

# The Coffee Frontier in Proto-Colonial and Colonial Angola

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Coffee plantations were unquestionably one of the defining features of Angola's colonial landscape. From the 1870s to independence, coffee was the main export of this former Portuguese colony, barring a couple of intervals during which rubber and diamonds held first place. During this time, Angola ranked consistently among the world's largest robusta producers, which it might still have been today had the country's civil war (1975-2002) not made commercial farming all but impossible. In Angolan popular memory, coffee occupies an ambivalent position: for some people it brings up memories of colonial forced labor, while others recollect stories of successful family farms. My research project, "Coffee and Colonialism in Angola, 1820-1960," aims to reconstruct the multiple, intertwined realities behind these contrasting memories. Focusing on northern Angola, where smallholding and estate farming always coexisted, it investigates how African farmers, colonial settlers, foreign traders, and global consumers shaped one of the oldest commercial coffee frontiers in sub-Saharan Africa. In doing so, it reflects on the question to what extent "colonialism" is the proper lens through which to study the history of coffee cultivation in Angola.

In and outside academia, people often associate coffee with the history of European colonialism (Wild, 2005). The observed connections are multiple. Coffee spread from Ethiopia and Yemen across the world's tropical zones through European imperial networks. While other crops and plants have followed similar trajectories, for many the global coffee trade has come to exemplify the modern world economy's intrinsic inequalities and exploitative nature. Grown in the Global South, for long coffee was consumed almost exclusively in the Global North, where consequently most value was added to its

production. Slavery and other forms of coercion were often central to its cultivation, notably in the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Dutch East Indies. Although in Latin America coffee growing took off after producing countries gained independence in the early 1800s, in many parts of Africa – the biological home of the world's two main commercial varieties of coffee – coffee developed as a cash crop under colonial rule. In the East African highlands, where climatic conditions made growing arabica coffee possible, European settlers dominated production with the backing of colonial governments, leaving the cultivation of the sturdier, but financially less rewarding robusta trees in the lower climatic belt to small African farmers (McCook, 2019). African colonies mainly produced for metropolitan markets, creating commodity chains that continued to shape the global coffee trade after decolonization (Talbot, 2004).



*Photo: Coffee bush near Mucaba, Uíge, Angola, 2011.*

**Coffee and Colonial Exploitation**  
My research on the history of coffee cultivation in Angola interrogates this common connotation of coffee with colonial exploitation. It does so specifically by placing

the Angolan coffee economy in its global context and by examining the reasons small farmers became involved in cash-crop production. The aim is not to deny the importance of empire and colonialism to Angolan coffee's history – fundamental transitions in the Portuguese empire in the early 1800s formed the background to an emerging coffee trade, and colonial rule played a crucial role in its later development – but rather to add complexity to broad generalizations about the way global forces and local dynamics interacted.

Most of the historical literature on the Angolan coffee economy has concentrated on the early settlers from Portugal and Brazil, the “coffee barons of Cazengo,” as David Birmingham (1978) aptly called them, who from the 1830s with the help of enslaved workers crafted the first coffee plantations out of Angola's indigenous robusta forests. It is important to recognize, however, that the rapid expansion of coffee cultivation in the second half of the century was mainly the work of independent African farmers living away from Portugal's proto-colonial enclaves. Sources in Portuguese and Angolan archives document how by cultivating wild and semi-wild stands and via plant transfers these small, entrepreneurial farmers radically transformed the Angolan coffee landscape, demarcating the space within which a new generation of colonial settlers from the 1920s built their coffee estates. In this regard, the history of coffee production in Angola resembled the “cash-crop revolutions” unfolding in other parts of Africa, which stemmed from indigenous, rather than colonial knowledge and initiatives (Richards, 1985).

Another important dimension of the Angolan coffee economy was that, from the beginning, local traders mainly exported to countries other than Portugal. Angola produced far more coffee than the small metropolitan market could absorb. As African robustas conquered their place in the world coffee trade during the first half of the twentieth century, two industrialized nations without colonies in Africa, namely the Netherlands and the United States, turned increasingly towards Angola for their robusta supplies. After World War Two, with the collapse of Indonesian robusta production, roasters in both countries became heavily

dependent on Angolan producers. To study the history of Angolan coffee, therefore, it is necessary to think outside the imperial box and look for records beyond the colonial archive. My research has drawn, for example, on the records of Dutch trade companies and coffee roasters to document the global – instead of imperial – connections between African coffee growers and European consumer markets.

