

In this study, the practices of the biographical writing on Agostinho Neto are scrutinized. The analytical apparatus used shows that this historiography was hegemonised over a long period of time by celebratory and hagiographic narrative, not based on research and featuring both an internationalist school and an exclusively Portuguese-speaking nationalistic school, which are both made up of non-academic and literary academic intellectuals connected to political activism. It also reveals a recent and non-academic trend for writing critical historical biographies, more focused on sources but driven by a political agenda and not by the historiographic debate, which gives a teratographic bias. Other solutions are suggested in the final sections and it is argued that the recent evolution of the academic biographical historiography in Southern Africa shows that the parallel path of Hagiography with Diabolization is not inevitable.



Helder Adegar Fonseca

## Agostinho Neto and Biographical Historiography



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**Source:** Lúcio Lara (Tchiweka), *Imagens de um Percurso. 80 Anos até à conquista da Independência*. Luanda, ATD ed., 2009, p. 79.

**Legend:** MPLA President Agostinho Neto in Banga Guerrilla Camp [Congo Brazza], near Cabinda border, February 7, 1965.

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### List of Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress (Northern Rhodesia)
ANTT	Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (National Archive of Torre do Tombo)
CDIH	Centro de Documentação e Investigação Histórica do
CC.MPLA	Comité Central do MPLA (MPLA Central Committee Historical Research and Documentation Center)
CEA MPLA	Centro de Estudos Angolanos (MPLA, Argel) / Centre of Angolan Studies (MPLA, Argel)
CEH MPLA or MPLA-PT	Comissão para a Elaboração da História do MPLA/MPLA-PT, Luanda (MPLA or MPLA- PT History Writing Commission)
CIA	USA Central Intelligence Agency
DISA	Direção de Informação e Segurança de Angola (Angola Service of Intelligence and Security)
FAAN	Fundação António Agostinho Neto (António Agostinho Neto Foundation)
FEAA	Fundação Engenheiro António de Almeida. (António de Almeida Foundation)
FLEC	Frente de Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda (Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda)
FNLA	Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (National Front for the Liberation of Angola)
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique Liberation Front)
GRAE	Governo Revolucionário de Angola no Exílio (Revolutionary Government of Angola in Exile)
MAC	Movimento Anti- Colonialista ( Anti-Colonialist Movement)
MINA	National Movement for the Independence of Angola (National Movement for the Independence of Angola)
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola)

MPLA-PT	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola – Partido do Trabalho /People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola-Party of Labor
NHRZ	Network for Historical Research in Zambia
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PAIGC	Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde)
PIM	Polícia Militar de Informação (Military Information Police, prior PIDE/DGS)
PCP	Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party)
PIDE/DGS	Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado / Direcção Geral de Segurança (Portuguese Security Intelligence)
SACP	South African Communist Party
SCCIA	Serviços de Centralização e Coordenação de Informações de Angola (Angola Information Centralization and Coordination Services, Portuguese Military Intelligence)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIP	United National Independence Party (Zambia)
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola)
UPA	União das Populações de Angola (Union of Angolan Peoples)
USA	United States of America

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## Agostinho Neto and Biographical Historiography<sup>1</sup>

Study the historian before you begin to study the facts  
(E.E.CARR, 1961, 22-23)

Se hace camino al andar, Al andar se hace camino  
(A. MACHADO, 1912, xxix)

### Introduction

#### Agostinho Neto as the subject of biographical historiography

This historiographic study analyses biographical writings about António Agostinho Neto, an Angolan [1922-1979] who began to make a name for himself in the 1950s. The main milestones in his life are usually considered to be his experience as an inhabitant of a colonised country and a poet of “Angolanness” [1940-50], an anti-colonial activist [1950s] and freedom fighter [1962-1974]. As a freedom fighter he led one of the revolutionary organisations struggling for Angola’s independence [MPLA, 1962-1974]. In addition, as the first president of the People’s Republic of Angola [1975-1979] Agostinho Neto was part of a group of historical African players, such as Kwame Nkrumah in

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<sup>1</sup> This book was written as part of the project *Historical Sources of Transnational Regionalism in Southern Africa: The Liberation Movements and White Africa as driving forces (1960-1980)* sponsored by CICIP.UÉ, R&D unit funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia [Science and Technology Foundation] of the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education.

