

In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre. By LARA PAWSON. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. xvi + 271 pp. ISBN 978 1 780 76905 9.

In broad outline, the failed coup attempt initiated by the MPLA figure Nito Alves in Luanda on 27 May 1977 and its aftermath are well-documented events. Alves had spent the last eight years of the liberation struggle in the MPLA's First Region, in the Dembos forest to the northeast of Luanda, with no contact with the rest of the MPLA from 1967 up until independence. He emerged with a political support base, a high level of self-confidence, and a sense of separateness from what David Birmingham once described as the 'suave cultural environment of the broad political leadership'.¹ After 1974 these factors translated into a populist and ultra-leftist anti-white and anti-*mestiço* discourse, and led eventually to the bungled attempt to seize power that cost Alves his life.

However, this book is emphatically not a history of the Nitista coup. It is rather a personal diary, describing a British journalist's research journey as she wrestles with the self-imposed task of constructing a coherent account of the 1977 events. In 1999 or 2000, after hearing about Nito Alves – evidently for the first time – Lara Pawson decided to 'try to uncover the unwritten truth behind the *vinte e sete*' (5). Nonetheless, despite her overtly positivist objective of discovering the 'facts' – including whether there really was a coup at all – Pawson never sifts, weighs or synthesises the information that she gathers from her extensive interviews (and to a limited extent from documentary sources). Nor does she interrogate her own assumptions about the character of the Angolan state and its ruling party throughout the post-independence period. For her, and consequently for the reader, the 'unwritten truth' remains ultimately unrecoverable.

The book is constructed as a series of loosely interlinked and heavily commented accounts of Pawson's more or less random encounters – often in public places – with witnesses, participants and others in London, Lisbon and Luanda, as well as describing visits to libraries, cemeteries and other sites. These *petits récits* remain largely independent of each other, and Pawson frequently pre-empts the reader's doubts about their usefulness by expressing her own questioning of her interlocutors' reliability, veracity and motivation: 'Someone told me a story. Why do I believe it? Will anyone else?' (26). She seems unaware of her responsibility to corroborate information or to test it for fidelity and coherence.

Although she tells us that she recorded most of the conversations – in both English and Portuguese – it remains unclear whether she is transcribing the interviewees' remarks or summarising them. The tone is confessional – Pawson describes her self-doubts and emotions, the weather, what she eats and drinks, what various cats, dogs and local insect life are up to, and whether she moves about by taxi, in private cars, or by Tube train. All too often her comments veer into the pointlessly discourteous – she remarks that the bathroom of one interviewee is 'neglected' (12), notes a minor speech impediment in another (48), and observes that a meal she is served by one kindly host is 'surprisingly tasty' (122).

From the beginning Pawson makes several interrelated assumptions. One of these is that the events of 27 May 1977 and their aftermath have been 'forgotten', as the subtitle of the book has it. For reasons that are entirely unclear, Pawson believes that there has been a conspiracy of silence about the coup and that she has a journalist's duty to bring the truth to public notice. She refers to the 'well-kept secret' of the *vinte e sete* (5) and implies that

even such respected observers of southern African affairs as the late Basil Davidson and Victoria Brittain have been complicit in hushing things up. She comments that she feels 'betrayed [...] by those writers and journalists I had always admired on the political left' (42). This is especially unfair with regard to Davidson, who had just arrived in Luanda when the coup took place and wrote an easily-discoverable first-hand account.² She also ignores – or is perhaps unaware of, given her inexperience as a researcher – near-contemporary and detailed although highly problematic accounts by Simon Malley,³ Paul Fauvet⁴ and David Birmingham.⁵

Her second assumption is that the coup attempt on 27 May was followed by a large-scale massacre in which very large numbers of people were killed as political scores were settled, and that consequently Angolans have lived ever since in a climate of fear in which any public discussion of Nito Alves has been impossible. It is certainly plausible that, had such a massacre of many thousands of people taken place, it might have created such an atmosphere. But the evidence cited in this book is extremely inconclusive. Pawson visits the grave of some victims, marked by 68 names (158–159). At various other points in her text she either reports others claiming, or claims herself, that 'thousands' (3), 'tens of thousands' (32), 'at least 25,000' (65), 'perhaps 20,000 or more' (86), 'at least 80,000' (168), and finally '90,000' (221) people were killed in the aftermath of the coup. When she is told by one interviewee, Ndunduma, that 'no one knows' the numbers, she dismisses this as a 'shoddy answer' (200). But she admits that she herself has not 'seen any solid data detailing the number of people who were killed [...] All I have is the word of a few Angolans who have urged me to investigate...' (54). By the end of the book we are no further along; Pawson admits that she cannot say that she has 'a clue how many people were killed...' She has 'no evidence...' (227). She wishes that she 'knew what was real and what was fiction' (212) – and after 200 pages, this reviewer found it hard to disagree.