Grown to a large extent on settler farms struggling with chronic labor shortages, coffee cultivation was heavily dependent on a system of labor coercion the Portuguese government developed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The use of slavery and forced labor in the Portuguese empire is well known, though strangely there are only a few detailed histories of labor in colonial Angola (Ball, 2015; Cleveland, 2015). The coffee estates were major consumers of compulsory contract labor, and my research is in part an effort to document this crucial episode in Angolan history. Using a series of labor inspection reports from the coffee districts in the 1940s and 1950s, I argue that colonial forced labor on the one hand grew out of an earlier history of proto-colonial slavery, but was on the other hand a response to specific problems created by settler colonialism. The settler economy was itself a particular historical outcome shaped by nineteenth-century precedents and by colonial policies aimed at stimulating white migration (Castelo, 2007).

**African Entrepreneurship**  
But the story of Angolan coffee cannot be written purely through the prism of colonial exploitation. African smallholder production grew in the twentieth century alongside the settler plantations and, given the nineteenth-century pattern of frontier expansion mentioned above as well as the prevalence of smallholding in other producing countries, it is almost certain that small farmers would have been more successful if the Portuguese government had given them free rein, as happened in Kenya in the 1950s (Hyde, 2009). While proportionally not as dominant as before, after WWII African farmers still accounted for a quarter of Angola's coffee outputs. To understand the involvement of these small farmers in export

production it is important to move beyond a longstanding and persistent view of economies in the Global South as primarily raw material suppliers to the industrialized core of the world economy. Such a view not only neglects the significant amount of processing of primary commodities that has historically taken place in the Global South (Clarence-Smith 2018). It also creates a one-dimensional picture of commodity producers as people lacking agency and economic motives of their own. In my research, I specifically point to the influence of material culture on cash-crop farming in Angola, which was rooted in precolonial consumer cultures and was a more important driver of agricultural entrepreneurship than colonial tax imperatives or cultivation schemes. A variety of historical accounts – by missionaries, travelers, businessmen, and statisticians, among others – indicate that the reasons for individual farmers to turn to coffee growing had less to do with the hut tax, and more with their search for material comfort, status, and economic security (Vos, 2018).



*Photo: Coffee berries drying in village near Mucaba, Uíge, Angola, 2011.*

Apart from the history of settler estates and forced labor, there is thus a story to tell about local entrepreneurship in the development of the Angolan coffee economy. Such a story resonates with documented cases of small farmers in Tanzania and Cameroon, who from the 1920s onward adopted coffee as a cash crop to increase their purchasing power.

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Rural households invested coffee revenues in a wide range of things, including school fees, bride-wealth, cattle, textiles, bicycles and sewing machines (Curtis, 2003; Eckert, 2003; Baroin, 2007).

#### **C**ommodity Frontiers

That brings me, finally, to the concept of a “coffee commodity frontier.” In northern Angola, this frontier was first crafted out of natural coffee reserves by entrepreneurial small farmers, who grew coffee in what we now call agroforestry systems. Subsequent expansion mainly happened within zones already opened in the late nineteenth century. The North Angolan coffee forests showed a remarkable capacity to regenerate; by the 1960s, after a century of commercial exploitation, they were by far not yet exhausted. The Commodity Frontier scholarship generally discusses frontier development as the outcome of an expansionary capitalist world economy, historically centered in the industrializing Global North, which continuously seeks out new areas of the “global countryside” for resource extraction as older frontiers become degraded and depleted (Joseph, 2019). My research contributes to this literature in two ways. First, it demonstrates that coffee commodity frontiers can be sustainable, especially when developed within a forest environment, as has been the case in Angola, Ethiopia, and Uganda, for instance. Secondly, it shows that local circumstances and contingencies condition the social, economic, and ecological transformations in frontier regions resulting from their incorporation in the global economy (Bosma & Curry-Machado, 2012). To avoid the risk of reducing the relationship between global capitalism and frontier regions to a story of “impact” and “resistance”, which easily leads to a simplistic local-versus-global view of history, it is important to recognize that despite structural inequalities in the world economy people in the Global South have often been active participants in the making of commodity frontiers.

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\*All photos provided by the author.

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