} Interview 67, La Habana, Cuba, 5 January 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.

\textsuperscript{23} Document from the Direccão Provincial de Educação da Huila to the C. Director do Gabinete de Intercâmbio e Cooperação Internacional do MED [Head of Province Department of Huila of the MED to the Director of the Department of International Exchange and Cooperation], Lubango, 7 November 1978, p. 2; my own translation from the Portuguese.
state visit to Cuba. Following this, other bilateral agreements in various sections were
signed and adapted to the respective requirements in annual renegotiations of a
bilateral commission. Organizationally, the civil mission was subordinated to the
military one until 1977. Then it became the responsibility of the Cuban embassy in
Angola, but it was still managed by the Cuban government itself. The Angolan
MED—along with other ministries—established a department of supervision, control
and coordination of foreign cooperations in August 1977. Despite institutionaliza-
tion, bilateral agreements and fixed mechanisms a parallel Cuban military–civil
structure existed on Angolan territory with its own administration, information
system, and its own structures for transport, supplies, and defense, none of which was
controlled by Angola.

The claim by Cuba that the cooperation in the civil field was “unselfish”
contradicts the documented and now proven fact that Angola paid for the civil
mission at least until the end of 1983—something that is perfectly justifiable, given
the magnitude of the cooperation and the precarious economic conditions of Cuba.
The payments were made directly to the Cuban government and, depending on the
individual’s professional qualification, amounted to between US$860 and US$1,140
per specialist per month.24 Furthermore, Angola was engaged to organize the
transport and accommodation. The cooperators merely got a little pocket money.25

CONTACT ZONES: ENCOUNTER AND DEMARCATION

After arriving in Luanda, the Cuban collaborators were brought to temporary
accommodation arranged specially for them. From there, they were transferred to
their destinations in the rural areas—if they did not stay in Luanda. They were rarely
in contact with the population; they moved in “Cuban spaces”. Excursions to
“Angolan spaces” were organized and controlled—depending on places and the
military-political situation. The contact with Angolans was limited mainly to official
meetings such as ceremonial acts, formalities, and commemoration days. A recurring
argument for the sealing-off was based on the precarious security situation.
Additionally, the point was to structure and control “Cuban space” in Angola in
similar ways to that of the island itself, in order to limit the freedom of Cubans—and
to avert the danger of escape.26

24 Several documents of the Department of International Cooperation of the Angolan Ministry of Education
contain schedules of the costs of the international cooperation, mainly for the years 1979–1983. Cuban
cooperants were paid in the range of US$ 860 to US$ 1,140 per month, according to their qualifications. But the
schedules also demonstrate that the Cuban cooperants were, together with the Vietnamese, the Congolese and
the Cape Verdians, the most “economic” by comparison with, for example, the Soviets, the Bulgarians and the
Germans (GDR).
25 Almost all my interviewees confirmed that—apart from free food supply and free accommodation—they
received no more than the equivalent of about US$10 a month, in Angolan Kwanzas.
26 One of my interviewees worked in the Cuban Embassy in Luanda and confirmed that every Cuban cooperant
had to deposit their passport in the Embassy during his stay in Angola. Interview 53, Sta. Clara, Cuba,
15 December 2004.
The most acute Cuban-Angolan contact zone, therefore, was the workplace, in this case the school. This space was under Angolan sovereignty. The cooperants had to follow the orders of the Angolan director. Because of Cuba’s integral concept of an education system, it included the leisure time of pupils and teachers in addition to the lessons. Teachers had to organize games sport and cultural events, as well as affinity groups. They also were to include families and communities in the educational concept. This included house visits—in other words, authorized everyday contacts were possible and frequent. However, the teachers were often not permitted by their responsible group leaders to accept private invitations by pupils and parents. This was prevented by the security situation or the evening curfew.

Friendships and love affairs were common among Cubans: young women were in the majority in the teacher brigades and were a great attraction for male cooperators and soldiers because the mission normally took place without partners or children. Relationships between Angolans and Cubans seemed to be more rare—or were not acknowledged. However, Angolans report the “many” children that were left behind by the Cubans in Angola—though I couldn’t find concrete evidence of this. I learned from an interviewee who worked in the Cuban Embassy in Luanda that there were “many” weddings between Cubans and Angolans. A (male) interviewee told me about the strong prejudices of Angolan women toward Cuban lovers: “[They] told me that Cuban men only made babies and then they disappeared.” Nevertheless, some of my interview partners also told me about illegal contact zones, such as the Candonga, the Angolan black market where some of the Cubans transacted business, bartering with groceries and articles of daily use to improve their precarious situation. Their accounts create the impression of a great fascination and profound repulsion because the Candonga seemed to epitomize to them a brutal—dirty and stinking—rampant capitalism: the complete opposite of Cuba’s society ideal. “I was terrified by these Candongas, these Candogas were horrible ... high prizes ... unemployed people with a very low education and horrible brawls.”