Ghana, “The Father of African Nationalism” (Birmingham, 1998; Biney, 2011), Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia (Simakole, 2012), Julius Nyerere in Tanzania (Molony, 2014; Bjerck, 2017), Samora Machel in Mozambique (Christie, 1996) and Nelson Mandela in South Africa (Maylam, 2014), who combined their leadership of the fight for freedom [national or anti-apartheid], with and without other rival organisations, with the forming of the first post-colonial government, either in an exclusive [dictatorial] or competitive [democratic] manner.

From the perspective of biographical historiography, the narratives on individuals or groups that lived in settings with a history as dramatic and traumatic as colonial and post-colonial Southern Africa<sup>2</sup> have at least two points of interest. The first is the fact that, from a research point of view, they may have a transnational or trans-imperial focus (Lambert and Lester, 2006). This social universe includes anti-colonial activists and many freedom fighters. The historiographic interest arises not only because the players led transnational or trans-imperial lives, but also because in that process, individual action, particularly that of the main leaders, became the subject of countless biographical constructions from a very early point in time for reasons of public awareness and reputation, [public or security] information, activist and counter-activist propaganda, or academic research. This large repository of biographical narratives has left a polyphonic legacy that received contributions from national and international institutionalised colonial and post-colonial powers, freedom

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<sup>2</sup> About “Southern Africa” as a conceptualized entity see Dallywater, Saunders and Fonseca (2019, 9).

movements, post-colonial rebel organisations and international, intellectual and social support movements (Minter, 2009, 19). It is essential to convert this variety of biographies into historiography.

The second point of interest is the “biographic question” (Lassig, 2004) of the individual identities, such as the ways in which they are [re]defined in the midst of profound changes over a relatively short period of time. It is a particularly pertinent discussion in the history of the 20th century, an age of successive external ruptures with dramatic effects on individuals’ life stories and plans. This is because it debates to what extent these fractures changed their direction and how visible these swerves are in biographical narratives. In the case of Southern Africa, these traumatic changes include: the varying, late, imperfect European occupation from the turn of the 20th century; mobilisation for the World Wars; trans-colonial labour migrations, the migration of refugees and experiences of exile abroad during the liberation wars [where they occurred, 1960-1980]; subsequent transitions to independence [revolutionary or negotiated, 1960-80] or post-apartheid [1990s], which resulted in other, forced migrations or movements of colonisers returning to Europe, as well as changes in individual status, for example, overcoming the role of colonised and inferior subject, and finally, there was the impact of the civil wars that, in the case of Angola, extended from the war of liberation and, with a brief pause in the early 1990s, lasted from 1975 to 2002 (Pinto, 2016). Contexts like these tend to have a profound effect on self-perception and the perception of others. These “altered perceptions” (Lassig, 2008, 19) complicate classic, simplistic, dichotomous perceptions of a colonial and nationalistic origin among the colonised and between these and the colonisers, and in the specific case of Angola, are illustrated in the antonymic or interchangeable relational use of terms of identification generically situated between blackness and whiteness,

such as African, native, black native, Portuguese black, Portuguese African, assimilated, child of the land [*filho da terra*], second-class or ill-born white [*branco de segunda* or *mal-nascido*], Euro-African, *Nguetas, Tuga*, Portuguese or tied to the ambiguity of terms such as terrorist, freedom fighter, revolutionary, counter-revolutionary, hero or sell-out. (Brizuela-garcia, 2007, 64; Gertjejanssen, 2014, 100-101; Khazanov and Payne, 2009; Mathews, 2011; Meneses, 2010; Meneses, 2017, 151; Naert, Verfaillie and Vanraepenbusch, 2016, 213-214; Neto and Neto, 2012, 504-509; Arquivo Nacional de Angola, 2014, 98, 146 e 170; Pacheco, 2016, 695, 698) In these circumstances, the plausibility of linear biographical narratives warrants particular attention.

