

REVIEWS

Marissa J. Moorman, *Powerful Frequencies. Radio, State Power and the Cold War in Angola, 1931–2002* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2019), 240pp, paperback, ISBN 9780821423707.

This important book is a substantial addition to the growing studies of the importance of radio on the African continent. It crosses bridges between the language divides in Africa set up by colonial rule, thus playing a key role in the current moves away from the fragmented regional approaches of earlier African studies. Another important factor is the ease with which the author weaves in the strands of global politics with the intensely local. Radio has always enabled this double view, as studies of radio and empire by Simon Potter, Peter Bloom and others have shown. Here we see its operations again, through the detailed and often startling material that the author brings to light, as she draws on and synthesises a range of archives, both sonic and written.

Moorman's skilled narrative style allows her to move easily in her analysis between scales ranging from the global to the densely and vividly local. At moments the text reads like a thriller, one that informs and enlightens, and also complicates how we think about radio. At the centre of the study, as the title suggests, is radio itself – its place and role in the political battles waged in the period of the Portuguese colonial state and guerrilla insurgency, the post-insurgency period and then in the post-colonial state. The picture Moorman paints is often highly intricate. Names and personalities from the eras she covers populate the book's pages. This gives the study a thickness and immediacy that enables the reader to grasp more clearly what was at stake in terms of power and political influence as warring ideologies fought for dominance. How radio played a key role as mediator and communicator to the scattered communities of listeners, and the urban centres, in this large and thinly populated country with a traumatic history, is a topic that plays itself out in a number of ways, in the varied chapters that take us through the eras of Angolan radio history from 1931 to the early years of the new millennium.

What gives the book a rare kind of sparkle is the way Moorman handles the sweep of time in her remit. Pleasure as well as politics feature in how radio works on the body, the psyche and political consciousness. This comes through particularly well in the early chapters on the pleasures of colonial settler life, which also establish the importance of radio within Angola. A world of cars, aviation, sun-drenched and (largely) racially segregated communities, far from the grey Portugal of Salazar, were all linked through the various Radio Clubs that settler communities established. Moorman makes it clear this was not Salazar's much vaunted lusotropicalism, but neither was it the vicious racial segregation of the Rhodesian and South African states to

the south. Interestingly, she shows us that radio itself provided a kind of cultural and linguistic permeability, a mirage perhaps, of a *possible* national sensibility. African languages, particularly Umbundu and Kimbundu, and the burgeoning African popular music scene had a place in the broadcasts of the Radio Clubs during the later years of Portuguese rule. Radio ownership, too, grew significantly as testimony to the dynamic radio presence of the 1960s and early 1970s. However, the frail possibility of inter-racial and cultural harmony, fed partly by radio dynamics, fell apart in what Moorman calls 'the entangled, messy and sensuous dimensions of the colonial/post-colonial interface'. Colonial and settler nervousness were fuelled from the 1960s by a vibrant insurgent radio presence, closely monitored by the Portuguese military and the secret police. Ironically much of the rich archival material that captures the vitality of radio comes from transcripts from these police (PIDE) and military archives. What we have is transcripts of Portuguese programmes but unfortunately none of any African languages. It was the *immateriality* of radio's power that seemed most to unnerve those opposed to regime change.

Moorman recounts how the power of radio to construct and maintain a nation was fully taken on board by the new socialist government of Agostino Neto's MPLA party, post November 1975. So much so, that any capacity to debate party and government positions had been quickly crushed in the 27 May 1977 purge, which targeted several leading radio figures at the newly named national station, RNA. Two further chapters establish, in gripping detail, how the MPLA made radio work for them as propaganda for their Marxist-Leninist approach to the state and nation-building at a time of intense pressure, and beset by powerful enemies, in the last years of the Cold War. The description of covert US and British pressure and South African aggression is particularly chilling, as it covers the role of a national radio station in fighting back against ideologically opposed superior powers. Finally, Moorman casts an eye on the UNITA radio station of Radio VORGAN, noting that radio complicates a too-simplistic reading of the role of the party in Angolan life. Her last riposte is at radio critics who assume radio is necessarily an ally of democracy. One has to read the radio landscape far more carefully she tells us. I agree.

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