As a matter of fact, freedom of action and movement were highly limited due to the persistent war situation. From 1984 on, Cuban civilians were affected by UNITA’s assaults. In provinces in the heartland where fights persisted, Cuban teachers only entered their classrooms armed. For most Cubans, Angola was their first encounter with war. The polarized situation fuelled their suspicion of Angolans; teachers recount that they were even afraid of their own pupils. “We had pupils who were soldiers, many of them were soldiers, some of them had been involved in thirteen combats, they were children. I had pupils who were of the opposition, I got along very well with them but we had to work with AKs at our sides, I had a red bag with

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27 Many of my interviewees talked only “off the record” about their own love affairs, but they almost never mentioned love affairs with Angolans.
29 Interview 51, Sta. Clara, Cuba, 14 December 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.
30 Interview 10, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 4 November 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.
ammunition with me."

Another one told me: “You never forget this great pain inside. All those nights you didn’t sleep ... because you thought that they will kill you ... this is the great suffering that an international mission brings you, but it’s solidarity and you have to fulfil your duty.”

The encounter with Angolans under these circumstances led to distance and demarcation. Angola was a culture shock for most Cubans. They couldn’t identify with Angola or Africa, least of all the Cubans of African descent that I interviewed. The following statement might characterize the perception of “Africa” of many of my interviewees: “I imagined Africa before as I experienced it afterwards ... those people with a low cultural level ... I went as a History teacher ... and I found all those characteristics ... From the moment I arrived in Luanda I was confronted with these African people, these persons with dark skin with that characteristic smell of the Angolans, of all Africans.”

The differentiation intensified their identification with their own culture. Most of them felt even more “Cuban” after their return than before: “I felt more Cuban, more accomplished with my revolution, I had a great desire to be home, with all those things that are our own ... I had a great desire to realize things here.”

In Cuba, Angolans were also pupils. There were only a few Angolan teachers of Portuguese, who prepared Cuban teachers for their departure to Angola and gave lessons to Angolan children in the boarding schools of the Isla de la Juventud. The pupils in boarding schools were not allowed to leave the island unauthorized. Just as Cubans in Angola lived in “Cuban space,” Angolans in Cuba lived in an “Angolan space,” but one that was specially designed and defined for them by Cuba. Encounters with Cubans were organized and controlled, such as cultural and sporting events. The pedagogical aim, moreover, was to let children grow up in an “Angolan space”—with Angolan teachers for Portuguese, geography, and sociology—to prevent a “Cubanization” because of their long-lasting absence from Angola.

Only the Angolan students at Cuban universities had more contact with Cubans. Contacts between Cubans and strangers were very much limited in the 1970s and 1980s. The disruption of discipline by some Angolan juveniles shows why: they left the school island without permission, and bought Western goods with their pocket money in the so-called “Diplo-Shops.” Then they resold them to Cubans on the black market. One of the Angolans responsible for the election of Angolan students

31 Interview 11, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 5 November 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.
32 Interview 10, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 4 November 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.
33 Interview 35, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 22 November 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.
34 Interview 24, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 12 November 2004; my own translation from the Spanish.
35 República de Cuba, Ministerio de Educación ao Cda. Ministro da Educação, Luanda, 23 January 1979, Escolas Angolanas na Ilha da Juventude [Angolan Schools on the Isle of Youth]. The document tells us much about the success of the schools and the plentiful opportunities offered to the students, but also asks for urgent support from Angola, in particular stressing the need for more—and more regular—information about Angola and contact with their families; more teaching materials for the Portuguese lessons; and more typical and traditional materials to help celebrate African cultural festivals.
on the Isla de la Juventud told me in an interview that those problems began to be virulent in the 1980s, when, due to the war situation, more and more children from Luanda came to the boarding schools. Their parents often were better off and sent them money—and some of them made a bargain out of it. Another problem, he explained to me, was that a lot of Angolan students found the Cuban school system too rigorous. Disciplinary problems often appeared after the students had been on their two-month holidays in Angola (which occurred, at best, once every two years, and depended on good marks and behavior) and were sad and unwilling to be back on the island.37