Focused on Agostinho Neto as a transnational historiographic subject this study provides a historical perspective of biographical narratives about him. This approach, which is not limited to national or nationalist history or historiography and covering a timeframe of around 50 years, favours broader reflection on the historical dynamics of the use and construction of the biographical representations and their limitations. It seems to me to be particularly useful at a time when, due mainly to the works of non-academic historians (Porcianni and Lutz, 2010, xiv), more and more memoirs and autobiographies of Angolans are being published<sup>3</sup>. Those works, by extending the frontier of factual knowledge about Agostinho Neto over his 35 years or so of literary and political action, complicate and generate a problematic for the individual legacy in history and also the biographical legacies produced. The intention here is not to revisit or deepen Neto's *rerum gestarum* but to raise awareness of the biographical production and to, in particular, analyse its

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<sup>3</sup> We mention the following as examples, because they were very recently published: Reis, 2017; Menezes, 2017; Andringa and Sousa, 2017; Lopes, 2017.

practices and models so that we can appreciate the plausibility of the narratives and question any differences between the life he lived and the life they describe.

This study of biographies is carried out from the point of view of an academic historian at a time of biographical [re-]turn (Perry and Lewis, 2010) that began in the late 1980s. This new era may be characterized by the variety of forms and concepts of biographical writing and by the “New Biography in Historical Practice” that still holds an exploratory and experimental feature (Benton, 2009; Caine, 2010; Depkat, 2014; Margadant, 1996). Distances between personalist (Render and Haan, 2013), comparative (Roteberg, 2010), contextual (Barman, 2010) and constructive (Lassig, 2008) approaches to cognitive biographical narrative and between the “primary historical-biographical forms” identified by Birgitte Possing<sup>4</sup> are still detected. They all incorporated cardinal principles of cognitive academic history, which are the fact that the narrative is research based, and sources presented clearly and critically (Cohen and O’Connor, 2004, xix and 24-26). Furthermore, due to its strong limitations and inconsistencies, the classic linear predominantly teleological narrative model was surpassed by the inclusion in the biographical explanation of the critical debate of contrasting interpretations [self, contemporaries or biographers] on the lives of the subjects. This requires biographers to ensure clarity in the epistemological orientations, the interpretative scheme and the guiding lines that dictate the biography’s kaleidoscopic structure (Lassig, 2008, 9-13).

The “issue of sources” as the foundation of biographical narratives is thus the first criteria that I will use in examining the biographies of Agostinho Neto. An additional criterion is the linearity or complexity of the narrative, as

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<sup>4</sup> B. Possing has identified eight “primary historical-biographical forms”: classic, existential [total], window-like, cultural reflector, life and times or life-work-times [total or dialectic], relational and the historiographical biography (Possing, 2001 and 2017). Other types are interdisciplinary, in Rassool (2004), and literary, in Benton (2009).



seen from the organising principle of its structure, the inclusion of other opinions [debate] and interpretative coordinates or generalisation (Munz, 2006). The documental corpus consists of biographical production about Agostinho Neto. It comprises exclusively textual production, excluding all other forms of biographical production from the colonial and post-colonial period, such as those in other media, broadcasts or visual records or those expressed on monuments or in museums and celebratory exhibition guides and other repositories of legacies [booklets or pamphlets<sup>5</sup>, etc]. We have also excluded police records, press articles<sup>6</sup>, obituaries, short biographies and figurative literature (Kendall, 1965; Rassool, 2004).

My starting point for creating the *biographic corpus* was a review of encyclopaedic biographical narratives [reference collections]. The *First Political Dictionary on Africa* was published in 1961 followed by a briefer sequel in 1962. Agostinho Neto and other political players in Angolan nationalism were mentioned in *Political Africa: a Who's Who of Personalities and Parties* and *African Profiles*. (Segal, Hoskyns and Ainslie, 1961; Segal, 1962). These biographical sketches mostly consisted of incomplete life stories of politicians who were still active. Exiled South African authors, intellectuals and academics did not hide their partisan convictions but achieved a posture of objectivity that made them works of reference (Munger, 1963, 713; Davidson, 1966; Marcum, 1969; Cartwright, 1983). After Agostinho Neto died [1979], there was a boom in the publication of this type of now complete biographical narrative in encyclopaedias and historical dictionaries. The format was one of linear-progressive narratives of selected facts that were often repeated and determined

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<sup>5</sup> An example of this type of document: Barnett and Harvey (1972).