Despite Pawson's self-doubt, most scholars today would probably accept the assessment of the Angolan journalist João Melo, quoted in the book, that 'the reaction of the state [...] was undeniably disproportionate' (218). Whether this created the climate of fear that Pawson asserts 'is so prevalent in Angola today' (219), as well as among Angolan exiles, is another question. But the existence – for example – of an *Associação 27 de Maio* with its own website dedicated to the memory of Alves, and the political activities of the rapper Ikonoklasta described in Pawson's own epilogue (245–249) seem to indicate that fear has at least been waning in recent years.

Pawson's final assumption is that the attempted coup was in some sense a critical conjuncture in modern Angolan history. She quotes but does not appear to have understood – possibly because of her admittedly inadequate knowledge of Angolan history (41) – strong hints from some of her interlocutors that this may not have been so. An Angolan interviewee tells her to be 'very cautious' about exaggerating what was essentially an MPLA experience (42). A few pages later, Pawson admits that the coup may have been just 'a dark but apparently minor moment' (56). Victoria Brittain tells her 'it just wasn't that important' (85) and that Angolan exiles would naturally believe that it was 'the worst thing that ever happened' (87). But Pawson never sees the need to argue the case for a new account of the coup, relying instead on the idea that mentioning it is still taboo.

As a researcher and interviewer, Pawson combines rookie inefficiency with shyness. She goes to the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies and appears to believe that

all the books on Angola will be gathered together on the same shelves, ignoring the catalogue (29–30). With interviewees she is often hesitant about asking further questions: ‘I want to persist [...] but I don’t want to cross-examine’ (24); ‘I chicken out. I’m afraid of offending people...’ (169); ‘I don’t have the heart to ask him...’ (187). She knows gossip when she hears it (67), but recycles it anyway, repeatedly hinting, for example, that Agostinho Neto had an incapacitating drinking problem (76, 103, 164, 231).

At the end of the second volume of his magisterial book *The Angolan Revolution*, published in 1978, the late John Marcum referred to the Nitista events, cautioning that

only detailed knowledge of the colonial crucible and the history and character of those who [broke] out of it can permit us to understand what follow[ed] independence [...] only such knowledge enables us to understand why black African leaders [...] who spent perilous years in the MPLA maquis fighting for independence would try to overthrow a (multiracial) MPLA government just a year and a half after independence...⁶

Unfortunately, Pawson has chosen to ignore these words of advice. In the end, her book disappoints because of the gaps in her own knowledge of contemporary Angolan history, her failure to synthesise, and her unwillingness even to attempt to answer the real and difficult questions that her topic raises.

Notes

1. D. Birmingham. *Frontline Nationalism in Angola & Mozambique* (London: James Currey; Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 75.
2. B. Davidson, ‘The MPLA Wins Out’, *West Africa*, 18 July 1977, 1472–1473.
3. See *Afrique-Asie*, 11 July 1977 and 25 July 1977.
4. P. Fauvet, ‘Angola: The Rise and Fall of Nito Alves’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 9 (1977), 88–104.
5. D. Birmingham, ‘The Twenty-Seventh of May: an Historical Note on the Abortive 1977 “Coups” in Angola’, *African Affairs*, 77, 309 (1978), 554–564.
6. J.A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution. Vol. II: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare, 1962–1976* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 281.

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A Place That Matters Yet: John Gubbins’s MuseumAfrica in the Postcolonial World. By SARA BYALA. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. xi + 330 pp. ISBN 978 0 226 03030 2.

Sara Byala’s *A Place That Matters Yet*, derived from her PhD dissertation, is the first published history of MuseumAfrica in Newtown, Johannesburg – an institution formerly called the ‘Africana Museum’ and located on the first floor of the Johannesburg Public Library. Opened in 1935, the Africana Museum was constituted from a collection