

N. Stassen, *The Boers in Angola, 1928–1975*

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Since the 1940s, historians have done thorough research on various themes relating to Afrikaner history. One aspect which has however remained unexplored is the history of Afrikaners in Angola during the mid-twentieth century. This book provides a thorough investigation of these so-called Angolan Afrikaners, their circumstances and activities, and the challenges they faced in Angola during the Portuguese administration. During these Afrikaners' residence in Angola they had little time for farming and were faced with a variety of difficulties. These include their problematic relationship with the Portuguese administration, economic hardships and inadequate education. Their resultant poverty led to shocking social and economic regression. After about 2 000 Angolan Afrikaners repatriated to the then South West Africa in 1928, a small Afrikaner community of between 386 and 471 individuals remained behind. Typical of this group was their conservative way of living, their poor practice of mixed farming and their reliance, for the sake of survival, on activities such as hunting and providing transportation.

This hefty tome of Stassen's is based on the doctoral thesis, *Die Afrikaners se Laaste Halfeeu in Angola, 1928–1975*, which he submitted to the University of Pretoria in 2009 and whose Afrikaans publication was reviewed in these pages in November 2010. His work is of importance for two reasons. Firstly, it represents a serious attempt to do

scientific historical research on a topic and period about which little has been written. The author utilises an impressive array of maps, photographs and statistical data for a variety of issues which he addresses. Secondly, Stassen aims to understand through his research why the community of about 500 Afrikaners after 1928 in Angola used to be described as “living fossils” and victims of their own conservatism. The author not only manages to tell a moving story about the fate and circumstances of the Angolan Afrikaners, but he also analyses how it was possible for such a small group to maintain their Afrikaner identity under difficult circumstances. This they managed to do to such an extent that Stassen can describe them as “dirt poor but of noble disposition ... able people, but condemned to the status of poor whites under the Portuguese” (p 217).

Stassen’s analysis of the lives and circumstances of the Afrikaners in Angola is divided into five sections. The first focuses on the relationship between these people and natural factors such as climate, vegetation, animal life etc. Stassen’s utilisation of other disciplines such as geology, climatology and archaeology is an attempt to use knowledge of *longue durée* changes to understand better the circumstances and history of the Angolan Afrikaners. These natural factors played an important role, not only in the history of Angola, but also in that of the Angolan Afrikaners.

The second section (chapters 2–4) deals with Angolan developments up to 1975, including the population make-up and economic activities. This section represents a social history in which the total history of various groups in Angola is covered since the earliest years of the country. Because the history of Angola is not particularly well-known among South African readers, this section serves an important function, helping the reader to come to a better understanding of the Angolan Afrikaners in the context of the country where they had settled. The analysis of the various population groups, ranging from the indigenous peoples to the Afrikaners, Germans and various protestant missionaries, reveals the rich variety of people living in Angola during this period.

Section 3 (chapters 5–13) first investigates in detail the history of the so-called Thirstland trekkers (*Dorsland Trekkers*) during the period 1874–1928. The Thirstland refers to the central part of the Kalahari through which these Angolan Afrikaners trekked. This is a gripping story in which Stassen introduces the reader to the various groups of trekkers in the period 1874 to 1880; their settlement in Angola from 1881 to 1890; and the smaller groups which left the old Transvaal for Angola between 1891 and 1928. The author also investigates the reasons why these people decided to trek. Chapter 6 examines why some of these Afrikaners chose to leave Angola in the 30 years from 1928 to 1958, while others opted to remain. The chapter that follows analyses the economic circumstances and activities of the Angolan Afrikaners during this period. This part effectively utilises photographic evidence in order to help the reader better understand the desperate circumstances of the Angolan Afrikaners. Their level of abject poverty by 1935 was succinctly summarised by Rev M.M. Grobler: “With a few exceptions, all the Afrikaners find themselves in the greatest poverty. Many have hardly any clothing or food. They themselves say they become ‘kafferised’ there, a harsh word, but perhaps the best to describe their condition” (p 192).

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the material and spiritual culture of the Angolan Afrikaners. Materially, these people suffered hugely, while in terms of their spiritual culture they could indeed be described as living fossils and victims of their own conservatism. Stassen’s analysis of the state of education among this group reveals that education was very patchy leading to high levels of illiteracy. Chapter 11 deals with the

general state of religion among the Angolan Afrikaners during this period. While they were generally quite religious, they gradually lost their religious convictions because of their geographic isolation and the worsening levels of literacy. Many left the Dutch Reformed churches (the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk* and the *Nederduits Hervormde Kerk*) to which they had originally belonged, joining other denominations.

The last chapters of section three cover the Angolan Afrikaners' interactions with other communities in Angola as well as their social circumstances during the period 1928–1958. Generally they got along well with other groups in Angola, such as the indigenous African groups, the Portuguese colonists and the so-called *mak volk* (“tame people”) who were descendants of the first African workers (of Zulu, Tswana and Ndebele origin) from the Transvaal who arrived with the Angolan Afrikaners in 1881. Although the Angolan Afrikaners interacted well with these groups, they considered themselves a separate ethnic group and managed to maintain their own distinct identity. Sometimes there were conflicts with the Portuguese colonists over issues of culture, religion and nationality, even though they were of the same race and economic class. Concerning social circumstances, Stassen investigate issues such as moral values, divorce, illegitimate children, miscegenation and mixed marriages. He comes to the conclusion that the Angolan Afrikaners generally upheld high moral values and felt that it was shameful for couples to divorce. More surprising is that this community was unconcerned about miscegenation. It was this aspect of their behaviour that upset Afrikaners from South Africa who visited them. Mixed marriages were also by no means unusual among the Angolan Afrikaners.

The final section of the book deals with various aspects of repatriation after 1958. Stassen discusses the origin of the idea; the reasons why the Afrikaners left Angola in 1958; the various opinions on repatriation; the availability of farms in South West Africa; and the actual repatriation of Angolan Afrikaners. He also pays attention to the question of why some Afrikaners decided to return to Angola, and others who moved back to South Africa again after they had repatriated. It is clear from this discussion that the “winds of change” which blew over Africa during the 1960s greatly influenced the decision of many of these Afrikaners to return to South Africa. The majority did not wish to be caught up in the African freedom struggle which followed in the period 1961 to 1975. Stassen also discusses those Afrikaners who returned to Angola and stayed there during 1958–1975, as well as their flight from that country in 1975.

Nicol Stassen's bulky *The Boers in Angola, 1928–1975* successfully manages to record through careful scientific research, the experiences of Afrikaners in Angola during this period. It illustrates the extremely difficult social and economic position in which these Afrikaners found themselves for an extended period of almost half a century in Angola; their repatriation; their return to Angola; and their flight from the country when the freedom struggle ensued. It paints a picture of much suffering, isolation and marginalisation. The fact that the history of these Angolan Afrikaners will soon disappear from popular memory makes this book even more important since it represents a fine attempt to immortalise the history of the Angolan Afrikaners in book form.

Juan Klee
University of Johannesburg