<sup>6</sup> See for example António Tomas, "The man who dreamed of being president" *Público* [Magazine 174], Lisbon, 26/09/1999, with criticism by Carlos Pacheco, "Agostinho Neto: an ambiguous historical portrait" *Público*. Lisbon, 10/10/1999.

by the current political context, namely the political history of the MPLA and Angola (Martin, 1980; Oliveira, 1980; GEPB, 1986; Broadhead, 1992; NEB, 1993; Castelo, 1996). More essentialist interpretive, subjectively oriented, clearly parallel perspectives began to appear in the late 1990s (Birmingham, 1999; Fredriksen, 2003; Margarido, 2008; Brinkman, 2005; Gonçalves, 2012).

Most of these sketches were written by academics [political scientists, historians, anthropologists and literati]. There were hardly any African authors, institutions or publishers. The biographer's exclusive perspective took precedence and this monophony produced a false consensus. Unusually, the main sources on which the narratives were based were only included later on and it was only rarely that these references involved biographical texts (Jones, 2008; Gonçalves, 2012).

Nonetheless, from the 1980s onwards, biographies of Agostinho Neto have abounded [13 titles] and some of them were written by academics or in an academic context (Khazanov, 1986; FEAA, 1989; Laranjeira, 2008; Bungo, 2015; Kandjimbo, 2011; Arquivo Nacional de Angola, 2014), others were commissioned by official institutions or aimed at defending Neto's and the MPLA's legacy (CEH MPLA-PT, 1990 and 2000; AA.VV., 2002; Barradas, 2010; Omoteso, 2009; Neto and Neto, 2012) or written on the initiative not-institutionalized authors and publishers (Carreira, 1996; Cosme, 2004; Pacheco, 2016). These are the biographical narratives that are examined here<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In this version it was not possible to include, because inaccessible, the historiographical analysis of the book: Arquivo Nacional de Angola (Ed.). 2014. *Sobre a Vida e Obra do Dr. António Agostinho Neto. Actas do Colóquio Internacional (Luanda, 18-16 Setembro de 2009)*. Luanda: Arquivo Nacional de Angola. It was read later. In it is clear the persistence of a comprehensive miscellany model of present-day memories of the past, laudatory testimonies, and unbalanced academic historical perspectives. In an overview, the work does not change the characteristics detected in this non-critical literature.

The biographical corpus is analysed and categorised on the basis of two general classifications [Table 1], one is the type of information and the other is aims. The first is an adaptation of Paul Kendall's classic dual classification, which is suitable because it is able to cover a vast range of biographical narratives. This literary historian makes an initial distinction between biographies based on personal acquaintance or a "vital relationship between the biographer and his subject" and the research-based biographies. For the latter, considering the "comparative objectivity of approach", Kendall named four categories which he ranked from the most objective - informative and critique, to the most subjective - pure and interpretative. He upheld that fictional biographies and biographical fiction could only be included in biographical literature "by courtesy" (Kendall, 1974). As a result, the historian Stephen B. Oates simplified the table by reducing it to three forms (Oates, 1986, x-xi).

The other classification is Roderick Barman's and is based on the biography's "focus". It consists of four types. They are the celebratory biographies of great men, "psychobiography" focusing on the singularity [personality] of a famous person; the narrative biography as a linear and container-narrative; and the context biography (Barman, 2010). I have added to these general types, which do not nor do they need to overlap, another category that I call constructivist biography that is based on the assumption "Se hace camino al andar" (Machado, 1912). In other words, the "evolution of the lives of [...] men and women is never explained as predestined or inevitable, not solely defined by their roles in the [colonizing] process". It requires consistency in theoretic, methodological and empiric terms and is based on the reconstruction of the subjects' lives, continuously fuelled by explorations of motivation, need, opportunity, and entanglement. It has a multi-faceted thematic structure that includes controversies and relates to the context(s). In

short it is a “synthetic form of biographical narrative” that combines “life description, literary account, and historical analysis” and its potential lies precisely in this “multifaceted nature” and complexity by allowing Oates-type interaction (Lassig, 2008; Brizuela-Garcia, 2007, 67 and 80; Dlamini, 2015, 41).