ASYMMETRIES AND DISSONANCES

In addition to the already-mentioned dissonances of everyday life, the most disturbing factor in the Cuban-Angolan relationship, in my estimation, was the Angolan loss of sovereignty to the Cubans. This loss, based on the relationship’s asymmetry, meant a forfeiture of control over one’s own territory and fate. For example, the Ministry of Education hardly had any influence on the choice of cooperants, and often had to content itself with underqualified staff. The Cubans’ annual holidays were a recurring problem. First, the mass exodus of thousands of collaborators was an extreme logistic effort for a country in a state of war and with notorious transport problems. Second, the Cuban holiday entitlement often collided with the end of school term, so that the Cuban teachers left Angola even before the final exams.38

Another problem emerged with the intensification of the military situation in the middle of the 1980s. Citing the precarious security situation, the Cubans relocated or removed their teachers without prior consultation with the authorities of the Angolan MED. This is why the Angolans accused them of “unilateralism.” The similarly “unilateral” decision to reduce the cooperation drastically from 1984 onwards had a disastrous effect on many schools in rural areas, which were mainly sustained by Cuban teachers. However, these breaches of sovereignty were apparently only discussed internally: because Angola was dependent on Cuban support, the Cubans were mentioned in a positive way in public, and even internal documents always stressed that Angola appreciated the Cubans for their grand effort. The internal documents of the MED are frequently self-critical and specify their own organizational and structural deficiencies, especially the insuperable problems of transport on a local, national and international level, which provoked the “unilateral” behaviour of the Cubans. Thus—with a good line of argument—the

37 Interview 22, Angola, Manuel Teodoro Quarta, 3 March, 21 March and 28 March 2006; translation of resumee from Portuguese C. H.

38 Many documents from the Ministry of Education’s Department of International Cooperation deal with the above-mentioned problems that could not be resolved until the end of the Cuban cooperation and were repeatedly discussed internally, not only within the Ministry itself but also in the bilateral commissions that took place with the Cubans.
Cubans organized their transport for holidays themselves, and could completely elude the control of the Angolan authorities.\(^{39}\)

**Memories and Silences**

The Cubans left an unsolved educational problem behind following their withdrawal in 1991. Today’s rate of illiteracy is again at sixty percent.\(^{40}\) The mission was not aimed for sustainability; there were still not enough Angolan teachers to substitute the Cubans. In fact, the constant availability of Cuban teachers prevented the development of an Angolan educational system, as a self-critical statement from an internal Angolan document at the beginning of 1990 indicates.\(^{41}\) Nevertheless, many young Angolans experienced their Cuban teachers in a very positive way because they had a better pedagogical training than their Angolan counterparts. Their lessons were much more interactive, flexible, and interesting. The Cubans could take the credit for the education of at least one generation of Angolans, as one of my Angolan interview partners stated.\(^{42}\) A Catholic priest and physics teacher from the hard-fought province of Kuando Kubango in South-East Angola told me that he wouldn’t have been able to understand physics at all without his Cuban teachers, and that he appreciates that they taught in his community at the cost of great personal privation.\(^{43}\) (Incidentally, many of today’s leading figures in Angolan economy and politics have benefited from the Cuban education.) Despite many positive experiences, the interviews I conducted revealed a range of feelings from admiration to incomprehension. Perhaps the Angolans’ vernacular expression offers the best characterization of what the Cubans meant to them: they called them the “Bons colonizadores,” the “good colonizers.”\(^{44}\) The Angolans actually admired the Cubans because of their self-sacrificing attitude, their diligence, and courage, though they also felt sorry for them because they were sent thousands of kilometres away by their...
government to get involved with foreign people in an alien country without any material advantages!

One aim of the Cuban mission was literally to leave its mark on Angola. Yet the results of my research show that perhaps “Angola” as a collective experience left a deeper mark on Cuba than vice versa. For many cooperants, the Angolan mission was seen as a cornerstone in their personal and professional development, in addition to the gratification of having served in the revolution and for the fatherland despite many deprivations. But unofficially, the Angola mission was also a national collective trauma, with 2500 deaths (the official number), numerous war invalids, traumatized repatriates, and broken families. The Cuban economic depression after 1990 is often attributed to the Angolan venture. The situation could be phrased in this way: if the Cubans had concentrated more on rebuilding their country and hadn’t sent the most productive part of their youth to Angola, they would have coped much better with the change of the system. The Angolan experience was also overshadowed by the execution in July 1989 of the popular general, Angola Arnaldo Ochoa Sánchez, who was accused of drug trafficking and corruption.

