

NEGOTIATING TRUST AS “MORAL SUBSTANCE” IN THE POST-WAR ANGOLAN SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF THE ETHNOGRAPHER’S POSITIONING IN THE FIELD

MĂDĂLINA FLORESCU¹

This is a paper about the negotiation of trust in the post-war Angolan society through a study of the positioning of the ethnographer in the field. The field of study are the social relations and forms of communication that organized the House of the Episcopal Conference of Angola and São Tomé (CEAST) in Luanda, four years after the official ending of the war. The war and its ending had produced a diffuse sentiment of suspicion that coloured the meaning of what people said. By looking at how the ethnographer was renamed it is possible to learn about a wider cultural way of conceptualising and negotiating trust as a “moral substance”. Its sharing between people created a “semantic atmosphere”. Whereas “landscape” has a visualist bias, the notion of “semantic atmosphere” seeks to convey what a sense of “meaningfulness” may feel like for those living in a divided society.

Key words: trust, post-war, Angola, ethnography of communication.

INTRODUCTION

When I began my field study in September 2006, the post-colonial war in Angola had ended four years earlier by military means with the killing of Jonas Savimbi, the leader of the opposition. One consequence was the enforcement of an authoritarian regime that contributed to the political colouring of the growing social and economic disparity that was visible at all levels of public life. It was said for instance that provinces whose governors were of the opposition party (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, UNITA) developed less than those whose governors were of the ruling party (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, MPLA). A similar distinction was also made with reference to dioceses and their Bishops’ political allegiances. But if economic differences were linked to differences between political parties, social identities were also defined in religious terms.

¹Centro de Estudos Africanos da Universidade do Porto (CEAUP), Portugal (<http://www.africanos.eu/ceaup>). Email: ngomendan@gmail.com

I would like to acknowledge the two reviewers for their immensely constructive comments.