The study is divided into three other sections. The next conducts a historiographic examination of the biographical corpus on Agostinho Neto. Having focused on the issue of sources and the narrative model and made eclectic use of the adapted dual biographical classification, I endeavour to show that, due to the poor solidity of their sources, most of the biographies of Agostinho Neto cannot be included in the categories of informative or accumulative biography. They are essentially, in relation to their purpose, and in terms of explanation and interpretation, either celebratory narratives or the opposite [what I call teratography] though they are all teleological, essentialist and monophonic. They tend to be partisan and ideologically guided by socialist internationalism, exclusive nationalism and/or political debate, none of them historiographically problematized. In short, they fluctuate in a group of categories that are “unproductive forms” (Barman, 2010, 63-64), to be avoided by professional biographers. The rare contributions from academia do not deviate from the above-defined standard. There are no biographical forms of cognitive history. The third section revisits some of controversies around the subject and suggests issues and questions for a problematized biographical narrative. In the final section, the panorama of biographical historiography in Southern Africa shows that the current “situation” in writing historical biographies about Angolans like Agostinho Neto is not unavoidable.

Table 1. Biographical Works about Agostinho Neto: General Types

	KHAZANO V	FEAA	CEH MPLA-PT (Ed.) 1990 and 2000	CARRERA 1996	AAVV. 2000	COSME S (ed.) 2005	LARAMJEIR A 2008	OMOTESO 2008	NETO and NETO (ed.) 2010	KANDJIMBO 2011	BUNGO 2015	PACHECO 2016
BIOGRAPHICAL WORKS ABOUT AGOSTINHO NETO (1922-1979) [1]	1986	1989	1990 and 2000	1996	2000	2005	2008	2008	2010	2011	2015	2016
Type of author	Hist. Acad.	Mixed	Not ident.	Non-acad.	[7]	Non-acad.	Lit. Acad.	Lit. Acad.	Non-acad.	Lit. Acad.	Hist. Acad.	Hist. Non-acad.
Type of publication	Acad.	Conf.	Commiss.	Indep.	Commiss.	Commiss.	Ind. (book chap.)	Acad.?	Commiss.	Acad. (art)	M thesis	Indep.
<b>TYPE OF BIOGRAPHY</b>												
Life of subject	Complete	Up to 1962	Up to 1959	Complete	[7]	Complete	1945-1956	[7]	1949-1974	1940-1960	Complete	1962-1979
<b>TYPE by SOURCES</b>												
Class T1: Type of information												
Personal knowledge				X								
Research	X					X	X	X	X	X	X	
Mixed		X	X									X
Class T2: Comparative objectivity of research												
Informative [2]	X		X			X	X			X		
Bio. Critical [3]												X
Pure [4]							X	X				
Interpretative				X								
<b>TYPE by FOCUS</b>												
Celebratory	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	
Psychobiographical												
Narrative												X
Contextual												
Constructivist [5]										X		

[Notes to the Table 1]

[1] A complete reference for each of the works classified here can be found in the bibliography attached to this study

[2] Also called "Accumulative" (Kendall, 1974) or "scholarly chronicle Biography" (Oates, 1986, x-xi)

[3] Or "critical study" (Oates, 1986, x-xi)

[4] "Standard" or "Pure Biography" or literary biography (Kendall, 1974 and Oates, 1986, X-XI) [5] or a "synthetic form of biographical narrative" (Brizuela-Garcia; 2007, 67 e 80)

[6] For analytical purposes only three contributions are considered, two of which are testimonial ( pp. 61-78 e 313-330) and the other is a historical essay by a political scientist (Patrick Chabal) (pp. 93-118) [7] work not consulted

[8] For analytical purposes the focus was placed on the three works that produced a "bibliographical portrait" and were entrusted "to three journalists and not historians" (Barradas, 2010, 14)