On the other hand, the Angolan mission inspired the unique experiment of the international boarding schools at the Isla de la Juventud, which was sustained even in times of crisis and made a free education possible for children and adolescents from the so-called Third World until today. Moreover, the experience of the civil cooperation with Angola was crucial for the development of the model for the “export of specialized workers” on a big scale. Today Cuban specialists are in great demand on the international job market. They work for the UNESCO or the WHO, and are employed with their campaigns for health and education in conflict areas worldwide. They are an important source of income for the Cuban state. Their symbolic function is also crucial: their mission serves the purpose of constructing Cuba as the only nation in the world that supports developing countries in a fairly and in a spirit of solidarity. It also serves to construct Cuba as a state of science and knowledge, with a pool of specialists who can advance development worldwide.

During my research, I realized that the “other” was remembered only unwillingly in Cuba as well as in Angola. No official commemoration of the Cuban mission exists in Angola, except for a memorial at Luanda’s marginal that was set up by the Cubans themselves. When I made inquiries, everyone was aware of the Cuban presence, and had an opinion about it; but this opinion was ambivalent, as mentioned earlier. Exceptions to this began to occur in more recent times: for example, the young Angolan author Ondjaki offers a friendly nod to his former teachers in the title of his autobiographical narrative “Bom Dia, Camaradas.” The Angolan memory of Cuba, moreover, is rather polarized: followers of UNITA demonize the Cubans as an occupying power. Supporters of MPLA do not entirely approve of the Cuban mission, but they perceive their former partner in a much more positive way.

The Angola mission was deleted from official memory in Cuba after the negotiated withdrawal in 1991. The victims of war are only commemorated in the nationwide

45 Ondjaki, Bom dia camaradas.
celebrations on 7 December called “Día de los mártires de la revolución cubana.”
Indeed, numerous books—mostly personal recollections—were written, and many
documentaries were commissioned. A lot of works were never published or are out
of stock, and most of the films were never shown in public. Only books and films that
deal with Cuba’s military victories are still available.

Many of my interview partners presented me with their unpublished stories and
poems about Angola. They made clear to me that there is an urgent need in Cuba to
talk about Angola. Though my research was officially obstructed, my project was
unofficially met with considerable sympathy and support. For most of my
interlocutors, it was the first time that they had ever been interviewed about their
experiences in Angola. Whereas until now only memoirs of the military were
published, some cautious attempts to document the personal experiences of Cuban
civilians in Angola have begun to emerge in recent years.

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investigation in Cuba, Angola, Portugal and the United States between 2004 and
2006. I interviewed about 150 persons (politicians and responsible for the mission,
educationalists, civil and military cooperants, e.g., Angolan Students and Cuban
teachers). I am very grateful to my interview partners for their confidence.

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Burness, Donald. On the Shoulders of Martí: Cuban Literature of the Angolan War. Colorado

46 The first publication that made an attempt to investigate the impact of the mission in Angola for the
participants was Donald Burness’s On the Shoulders of Martí. He analyzes published literature and poetry by
Angolan veterans. See also Franzbach, Angola im Schnittpunkt von Afrika, Europa und Amerika.
47 In 2002 the cultural centre, Casa de Angola in La Habana, organized a competition, “Angola en la memoria”
(“Angola in the memory”), encouraging Cuban Angola civilian and military veterans to submit artistic
contributions (such as literature, poems, diaries, paintings, and photos) that expressed their personal memory
of their stay in Angola. The response was overwhelming; several hundred contributions were submitted. This
was the prelude for Nancy Jiménez, former leading cooperant in the mission in Education in Angola, to work on
her study of the Cuban female contribution to the civil missions. It is in the process of being published, and I
am grateful to Nancy that she made her manuscript available to me: Jiménez Rodríguez, “Un combate
diferente” and “Mujeres sin fronteras”.


*Historia de la Colaboración entre la República de Cuba y la República de Angola*. Unpublished document courtesy of Ministerio para la Inversión Extranjera y la Colaboración Económica (MINVEC), La Habana, 2002.


