



TERRENO OCUPADO

By Jo Ractliffe

Five centuries of Portuguese rule ended in November 1975 when Agostinho Neto, leader of MPLA, proclaimed the People's Republic of Angola. It also marked the beginning of Africa's longest and most convoluted civil war. Divisions between the liberation movements, fuelled by Cold War politics and the interests of other African countries (notably South Africa), laid the foundations for the violent conflict that subsequently consumed Angola for nearly 30 years. It was only after the death of rebel Unita leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002 that military leaders on both sides agreed to a ceasefire, paving the way for a final political settlement and peace.

Ironically, the civil war strengthened a sense of national identity and common purpose. But it left a devastation in its wake and its toll is measured in the millions: of lives lost, of refugees and people separated from their families and displaced from their homes and of landmines left scattered across the country. Most citizens are without access to land, adequate housing, basic services, health care, education or jobs. And although the country has embarked upon the monumental task of reconstruction, it is one that despite Angola's natural wealth and burgeoning economy is beset with problems.

I first read about Angola in *Another Day of Life*, Ryszard Kapuściński's book about events leading up to independence. It was during the mid-eighties, a time when South Africa was experiencing intense resistance and increasing mobilisation against the apartheid government, which was also waging war in Angola against what it viewed as the "total onslaught" of African nationalism and communism.

I was photographing in the townships around Cape Town – images for a series of apocalyptic photomontages of urban wastelands, resettlement camps and feral dogs (*Nadir*). In my readings on landscape, dispossession and war, Angola increasingly absorbed my attention. Until then, in my imagination, Angola had been an abstract place. In the seventies and early eighties, it was simply "The Border", a secret, unspoken location where brothers and boy-friends were sent as part of their military service. And although tales about Russians and Cubans and the Cold War began to filter back – all of which conjured up a distinctly different image from the one portrayed by the South African state – it remained, for me, largely a place of myth.

In 2007 I went to Luanda for the first time. Five years had passed since the war had ended and I wasn't sure what I would find there. I was not seeking to produce a commentary on the "state of things" in Luanda now. My impulse

was to go in search of something else. The emblematic. Traces of the imaginary Angola.

What I found was a landscape that appeared both medieval and post-apocalyptic simultaneously – as if *Mad Max* had collided head-on with the *Canterbury Tales*. It is topography of extremes; at once a ruined desolation, yet full with the aliveness of human endeavour and enterprise. Two sites in particular arrested my attention: Roque Santeiro and the adjacent squatter settlement, Boa Vista.

Named after a Brazilian soap opera, Roque Santeiro is Luanda's biggest market. It sprawls across the edge of a hilltop overlooking the sea. Here you can buy everything – fresh produce, livestock, ice, clothing, appliances, furniture, building materials, coffins, medicines and herbal remedies. You can have your car or motorbike serviced, your watch or cell phone repaired, your hair cut, nails painted and clothes tailored. You can also eat and drink at the many food stalls, or watch *Senhor e Senhora Smith* in the video clubs – military-style tents where action movies are presented on large television screens powered by generators. But Roque Santeiro is also a place that thrives on myth. Some call it the home of Luanda's "Reserve Bank"; others proclaim it Africa's biggest black-market, a place where anything can be sourced, even a Mig jet.

Boa Vista is one of Luanda's oldest and largest *musséques*. Situated on a steep bluff overlooking the harbour – its name means "good view" – it is a precarious home to the growing number of people who have been driven to the urban centre as a consequence of the war. Here they live in makeshift shacks without electricity, running water, sanitation and refuse removal. Layers upon layers of garbage and waste have come to form the substrate of this human settlement. Its unstable terrain is easily eroded, giving way to landslides during heavy rains. Some years ago several people died when their homes were engulfed by water and mud. This prompted the government to evacuate residents, although given the large number of evictions, many believed that plans to develop the harbour and build luxury residential and leisure complexes were the real reason behind this.

Stories about relocating Roque Santeiro and Boa Vista continue to circulate. But at the moment, across the city, it is the "petroleum towers", the headquarters of international oil corporations that are rising up to reshape the city skyline.

This is an extract from Jo Ractliffe's book Terreno Ocupado, which is available at the Boekhuis in Johannesburg, Exclusive Books in Hyde Park and Clarkes in Cape Town.



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1. View of Boa Vista from Roque Santeiro market.
2. Women minding pigs, Roque Santeiro market.
3. Video club, Roque Santeiro market.
4. Roadside stall on the way to Viana.
5. Woman and her baby, Roque Santeiro market